

MYTH MAKING METHODS (II)

Bad data, (slightly) better data, and how to find them

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RECAP FROM YESTERDAY

- The “past” as such needs to be **created** by interpreting witnesses, guided by linking hypotheses
 - 1 Using Uniformitarianism ← linking hypotheses based on better data / the present
 - 2 Using all the data (not just linguistic witnesses)
- Apply care: blind spots are **expected!**

- Three case studies
- Four questions each:
 - 1 (Individual research questions)
 - 2 Linking hypothesis: what do we expect to find, based on our theory?
 - 3 How bad are our data, and how can we make them better?
 - 4 Testing the hypothesis. What can we know?

CASE STUDIES

- 1 How to use the past to understand the present?
- 2 How to use the present to understand the past?
- 3 How to use space to access time?

There is a natural alliance between dialect geographers, who study heterogeneity in space; sociolinguists, who study heterogeneity in society; and historical linguists, whose concern is heterogeneity in time. Historical linguistics may be characterized as the art of making the best use of bad data.
(Labov 1982, 20)

CASE 1: PAST > PRESENT

(1) PAST > PRESENT

■ Background (1):

- (a) In present-day Dutch: agreement variation in those verbs that do not have syncretic forms for 2nd and 3rd person agreement

(1) *u hebt – u heeft* *u kunt – u kan* *u zult – u zal*

■ Research question:

- When *u* became used as a (polite) subject pronoun around 1600 in Dutch (cf. Paardekooper 1996) in Dutch, what verbal agreement did it go with?

■ Background (2):

- (b) *U* is originally the **object form of *gij*** (2PL > 2 SG+PL between 1500 and 1600)
- (c) **Epistolary forms of address** *u.e.* (*uwe edelheid*) / *u.l.* (*uwer liefde*) between 1600 and 1800

(1) PAST > PRESENT

	Sg		Pl	
	Nom	Acc/Dat	Nom	Acc/Dat
Middle Dutch (c. 1150-1500)	<i>du</i>	<i>di</i>	<i>ghi</i>	<i>u</i>
1500-1700	<i>du, ghi</i>	<i>di, u</i>	<i>ghi</i>	<i>u</i>
17th/18th c.	<i>gij</i> <i>je/jij</i>	<i>u</i> <i>je/jou</i>	<i>gij</i>	<i>u</i>
today	T: <i>je/jij</i> V: <i>u</i>	<i>je/jou</i> <i>u</i>	<i>jullie</i> < <i>gij lieden</i> <i>u</i>	<i>jullie</i> <i>u lieden</i> <i>u</i>

(1) PAST > PRESENT

■ Linking hypotheses:

- 1 **Either:** If subject *u* derives from *u.e.*, oralised *uwé* (cf. (2)), we expect 3rd person agreement to be first (pronominalisation of a noun). 2nd person agreement would have arisen later by analogy because *u* is a form of direct address (Van der Horst 2008: 1094; www.taaladvies.net).

- (2) *Nog een ander van 't gebroedsel
Dat of Pen, of Degen voer':
Mijn soulas, mijn vreugdenvoedsel,
Ah! Quitteert V.E. la Cour?*

(Huygens, *Voorhout*, 1622)

- 2 **Alternatively:** If *u* replaces *gij* as a polite form, another expectation is possible, viz. that *u* is used with the verbal agreement required by *gij*, i.e., 2nd person.

- What kind of **data** do we need? Can we find such data?

