

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,