

Existential matters. How the Limburgs introduce new information in discourse.

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If we go by their phonetics and lexis, it is obvious that Belgian and Netherland Limburg (are beginning to) represent separate standard language unities: speakers from both provinces manifest an audibly different accent in their Standard Dutch (Steegs et al. 2008), alongside some deviating lexical choices (Huisman et al. 2021). These differences are canonically interpreted in light of the claim that Belgian and Netherlandic Standard Dutch are diverging in *any* conceivable component.

While there has traditionally been some reluctance to recognize North/South divergence in the syntactic component of Dutch (Grondelaers et al. 2020), De Troij et al. (2023) reports convincing corpus evidence that Belgian and Netherlandic Dutch are also diverging in their deepest syntactic motor.

But does this divergence also hold for the Limburg area, which was a political unity long before the birth of the Belgian and Netherlandic nation states in 1839? While some evidence suggests the existence of syntactic differences between the two Limburgs – most noticeably in the use of Netherlandic *do*-support (*Ik doe tafeltennissen*, Cornips 1994; 1998) which is categorically absent in Belgian Limburgian Dutch –, other evidence from the domain of existential sentences (Grondelaers & Ghyselen 2023) suggests some syntactic *alignment* between the two Limburgs against the backdrop of massive national divergence.

In this paper, we zoom in on adjunct-initial sentences with and without *er* (*Op het dak staat (er) een schoorsteen*) to further probe the syntactic motors of Belgian and Netherlandic Limburgian Standard Dutch, and to investigate to what extent they diverge. The presence or absence of existential *er* in adjunct-initial sentences is a privileged variable in this respect:

- It is anchored too deep in the syntactic motor to be accessible for (conscious) planning efforts: Netherlandic Limburgians may believe, for instance, that it is preferable to drop their postverbal *er*'s in light of national preferences, but it is unlikely that they can do so consciously.
- From previous psycholinguistic experiments and corpus studies (see Grondelaers et al. 2009 for an overview), we know how adjunct-initial clauses and the existential *er* in them function in Dutch, and how these functions materialize in the lexicon and syntax of these clauses: while adjunct-initial clauses are tailormade strategies for the convenient introduction of new information in discourse, existential *er* is an “expectancy monitor” which signals low probability subjects.
- In addition, we know how the respective grammars of Belgian and Netherlandic Dutch shape the syntax and the lexicon of adjunct-initial sentences and the distribution of *er* in them (see especially Grondelaers et al. 2008).

In this paper, we go one granularity level lower, and limit our attention to a comparison between the distribution of existential *er* in Belgian Limburgian and Netherlandic Limburgian

adjunct sentences. We build on a dataset of some 1500 tweets from the recently compiled Meertens Twitter corpus, and on both manual and automatic annotation (notably distributional analysis and predictability measures) to investigate to what extent the emergence of national standards has impacted the grammar of Limburgian.

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