(1) PAST > PRESENT

■ “Letters as Loot” (<https://brievenalsbuit.ivdnt.org>):

(Rutten/Van der Wal 2014)

- Corpus of *Sailing Letters* = “Dutch letters from the second half of the 17th to the early 19th c. from and to home, that were captured and have been preserved in British archives.”
- Ca. 1.000 letters (of about 40.000 preserved letters) have been enriched with linguistic annotations



(1) PAST > PRESENT

- **Annotation:** lemmatized, POS-tagged, sociolinguistic information (age groups (<30, 30–50, >50), socio-economic class, date — two periods (1661–1673; 1777–1783)),
no syntactic parsing
 - Extraction of **all** occurrences of lemma “u.e.” and “u.l.”
 - 8627 hits; 621 of those subject-*u* with non-syncretic verbs (*zijn* (1), *hebben* (2), *zullen* (3), *kunnen* (5), (*ver*)*mogen* (10), *willen* (15))
- **Recoding:**
 - Simplified socio-econ. class
 - **Generation:** age groups recoded as approximate birth year (“30–50” in 1680 \rightsquigarrow born c. 1640)
 - only four provinces with most letters (Ams, NH, ZH, ZL)

\rightsquigarrow 451 tokens

(1) PAST > PRESENT

(3) Inversion

- a. *soo **kunt** vE hem spreken*
'so can(2SG) you speak to
him'
(bab0908; Zeeland, 1620)
- b. *daar **kan** ul dan reekeningh
naer Maeckken*
'there can(3SG) you then
make accounts for'
(bab1063; Noord-Holland,
1664)

(4) Uninverted (straight) V2

- a. *vl **bent** niet vit mijn herte*
'You are (2SG) not away from
my heart'
(bab0300; Zeeland, 1664)
- b. *UE **is** hier meer geweest*
'You have (lit. are(3SG)) been
here more often'
(bab0410; Amsterdam, 1780)

(5) Verb-final/later

- a. *Zoo als UE omstandig In de brieven van vader **zult** vinden*
'As you will(2SG) find extensively in the letters from (our) father'
(bab1011; Zuid-Holland, 1780)
- b. *... dog hoopen dat uld het niet kwalyk nemen **zal***
'but hope that you will(3SG) not resent it'
(bab0914; Amsterdam, 1781)

(1) PAST > PRESENT

Results: variation \neq random

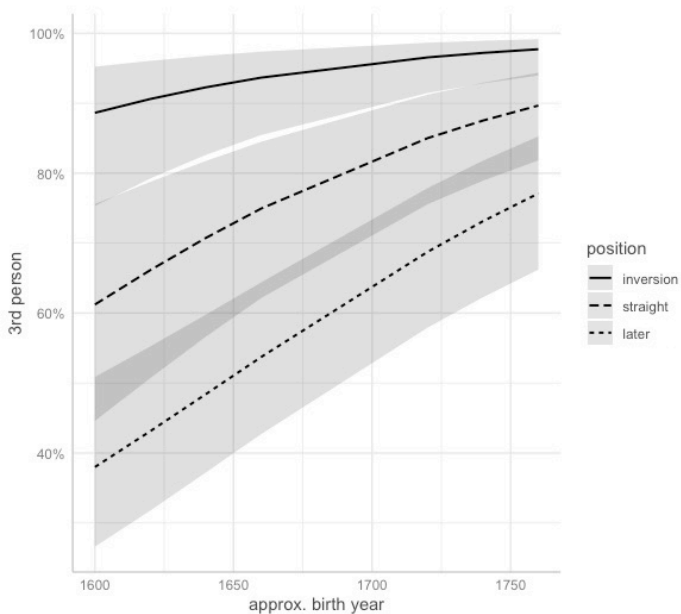
17th c.			
verb	2Sg	3Sg	Total
later	94	38	132
inversion	6	21	27
straight	16	12	28

18th c.			
verb	2Sg	3Sg	Total
later	59	95	154
inversion	2	39	41
straight	12	57	69

- 17th c.: strong conditioning by **syntactic context**
- 3rd person is the incoming form, replaces 2nd person and becomes dominant in 18th c.
- Earliest attested examples from 1599: 2nd person agreement (*u hebt*)

(6) *ende u hebt in dese wech al 7 vame 6 vame ende bij lant komende 5 vamen*
'And you have(2SG) in this way already 7 fathom, 6 fathom, and, coming
onto the shore, 5 fathom.'
([1599] *De tweede schipvaart der Nederlanders naar Oost-Indië* [...])

