

Enregistering Grammatical Gender: Indexing Brabantishness through Languagecultural Practices in Digital Tiles

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ABSTRACT

In the southern Dutch province of North Brabant, local dialect use is declining sharply. Dialect leveling and loss lead to convergence to standard Dutch, and simultaneously to divergence that is reflected in increasing variation, that is, hyperdialectisms. This can be clearly observed in morphosyntactic features such as the adnominal masculine gender suffix *-e(n)*. The current study investigates the sociolinguistic enregisterment of this suffix in 336 multimodal “tiles” with Brabantish aphorisms and jokes on Instagram. Based on digital and interview data, it shows how linguistic structure, situated use, and metalinguistic awareness (i.e., Silverstein’s total linguistic fact) are constantly interrelated. It is argued that the gender suffix acquires indexical social meaning at the expense of grammatical function, as its (hyperdialectal) use becomes associated with and recognizable for a place-based identity (“Brabantishness”). This research offers insights into how this meaning-making process is enhanced by co-occurring linguistic and nonlinguistic resources in mediated “languagecultural” practices.

With the rise of social media, the potential uses for everyday informal language have skyrocketed (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2016, 288). This leads to a paradoxical situation for traditional dialects that were

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historically reserved for spoken communication on a very local scale. Writing down the dialect in a digital environment not only leads to a new modality, and hence new language practices, but also gives the local dialect a global reach (Leppänen 2012). This article examines a very specific dialect, namely, the dialect of the southern Dutch province of North Brabant. In this province, not only is dialect use declining sharply but the dialect itself is also undergoing significant change (Hoppenbrouwers 1990). Despite this downturn, the Brabantish dialect pops up regularly on social media (Visser et al. 2015; Swanenberg 2017; Doreleijers and Swanenberg 2023). An example is shown in figure 1. This image was posted on October 18, 2018, on the Instagram page of RoekOe Brabant.

The post is (partly) written in Brabantish dialect. First, it includes a question for the reader: “Kende gjj d’n d’n fout vinden?” (Can you find the the error?). This question is followed by a series of numbers (123456789) and a request for action: “LIKE as ge ut meteen zag” (LIKE if you saw it right away). Not only does the message contain a misleading question, but there is also an ambiguity in the answer that the writer may not have realized himself. Many readers will probably look at the set of numbers to find the error, but the error is obviously in the redundancy of having the same definite article spelled out twice: *d’n d’n fout* ‘the the error’. However, the linguistic form of the definite article is unexpected here, as it contains a suffix *-n* for masculine gender that does not appear preceding a noun with the initial sound *f*, according to dialect grammar descriptions (see the next section for a detailed explanation). Therefore, it is an overgeneralization of a dialect feature that sounds (in this case: looks) typically Brabantish (*d’n fout* instead of *de fout*). This means that the error is not only in the redundancy of repeating the article, as proficient dialect speakers would reject the article in its current form anyway.

Nevertheless, the post has received 441 likes and 14 comments.¹ The repetition of the article was the most given answer to the question in the post, but there was also one reader who gave a different answer: *zo’n beetje de hele zin* ‘pretty much the whole sentence’. Although the language use in the post has an unmistakably Brabantish flavor, there is something odd about it. Besides the masculine gender suffix, there are other dialect features that differ from Standard Dutch (SD), such as the inflection of the verb for the second person *kende* (SD: *ken je* ‘can you’), the personal pronouns *gij* and *ge* (SD: *jij* ‘you’), the spelling of the comparative

1. In this article, all social media page statistics date from March 2021.



Figure 1. RoekOe Brabant Instagram account, October 18, 2018

conjunction *as* (SD: *als* ‘if’), and the spelling of the anaphoric pronoun *ut* (SD: *het*/'t ‘it’). Simultaneously, the verbal forms *vinden* ‘to find’ and *zag* ‘saw’ and the adverb *meteen* ‘immediately’ are written down as in Standard Dutch, creating a mix of varieties.

