

Who power Polder Dutch?

A perceptual-sociolinguistic study of a new variety of Dutch*

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1. Introduction

According to Stroop (1998) and others before him (e.g. Reker 1993) a new language variety is emerging in the Netherlands. Stroop assumes the process has been started off by younger women with common social and personal characteristics. He bases this idea on observations of language use on radio and television, especially in talk shows, sports programs, discussion programs, and current affairs programs. The new variety is said to be mostly spoken by women active in politics, science, and culture, holding professions such as historian, writer, journalist, lawyer, politician, and popsinger, but not by businesswomen.

Stroop (1998) names this new variety Polder Dutch and describes it as an accent of Dutch characterized by a lowering of the first element of diphthongs and long vowels. Especially the realization of /ei/ is conspicuous, /eiγələk/ (*eigenlijk* “actually”) being pronounced as [aiγələk] and /keikə/ (*kijken* “look”) as [kaikə]. /œy/ and /au/ are realized as [au] and [au], respectively, whereas the long vowels /e/, /ø/, and /o/ are moving in the direction of [ei], [œy], and [au], respectively.

The typical, first generation speaker of Polder Dutch has a higher middle class background, an environment traditionally dominated by Standard Dutch, and is between 25 and 40 years of age. As the variety is spreading, Stroop hears it more and more often among students and salesgirls of a younger age as well. According to Stroop it is difficult to find men with a Polder Dutch accent matching the typical, highly educated Polder Dutch woman, especially above age 30. However, among very young teenagers he thinks that the number of boys speaking Polder Dutch is increasing rapidly. Stroop regards Polder Dutch as a sociolect rather than a regiolect, as it seems to be socially conditioned rather than geographically; its

speakers come from all regions of the Netherlands.¹

What evidence has been gathered to date to support the notion of a new variant of standard Dutch spoken mainly by women? Firstly, there are the real-life observations by Stroop. Secondly, there are the results of a small-scale transcription study in which the /ei/-realizations by nine women were indeed found to be significantly lower than those of nine men (newsreaders and guests of the cultural television program *Het blauwe licht*). Thirdly, there is some anecdotal evidence of women being conscious of using Polder Dutch and of parents noticing and reacting unfavourably to their daughters speaking Polder Dutch (Stroop 1998:23).

However, we think more is needed, both in the production and perception domain. To validate Stroop's claims production data will have to be gathered from large groups of women and men of different ages, regions, and classes, to be analysed auditorily as well as acoustically. In addition, the social embedding of Polder Dutch could be confirmed by experimentally obtained perception data, as it can be assumed that the decision to pick up particular speech habits will be motivated by a positive attitude towards the speech characteristics involved. The present study focusses on perception. It aims at verifying Stroop's ideas by means of a judgement study with auditory stimuli.

The principal research question we sought to answer was: Are the reactions of young women towards Polder Dutch indeed more positive than those of other people and does it make a difference where these women come from? More concretely, the study focussed on linguistically naive people's perception of Polder Dutch as compared to Standard Dutch, Dutch with an Amsterdam accent, and Dutch with an accent typical of smaller cities in the Randstad (i.e. the densely populated western part of the Netherlands enclosed by the city belt of Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, and Utrecht). The experiment was administered to women and men of various ages and regional origins.

In line with Stroop's (1998) ideas we expected young female listeners to be more positive towards Polder Dutch than older female listeners and both young and old male listeners. We expected this effect to be independent of regional origin. Moreover, we expected a more positive attitude towards Polder Dutch to be combined with a less positive attitude towards Standard Dutch, which means that young female listeners would be less positive towards Standard Dutch than other listeners. We did not formulate any hypotheses with respect to people's attitudes towards Randstad Dutch and Amsterdam Dutch, as their relation to Polder Dutch is not explicitly discussed by Stroop.

