

PRESCRIPTIVISM AND THE EVALUATION OF VARIATION: A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP?

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1. Introduction

In 1985, James and Lesley Milroy published their seminal book *Authority in Language*. In this work, they critically approach a large number of different aspects of the English standard language ideology, including its implications for education, the interplay with social factors, and the ways in which the standard language ideology is maintained and strengthened. One of the central points they make is that “the process of language standardization involves *the suppression of optional variability in language*” (original emphasis, Milroy & Milroy 1999: 6). This phenomenon, they argue, plays a role in all stages and levels of the standardization process. For example, in selecting a language variety or dialect as the basis for the standard variety, other varieties are suppressed on a macro-linguistic level. On a micro level, we see this suppression, or intolerance, as they call it somewhat more nuanced elsewhere (1999: 22), playing a role in the choice between language variants “at all levels of language – in pronunciation (phonology), spelling, grammar (morphology and syntax) and lexicon” (1999: 30). Specific micro-level cases of variation, where one of two or more existing functionally more or less equivalent forms is condemned, are usually called *usage items* or *usage problems*. Some of these usage items are *old chestnuts*: cases of variation which are repeated again and again in prescriptive publications, such as the split infinitive, preposition stranding and the greengrocer's apostrophe. Others are recent additions to the prescriptive canon, such as the use of *literally* (Kostadinova 2018) or the pronunciation of *GIF* (van der Meulen 2020a).

Since Milroy and Milroy's book, the principle of suppression of optional variability has been used extensively for empirical research into language norms, both on the macro and the micro level. On the micro level, there has been quite a substantial amount of research that studies specific prescriptive usage items based on a threefold distinction in the level of acceptability of optional variation. This approach distinguishes between complete acceptability, limited acceptability, and complete unacceptability of optional variation for a given usage item. Since its introduction by Peters & Young (1997, although see also Cresswell 1975), this framework has been used by many authors for as many circumstances and languages (although with a strong emphasis on English). For example, Yáñez-Bouza (2015) uses it to classify remarks about preposition stranding in the history of English until 1900, while Albakry employs the framework to investigate five usage items in eighteen usage guides and style manuals from the second half of the twentieth century (2007). For a slightly different operationalization in French of essentially the same approach, see Poplack & Dion (2009). While results indicate that the other stances (i.e., limited and complete acceptability of

variation) are not completely absent from prescriptive works, it seems to be generally assumed that the ‘basic’ viewpoint in prescriptivism is indeed a complete unacceptability of optional variation.

There is debate, however, whether or not the suppression of variation may be diminishing in strength over time. It has been widely observed that recent years have seen a broader inclusion of language variants and varieties in many standardised European languages (see the contributions in Kristensen & Coupland 2011). For Dutch, for example, Grondelaers and Van Hout state that there is “evidence that SLI [standard language ideology] is being ‘relaxed’ to accommodate (some) variability” (2011: 115). Most of the existing evidence, however, stems from attitudinal research: to what extent a similar trend can be observed in prescriptivist publications is less clear. On the one hand are those who say that this is indeed the case. For example, Crystal posits that we are witnessing “a move away from the prescriptive ethos of the past 250 years” (2006: 408). On the other hand, we find researchers like Lukač, who asserts that usage guides “have not as a matter of course become more lenient” (2018: 8) over the last two centuries. For Dutch, Van der Meulen (2020b) did show that prescriptive comments became slightly more lenient across a sample of 1600 utterances over the 20th and 21st century, but the sampling method used for this paper prevents us from zooming in on particular usage items.

Whether or not prescriptive publications are becoming more lenient in general, then, remains up for debate. An additional question is whether there are differences with regards to the evaluation of particular usage items. As Anderwald notes, in research studying the effects of prescriptivism on language use, there seem to be substantial differences between features, and as a result, “rather than take prescriptivism as a given wholesale, then, detailed investigations of individual features are essential” (2019: 102). There is no reason to assume that this is not also the case with regards to the prescriptive treatment of usage items. Thus, the present research sets out to investigate whether the stance towards variation in prescriptive publications stays the same over time, or whether it develops, either towards a more lenient or a more strict evaluation of optional variation. As a starting point I will take a set of morphosyntactic usage items, which I will study both as a whole and on a case-by-case basis. Also, as the vast majority of research into prescriptive publications focusses on English, I look into Dutch prescriptive publications, which form a substantial genre, in particular in the 20th and 21st century. In the following, I will firstly describe the data and methods I used (§2), before moving on to results (§3) and a general discussion (§4).