In addition to the linguistic features, the layout of the post stands out. It turns out that the black background, the framing of laurel leaves and the RoekOe Brabant logo are typical of a recurring type of posts referred to as *tegelkes* ‘little tiles’. These digital tiles are based on Dutch *tegelspreuken* ‘tile texts’ or *tegeltjeswijsheden* ‘tiles of wisdom’: small tiles in blue and white Delftware style that are inscribed with inspirational aphorisms or proverbs. These are used as decorative wall hangings, especially during the 1970s but also recently as kitsch decoration (Cornips and Van den Hengel 2021, 283). The Brabantish tile, however, raises an interesting case. Why does RoekOe Brabant choose to create Brabantish tiles in an era of dialect loss? How meaningful are local linguistic features in this (multi)mediated context? And, in particular, to what extent should the use of dialect features be perceived as authentic to convey a local image? The aim of this article is to demonstrate how a specific dialect feature, the gender-marking suffix, undergoes a process of enregisterment where it no longer expresses (only) a grammatical feature but becomes indexically loaded and linked to a local identity through digital “languagecultural” practices, that is, social media users engaging with the tiles.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section discusses the current trend of dialect change in the area of study. This is followed by a section elaborating on the concepts of enregisterment and the total linguistic fact. The latter concept forms the theoretical backbone of this article, resulting in three concrete research questions. After that, both the case study and the (mixed) method of data collection is described. Subsequently, the main results are presented and discussed. Based on the holistic approach of the total linguistic fact, this section is divided into three paragraphs, aligning with the three dimensions

of linguistic structure, situated use, and metalinguistic awareness. Finally, these perspectives will be synthesized in the conclusion.

Dialect Loss and Change in North Brabant

North Brabant is the third largest province of the Netherlands, with about 2.5 million inhabitants. The local Brabantish dialects lack formal recognition (Swanenberg 2013) but are used for informal communication within the regional community. However, in general, dialect use in the Netherlands, including the province of North Brabant, is declining sharply (Swanenberg and Van Hout 2013; Versloot 2020). Due to increasing processes of globalization, urbanization, and growing mobility, language contact causes the local dialects to converge toward Dutch, leading to leveled varieties. Traditional, local dialects are given up in favor of varieties with a larger geographical reach, that is, *regiolects* (regional dialects) or *koinés* (Hoppenbrouwers 1990; Britain 2009).

Nevertheless, recent research shows that although much dialect vocabulary is indeed disappearing, the language use in the region remains recognizably Brabantish (Swanenberg 2014). Specific dialect features are lost in some cases, adding to convergence to Dutch, but magnified in others. This means that convergence is accompanied by divergence, in which the difference from the standard is emphasized (Swanenberg 2020; Doreleijers et al. 2021). Divergence is shown, for example, in so-called hyperdialectisms: overgeneralizations of a dialect feature in linguistic contexts where it does not belong historically (Lenz 2004; Hinskens 2014, 112).

One Brabantish dialect feature that is particularly suited to this kind of magnification is the adnominal marking of lexical gender. In contrast to Dutch, which has a two-gender system, that is, a formal distinction between common and neuter lexical gender, traditional Brabantish grammar descriptions (±1960–2013) still distinguish between masculine, feminine, and neuter gender in the adnominal domain (e.g., De Bont 1962; De Schutter 2013). Therefore, determiners and adjectives are assigned a suffix *-e(n)* or *-n* in singular masculine noun phrases, for example, *enen/den (bruinen) hond* instead of *een/de (bruine) hond* ‘a/the (brown) dog’. However, in contemporary dialect, the masculine suffix is sometimes also applied in feminine or neuter noun phrases, for example, *enen oma* ‘a grandmother’ or *ene kuukske* ‘a cookie’, or in plurals, for example, *d’n keuzes* ‘the choices’ (Doreleijers et al. 2020). Another example is the overgeneralization of the so-called binding-*n* as already mentioned in the introduction. Although this euphonic *n* traditionally only appears preceding masculine nouns starting with a vowel or *h, b, d, t*, it nowadays occurs frequently in other contexts

too, for example, *d'n fout* instead of *de fout*, as seen in figure 1.² The cause of these hyperdialectisms is often to be found in a deficient knowledge of the dialect, and it is often assumed that (non-native or semi-) speakers “do not know any better” (Trudgill 1988, 551; Hinskens 2014, 114). In an attempt to sound local and claim the Brabantish identity, they unconsciously apply dialect rules in a nontraditional way, leading to a makeshift dialect variety (Hoppenbrouwers 1990, 124; Hinskens 2014, 115). However, the question arises whether deviation from the traditional dialect rule is always unconscious and erroneous. Producing hyperdialectisms may also be a deliberate action by the speaker to emphasize a difference from the standard language, thereby marking their local or dialectal identity (cf. “fennicisms” in Strandberg et al. [2022]). Linguistic insecurity may play a role, but speakers may also deviate from the norm when they *do* know what that norm is.

