

Introduction

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Voicing in Dutch: (De)voicing – phonology, phonetics, and psycholinguistics

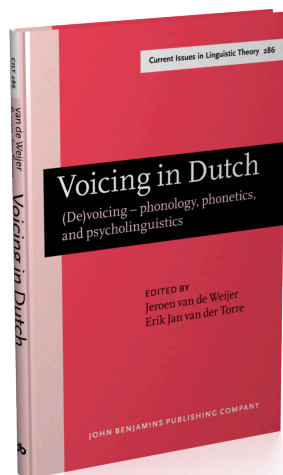
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Introduction: Voicing in Dutch

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This volume focuses on the phonology, phonetics and psycholinguistics of voicing-related phenomena in Dutch. Dutch phonology has played a touchstone role in the past few decades where competing theories regarding laryngeal representation have been concerned. The intricacy of different rules manipulating values for the distinctive feature [voice], sometimes from [+voice] to [-voice] and back again, have sparked off different debates, among other things with respect to rule ordering and the ‘arity’ of the feature [voice], which are currently still in full swing. Outside such discussions about segmental structure proper, processes like final devoicing have played a role in discussions about “evolutionary phonology” (Blevins 2004), where this process is related to differences between stops and fricatives, vowel length and differences in place of articulation (Blevins 204: 103ff). All of these factors play a role in some of the articles in this volume.

This volume adds fuel to these debates on several fronts, both on the level of the facts that competing analyses must account for and by critically examining different analyses that have been proposed. First, the article by Zonneveld reviews the facts of the standard language and presents an overview of formal approaches, from rule-based generative phonology-style ones to various recent OT-based analyses using local conjunction. It lays out the facts regarding the paradoxical facts of the behaviour of the past tense morpheme in Dutch, and the problems this poses for these different approaches. It also presents interesting new material from loanword data and the way these are incorporated, with special attention to voice. Finally, it presents a new OT analysis relying on local conjunction and positional faithfulness which overcomes the problems of past analyses. Importantly, this analysis is able to maintain a monovalent feature [voice].

An area of controversy in the literature is which feature should be based to express voicing contrasts in different languages. For ‘aspiration’ languages such as English and German, the feature [spread glottis] seems adequate while (pre)voicing languages such as Dutch would seem to require the distinctive feature [voice]. For both features it is possible to argue about the question whether they are binary or unary and whether –if binary– they are initially underspecified or not. This makes predictions about acquisition, in particular with respect to the question which member of a pair of consonants is expected to be acquired first, and which error patterns are expected under any of these approaches. This is the

topic of the contribution by René Kager, Suzanne van der Feest, Paula Fikkert, Annemarie Kerkhoff and Tania S. Zamuner, who investigate these questions for the three languages mentioned above, and conclude that the facts of acquisition indeed point to differential specifications for voicing languages and for aspiration languages. A number of other factors are important in this debate, viz. the role of phonetics (in terms of articulatory effort) and the role of other processes that might interfere with the pattern of errors that children make, in particular consonant harmony.

The third paper, by Marc van Oostendorp, investigates a hitherto unreported aspect of the Dutch voicing rules, viz. the fact that in certain dialects there appear to be exceptions to final devoicing. While devoicing has been investigated from a phonetic point of view and has (sometimes) been found to be incomplete in phonetic detail, certain dialects appear to show systematic exceptions in the synchronic phonology. These exceptions are well-defined: they take place in the case of final labial and velar fricatives in the first person plural. A historical explanation is that these dialects have recently lost (or still variably have) a first person morpheme which ‘protects’ the final consonant from undergoing devoicing. Synchronically, there are two alternative ways of approaching this: one based on paradigmatic uniformity and one based on abstract underlying representations, both of which present certain problems. It is hoped that facts like these, possibly complemented by other dialectal variations on the theme of voicing, and their analysis, will play a role in future discussions about the facts of Dutch.

Petra M. van Alphen describes the exact phonetic realization of the voiced stops in Dutch, offering an introduction to the phonetic side of the voicing distinction in Dutch. She shows that vocal cord vibration, which is usually assumed to accompany voiced plosives, is frequently absent in these sounds. Surprisingly, it is still possible for Dutch listeners to recognize voiced plosives compared to voiceless plosives. This means that other acoustic cues must be available that aid the perception of voiced plosives, and it entails that voicing is indeed, phonetically, a gradient category.

Wouter Jansen explores the thin (or non-existent) line between phonetics and phonology, in an exploration of the facts of regressive voicing assimilation. He shows that regressive assimilation indeed does take place, but that it has all the hallmarks of a ‘low-level’ phonetic process, more akin to a coarticulatory effect than a ‘real’ phonological rule. The question therefore arises in which component of the grammar it should be accounted for.

In the final paper of this volume, Mirjam Ernestus and Harald Baayen take up the fact, referred to above, that final devoicing in Dutch presents a case of phonetically incomplete neutralization (cf. also Port & Leary 2005, where this point is taken as a frontal attack on the main premises of generative phonology). On the basis of a perception experiment, they show that listeners rated different plosives differently according to whether they alternated between voiced and voiceless or not. They take this as evidence that listeners activate morphologically related words when accessing a particular form of a paradigm. If these forms have conso-

nants with different values for [voice] (i.e. if they alternate), the resulting sound will be a ‘compromise’ between voiced and voiceless.

We hope that these papers will serve to describe the state of the art in the phonology and phonetics of Dutch voicing, and to spark off new descriptive, theoretical and experimental research.

References

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- Port, Robert F. & Adam P. Leary. 2005. “Against Formal Phonology”. *Language* 81.927-964.