2. Data and method

The Dutch normative situation is comparable to the English, insofar as that there is no language academy or governing body which enforces a single top-down language norm.¹ As a result, we see private publications by self-appointed authorities appearing, which contain prescriptive rules about particular cases of linguistic variation on all linguistic levels (i.e., pronunciation, grammar, lexis, etc.). For Dutch, the normative tradition goes back to the 1550s, but prescriptive publications that focus only on specific cases of unwanted only started

¹ There is the Dutch Language Union, a multilateral policy institution. While this institution is mostly concerned with status planning, it does also have a legal mandate to publish norms regarding spelling. These are obligatory for civil services and education, and are widely followed in most domains of the language. As for other levels of language, they do publish a collection of norms (available at <https://taaladvies.net/>), but this has the same ‘official’ status as any other prescriptive publication.

to appear from the late 19th, early 20th century onwards (van der Sijs 2019: 183). Since then, hundreds of prescriptive publications have appeared. These have differed on a number of parameters, for example their intended target audience (general or specialised, e.g., employees of Philips), linguistic focus (general or specialised, e.g., German loanwords), and geographic focus on either the Netherlands, Flanders, or both. In my research, I focus on publications with a general linguistic focus that appeared between 1900 and 2018, and which were aimed at a broad audience of adult mother tongue speakers in the Netherlands (see van der Meulen 2020b for a more detailed description).

For the current research, I used a selection of 117 prescriptive publications from the period 1940-2018. The reason for beginning with 1940 is that before that year we find very few references to the grammatical problems under scrutiny here. From this selection of works I extracted statements about usage for eleven morphosyntactic variables. I focussed on morphosyntactic variables, as it seems that their presence in prescriptive publications is relatively stable over the course of the 20th and 21st century, as opposed to lexical variables, which seemingly have a shorter shelf life. As a starting point I used the selection made by Bennis & Hinskens (2014), as their selection of morphosyntactic variables “probably represents the most widespread examples of non-standard inflection in spoken Standard Dutch” (2014: 143). However, I removed two variables (*hij heeft/hij heb*, 'he has', and subject-*hun*), as utterances about these cases were found relatively infrequently in the prescriptive publications. Instead, I added four other cases: verb order in subordinate clauses, double negation, the use of *hen/hun* and the use of *om*, which are among the most frequently found usage items in Dutch prescriptivism (see Van der Meulen 2021). All in all, this yielded 461 statements about the eleven variables. Table 1 gives an overview of the variables and the frequency with which they were found.

	Usage item Dutch	Translation	Description	No. of items
1.	het boek dat/wat	the book that/which	agreement relative pronoun with neuter noun	68
2.	een aantal mensen is/zijn	a number of people is/are	number agreement noun phrase and verb	65
3.	ik geef hen/hun een boek	I give them a book	3rd person personal pronoun direct and indirect object	57
4.	Hij beloofde om/∅ te komen	He promised to come	Overt or covert infinitival complementizer	45
5.	de vrouw van wie/waarvan	the woman of whom/of which	relative pronouns with human antecedents	43
6.	u heeft/hebt	you-FORM have	2nd person formal verb form for verb <i>hebben</i> ('to have')	36
7.	ik heb nooit geen/nooit	I have never no/never	single vs double negation	35
8.	dat hij is gekomen/gekomen is	that he has come/that he come has	verb order in subordinate clauses	34
9.	je kan/kunt	you can	2nd person verb form for verb <i>kunnen</i> ('can')	27
10.	een aardig/aardig-e meisje	a nice/nice-AGR girl	adjectival agreement with indefinite neuter noun	26
11.	een heel/hele mooie auto	A very/very-INFL nice car	adverbial inflection	25

Table 1. Variables used in present research

The 461 statements were tagged for their stance towards variation, following the threefold distinction mentioned before. This meant that statements could show a complete acceptance of variation (Example 1), a limited acceptance of variation (Example 2), or considered optional variation to be completely unacceptable (Example 3). Due to the distribution of the results over time, I classified the results per decade.