The current situation of dialect leveling and loss provides an optimal research context, as coinciding processes of language shift and dialect change can serve as a springboard for producing hyperdialectisms. Moreover, it is accompanied by yet another development of increasing digitalization. New and social media have given dialects a new mode of expression, that is, an informally spoken and written genre (Swanenberg 2017). Local language use is being deployed online to propagate a sense of belonging to the region (e.g., Cornips et al. 2016, 2018). Depending on the context, speakers choose the linguistic features from their plurilingual repertoire that best fit what they want to say and how they want to say it. These features can range from the smallest linguistic units of phonemes and morphemes to words or phrases. This feature-based approach (cf. Jørgensen et al. 2015) provides opportunities for disappearing dialects, because speakers do not need full command of the dialect to express themselves adequately. The use of a limited number of shibboleth-like dialect features is ideally suited for indexing place-based identities (cf. Cornips and De Rooij 2020). The next sections explore this in more detail.

Local Dialect Use in an Era of Global Digitally Mediated Communication

Previous research has already shown that the internet register is not homogeneous but rather sociolinguistically variable and diverse (e.g., Androutsopoulos and Ziegler 2004). This linguistic heterogeneity is closely connected to the

2. Note that *fout* has changed from feminine lexical gender to common gender in Dutch, and due to dialect leveling, this might well be the case in the Brabantish dialects. To not overinterpret this hyperform, it is here analyzed as a form violating the phonological constraint; however, it could be a violation of the gender constraint at the same time.

interrelation between online language use and the construction of identities. Indexical stance-taking practices—such as self-presentation, relationship-building, and identity negotiation, that is, stylization (Coupland 2001)—are considered to be some of the core features of virtual interaction and drivers of linguistic innovation (e.g., Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015). In mediated discourse, single linguistic features that are part of the full semiotic repertoire can also be loaded with social meaning (cf. Eckert 2008). Enregisterment takes place when specific linguistic forms become linked with ways of speaking, thereby indicating social and place-based identities.³ Processes of enregisterment can take place in and through social media and may involve multiple types of linguistic features to deploy socially recognizable personae or characterological figures (Agha 2003, 243); see, for example, Ilbury (2020, 2022) on the “Sassy Queen” and the “Hun,” Heyd (2022) on “Lisa,” or Cole and Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (2022) on “Haagse Harry.”⁴

Within the southern Dutch context, Cornips and De Rooij’s (2020) study of a carnivalesque song has shown how popular music artists from a local town in the province of Limburg (Heerlen) can have a strong influence on processes of enregisterment through their presence on social media. By selecting a particular set of linguistic (dialectal) forms and thereby deselecting others, they create indexical ties between these forms, the local community, and a specific place (i.e., Heerlen North). For example, in general, Limburgish as well as Brabantish speakers are recognized by their soft *g* pronunciation, which is indexical not only for their southern origin but also for the perceived soft qualities of the speakers themselves, that is, their conviviality, *bon vivant* lifestyle, and sense of community (Cornips et al. 2017).

However, this focus on place-based identities (cf. Antonsich 2010) calls for taking into account nonlinguistic resources as well, as belonging is achieved not only through language but also through culture. The concept of “languaculture” (Agar 1994, 60) or “languageculture” (Cornips and De Rooij 2020, 342) acknowledges that local identity is expressed in the dialect use (i.e., in deviating from the national norm or standard) as well as in local cultural events (such as local carnival celebrations). These languacultural practices are considered to be constantly shifting, because they are influenced by changing interactional practices and

3. See, e.g., Agha (2005, 2007); Beal (2009); Johnstone (2011, 2016, 2017).

4. These studies are not discussed in detail here, but describe similar phenomena to the one that is the focus of this article. Social voices are linked to a specific register (cf. *enregistered voices*: Agha [2005], 39), and in this process specific linguistic features evoke a stereotypical persona, for example, indexing a sassy and fierce character (Sassy Queen), a “Shallow Girl” (Lisa), or a lower-working-class male (Haagse Harry).

(cultural) ideologies (Johnstone 2016, 641), or, in other words, language choice, practice, and ideology constantly and mutually shape and inform each other. To achieve a holistic understanding of a linguistic phenomenon, that is, to grasp “the total linguistic fact” (Silverstein 1985), it is necessary to take these multiple perspectives into account, as it is a result of “an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualized to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” (220).

