Investigating language landscapes: Variation in verb cluster interruption

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Except for finite verbs in main clauses, verbs in Standard Dutch occur at the end of the clause. In the case of multiple verbs this gives rise to clause final verb clusters with all non-verbal elements generally preceding all verbs. However, in certain Dutch dialects, non-verbal material can occur within a verb cluster (Verhasselt 1961, Hoeksema 1993, among many others). These dialects vary in which types of elements can interrupt a verb cluster, varying from particles (*moet op-bellen* 'must up-call') to various types of arguments (*moet een schuur bouwen* 'must a barn built') and adverbs (*moet vroeg opstaan* must early rise) (Barbiers et al. 2008). I argue that variation in this domain is systematic and directly follows from the interaction between syntax and processing.

A preference of performance that has been dubbed minimize domains (Hawkins 1994, 2003, 2004) requires both the higher verb and the intervening element in these constructions to be in a minimal domain with the main verb, leading to two conflicting structures. The minimal domain is affected by the syntactic size and position of the intervening element. The interaction of processing and syntax accordingly leads to an ordered ranking of grammatical types. A study amongst speakers of 40 Dutch dialects reveals that this ranking is directly reflected in the number of speakers that accepted a verb cluster interruption by each element type.

The results illuminate on the notion 'dialect'. The study reveals a language landscape without clear borders. As syntactic principles interact with processing principles, practices can be spread across the language area. Microvariation in the use of this phenomenon can hence not be traced back to parametric differences between dialects.