(1) PAST > PRESENT



(1) PAST > PRESENT

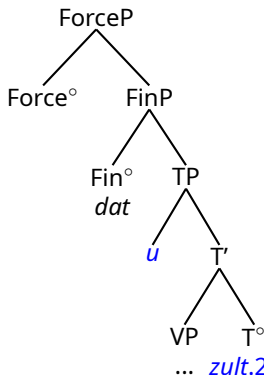
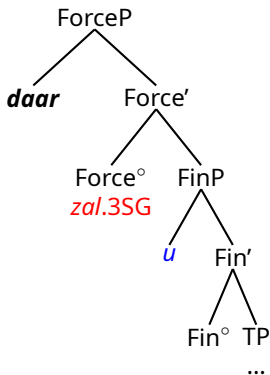
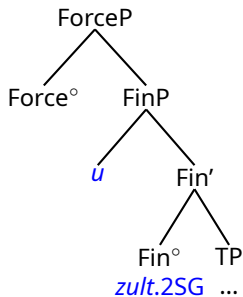
- **Striking**: very regular diffusion through syntactic contexts (inversion > straight V2 > embedded):
- **Position-dependent Agreement (PDA)** in Dutch: standardly with 2Sg *jij*, dialectally also with 1PI

(7) Ben-∅ jij / Jij ben-t
'Are you / you are'

- Standardly analysed as **asymmetric V2** (Zwart 1993)
↪ V_{fin} is in different positions in inversion contexts (higher) and straight/embedded contexts (lower)

(1) PAST > PRESENT

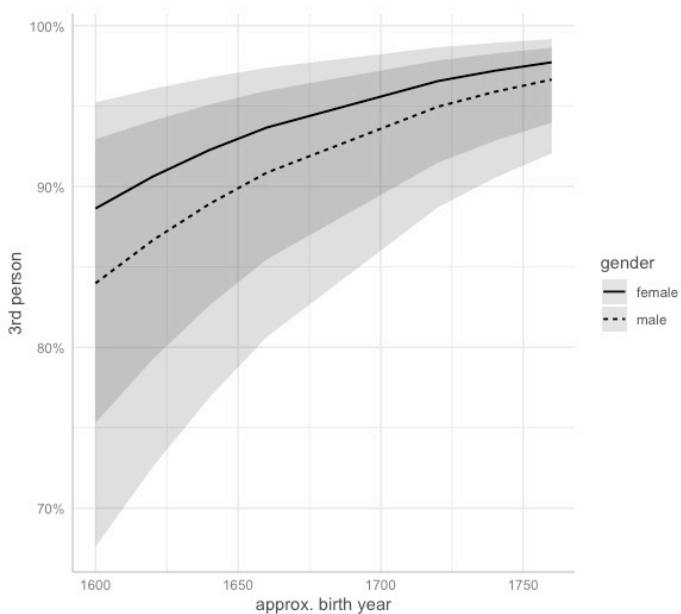
- Original system reflects the use of epistolary forms *U.E./U.L.* with the underlying PDA that derives from the recently established singular use of *gij*
 - 2nd person when verb is in V/T or Fin, agreeing with *u* in its specifier
 - 3rd person (elsewhere) when verb is raised to Force, where it is not in a spec-head-relation with *u*.



(1) PAST > PRESENT

- During the 17th c., subject-*u* is reanalysed as requiring 3rd person agreement
- Paradigm pressure / analogy + social evaluation
 - Most verbs = syncretic (2nd = 3rd person); inversion-form = 3rd person \rightsquigarrow very frequent \rightsquigarrow analogical pressure (Kodner 2023)
 - Epistolary forms = more formal than *gij* (Van Leuvensteijn 2002); 3rd person \sim change from above (Breitbarth 2026)
- Only the most frequent verbs can resist analogical pressure (*zijn* (1), *hebben* (2), *zullen* (3), *kunnen* (5), *(ver)mogen* (10), *willen* (15))
- Fossilization of variation + lexical differences regarding the preference for 2nd or 3rd person: *u bent* 'you are.2SG' vs. *u heeft* 'you have.3SG'