An appropriate example of a study elaborating on the total linguistic fact is documented in the article by Androutsopoulos and Busch (2021) on digital punctuation (the message-final period) as an interactional resource. Drawing on an interplay of digital data, ethnographic insights, and interviews with informants, they demonstrate that the message-final period undergoes a process of pragmatization: “a gain of pragmatic functions at the expenses of syntactic ones” (Androutsopoulos and Busch 2021, 1). They show that the period is enregistered as an index of communicative distance. Adolescents are aware of this social meaning and use the message-final period to “index a writer’s insistence on their viewpoint, their unwillingness to further negotiation on a subject matter, or their annoyance with the interlocutor or the referent” in text messages (Androutsopoulos and Busch 2021, 8). The analytical framework proposed by Androutsopoulos and Busch (2021, 3–4) includes three interlocked levels that can easily be deployed for other linguistic features as well. The first level focuses on the frequency and distribution of a linguistic feature in the data (cf. linguistic structure), the second level examines this linguistic feature in terms of interactional practice (cf. situated use), and the third level investigates metalinguistic practices in which the linguistic feature is thematized and evaluated by (digital) language users (cf. linguistic awareness).

Inspired by this framework, the current article analyzes the use of adnominal gender marking in the digital Brabantish tiles by paying attention to all three dimensions of the total linguistic fact. First, the analysis starts with describing the frequency of the gender marked forms in alternation with unmarked forms: how is the gender-marking suffix distributed in the tiles? Second, the analysis delves into the situational and contextual conditions of occurrence in the interactive digital writings: how is the gender-marking suffix turned into a communicative resource in the tiles? Third, the analysis deals with the reflexive loading of the suffix with social meaning in metalinguistic discourse, that is, the indexical linking to social personae or practices: how do speakers reflect on the use and social value of the gender-marking suffix in the tiles? Before moving on to this multifaceted analysis, the next section first provides a brief description of the

background of the phenomenon central to this article, that is, the social media account of RoekOe Brabant, and the method used.

Research Phenomenon and Method

RoekOe Brabant

During the annual carnival festival in 2010, a group of friends from the city of Oosterhout (West Brabant) created a page on the Dutch social networking website Hyves (available from 2004 to 2013) on which they shared photos of their carnival celebrations (e.g., dressing up as pigeon fanciers). When the festival was over, one of the friends decided to keep the page and post jokes on it in Brabantish dialect. In 2013, the Hyves page was exchanged for Facebook and Instagram pages titled “RoekOe Brabant,” an example of onomatopoeia, as it refers to the sound made by a pigeon, which is also known as *koeren* ‘cooing’. Moreover, *RoekOe* is similar to *ik ruik je* (*ik roek oe* ‘I smell you’) in Brabantish dialect. In March 2021, the RoekOe Brabant Instagram page had about 10,000 followers. Of the group of friends who started the account, only one was still active as of 2022: a forty-nine-year-old man, George, who was born and still lives in Oosterhout. He was raised speaking Standard Dutch (“Everything had to be neat and correct”) in an upper-middle-class milieu and works as a sales representative. His RoekOe Brabant activities are a hobby and not a steady source of income (apart from a limited income from the sale of merchandise). Although RoekOe has many followers, George is not a publicly known figure.⁵

The aim of RoekOe Brabant is to promote the *bourgondische* ‘Burgundian’ (exuberant, bon vivant) and convivial character of the province of North Brabant in a funny way. In doing so, George wants to resist negative stereotypes, such as a rough and burly image with foul language, that are often conjured up when referring to the province (Swanenberg 2014). As a counterforce, RoekOe Brabant wants to express pride in the region by highlighting what is perceived as local and authentic, such as the Brabantish flag, local food and drinks, specific music (songs), carnival celebrations, and the local language. Yet George (despite his own dislike) cannot resist leaving some traces of the rough and burly image (but without the foul language) to appeal to his followers: “I think we should promote ourselves as Burgundian and convivial . . . not as a bunch of *ordinaire boeren*

5. The information in this section was obtained through an article of Boeijen (2018) and a semistructured interview with George, the initiator of RoekOe Brabant, on June 23, 2021. This interview lasted 104 minutes and was part of the data collection for this study. I conducted the interview, which was then transcribed and stored for the long term in the digital archive of the KNAW Meertens Institute in Amsterdam; all translations are mine. Informed consent has been obtained. The data are accessible to other researchers under collection ID 1144.