- (1) In een groot aantal gevallen kan *om* naar keuze gebruikt worden. (Overduin 1986: 318)
(„In a large number of cases *om* can be used optionally.”)
- (2) Daarom doet men verstandig als men deze verbuiging beperkt tot de spreektaal. (Meijers 1959: 37)
(„That's why one would be wise to limit this inflection to spoken language.”)
- (3) “*We hadden veel last van het stof wat overal lag.*” ‘Wat’ is hier onjuist gebruikt; ‘dat’ is in dit geval de correcte vorm. (De Rijk, 1994: 74)
(“We were bothered by the dust which was everywhere.” ‘Which’ is used incorrectly here; in this case, ‘that’ is the correct form.”)

3. Results

Figure 1 shows the overall distribution of the three stances towards variation for the whole data set of 461 utterances. It is clear that unacceptability towards variation is the dominant stance, with 53,8% of the utterances labelled as such. However, both limited (16,3%) and complete acceptability (29,9%) are present to a much larger degree than would be expected based on the categorical nature of the statement by Milroy and Milroy. Condemnation of variation, then, is definitely not the only stance towards variation in Dutch prescriptivism, an observation that is echoed by results from other research (e.g., Peters & Young 1997; Poplack and Dion 2009).

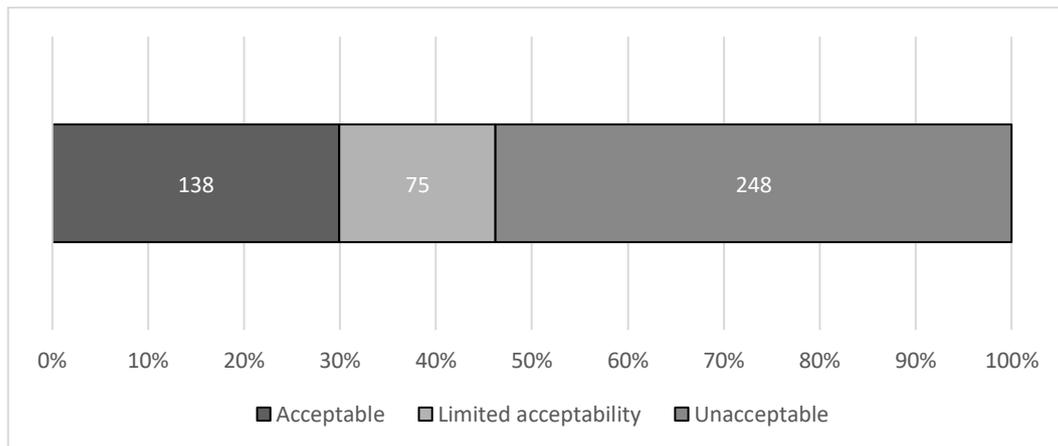


Figure 1. Overall distribution of statements across stances towards variation (n=461)

3.1. General development of stance over time

Next, we looked at the development of stance towards variation over time, initially again for all usage items combined (see Figure 2). Here we see that there are substantial fluctuations

in the level of acceptance of optional variation in different decades. On one extreme, in the 1940s the majority of utterances dismissed variation altogether (twenty utterances, 64,5%). Conversely, we see that in the 1970s, only six utterances categorically dismissed optional variation (31,6%). However, this peak in acceptance of variation in the 1970s is due to one very lenient usage guide, Theissen (1978).² When we leave this outlier out, the degree of complete unacceptability of variation wavers between 64,5% in the 1940s and 45,6% in the 1980s.