(1) PAST > PRESENT



CASE 2: PRESENT > PAST

(2) PRESENT > PAST

■ Background (1):

- Many publications on grammaticalization link phonetic erosion and semantic loss s (e.g., Heine/Kuteva 2002), cf. *Parallel Reduction Hypothesis* (Bybee 1994)
- What is semantic loss, exactly? (cf. von Stechow 1995: does grammaticalization actually involve semantic “loss”?)
- And what is phonetic erosion? (also occurs outside diachronic change, e.g. as a result of lexical frequency, Shi et al. 2005, or predictability in the context, Lindblom 1990)
- Wichmann (2011): intonational changes in grammaticalisation (“loss of prominence”) > change in segmental properties

(2) PRESENT > PAST

■ Background (2):

Stages	Form	Function
Ia	<i>ne V</i>	<i>ne</i> = logical negation
Ib	<i>ne V (pas)</i>	<i>ne</i> = logical negation <i>pas</i> = optional pseudoargumental re-inforcer
IIa	<i>ne V (pas)</i>	<i>ne</i> = logical negation <i>pas</i> = generalized negative polarity adverb (NPA)
IIb	<i>ne V pas</i>	<i>ne+pas</i> = logical negation
IIc	<i>(ne) V pas</i>	<i>ne</i> = optional remnant (?) <i>pas</i> = logical negation
III	<i>V pas</i>	<i>pas</i> = logical negation

- **Question:** How can we tell whether a language entering JC is in **stage Ib** or in **stage IIa**? Or perhaps already **stage IIb**? At what point does 'incipient' JC become 'full-scale' JC?

(2) PRESENT > PAST

- NPAs (IIa) activate set of alternatives \leadsto obligatory exhaustification \leadsto elimination of any alternatives not entailed by the assertion (Chierchia 2013)

→ particularly suitable to express narrow-focus and constituent negation (Willis 2016, Blaxter/Willis 2018, Breitbarth/Lucas/Willis 2020)

- (8) a. thuo niet ekir iro selon neuen ok ...
then NEG only 3PL.GEN soul.PL but also

'then not only their soul, but also ...' (OS, Glossen zu den Homilien Gregors des Großen 63, 15–16)

- b. ða wæs in sumum tune noht feorr
there be.PST.3SG in some.M.DAT.SG hamlet.DAT NEG far
sum ging ðearfa ...
some young pauper

'There was in some hamlet not far (away) a certain young pauper ...'
(OE, YCOE, cobede, Bede 5:2.388.14.3858) (Willis 2016:482)

(2) PRESENT > PAST

→ Linking Hypotheses:

- H1 A new negator first emerges in contexts where it expresses narrow **focus** negation (< sentential scope). After reanalysis as a **neutral / polar** negator, the new element loses this distributional restriction.
- H2 A new negator should therefore **prosodically interact** with the expression of certain information structural categories, particularly focus and contrast. As reanalysis happens, **uncertainty** in the prosodic encoding is expected.
- H3 A new negator should be **prosodically independent**, as it is initially syntactically phrasal. The head of this phrase, being a lexical word, projects a fully-fledged phonological word. After reanalysis, the new negator may **lose** its prosodic strength. Segmental erosion (duration reduction, consonant lenition, vowel centralization, ...) is a byproduct of the prosodic change.

(2) PRESENT > PAST

- What kind of **data** do we need? Can we find such data? (Prosody in written data = difficult)
- Testing H1-3 requires a language currently between stage Ib and IIb of JC
- The dialects of Veneto form a continuum concerning the use of *mica*:

Verona > Padua > Venice

(2) PRESENT > PAST

- Experiment: native speakers translated constructed dialogues into dialect; 30 target sentences (15 aff/ 15 neg; 5 each broad /narrow informational / narrow contrastive focus)
(Magistro/Breitbarth/Crocco 2022; Magistro 2023)
- **Venice+Padua**: *miga* emphatically denies old/given information (= counter-expectational); Verona / **Gazzolo**
d'Arcole: *mia* also in negation of new and broad focus

(2) PRESENT > PAST

(9) a. *La ga magnà la torta che ti ga preparà?*

'Did she eat the cake you had baked?'

b. *No go **miga** preparà la torta. (No go vuo tempo.)*

'I didn't bake the cake at all. (I didn't have any time.)'

