

Beyond the monolingual narrative: Repertoires, practices and variation in the Dutch-German borderlands

Andreas Krogull (Universität Zürich)

Recent scholarship in historical sociolinguistics has increasingly foregrounded the fact that “[m]ultilingual societies were composed of multilingual individuals who used more than one language in their daily lives” (Pahta et al. 2018: 3). Investigating various aspects and phenomena of multilingualism and language contact, historical-sociolinguistic research has contributed to alternative accounts of European language historiography (e.g. Franceschini et al. 2023; Pavlenko 2023; Krogull & Rutten 2025), including the history of Dutch (e.g. Rutten et al. in press).

The Dutch-German borderlands constitute a particularly intriguing sociolinguistic space that challenges the traditionally monolingual narrative of ‘the’ history of Dutch (e.g. Krogull 2021). An important zone of contact and transition, both culturally and linguistically, the northeastern Dutch provinces (e.g. Groningen, Drenthe) and neighbouring regions in northwestern Germany (e.g. East Frisia) offer a fertile ground for the study of multilingual (writing) practices in the past, even in the border-making era of the long nineteenth century.

Drawing on handwritten archival sources from the private sphere, primarily letters, this lecture investigates the use of layered multilingual repertoires, involving varieties of Dutch, High and Low German, but also French. It is shown how individuals and families deployed the linguistic resources at their disposal in order to communicate – sometimes to the extent that the boundaries between distinct ‘named’ languages become blurry. This also raises questions about territorially demarcated, allegedly monolingual spaces as the default in language history writing.

References:

- Franceschini, R., M. Hüning & P. Maitz (2023). *Historische Mehrsprachigkeit. Europäische Perspektiven*. De Gruyter.
- Krogull, A. (2021). Rethinking historical multilingualism and language contact ‘from below’: Evidence from the Dutch-German borderlands in the long nineteenth century. *Dutch Crossing* 45(2), 147–170.
- Krogull, A. & G. Rutten (2025). *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Historical Multilingualism in Europe*. Special issue of *Sociolinguistica* 39(1). De Gruyter.
- Pahta, P., J. Skaffari & L. Wright (2018). *Multilingual Practices in Language History: English and beyond*. De Gruyter.
- Pavlenko, A. (2023). *Multilingualism and History*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rutten, G., A. Krogull, B. Assendelft & J. Puttaert (in press). *Pardon my French? Dutch-French Language Contact in the Netherlands (1500–1900)*. John Benjamins.