

## **Unity in variation: a case study of /r/ in urban dialects in Flanders and the Netherlands**

*Evie Tops, Koen Sebregts & Hans Van de Velde*

The realization of the Dutch phoneme /r/ is – as in many other languages – subject to a large amount of variation. It includes at the one hand geographical, social and stylistic variation and at the other hand linguistic factors. The place of articulation of Dutch /r/ can be alveolar, palatal, retroflex, velar or uvular. In terms of manner features, /r/ may be realized as a trill, tap, fricative, approximant or vowel. In addition, /r/-deletion is also found in Dutch. In numerous publications it is claimed that in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century two variants have been spreading in the Dutch language area: uvular /r/ and – more recently and exclusively in the Netherlands – central approximant /r/. Furthermore, it is often observed that large cities have a particular r-variant in comparison with the surrounding area. However, until recently Dutch /r/ has nearly been studied by variationists. In this paper a study of (r) in 10 urban dialects in the Netherlands and Flanders is presented. It will be shown that despite the enormous intra- and inter-speaker variation, a lot of the observed patterns of variation can be explained by a detailed analysis of both socio-geographical and phonological factors.

The subjects are patrons of HEMA stores in six cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Den Haag, Leiden, Nijmegen, Rotterdam and Utrecht) and four in Flanders (Antwerpen, Brugge, Gent and Hasselt). The HEMA stores can be classified as working class / lower middle class. In each city 40 local speakers were selected, stratified for age (2) and sex. By means of a picture naming task and a word list 55 tokens of (r) were collected. Position in the syllable and preceding and following segment were systematically varied. In total, a consensus transcription was made for 22000 tokens of (r) (40 speakers x 10 cities x 55 tokens). 17 variants of (r) were distinguished.

First, a frequency distribution is presented split up by city. We will also focus on within-speaker variation: subjects use between two and eleven variants, within-speaker variation in Flanders is larger than expected, but it is still much smaller than in the Netherlands.

Second, for the analysis of the external factors (ANOVA) the variants are recoded in two index scores: place of articulation and consonanticity. Coronal realizations are dominant in Amsterdam, Antwerpen, Brugge and Utrecht; dorsal realizations are dominant in Den Haag, Hasselt, Gent, Leiden and Nijmegen; Rotterdam is the only city with an equal distribution of front and back realizations. Furthermore, it is shown that most speakers do not show variation for place of articulation. Variation for place of articulation is mainly linked with variation between speakers. For consonanticity, there is an obvious distinction between the Netherlands and Flanders. In Flanders approximant and vocalic realizations are rare, in the urban dialects spoken in the Netherlands non-consonantal realizations of (r) occur frequently. Nor for place of articulation, nor for consonanticity significant effects for sex and age show up, suggesting that there is no change in progress.

Third, there is also a high degree of variability according to phonological context. Two clear patterns emerge. First, (r) in onsets is mostly confined to vibrant (trilled or tapped) realizations. Variation in onset positions turns out to be largely limited to place of articulation (coronal vs. dorsal). Speakers show a great amount of stability for this feature, as they exclusively use either front or back trills. It is also stable across speakers of the same urban dialect, with the exception of Rotterdam. Second, /r/ in codas behaves in two fundamentally different ways: it either vocalizes or fricatives. Dialects display either one of these options, irrespective of whether /r/ in onsets is coronal or dorsal, but reflecting a north-south divide: in the urban dialects spoken in Flanders (r) fricatives in codas (especially word-finally), whereas speakers in the Dutch cities vocalize.