(Venetian)

(10) a. *Cossa succede?*

what happens

'What happens?'

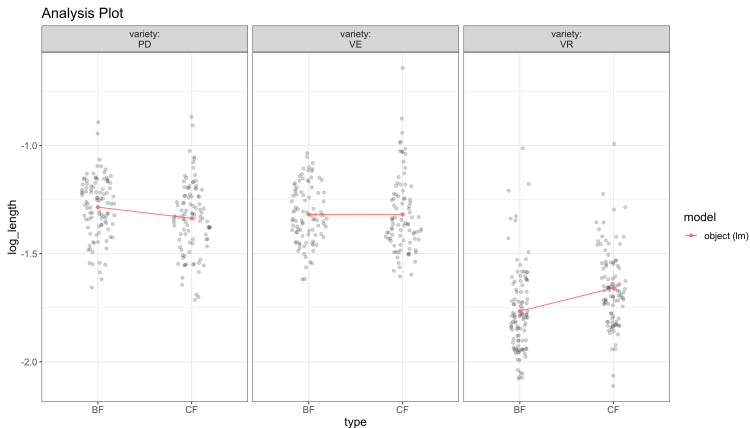
b. *No sento **mia** la musica.*

'I don't hear the music.'

(Gazzolese)

(2) PRESENT > PAST

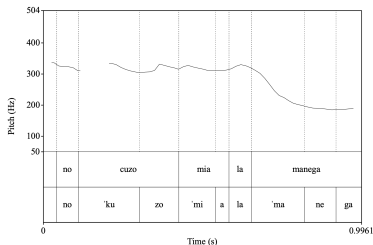
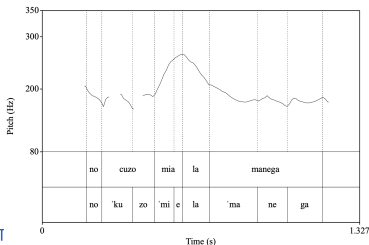
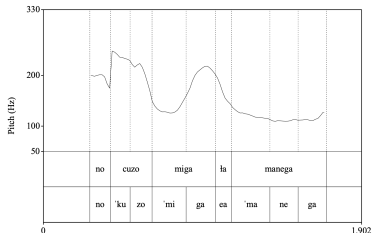
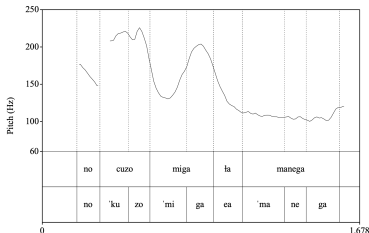
- Gazzolo *mia*: variation in **duration** depending on context, greatest variation in counter-expectational contexts ~ change in progress / uncertainty?
- **Segmental reduction** *miga* > *mia* > *m*



(2) PRESENT > PAST

- pitch accent on *mia* in counter-expectational, new narrow focus, and contrastive focus contexts; not in broad focus statements

(Magistro et al. 2022; Magistro 2023)



(2) PRESENT > PAST

- In Venice, the most conservative Venetan variety, *miga* is still mostly used for narrow focus and CF negation. It always has a pitch accent, and is never reduced.
- In Gazzolo (near Verona) at the western side of Veneto, the postverbal element is segmentally reduced to *mia*, can be used in BF negation contexts, and only bears a pitch accent when used contrastively.
- **Interpretation:** *mia* in BF contexts has lost its metrical strength \leadsto no longer docking site for associating a pitch accent. (Ladd 1996, Magistro 2023)
- **Extrapolation** (or, according to Lass, myth-making, under **Uniformity**): This is \pm what happened in other cases of incipient Jespersen's Cycle in the past.