[lit. ‘vulgar peasants’] all shouting *kut* [lit. ‘cunt’], I don’t like that so I won’t encourage that image on my page. Of course, I have to push the boundaries, that’s also why I have been trown off [the platform] a few times, for example that you see bare boobs in the background of the post, because ‘sex sells’ . . . but I don’t like doing that because I am not proud of it.”

The main genres of RoekOe Brabant are tiles and memes, in which images are combined with short texts in Brabantish language (Wagener 2021). Some tiles include more classic jokes featuring two fictitious Brabantish characters, Franske and Truuske (first names with a typical Brabantish diminutive suffix *-ke*), often with a (slightly) sexist undertone. All tiles were created by George himself using the photo editor PicSay.

Triangulating Approach

The method for this study can be described as a triangulating approach that is blended in nature (Androutsopoulos 2017), as digital data were collected for distributional linguistic analysis, and these were supplemented with interview data.⁶ The study started with screen data collection, that is, sampling by genre. The tiles collected for this study were posted between March 2018 and March 2021 on the Instagram page of RoekOe Brabant. A total of 336 tiles were collected and coded to answer the first research question about linguistic form. To answer the second research question about situated use, the interactional context was examined as place, pointing to Instagram as a discursively created space for online interaction through which users shape linguistic practice and give meaning to it. Therefore, the emplacement of the tiles was studied, and qualitative, semi-structured interview data were collected through personal contact with the creator of the tiles as well as page statistics (number of likes, comments, etc.). To answer the third research question about metalinguistic awareness, statements were elicited in the interview, and these were supplemented with digital comments on the posts.

Adnominal Gender Marking in Digital Tiles: Linguistic Form, Situated Use, and Metalinguistic Awareness

Linguistic Form: Frequencies and Distribution

The data collection of 336 tiles allows for a quantitative comparison of the uses of gender marking. As 48 tiles did not contain a nominal phrase, these tiles were excluded from the analysis. The remaining 288 tiles did contain one or more

6. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Tilburg University, REDC#2020/129.

nominal phrases. In total, the tiles included 961 nominal phrases written down in Brabantish dialect. The use of the masculine gender suffix turns out to be a variable feature, as the suffix is only used in 515 phrases. Based on grammar descriptions, it is possible to investigate whether specific instances of the suffix are expected or not following the general gender-marking patterns in Brabantish dialects (as previously described), leading to the following twofold hypothesis: (1) the masculine gender suffix *-e(n)* is attached to adnominals preceding masculine singular nouns, and (2) the binding-*n* only precedes (ad)nominals starting with a vowel or *h, b, d, t*.

A linguistic analysis of all phrases reveals that this hypothesis holds in 605 phrases (63.0 percent) and that it does not hold in 356 phrases (37.0 percent). An overview of variation types is given in table 1 ($n = 550$). The phrases that follow the hypothesis contain 199 expected uses of the suffix. In all cases not expected according to the hypothesis, the reasons for unexpectedness vary. In 35 phrases (9.8 percent), it is caused by omission, that is, masculine nouns that are lacking the adnominal gender suffix. In addition, in 85 phrases (23.9 percent) the gender suffix is only partially applied. These compromise forms lack the binding-*n* despite being expected within the masculine context. Omissions and compromise forms are indicative of convergence toward Dutch, and thus dialect loss. However, in terms of frequency, the majority of the unexpected forms concerns the hyperdialectic use of the gender suffix. In total, 230 phrases (64.6 percent) contain a hyperdialectism, almost a quarter (23.9 percent) of the total number of phrases (961) included in the analysis.

Table 1. Variation in Adnominal Gender Marking in the Roek0e Brabant Tiles
($n = 550$)

Variation Type	Frequency	Examples
Expected form	199	<i>zunnan hond, d'n dokter</i> 'his dog', 'the doctor'
Omission	35	<i>oew kop, un zwaore jonge</i> 'your head', 'a tough guy'
Compromise form	85	<i>munne hond, unne avond</i> 'my dog', 'an evening'
Phonological hyperdialectism	109	<i>oewen kop, d'n vloer</i> 'your hat', 'the floor'
Morphological hyperdialectism	79	<i>d'n daome, munne schoene</i> 'the lady', 'my shoes'
Phonomorphological hyperdialectism	42	<i>d'n politie, d'n klachten</i> 'the police', 'the complaints'
Hypermarking	1	<i>nunnenond</i> 'a dog'