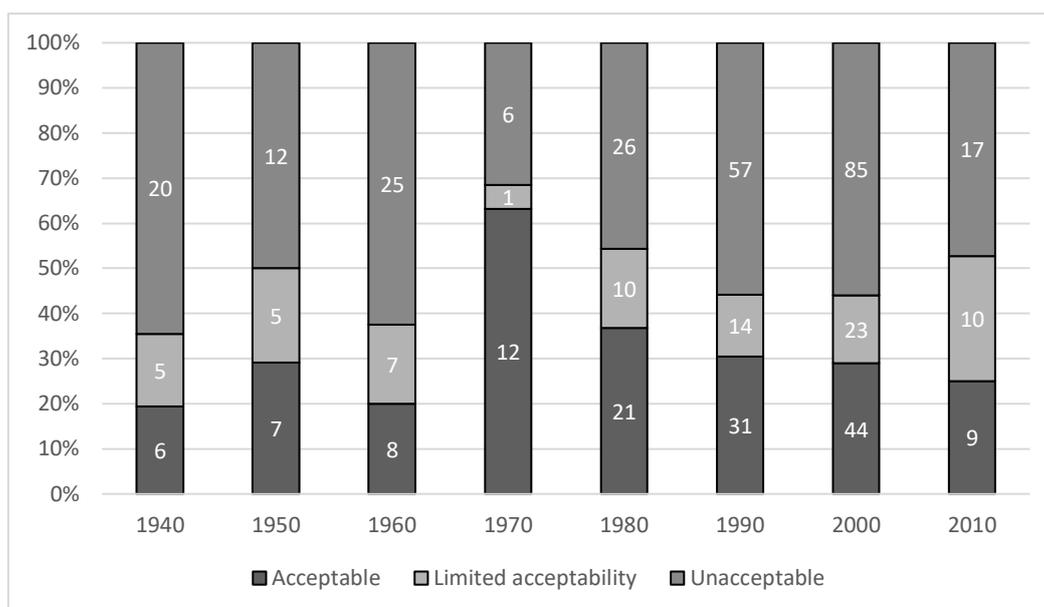


Figure 2. Distribution of statements across stances towards variation over time

As Figure 2 shows, our data supports the statement made by Lukač: similar to English, Dutch prescriptive publications do not seem to become more lenient over time. This does not mean that the degree of acceptance of variation is stable: rather, there is a general wavering between the two extremes, with little linear progression over time. One additional observation is the relation between limited and complete acceptability. We see that the degree of limited acceptability varies between 13,7% in the 1990s to 27,8% in the 2010 (leaving out the 1970s again). Although the most recent prescriptive publications show the largest degree of limited acceptability, again, we don't see any definite progression. However, with regard to the degree of complete acceptability of variation we do see a development: starting from the 1980s onwards, this degree slowly declines, from 36,8% in the 1980s to 25,0% in the 2010s.

3.2. Development of stance per usage item

For the next stage, we looked at the development of the stance towards variation per usage item, again at first without taken temporal development into account. Figure 3 gives an overview of the data for all eleven usage items, ordered from left to right based on the proportionate degree of complete acceptance of variation. On the far left is the usage item

² This prescriptive publication was a reworking by a linguist, Siegfried Theissen, of his PhD thesis. In this case, then, the background of the author clearly played a role. Whether background plays a role in the acceptance of variation more generally falls outside of the scope of the present article, although it seems feasible.

which shows the highest degree of acceptance, *dat hij is gekomen/gekomen is*, with 88,2%; conversely, on the far right we see *een aardig/aardige meisje*, for which not a single prescriptive author accepts the progressive form.