CASE 3: SPACE = TIME

(3) SPACE = TIME

■ Research question:

- Since the 16th c., *dan* as a comparative complementizer is replaced by equative *als* in spoken / informal Dutch, even though the written / standard language maintains the distinction. How did this happen in detail?

- (11) a. doch onse herten sijn harder **dan** een dijamant
but our hearts are harder than a diamond
(Pieter Zwart to Jannetje Claas, 1664/12/01)
- b. doch godes bewringe is veel grooter als **haer** gevaer
but God's protection is much bigger than her danger
(Maartje Nannings to Paulus Pietersz. Schuitemaker, 1665/01/30)

(3) SPACE = TIME

■ Linking hypotheses:

- 1 **Either:** The split between *als* and *dan* never really existed in Dutch; *dan* may be a (written) loan from MHG. Dutch dialects either have a *als* – *of* split, or only *als*. (e.g., Paardekooper 1970)
Expectation: there should be no dialects using *dan*.

*“Inzake **als/dan** blijkt het systeem vrij zeker in geen enkel nederlands dialect bekend, al is **groter dan** wel hier en daar schriftelijk opgegeven, maar enkel onder suggestie van het ABN. Zeker is er geen sprake van een dan-gebiedje.”*
(Paardekooper 1970: 329)

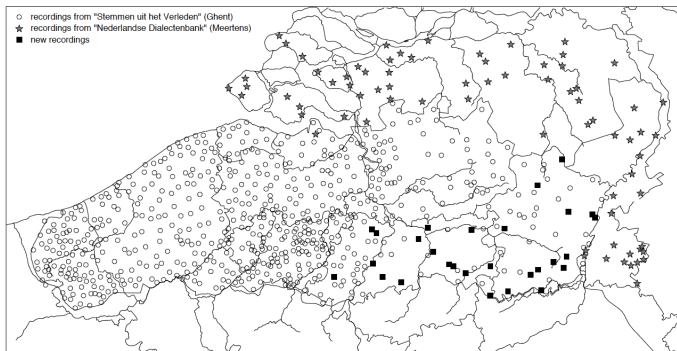
- 2 **Or:** There were two different *dan* in historical Dutch, a temporal [–NPI] one and one that is a [+NPI] univerbation of *dat* + (negative) *en*. With the loss of *en* in EMDu, NPI-*dan* in comparatives was lost. (e.g., Postma 2006)
Expectation: There should be comparatives at some stage with *dat* and *en* not yet univerbated.

- What kind of **data** do we need? Can we find such data?

(3) SPACE = TIME

■ Data:

- **Corpus Middelnederlands** for MDu (1300–1550/ 1200–1820) (<https://corpusmiddelnederlands.ivdnt.org/>)
- **GCND**: POS-tagged (and increasingly parsed) corpus of spoken (Southern) Dutch dialects; speakers born between 1871 and ±1920 (<https://gcnd.ivdnt.org/>) (Breitbarth et al. 2026)
- **SAND Atlas** (<https://sand.meertens.knaw.nl/zoeken>)



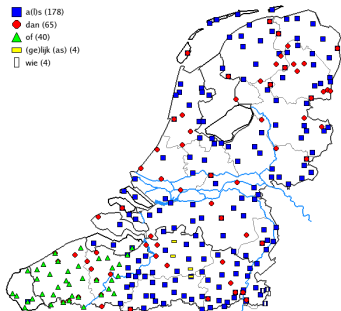
(3) SPACE = TIME

1 Hypothesis 1: We expect no *dan*-areas

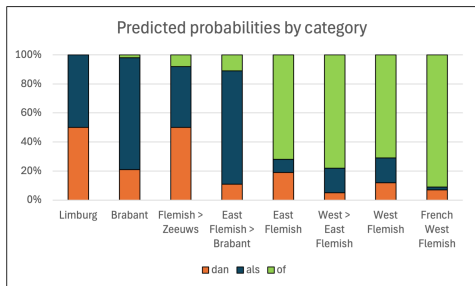
- (12) a. maar het was toen veel slechter **dan** nu.
but is was then much worse than now
(H109p Esen (WF), *1882, rec. 1965)
- b. het was schoner **of** nu wi.
it was nicer than now PRT
(H109p Esen (WF), *1882, rec. 1965)
- (13) a. is nu dit jaar veel beter **als** verleden jaar.
is now this year much better than last year
(K190p Poppel (Bra), *1910, rec. 1968)
- b. dat is werkelijk nu beter **dan** andere jaren,
that is really now better than other years
(K190p Poppel (Bra), *1910, rec. 1968)