2. Method

2.1 Speakers

Listeners heard the speech of twelve women. Three of the speakers spoke Polder Dutch, three spoke Dutch with a typically Amsterdam accent, three spoke different variants of Randstad Dutch, and three spoke Standard Dutch. Polder Dutch is the focus of this study, the three other varieties served as reference points. Randstad and Amsterdam Dutch were chosen as references because many people consider Polder Dutch as ‘just another Randstad accent’. We were curious to see whether Polder Dutch would be evaluated different from regional accents from the Randstad. Standard Dutch was included as the traditional norm for spoken Dutch.

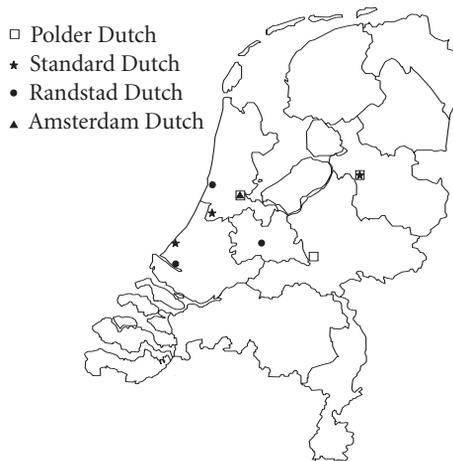


Figure 1. Origin of the speakers.

The geographic origin of the twelve speakers is shown in Figure 1. The speakers of Polder Dutch can be seen to come from different regions in the Netherlands. These speakers were selected by Stroop as good representatives of Polder Dutch, mainly on the basis of their realization of /ei/, i.e. the most conspicuous aspect of Polder Dutch. The other characteristics of their speech were fairly neutral. The three speakers with an Amsterdam accent were all born and raised in Amsterdam; they manifested some typical Amsterdam features such as palatalization of /n/, /s/ and /t/, and rounding of /a:/. The three speakers with a Randstad accent originate from smaller places in the Randstad. Their accents are not identical but all have clear Randstad elements, such as devoicing of /v/ and /z/ and diphthongization of /e:/ and /o:/. The three speakers of Standard Dutch were born and raised in the western

and eastern parts of the country. Their speech was judged by a panel of five phoneticians to be (almost) perfect Standard Dutch. They had none of the Polder Dutch, Amsterdam or Randstad features characteristic of the other three groups of speakers.

According to Stroop (1998), typical speakers of Polder Dutch are of the female sex, between 25 and 40 years of age, and highly educated. The speakers of Polder Dutch in the present experiment fit this profile well. This also holds for the speakers of the other accents.² Thus the listeners were confronted with speech samples from a homogeneous group of speakers.

2.2 Speech

Utterances referring to the origin, profession, personality, and opinions of the speakers were excluded from the listening materials, so that the contents of the stimuli could not influence the judgements. By means of a digital wave editor the selected utterances were excised from their original context (radio and television programs, sociolinguistic interviews) and placed in a random order, separated by pauses of 400 ms. This procedure resulted in semantically neutral speech samples, composed of unrelated utterances with a total duration of about 25 sec per speaker. The speech samples were placed in two random orders, A and B.

