

On the emergence of the Dutch laryngeal system

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The paper looks at the laryngeal system of modern (Standard Northern) Dutch from the perspective of a 'realistic laryngeal' typology. Dutch is an ideal testing ground for laryngeal oppositions because its laryngeal assimilations show untypical patterns: a) all voiceless obstruents trigger the devoicing of a *following* voiced fricative (*asvat* /s#v/ > a[sf]at 'ashbin', *afzuigen* /f#z/ > a[fs]uigen 'to extract'); b) (the 2) voiced stops trigger classical *regressive* voicing assimilation of all obstruents (*eetbaar* /t#b/ > ee[db]aar 'edible', *boekboek* /k#b/ > koe[gb]oek 'cookery book') – cf. Booij (1995:58-64). These data would suggest that Dutch exploits both [spread glottis], to spread rightward in a), and [voice], to spread leftward in b). Honeybone's 'laryngeal realism' approach (2005) demands, however, that a language opposing two series of obstruents, say plain vs voiced or plain vs aspirated, must be analyzed as opposing only one particular specification, voice or aspiration, throughout the whole of its obstruent system. The paper proposes exactly such an analysis for Dutch, in the privative element theoretical framework of government phonology (KLV 1985, Backley and Takahashi 1998, Honeybone 2005, etc), involving privative [voice] only: nothing spreads in a) because voicelessness is not active in Dutch obstruents, and the licence of a voiced fricative is revoked in a specific phonological environment.

These patterns, according to some authors, have a language contact explanation, and this paper will contribute to this debate clarifying some issues. Iverson and Salmons analyze (1995, 2003, 2008) the Germanic laryngeal system as a [sp gl] system and claim (2008) that Dutch switched to a voice system under the influence of French. They enumerate (following Kloeke and Weijnen) the main pieces of evidence: unconditioned fronting of /u:/ to /y:/, vocalization of /l/ in codas (*oud* – Gmn *alt*), h-dropping in especially southwestern varieties and the presence of nasal vowels in some. There are considerable problems with these phenomena as constituting decisive evidence for phonological interference. 1) They can easily occur independently across languages: English dialects also have /l/-vocalization (*talk*, *calf*, *palm*), some have h-dropping and American English often has nasalized vowels. 2) They do not always apply as they did in French: Dutch vocalized /l/ only before coronal stops /t d/ (and English only before non-coronals after back vowels), while French lost /l/ before any consonant (without particular evidence that it had all started before coronals). 3) There are further similarities between North Sea Gmc and Romance: eg, the drop of nasals before 'voiceless' fricatives (L *insula* > Fr *île* 'island', Du *fijf* – Gmn *fünf* 'five'). What about these? On the whole, it seems that these phenomena could readily occur in Dutch without external interference and, therefore, they do not constitute unequivocal evidence for French influence. Nevertheless, the idea of language contact in connection with the laryngeal systems in Germanic and neighbouring languages is relevant, but a much earlier date will be suggested: Latin could already be in touch with [voice] Gmc varieties. Furthermore, it will be recalled that French itself is the result of Germanic–non-Germanic interference. The laryngeal interferences are worth examining in depth: some peculiarities will be pointed out.

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