

Borders in continental West Germanic dialect syntax: Evidence from the Wenker surveys

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The Continental West Germanic languages Dutch, Frisian, and German are all classified into various subdialects (e.g., West, East, and North Frisian; High and Low German; etc.), mostly according to phonological criteria. In addition, they are dispersed over many administrative entities (Dutch: Netherlands, Flanders, and France; Frisian: Netherlands and Germany; German: Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and further adjoining areas). The Frisian area is split up into three non-contiguous entities, surrounded by Dutch or German dialects, respectively. There are thus a lot of "borders", both linguistic and administrative.

In my talk, I would like to investigate whether large-scale syntactic areas in Continental West Germanic coincide with traditional phonological isoglosses and/or with administrative borders. To be able to do so, it is of paramount importance to have data at ones disposal that not only covers the whole Continental West Germanic area, thus allowing for exact comparison, but has also been collected using the same method. Such a data base exists in the form of the so-called "Wenker sentences". As is generally known, Georg Wenker (1852—1911) sent out questionnaires containing 40 Standard German sentences to school teachers all over Germany, asking them to provide translations of the sentences in the local dialects; in this original survey, in addition to German dialects other languages (such as Frisian, Danish, French, Sorbian, among others) were documented. As is little known so far, however, almost two generations later surveys using the Wenker sentences were conducted in further areas, among others in Austria, Switzerland, Flanders, and the Netherlands (see Meertens 1936).

While the Wenker data, given that we are dealing with translations, do pose some methodological problems that need to be addressed, its sheer quantity and the fact that the same method was used to document nearly all of the Continental West Germanic area make up for this shortcoming. As has been demonstrated in several studies, the Wenker sentences do provide rich material with respect to various syntactic phenomena (see most recently Fleischer 2012, Schallert 2013).

During my presentation, I will present analyses of various syntactic phenomena contained in the Wenker sentences (pro-drop, object pronoun serialization, loss of the preterite, negation) by using a sample of ca. 2.400 questionnaires that are equally distributed over the whole Continental West Germanic area. The main question to be addressed will be whether there are correlations between syntactic and other types of borders (both administrative and linguistic). In that respect, given its areal scattering, it is of special interest to investigate whether the Frisian dialects provide the same syntactic patterns as their Dutch and Low German surroundings, respectively, or whether there are

syntactic constructions differentiating Frisian from its neighboring languages (possibly even uniting all three Frisian dialect groups). This could allow us to decide whether genetic relationship or areal spreading is more important for the emergence of syntactic areas.