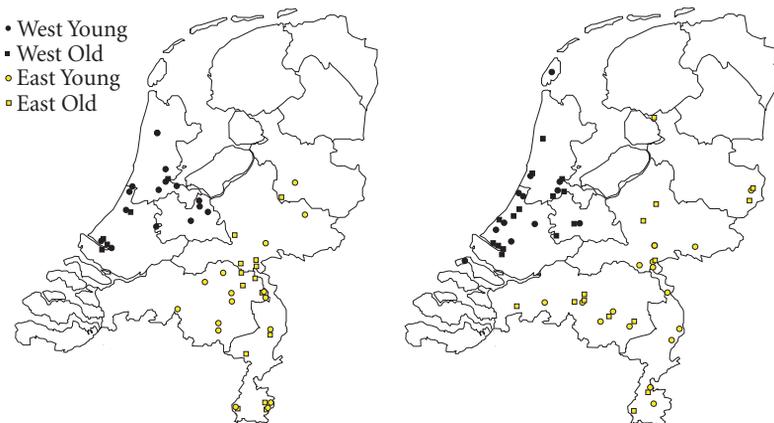


Figure 2a. Origin of female listeners

Figure 2b. Origin of male listeners

2.3 Listeners

A total of 160 listeners took part in the experiment. They fell into eight groups of 20 listeners each. Each group was defined by three variables: sex ('male' and 'female'), age ('young' and 'old'), and regional origin ('west' and 'east'). The younger listeners were mostly in their early twenties and the older ones in their late forties. The subjects from the west had spent the greater part of their lives in the western provinces of Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, or Utrecht, the subjects from the east in the provinces of Overijssel, Gelderland, Noord-Brabant, and Limburg, i.e. the southeastern part of the Netherlands, bordering on Germany and Belgium. The origin of the listeners is indicated in Figures 2a and 2b. The listeners' educational level was high, in accordance with that of the speakers.

2.4 Task and procedure

The listeners expressed their reactions to the speech samples by ticking six 7-point scales, with opposite terms on either side. The scales had been selected on the basis of their supposed relevance for ongoing change in the standard language. They included: *broad – standard*, *diverging – normal*, *old fashioned – modern*, *ugly – beautiful*, *sloppy – polished*, *not my cup of tea – my cup of tea*. Within each listener group some subjects heard the speech samples in order A and the others in order B. The stimuli were preceded by practice samples, composed in the same manner of semantically neutral utterances. The circumstances in which the experiment was administered varied; some listeners listened to the stimuli in groups, others individually. There were also quite a few subjects who took the test through the internet.

3. Results

The reliability of the scales, assessed by means of Cronbach's alpha, was high, for the eight separate groups as well as for groups combined. Of all coefficients there was only one below .80, namely *modern* as judged by the young male listeners from the east, and most coefficients exceeded .90. This means that the listeners within and across the various listener groups made clear and similar distinctions among the speech samples along the six judgement dimensions: they agreed to a high degree on the characteristics of the stimuli. Apparently, the six scales were indeed relevant to differences between the accents judged.

The principal purpose of this study was to compare the reactions towards different language varieties of four particular social groups, namely young women,

old women, young men, and old men. We therefore decided to carry out a series of analyses of variance in which these four groups constituted the four levels of one factor Group. Group thus refers to specific combinations of age and sex of listener. Two more factors were included, i.e. Variety of speaker, also with four levels (Polder Dutch, Standard Dutch, Randstad Dutch, Amsterdam Dutch), and Region of listener, with two levels (west and east). For each analysis there was one dependent variable, which consisted of the ratings on one particular scale, averaged over the 20 listeners in each of the original eight groups as described in Section 2.3.

Table 1. Analyses of variance on all listeners: F-ratio's and significances (* $p < .05$). V = Variety of speaker, G = Group of listener, R = Region of listener

Scale	Main effects and interactions			
	V	V×G	V×R	V×G×R
Standard	229.56*	3.18*	0.63	0.21
Normal	149.91*	3.75*	0.70	0.91
Modern	35.75*	1.17	0.84	0.62
Beautiful	144.47*	4.22*	0.20	0.36
Polished	213.18*	7.14*	0.18	1.02
My cup of tea	124.68*	4.72*	0.89	0.56

The main results of these analyses, which were carried out separately for each of the six judgement scales, are given in Table 1. Listed are the main effect of the factor Variety, the second-order interactions of Variety with Group and of Variety with Region, and the third-order interaction between Variety, Group, and Region. Not listed are the main effects of Group and Region, nor the interaction between these two factors. They point to general tendencies in the judgement behaviour of the listeners, independently of particular accents, and are therefore irrelevant to the aim of this research.

From Table 1 it may be clear that all six scales yield a significant effect of Variety, so for all six aspects judged the listeners perceive systematic differences among the accents. In five cases there is a significant interaction between Variety and Group: with respect to *standard*, *normal*, *beautiful*, *polished* and *my cup of tea* there are systematic differences between the reactions of (some of) the groups of listeners towards (some of) the varieties judged. There is only one scale that does not show an interaction between Variety and Group, namely *modern*. This means that in this case the four groups of listeners hold similar views on the varieties presented to them. It can be noted furthermore that none of the interactions involving Region is significant, which indicates that the regional origin of the listeners never plays a role in the judgements. So the judgements by the listeners

from the western part of the Netherlands are similar in all respects to those by listeners from the eastern part.