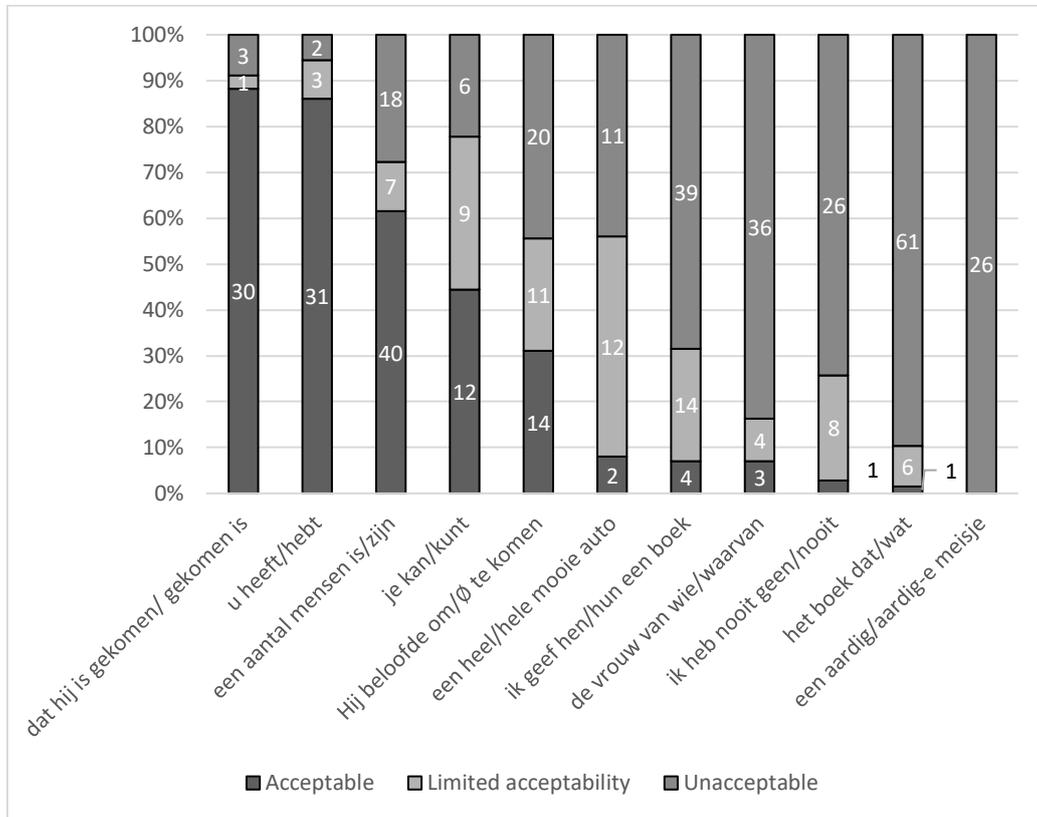


Figure 3. Distribution of stances towards variation per usage item.

When we look at the results for complete and limited acceptance of variation, we see that six out of eleven variables in our data show some degree of acceptability of optional variability to be the dominant position. What is more, only in one case, *een aardig/aardige meisje*, is the condemnation complete. So, again, while suppression is definitely the more prevalent stance towards optional variability, it is far from the only one.

It is abundantly clear from Figure 3 that different usage items show very different degrees of acceptance of variation. Two usage items in particular are very lenient towards variation (*dat hij is gekomen/gekomen is* and *u heeft/hebt*), with 88,2%; and 86,1% respectively of the prescriptive utterances showing a complete acceptance of optional variation. Next, there are three usage items that show acceptance between 61,5% (*een aantal mensen is/zijn*) and 31,1% (*hij beloofde om/∅ te komen*). Finally, there are six usage items for which a complete acceptance of optional variation occurs in less than 10% of utterances. Importantly, the distribution amongst different publications is not random for these low-score items. In fact, the eleven instances where we do find complete acceptance of variation originate in only six different publications, of which one contains four (De Taalclub, 2008). This reinforces the notion that for the vast majority of prescriptive writers, complete acceptance of variation for these six usage items is indeed not possible.

The category of limited acceptability shows an additional pattern. When we look at the proportion of utterances displaying limited acceptance of variation, we see that the four variables with the most extreme degree of acceptance (both complete and none) have the least number of utterances with limited acceptability. Moreover, towards the middle of Figure 3 the proportion of utterances that do show limited acceptability increases, with *een heel/hele mooie auto* (48%) and *je kan/kunt* (33,3%) showing the highest degree of limited acceptance. Such a pattern could be an indication of a diachronic development, where a usage item goes through a phase of limited acceptability before it becomes completely acceptable. However, as we will see in the next section, such diachronic patterns are not necessarily present in our current data set.

There does not appear to be a correlation between the frequency with which a usage item is mentioned and the degree of condemnation. The most frequently found usage item, *het boek dat/wat*, is second to last in acceptance of variation; the second-most frequently found usage item, *een aantal mensen is/zijn* is the second-highest ranking in terms of acceptance. Conversely, the highest-ranking item in terms of complete acceptance, *dat hij is gekomen/gekomen is*, ranks eight in terms of frequency of utterances.

3.3. Development of stance per usage item over time

Finally, we look at the development over time for individual variables. Three developments are theoretically possible with regard to any variable: the position towards optional variability can stay the same, the evaluations become more strict over time, or the prescriptivists become more lenient. All three patterns are found in our data. Because of the scarcity of the data for especially the earlier decades for most variables, I have divided the data in four time frames of twenty years.

Five variables show no development over time with regard to the acceptance of variation: *een aardig/aardige meisje*, *het boek dat/wat*, *ik geef hen/hun een boek*, *de vrouw van wie/waarvan*, and *u heeft/hebt*. This group contains variables from all points of the acceptance spectrum. We see variables such as *u heeft/hebt*, for which variation was acceptable to most writers starting in the 1940s and continuing up until present day, but also *de vrouw van wie/waarvan*, for which variation is mostly condemned for the whole time period. In all cases (with the exception of *een aardig/aardige meisje*) all variables in this category show certain writers to diverge from the general view, for example in condemning a variable which is largely accepted, but such evaluations seem idiosyncratic.