A more in-depth analysis of these hyperdialectisms shows that out of the 76 singular feminine nouns in the data collection, 57 nouns (75 percent) are assigned a masculine gender suffix. This percentage is lower for singular neuter nouns, of which only 7 out of 329 (2.1 percent) are assigned this suffix. This could be explained by the fact that in Dutch, it is easier to distinguish neuter nouns from masculine nouns than to distinguish feminine nouns from masculine nouns, since the former are accompanied by a different article (*het* ‘it’) and feminine and masculine singular nouns both share their article (*de* ‘the’ for common gender). Convergence to Dutch may result in Brabantish speakers being unable to properly distinguish between masculine and feminine lexical gender. Following the hypothesis, number also plays a role in the allocation of adnominal gender marking, as traditionally only singular nouns are marked for gender. Nevertheless, 52 out of 100 plural phrases (52.0 percent) in the data collection are assigned a masculine gender suffix.

In terms of hyperdialectisms, it is possible to roughly distinguish between hyperdialectisms of a phonological type (i.e., assigning an unexpected binding-*n*), a morphological type (i.e., assigning an adnominal masculine gender suffix to nouns that classify as feminine or neuter, appear in the plural, or appear as diminutives that are inherently neuter), or a combination of both. In the current collection of 230 hyperdialectisms, the phonological type occurs 109 times (47.4 percent), the morphological type occurs 79 times (34.3 percent), and the combination occurs 42 times (18.3 percent). Moreover, one phrase was classified as another specific hyperform with two stacked suffixes: *nunnenond* (*nunnen hond* ‘a dog’ with *h*-dropping). In this case, the indefinite article and the noun have assimilated into one form and the indefinite article has two masculine endings (note that *(e)nen hond*—spelled here as *(un)nen*—would be the expected form).

The finding that the suffix occurs very frequently in the tiles, irrespective of grammatical correctness as illustrated by the predominance of hyperdialectisms, confirms that it is regarded as a distinctive feature of the Brabantish dialect. This is also supported by the interview data in which George mentions the suffix as one of the linguistic features that he considers typically Brabantish and therefore appropriate to use (see the third subsection of this section): “I like *gij* [‘you’] of course, that’s a default feature though, and *oe* [‘you’], and *un bietje* [‘a little bit’], that’s a nice and light-hearted Brabantish word, and also *unne* [‘a(n)’].” However, the suffix is not an isolated feature to give the language a local flavor, as it co-occurs with other linguistic features and nonlinguistic signs. The next section further elaborates on this.

Situated Use: Tiles within the Interactional Context

To come to an adequate understanding of the way the suffix is used within the tiles, it is important to study the broader interactional context. In general, RoekOe Brabant communicates in Brabantish dialect with a frequent interference from Dutch, as shown in figure 1. RoekOe Brabant describes this hybrid language use as light-hearted Brabantish that is easy to read for everyone, including people who are not from the province. These people are referred to as *Bovensloters* ‘people from above the ditch’, a term popularly invented and generally adopted in the southern provinces of the Netherlands to denote people from above the rivers Rijn/Waal and Maas who speak distinct dialects. However, since George is not a native speaker of the Brabantish dialect, it is unclear which variant of the Brabantish dialect he is drawing on. In the interview he indicates to use Brabantish as he hears it around him and to (sometimes) search the internet for correct spellings: “I started looking on the internet for things like how to write. . . . Talking Brabantish is easy, you do it the way you hear it or whatever, but writing is really different.” However, there is no standardized orthography, and differences between the eastern and western parts of the province are quite large. Therefore, George is often still insecure of his dialect writing, but he does not care that much either: “Otherwise I would have to take a course. First of all, that doesn’t exist, and I also don’t feel like it and don’t have the time to do it.”

In the Instagram profile description, RoekOe Brabant is defined as a comedian. In March 2021, the profile description stated: “Droge Brabantse humor op dieje zwarte RoekOe Brabant tegelkes” (Dry sense of Brabantish humor on those small black RoekOe Brabant tiles). It is striking that this description already contains a hyperdialectism, that is, the use of the masculine gender suffix within the demonstrative pronoun (*dieje* ‘those’) preceding a plural noun (*tegelkes* ‘small tiles’). Furthermore, the description includes a link to a web store with merchandise (e.g., T-shirts, mouth masks, aprons, and mugs) decorated with RoekOe Brabant jokes and aphorisms, thereby turning the Brabantish identity, including the local language, into a marketable product. Brabantishness is also portrayed in the profile picture (fig. 2) that includes a background in the checkered pattern and colors (red and white) of the Brabantish flag, and the name of RoekOe Brabant, with *RoekOe* in a black and white Comic Sans–like font (with red hearts filling up the Os), contributing to a humorous effect (Turner 2017, 90). The logo also features a typical Brabantish aphorism: “Witte wel, witte nie!” (Do you know, don’t you know!). This aphorism is dialectal because of the second person pronoun (singular) that is integrated into the verb via cliticization in an inverted