To gain further insight into the differential behaviour of the four listener groups towards the four varieties, a second series of analyses of variance was carried out, separately for the younger female, the younger male, the older female, and the older male listeners, the only remaining factors being Variety and Region. As expected, for all four groups the factor Variety again had a significant effect on the ratings for each of the six scales, whereas the factor Region never had any effect.

Table 2. Results of post-hoc analyses (* $p < .05$), with accents ordered from highest to lowest rating. Groups encompassing Polder Dutch are underlined. S=Standard Dutch, P=Polder Dutch, R=Randstad Dutch, A=Amsterdam Dutch

	Male young	Male old	Female young	Female old	All listeners
Standard	S	S	<u>S+P</u>	S	S
	<u>P+R</u>	<u>P+R</u>	R	<u>P+R</u>	<u>P</u>
	A	A	A	A	R
					A
Normal	<u>S+P</u>	S	<u>S+P</u>	S	S
	<u>P+R</u>	<u>P+R</u>	R	<u>P+R</u>	<u>P</u>
	A	A	A	A	R
					A
Modern	<u>P+R+S</u>	<u>P+S+R</u>	<u>P+S+R</u>	<u>P+S</u>	<u>P</u>
	S+A	A	S+R+A	S+R	S+R
				A	A
Beautiful	S	S	<u>S+P</u>	S	S
	<u>P+R</u>	<u>R+P+A</u>	R	<u>R+P</u>	<u>P+R</u>
	A		A	A	A
Polished	S	S	S	S	S
	<u>P+R</u>	<u>R+P</u>	<u>P</u>	R	<u>P+R</u>
	A	<u>P+A</u>	R	<u>P</u>	A
			A	A	
My cup of tea	S	S	<u>P+S</u>	S	S
	<u>P+R</u>	<u>R+P</u>	R	<u>R+P</u>	<u>P</u>
	A	A	A	A	R
					A

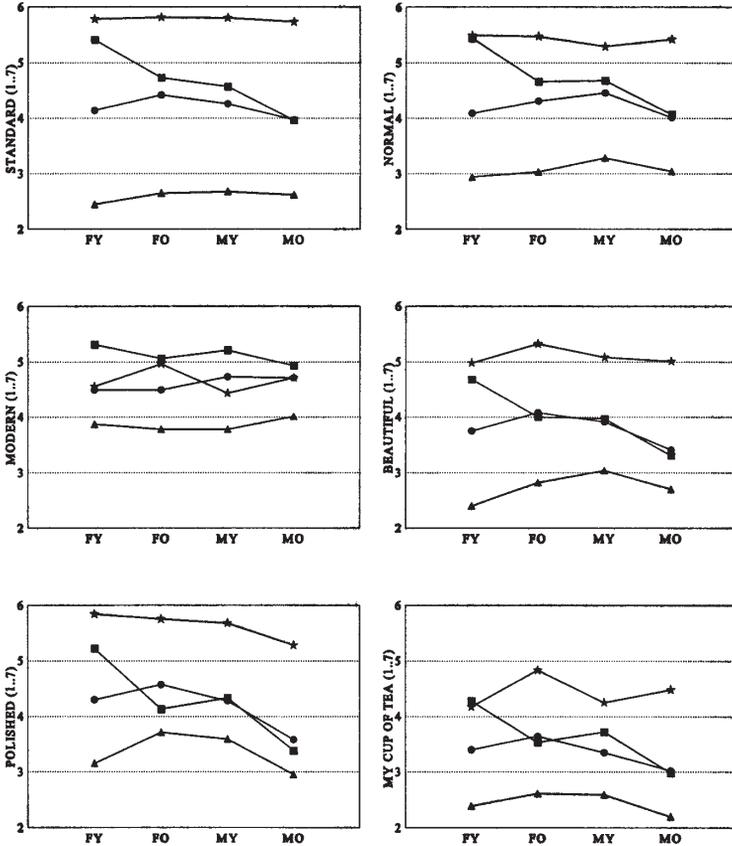
We were especially interested, of course, in the *nature* of the effect of Variety, i.e. whether and in what way the groupings of the four accents by the younger

female listeners deviated from those made by the other three groups. To this end, post-hoc tests (Tukey's HSD) were run as part of the analyses, the results of which are shown in Table 2. In this table independent subsets appear on separate lines. An accent which was perceived by listeners as significantly different from all other accents forms an independent subset, whereas accents that were not judged to be significantly different from each other are within one subset, indicated by the plus sign.