In six cases, there is a development over time with regard to the acceptance of variation. Three of these show a trend towards more leniency: the verb order in subordinate clauses, *een heel/hele mooie auto*, and *hij beloofde om/Ø te komen*. In the case of the verb order in subordinate clauses, the two times this variable is mentioned in the 1940s, the word order with the auxiliary verb in final position (*dat hij gekomen is*) is condemned. From the 1950s onwards, however, all publications completely accept the variation. Here, then, we do in fact see norms becoming more lenient over time, although 'over time' already happened midway through the twentieth century. A somewhat similar development can be observed with regards to *een heel/hele mooie auto*. As Figure 4 shows, the period between 1980-1999 showed a large proportion of non-acceptance (83,3%), but the subsequent period saw a decrease of this share to 35,7%, as well as the emergence of two publications that completely accepted both forms.

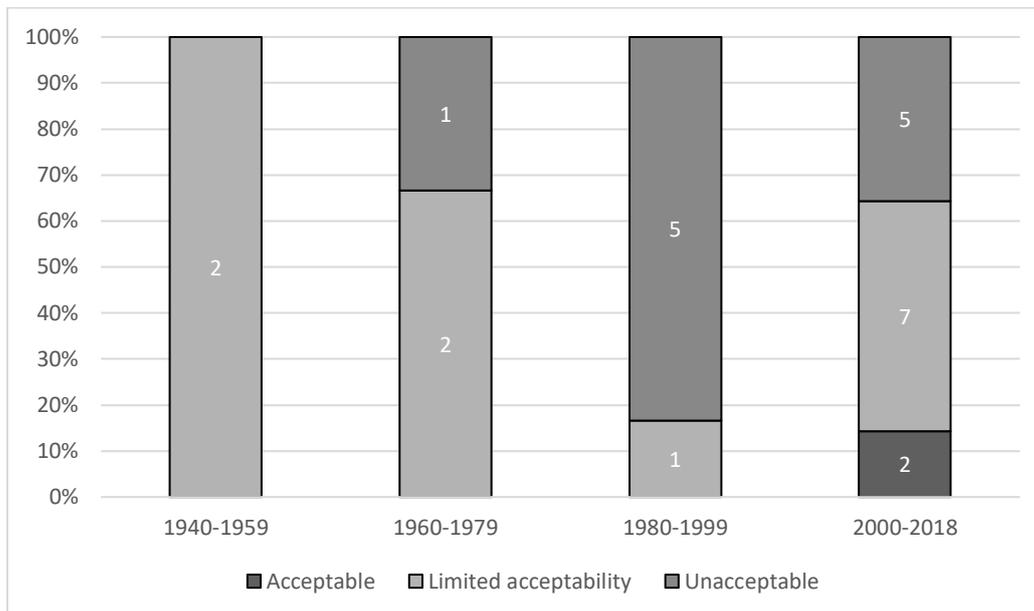


Figure 4. Development of *een heel/hele mooie auto* over time

The clearest example of change towards leniency can be observed with *hij beloofde om/Ø te komen* (Figure 5). Interestingly, this variable has the best distribution over time, with prescriptivists in all periods mentioning this variable, giving a clear picture of the development. The first instance where variation is accepted is in 1959, and from then onwards, there is a gradual but substantial increase in the acceptance of variation, towards 40% of authors completely accepting variation and 33.3% of authors partially accepting variation in the final time period.

