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Inflectional economy and politeness : morphology-internal and morphology-external factors in the loss of second person marking in Dutch

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Summary

The second person singular pronoun in Middle Dutch was *du*. The pronoun *du* combined with finite verbs ending in the suffix *-s*. Both the pronoun *du* and the suffix *-s* are lost in Modern Dutch. The loss of the pronoun and the suffix is related: there is no variant of Dutch that has a suffix *-s* that does not also have the pronoun *du* or vice versa. The question is how we should understand this combined loss of both the pronoun and the suffix.

The central claim in this book is that the decrease in the use of the pronoun *du* (combining with the suffix *-s*) is driven by politeness. The plural and polite pronoun *gi* (combining with the suffix *-t*) came to be used in an increasing number of contexts. Although we can understand the decrease of the pronoun *du* and the suffix *-s* as the result of politeness, the loss of both the pronoun and the suffix is driven by inflectional economy. The suffix that the pronoun *gi* combined with was more economical than the suffix that *du* combined with.

In chapter 2 the notion inflectional economy is discussed. Inflectional economy is related to the notion of learnability. Apart from inflectional economy chapter 2 discusses the ways in which we can recognize morphology-external sources of homophony in the verbal paradigm. The morphology-external sources discussed are politeness and phonology.

In chapter 3 politeness driven changes in the Dutch pronominal system are compared to politeness driven changes in other languages. Most of the changes that occurred in Dutch can also be found in other languages. There is only one change that stands out from other languages and that is the loss of second person singular. Apart from English and Dutch no other language has lost its original second person singular. The loss of second person singular is also difficult to understand from a socio-pragmatic angle. It is remarkable that this rare and pragmatically awkward change had such a profound effect on the verbal paradigm of Dutch.

In chapter 4 the economy hypothesis is developed. The central claim is that the loss of second person singular is driven by inflectional economy. In this chapter it is shown that English and Dutch belong to the small group of languages where the replacement of second person singular by second person plural marking results in a more economical verbal paradigm. Inflectional economy can explain why it is English and Dutch and not other languages that have lost original second person singular marking. Moreover, inflectional economy can explain why second person

singular was lost from domains where we would not expect this loss on the basis of socio-pragmatic grounds.

In chapters 5 and 6 empirical evidence for the role of inflectional economy in the loss of second person singular is presented. Chapter 5 discusses diachronic evidence for the economy hypothesis. The most important results from chapter 5 are that (i) *du* was lost as a subject before it was lost as a non-subject and (ii) that *du* as a subject was retained longest in combination with high frequency verbs, especially in combination with the verb *zijn* ('to be'). Both results confirm the role of inflectional economy. High frequency verbs resist deflection longer and it is therefore expected that *du* combines longer with high frequency verbs than with low frequency verbs. The early loss of subjects in comparison with non-subjects is also expected since only subjects combine with finite verbs.

In chapter 6 synchronic variation in Dutch is discussed. The most important results from chapter 6 are (i) that also in the micro level we find a relation between the loss of *du* and inflectional economy and (ii) that *du* is lost in more measure points as a subject than as a non-subject. Consequently, the data in chapter 6 are in line with the data in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 4 we observed the relation between the effect on the verbal paradigm and the loss of *du* on a macro level and in chapter 5 we had already observed that *du* as a subject is more prone to loss than as a non-subject.

Chapter 7 contains a more elaborate summary of this book on the basis of research questions formulated in chapter 1. Furthermore, the question is discussed whether the conspiracy between morphology-internal and morphology-external sources that we observed in second person singular is unique. The claim in chapter 7 is that conspiracy between these different sources of syncretism is not unique. Conspiracy makes deflection possible that on the surface is not recognizable as such. Conspiracy is also observed in other languages and in other domains, for example, we find conspiracy between inflectional economy and phonology.