To facilitate the interpretation of the post-hoc results, the corresponding judgement data are shown graphically in Figures 3 to 8. In these figures the factor Region is not presented, since it had no effect on the ratings. Represented are the four sex by age listener groups along the horizontal axis and the scale ratings for the four varieties, averaged over 40 listeners per group, along the vertical axis.

We will start with the scale *modern*, which differs in a number of ways from the other scales. First, the distinctions among the accents are much less clear for *modern* than for the other scales. This appears from Figure 5, where the *modern* ratings for the four accents can be seen to be concentrated within a relatively narrow range (between 3.8 and 5.3). It can also be deduced from the post-hoc results in Table 2, where, at least for the separate groups, most accents are clustered together and hardly any constitute a subset by themselves. Second, *modern* is the only scale where Polder Dutch has been given the highest rating. In the separate groups it shares the first position with Standard Dutch and often Randstad Dutch. However, for all listeners together it differs significantly from these two accents. Important for the purpose of this study is the finding that in the case of *modern*, which is the least evaluative and most descriptive of the six scales, the judgements of the younger females are similar to those of the other listeners.

All other scales show diverging judgements by the younger women for Polder Dutch. The post-hoc results in Table 2 show similar patterns of groupings in this respect for three scales, namely *standard*, *beautiful*, and *my cup of tea*. Whereas the young males, the old males, and the old females group Polder Dutch together with Randstad Dutch, the younger females group it with Standard Dutch. The difference is clearly visible in Figures 3, 6, and 8. For the young women there is a wide gap between the judgements for Randstad Dutch and Polder Dutch, and only a small gap or no gap at all between the judgements for Polder Dutch and Standard Dutch. For the other three groups of listeners, however, the situation is reversed: hardly any or no gap between the judgements for Randstad Dutch and Polder Dutch, and a wide gap between Polder Dutch and Standard Dutch (except perhaps for the males in the judgement of *my cup of tea*, we will come back to this later). So, young females perceive the Polder Dutch accent to be equally standard, beautiful, and their cup of tea as Standard Dutch, whereas the three other groups assign Polder Dutch a significantly lower second rank, together with regional accents from the



Figures 3 through 8. Judgements for *standard*, *normal*, *modern*, *beautiful*, *polished* and *my cup of tea*. FY = Female Young, FO = Female Old, MY = Male Young, MO = Male Old. ■ = Polder Dutch, * = Standard Dutch, ● = Randstad Dutch, ▲ = Amsterdam Dutch.

Randstad. Here, the evaluations of the younger females are clearly more positive.

In judging *polished*, it appears from the post-hoc results in Table 2 and the data in Figure 7 that the young females agree with the other listeners that Standard Dutch is the single most polished accent of the four. In fact, *polished* is the only scale which shows that the young females indeed distinguish Polder Dutch from Standard Dutch. For all four groups, the high polished ratings for Standard Dutch are consistently separated by a fairly wide gap from the other accents further down the scale. However, whereas the young males and the old males consider Polder Dutch to be equally polished as Randstad Dutch and whereas the older females consider Polder Dutch to be even less polished than Randstad Dutch, the younger

females place Polder Dutch above the Randstad accents. Again the young women are found to hold a more positive attitude towards Polder Dutch than the other listeners.

