

Watching Dutch grammar change: why do we use *them* when we know perfectly well it should be *they*?

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Sociosyntacticians are rarely in the occasion to watch syntax change right under their nose, but Dutch analysts are currently amazed (and/or alarmed) by the rapid spread of the object pronoun *hun* in subject position (as in *Als je zo speelt krijgen hun natuurlijk altijd kansen* ‘If you will play like that *them* will always get chances’, Author2 2003:277). While this change excites (extreme) irritation on the part of the cultural and educational establishment, (socio)linguists predict that “*hun* will eventually win out in Standard Dutch” (Author2 2006:285).

In this paper we try to answer the controversial question which factor(s) condition the rapid dissemination of non-standard *hun*. Both external and internal determinants have been proposed. While Author1 & Author2 (to appear a & b) claim that subject-*hun* embodies the demise of the conservative Standard Language Ideology which is hostile to variation, Author2 (2003 & 2006) has emphasized the system-internal advantages of subject-*hun*, which reduces the massive double duty inherent in the pronoun system of Dutch. In a similar vein, Van Bergen et al. 2011 claim that *hun* is functionally superior to the standard subject pronouns *zij* and *ze* “they” because it exclusively denotes animate entities, whereas the standard forms are intrinsically ambiguous between animate and non-animate referents.

Unfortunately, all these studies raise concern because they focus on either external or internal determinants, and because (in the case of Van Bergen et al.) they build on materials from the Corpus of Spoken Dutch which is too old to document ongoing change. In answer to these concerns, we extracted 2449 sentences with subject *ze*, *zij* or *hun* from a corpus containing 125 hours of Netherlandic Dutch compiled from a stratified selection of television programmes broadcasted between 2009 and 2011. All sentences were coded for a number of internal and external variables, but a stepwise forward regression analysis confirmed the predominance of the internal variables: the use of *hun* is significantly preferred in sentences where it bears primary stress and in sentences which express a negative contrast between the referent of *hun* and the speaker (group). While we found no effect of animacy (as Van Bergen et al. predicted) we did not find any external constraints on the use of *hun* either (beyond the almost categorical restriction of *hun* to non-scripted spontaneous speech). In sum, our data indicate that subject-*hun* is a syntactic optimization whose use has by now become ubiquitous in all but the most formal/prepared speech of almost all the Dutch.