(3) SPACE = TIME

⇒ This is not borne out: *dan* is used both spontaneously and in questionnaire data in comparatives ~> should be autochthonous feature, no clear area though



(SAND)



(GCND)

(3) SPACE = TIME

Corpus Middelnedderlands INT More Historical Dutch About Help

en ...

Documenten N-grammen Statistieken

N-gram grootte: 5

N-gram type: Word

Word Word Word Word Word

maer/maeren/maerjme Word dat en/ne Word

Alles selecteren Alles selecteren Alles selecteren Alles selecteren

Alles deselecteren Alles deselecteren Alles deselecteren Alles deselecteren

Filter zoekopdracht op ...

Date: Text type Title and author

Witness Year: 1200 1820

Gedeeltelijke overlap Volledige overlap

1200-1820

Witness Year (Date): 1200-1820

Geselecteerd subcorpus:

Totaal aantal documenten: 378 (99.7%)

Totaal aantal tokens: 9,198,456 (94.8%)

Zoeken Wissen Geschiedenis

Resultaten voor: Word 5-grams binnen documenten waar Witness Year: 1200-1820

Per Hit Per Document

Geen resultaten gevonden.

2 Hypothesis 2: There should be comparatives at some stage with *dat* and *en* not yet unverbated.

⇒ Not borne out:

- Negative *en* in MDu always precedes a finite verb \leadsto *dat+en* should never co-occur in comparatives (and they don't)

(3) SPACE = TIME

- 3 Let's try a third hypothesis: **spatial diffusion** in the West Germanic dialect continuum.
 - A similar development has been observed for German, where the equative particle has in fact repeatedly first encroached upon the comparative one, and then replaced it, only for itself to be replaced by a new equative particle: *dan/als* > *als* > *als/wie* > *wie*. (Jäger 2010; 2018; 2019)
 - **English** retains the historical *than/as* distinction for comparative / equative. (Jäger 2018)
 - Dutch dialects seem to have *dan/als* variation in the **East**, cf. esp. spontaneous GCND data
 - (West) Flemish is a relic area of a different system.

(3) SPACE = TIME

Typ	Äquative		Komparative
	Nicht-Grad-Äquative	Grad-Äquative	
	[- Ungleichheit]		[+ Ungleichheit]
	[- Gradsemantik]	[+ Gradsemantik]	
Dreiersystem	Engl. <i>like</i>	<i>as</i>	<i>than</i>
	BSN <i>zoals</i>	<i>als</i>	<i>dan</i>
Zweiersystem a (Einheitsvergleichs- partikel für Äquative)	Nl. <i>als</i>		<i>dan</i>
	Span., Katalan., Portug., Ital. <i>como/com(e)</i>		<i>que/che</i>
Zweiersystem b (Einheitsvergleichs- partikel für Gradvgl.)	Frz. <i>comme</i>	<i>que</i>	
	AD <i>zoals/gelijk</i>	<i>as</i>	
	Lat. <i>ut (/quomodo)</i>	<i>quam</i>	
Einersystem (generelle Einheits- vergleichspartikel)	Ungarisch <i>mint</i>		

(Jäger 2019:374)

SUMMARY

SUMMING UP

- Epistemological and methodological issues: what can we know, and how?
- Historical data are bad, but
 - There's no data like ... all available data.
(the Lauersdorf principle, the Uniformitarian Hypothesis):
metadata
past, present, space
 - Data alone are not information:
We need **theory** to identify meaningful patterns
- Tips:
 - Try hard
 - Report everything
 - Avoid universal statements

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