

Does dialect loss give more or less variation? On language creativity and dialect leveling.

Jos Swanenberg

Tilburg University

In our world and times of globalization and superdiversity it is obvious that language continuously changes, and that the growing intensity and variation of language contact adds meaning and saliency to linguistic changes. Thus, language is not a static phenomenon; it changes continuously through space, time and use (or users).

In the province of Noord-Brabant in the south of the Netherlands, traditional dialects are under pressure, giving way to dialect leveling processes. Dialect leveling leads, after an initial increase of variation due to language contact, to a reduction of intersystemic variation as dialects change towards the standard language (vertical change) and towards each other (horizontal change). This supposedly results in a regional koine, a new system in between local dialects and standard language (Britain 2009). However, our data show that intrasystemically the degree of variation in fact may increase (Mutsaers & Swanenberg 2012).

Recent data from experiments that were aimed at describing the process of dialect leveling and dialect loss, show vast variation in all age groups, with curious coinages and hyperdialectisms, even in the oldest age groups. It seems that variation not only increases in the initial stage of contact, but it keeps increasing. These data were checked with the aid of substantial online enquiries.

This paper addresses the process of dialect leveling and dialect loss, and gives special attention to creative new forms and their implications for language variation and change.