Figure 2. RoekOe Brabant's Instagram profile picture

clause *witte* (*weet je* 'you know') and the nonstandard spellings of *wit* (SD: *weet* 'know') and *nie* (SD: *niet* 'not'; *t*-deletion).

The design of the tiles also reflects the Brabantish flag. In the first part of the data collection (up to August 6, 2019), the tiles (139 in total) contained a black background with a white border of laurel leaves and a RoekOe Brabant logo in black and white (see fig. 3). On August 12, 2019, this design changed for the remaining tiles. From then on, the tiles included a black background with a clean red and white frame and a name inscription of RoekOe Brabant featuring two Brabantish flags (fig. 4). This change was intended to modernize the tiles and give them a more recognizable Brabantish character through the use of the colors. Note that in figure 3 (about the consequences of spooning for men and women) and figure 4 (about asking a lady about her age), there also seems to be a conflict between George's aims and his actual sign usage, as George has to balance between his own aims in portraying a Brabantish persona and existing stereotypes of *de Brabander* as a rough, burly, and slightly sexist characterological figure (cf. Swanenberg 2014).

On Instagram, it is relatively easy to track the uptake of the tiles by looking at the user contributions, that is, the number of likes and comments. The average number of likes is 297.3 (ranging from 199 to 601), and the average number of comments is 7.3 (ranging from 0 to 87). However, these numbers are only an



Figure 3. RoekOe Brabant Instagram account, September 25, 2018



Figure 4. RoekOe Brabant Instagram account, December 10, 2019

indicator that (at least) some of the followers can identify with the tiles, but they do not reveal anything about the interaction type. A more in-depth analysis of the comments shows that most interaction consists of sharing emoticons (mostly faces with tears of joy) or tagging other Instagram users. In a total of 43 tiles (12.8 percent), people explicitly respond to the local language used in the tile. These comments vary from discussing specific words that differ within the province to general comments on the dialect or the (un)intelligibility of the language use, but none of these comments were about gender marking specifically. In addition, in one of the tiles (fig. 5), followers are asked to respond to the question “Wa is nou typisch Brabants?” (What is typical Brabantish?). This question has elicited 87 answers ranging from linguistic items—for example, the farewell greeting *houdoe*, the soft *g* pronunciation, or the excessive use of the masculine gender suffix (*nunnenond* instead of *nen hond* ‘a dog’)—to local food (e.g., a *worstenbroodje* ‘sausage roll’ or a *Bossche bol*, a chocolate ball filled with whipped cream), the professional football club PSV, the music of the Brabantish singer Guus Meeuwis, annual carnival celebrations, or feelings of *gastvrijheid* ‘hospitality’ and *gezelligheid* ‘conviviality’, ‘coziness’.

Such nonlinguistic semiotic resources are also deployed by RoekOe Brabant, as shown in figure 6. This post depicts various local delicacies: the previously



Figure 5. RoekOe Brabant Instagram account, August 29, 2018



Figure 6. RoekOe Brabant Instagram account, September 2, 2018

mentioned *worstenbroodjes* ‘sausage rolls’ that are well-known throughout the province, Schrobbeleer liqueur from the city of Tilburg, La Trappe beer from the village of Berkel-Enschot, *een kaneelstok* ‘a cinnamon stick’ from the town of Oosterhout, and the *Bossche bol* from the city of ’s-Hertogenbosch. These are accompanied by the Brabantish flag in the background and on the napkin. In addition, the inscription “Dan denkte aon Brabant” (Then you think of Brabant), with the characteristic second-person conjugation (*denkte* instead of *denk je* ‘you think’) and the nonstandard spelling of *aan* as *aon* ‘of’, stands out. People from or familiar with the province will recognize the “intertextuality” in this inscription (cf. Hill 2005; Silverstein 2005), as it refers to one of the lyrics of the song “Brabant” from the popular Brabantish singer Guus Meeuwis, which is generally considered to be the unofficial anthem of the province. Besides, the post includes the text *ons mooie bourgondische* ‘our beautiful bon-vivant/exuberant [Brabant]’. The term *bourgondisch* is associated with an attitude of enjoying life, including food and drinks. Thus, this example shows that the expression of Brabantishness is to be found not only in (small) linguistic features but also in other semiotic elements. In fact, their co-occurrence has a reinforcing effect.

