

Expanding the Margins in the History of Dutch: Multilingual Sources, Practices and Perspectives ‘from Below’

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Over the past 20 years, the “from below” approach has considerably broadened our understanding of language histories. From the beginning, the historical-sociolinguistic study of Dutch has been at the forefront of these developments, both in the Northern (e.g. Rutten & van der Wal 2014) and the Southern Low Countries (e.g. Vandebussche 2007; Puttaert et al. 2019). Most studies have focused on language variation and change, filling in many blank spots in the canonical historiography of Dutch by incorporating authentic data sources of men and women from different social backgrounds.

However, there are still major gaps. For example, the northeastern periphery of the Low Countries has largely been excluded from both historiographical accounts and historical corpora of Dutch. Shifting the focus to these overlooked geographical margins, the northern parts of the Dutch-German borderlands (Groningen, Drenthe, East Frisia etc.) take centre stage in this paper. Characterised by cultural and linguistic contacts for centuries, this peripheral area constitutes a promising testing ground for new multilingual perspectives on traditionally monolingual narratives (Krogull 2021).

Concentrating on the long nineteenth century, two types of data sources “from below” are presented. First, (semi-)private letters by non-elite writers provide new insights into multilingual practices deployed for cross-border communication. Secondly, the paper explores household account books as hitherto underappreciated sources from the private sphere, many of which were kept by women, including domestic staff (Krogull 2024). These archival documents enable us to investigate the layered linguistic repertoires of individuals and families by taking into account their multilingualism and mobility.

References

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