

The emergence and evolution of urban style in peripheral industrial areas:

The case of Limburg

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Urban vernaculars are most often observed in large multicultural cities, where they typically acquire social meanings such as "coolness" or "streetwise" attributes. Research has demonstrated that these third-order social meanings render the linguistic features which carry them especially visible, and facilitate their spread in the speech community (Sneller & Roberts 2018; Grondelaers & Marzo 2023).

This study investigates the use of the palatalization of /s/ in the Limburg mining regions. While /s/ palatalization is a feature that has its roots in the regional dialect of Limburg, and is present in both the Flemish (Genk) and Dutch (Heerlen) mining regions, it is primarily in the Flemish mining region that it has become strongly associated with a distinct meaning, namely that of urban coolness or streetwise style. We address three key research questions:

- (1) What factors contributed to the emergence of this particular meaning in a multicultural yet otherwise peripheral industrial (and initially rural) region?
- (2) What are the specific characteristics of the speakers who use this feature to convey a sense of "coolness"?
- (3) What changes have occurred in the association of palatalized /s/ with streetwise cool since the first studies?

These questions are investigated through both qualitative and quantitative analysis of spoken production (spontaneous interactions and sociolinguistic interviews) and experimental evaluation data (attitudes) collected over several years. The findings suggest that the emergence of the urban style meaning is probably the result of the widespread dissemination of urban genres—especially music—between 2010 and 2015. The palatalisation of /s/ also appears to be evolving *beyond* its earlier association with youth. It seems to have become a linguistic marker strategically employed with broader stylistic intentions by adults, who also appear to be using it for broader pragmatic purposes, rather than merely attempting to sound "cool".

References

- Sneller, B. & G. Roberts. 2018. Why some behaviors spread while others don't: A laboratory simulation of dialect contact. *Cognition* 170: 298-311.
- Grondelaers S, & S. Marzo. 2023. Why does the shtyle spread? Street prestige boosts the diffusion of urban vernacular features. *Language in Society* 52(2): 295-320.