Finally, the scale *normal* shows again a (slightly) different pattern. According to the post-hoc results in Table 2, both the young males and young females do not differentiate between the degree of normalcy of Polder Dutch and Standard Dutch, whilst the other two groups judge Polder Dutch to be significantly less normal than Standard Dutch. The data in Figure 4 are not convincing in this respect, as the gap between the judgements for Polder Dutch and Standard Dutch is hardly any smaller for the young males than for the older females. However, statistically speaking the young males side here with the young females. Both young groups of listeners express a greater degree of habituation to Polder Dutch than the older listeners. In the case of *normal* there is a sex independent generation gap.

4. Discussion

A perception study was run with four accents of Dutch as stimuli and female and male listeners of two age groups and regional origins as listeners. Reactions were expressed on six judgement scales. The main goal of the study was to verify the predictions derived from Stroop (1998) that young women would be more positive towards Polder Dutch than other people, and that this attitude would be independent of their geographic origin. We furthermore predicted that a more positive attitude towards Polder Dutch would be combined with a more negative attitude towards Standard Dutch.

Our results confirm the hypothesis that young women would be more positive towards Polder Dutch than other listeners. Generally speaking, young women place Polder Dutch on an equal footing with Standard Dutch, giving these two varieties the highest ratings, whereas other listeners place it together with Randstad Dutch in second position. Only with respect to *polished* do the young females place Standard Dutch above Polder Dutch. So our experiment lends strong support to the real-life observations by Stroop (1998). It indeed appears to be the young Dutch women who favour Polder Dutch. In fact, there is no evidence in our results that men or older women even distinguish Polder Dutch from regional accents from the Randstad, since it is judged significantly different on none of the scales. There is little evidence that Polder Dutch would be spreading among young males, although there are some indications that young men are more used to hearing it than people of the generation above them.

Also in accordance with Stroop's (1998) views is the finding that people's regional origin is irrelevant. The same attitudes towards Polder Dutch are indeed

held by people from the west of the Netherlands and those from the east. In fact, no significant region-related differences in the attitudes towards the other accents were found either. So, contrary perhaps to what one would intuitively expect, listeners from the west are not more positive towards Randstad and Amsterdam accents than people from the east.

The hypothesis that a more positive attitude towards Polder Dutch is combined with a less positive attitude towards Standard Dutch is confirmed for the scale *my cup of tea*, where indeed the responses for these two accents seem to mirror each other: the two groups with the highest ratings for Polder Dutch (young females 4.3 and young males 3.7 as compared to old females 3.5 and old males 3.0) also have the lowest ratings for Standard Dutch (4.2 and 4.2 vs. 4.8 and 4.5). Since *my cup of tea* probably reflects the personal preferences of the listeners most strongly, we feel justified in stating that this last hypothesis is partly confirmed.

To summarize, Stroop (1998) seems to have been right about the social meaning of Polder Dutch in present day Dutch society. Our perception data show it is powered by young women both in the west and the east of the country. They consistently hold more positive attitudes towards this variety, making it plausible that they speak it more consistently as well.

The role of women in this ongoing change in Dutch seems to fit in with the Conformity Paradox recently formulated by Labov: “Women deviate less than men from linguistic norms when the deviations are overtly proscribed, but more than men when the deviations are not proscribed” (2001:367). Evidently, the main feature of Polder Dutch, i.e. the lowered realisation of the first element of /ei/, has no overt prestige; on the contrary, it has always been condemned. This much is clear. However, further comparisons between the leading role of women in advancing Polder Dutch and the role of women in the Northern Cities Shift as studied by Labov are very hard to make because the situations are crucially different. Labov considers linguistic change in a number of large cities, specifically Philadelphia, whereas the present study pertains to not locally tied developments in Standard Dutch. Moreover, Labov assumes that the linguistic changes he observes are spreading through direct contact, whereas this is implausible in the case of Polder Dutch.

Notes

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Stroop for providing the speech samples for Polder Dutch and Amsterdam Dutch, and for placing the speech samples on the website, so that listener responses could be collected from all over the Netherlands.

1. More information about Polder Dutch and related subjects can be found on the Polder Dutch website (<http://www.hum.uva.nl/poldernederlands>).
2. There is one exception: one of the three speakers from Amsterdam had a vocational education at the middle level.

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