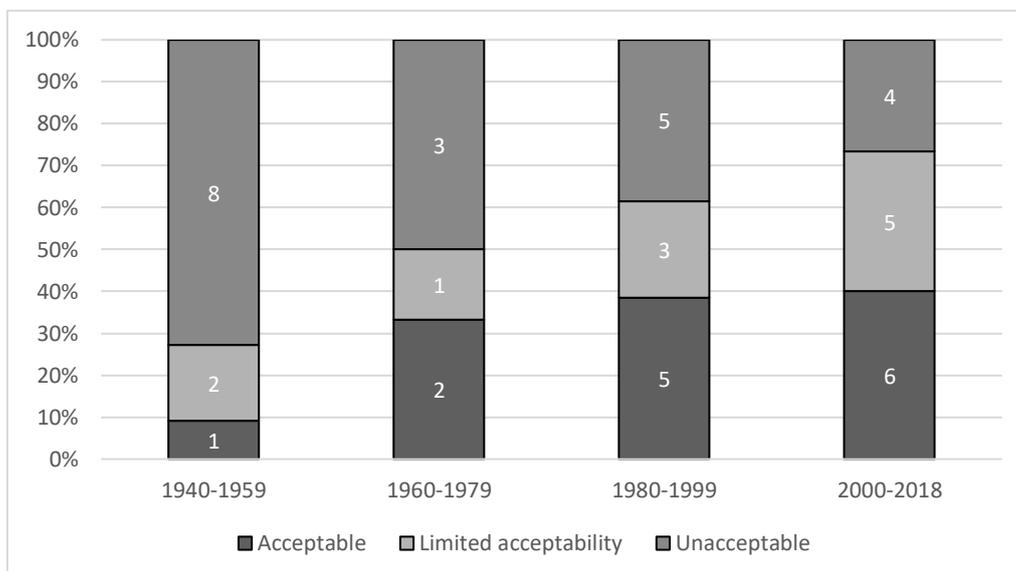


Figure 5. Development of *hij beloofde om/Ø te komen* over time

In three cases we see that norms are actually becoming more strict: *een aantal mensen is/zijn*, *je kan/kunt*, and double negation. First of all, for double negation, we see that in the period 1940-1990 seven out of seventeen prescriptive publications accept optional variation in spoken language. From 1990 onwards, however, only two out of the sixteen utterances accept variation to some degree (one limited, one complete). For *je kunt/kan*, all but one of the prescriptive publications that mention this variable up until the mid-1980s completely accept variation, with only one showing partial acceptance. From then onwards, however, we see a strong increase in both limited acceptability and complete condemnation of the innovative form. Finally, we see a decrease in acceptance of variation for *een aantal mensen is/zijn*. As Figure 6 shows, this item showed a complete acceptance of variation of around 80% between 1940 and 1999, but since then the proportion of prescriptive publications that condemn optional variation for this variable has increased greatly.

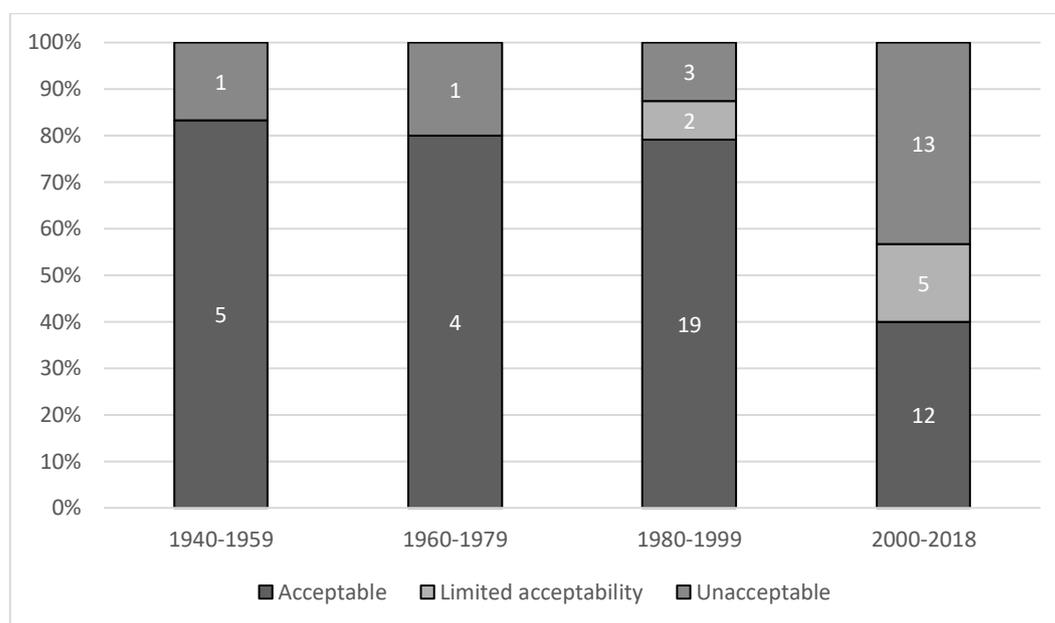


Figure 6. Development of *een aantal mensen is/zijn* over time

4. Discussion and conclusion

The present research shows that, as far as rules for Dutch morphosyntax in the 20th and 21st century go, prescriptivist publications do not as a whole become more lenient over time. When we combined our data, we saw that there is a slight increase in cases where variation is completely accepted, from 19,4% in the 1940s to 25,0% in the 2010s. For the same time period, the proportion of limited acceptability increases from 16,1% to 27,8%. However, earlier decades show comparable (1950s) or even higher proportions of acceptability (1980s). The seemingly safest conclusion to draw from this, then, is that taken as a whole, prescriptive publications in different decades vary somewhat in their condemnation but largely maintain the same level of acceptance of variation.