In short, the interactional context, the situated use in which the gender suffix appears frequently, is a humorous context that paves the way for a magnification of the local language to create a comic effect (Cornips et al. 2018). Studying the context reveals that the suffix does not stand alone in creating social meaning but that the indexical link between Brabantishness and such a small linguistic feature is established and reinforced by the presence of other semiotic signs, such as references to local food and drinks, the Brabantish flag, and the lyrics of a popular song with a strong local flavor. This co-occurrence contributes to the creation of an (imagined) social persona of *de Brabander* (composed of a set of features indicating how they speak and what they like). However, the question remains as to what extent the use of languagecultural signs, in particular the

use of the gender suffix, should be perceived as authentic to convey a local image in a convincing way?

Metalinguistic Awareness: The Reflexive Loading of the Gender Suffix
 Given the large number of hyperdialectisms, the question arises whether Instagram users evaluate these forms as positive or negative (or whether they evaluate them at all). As the comments on the tiles did not contain any remarks about gender marking specifically, one could argue that the hyperdialectal use of the suffix is not noticed or that people simply do not care about it. However, a defining characteristic of social media is that popular posts are easily shared on other accounts. In the case of RoekOe Brabant, this reposting is (for example) done by the regional news broadcaster Omroep Brabant. Their Instagram page had about 140,000 followers in March 2021. Interestingly, one of the reposts (displayed in figs. 7 and 8) did receive some metalinguistic comments on the gender suffix. The text on this tile contains a joke about talking dialect: “War/was munne buik/buuk maor net zo plat a(l)s mun(ne) dialect” (If only my belly were as flat as my dialect). The word *plat* is ambiguous, as it is used to refer to talking dialect (*plat praten*), but it can also indicate a flat surface, in this case a flat belly.⁷ However, a comparison of the RoekOe Brabant tile (fig. 7) and the Omroep Brabant tile (fig. 8) reveals a number of differences.

In the first place, the design deviates. In the repost, Omroep Brabant has chosen to add a background with a bare belly and a jeans waistband, and more importantly, a tile with the layout of the Brabantish flag and some Omroep Brabant logos. Second, Omroep Brabant has made some linguistic adjustments: the verb form *war* is changed into *was* ‘was’, the noun *buik* is changed into *buuk* ‘belly’, the comparative conjunction *as* is changed into *als* ‘as’, and the possessive pronoun *mun* is changed into *munne* ‘my’. In the case of *was* and *als* there is convergence toward Dutch, as these are Standard Dutch forms. This change contributes to the hybrid character, that is, the mix of varieties, in the tile. Strikingly, the pronunciation (and spelling) of the noun *buuk* is only used in a small municipality, Land van Cuijk, in the very northeastern part of the province (otherwise: *buik*). However, the most relevant change for the current study is the addition of the masculine gender suffix preceding the neuter noun *dialect* ‘dialect’, resulting in hyperdialectism: *munne dialect* ‘my dialect’. Interestingly, some followers have

7. The word *plat* is a folk concept referring to dialect, that is, it is a common term used by speakers when talking about dialect.



Figure 7. RoekOe Brabant Instagram account, June 10, 2019 (source)

observed and commented on this linguistic deviation, as shown in the quotations below (note that A, B, and C represent different anonymized speakers).

Example 1

- A. Was da vur een dialect munne?
[What kind of dialect is *munne*?]
- B. Inderdaad, moet mun dialect zijn
[Indeed, it should be *mun dialect*]

Example 2

- A. Unne buuk en mien dialect toch?
[*Unne buuk* and *mien dialect*, right?]
- B. Of munne buuk en men dialect
[Or *munne buuk* and *men dialect*]
- C. In ieder geval niet munne dialect
[At least not *munne dialect*]

In these examples, the participants openly and explicitly discuss the use of the suffix and label it as erroneous (i.e., overgeneralized) in the current linguistic context. Although a concrete reason for rejecting the use of the suffix is not



Figure 8. Omroep Brabant Instagram account, July 8, 2020 (repost)

given in these examples, it is given in another tile (fig. 9) in which the masculine gender suffix appears in the definite article preceding the feminine noun *vrouw* ