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The moving target of language variation

Language variation can be described in spatial, temporal and social dimensions. The first one is the area of classical dialectology, the second of historical linguistics and the third of sociolinguistics. Social variation can often be understood as a more or less intentional expression of social group identity, whereas spatial variation is rather accidental and a confounder of spatial distance, which leads to less contact between communities of speakers and hence diversification. The linguistic expressions of variation are changing through time.

Social and spatial variation have been intertwined in a fascinating way in the history of the Dutch and Frisian language. Nearly half the speakers of Dutch in the Netherlands live in the areas that used to be Frisian-speaking in the Early Middle Ages. Dutch – as a fundamentally Franconian variety – and Frisian have existed side by side in Holland until the 17th century, and both have been in use in the present-day province of Fryslân – nowadays the core of the Frisian speaking regions – since at least the 15th century.

During the ages of contact, Frisian was mostly the less prestigious language of the two and over the centuries lost most of its area to Dutch. Some of the linguistic traces of Dutch were, however, shaped by its contact with Frisian. Frisian, in turn, absorbed enormous amounts of linguistic material from Dutch. Despite this mutual exchange of linguistic material, the two linguistic identities ‘Frisian’ and ‘Dutch’ remained intact. This lecture will illustrate how the cohabitation of these two languages developed, focusing on remarkable shifts in linguistic composition of the varieties and the linguistic identity of their speakers.