When we zoom in on specific variables, we do see developments over time. Verdicts about variation stay the same over time for five variables, but for three variables the verdicts

actually become less inclined to accept variation. Conversely, for three variables the verdicts did become more lenient, although in one of these cases the change was already completed in the 1950s. There does not seem to be a relationship between the development of the level of acceptance over time and the frequency with which a usage item is mentioned. This seems to indicate that salience, i.e., the degree to which prescriptivists are aware of particular variation, does not seem to influence the degree of acceptance. Also, the variables that show no development over time show different degrees of acceptance, showing that there is not one path from non-acceptance to acceptance for usage items, but that the level of acceptance can stagnate at different stages.

The fact that we find all three possible developments of stance towards variation shows just how crucial it is not to draw too general conclusions about the evolution of prescriptivism based on a limited set of usage items or linguistic variables. As the present research shows, by stating that prescriptivism *as a whole* does not become more lenient, we fail to do justice to a highly complex and variable situation. Moreover, we imply that prescriptivism is in a state of immobility. However, as we saw, that is not the case: since the 1940s, the stance towards variation has changed for more variables than it has not. In light of the present research, then, we would say that prescriptivism is both inert and in flux over time, depending on which variable you look at. We should, then, focus on nuanced descriptions of individual features, as only by exploring particular variables can we truly start to understand how prescriptivism works.

How and why the prescriptive stance towards variation changes for some variables but not for others remains a question. It is possible that prescripts may change as a result of changing attitudes or changing usage, but even that is only shifting the question, rather than answering it. After all, why is usage changing? Also, the question whether usage influences prescript or the other way around has not been answered satisfactorily, and may well also differ between variables. As Rutten and Vosters state, even though “a host of studies has been devoted to the relationship between norms and usage (...), it is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question” (2021: 78). Finally, the grammatical nature of the variable may be another factor in causing prescripts to change. This notion is reinforced by results from van der Meulen (2020b), who showed that, when we also take lexical prescriptivism into account, there does seem to be a gradual loosening of norms. Differences in prescriptive approach between different parts of the linguistic system, however, remain under-researched.

On a more theoretical level, it seems feasible to revisit the central tenet of optional variability. As we saw when we looked at all the data together, while there is a slight majority of cases in which variation is completely condemned, both other positions (limited and complete acceptability) make up almost half of all verdicts. This indicates that the suppression of optional variability may be an important part of prescriptivism (and standardization in general), but it is in no way the only position. Disregarding cases in which variation is accepted, either partially or completely, again does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. As studies of prescriptivism have become more nuanced, so should our approach of this theoretical notion (see De Vos and Van der Meulen 2021).

Of course, the present research only takes eleven variables into account: there are hundreds more usage items to study for Dutch, let alone other languages. As usual, more research into other variables could show whether any of the developments we saw may be more common. Moreover, studying more variables could shed light on whether different types of variables display different behaviour. Another aspect that could be developed is the medium of the prescript. Recent years have seen a decrease of prescriptive books being published, likely as a result of the increase in online prescriptive sources becoming available.

Anecdotal evidence shows that these online sources may be somewhat more lenient than their written counterparts. Perhaps the published books become more fringe, and, as a result, also take more fringe positions. Finally, it might be worthwhile to investigate more qualitatively how prescriptive publications are created, and what considerations play a role for prescriptivist in determining their stance towards variation.

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(Abstract)

The suppression of optional variability has long been assumed to be a key aspect of all phases of the standardization process. Recently, however, it has been claimed that in prescriptivism this position is diminishing in strength, while others hold that prescriptivism has not become more lenient. Both positions, however, base themselves on limited evidence. In this paper, I investigate the development of the prescriptive stance towards the acceptability of optional variation in Dutch. I do this using 461 verdicts for eleven morphosyntactic phenomena from 117 prescriptive publications in the 20th and 21st century. Results show that of the eleven variables, five stay the same over time with regard to the acceptance of variation. In three cases, verdicts become more lenient, while in three other cases they become stricter. While this seemingly shows that language norms do not necessarily become more lenient over time, we argue against such a conclusion, as it implies a state of inertia. Rather, we would say that the suppression of optional variability remains important in prescriptivism, but that stances are changing for particular usage items, both towards more leniency and towards more strictness. In general, as suppression of variation is only barely the dominant position, I argue for a more nuanced approach to this theoretical concept in the study of prescriptivism.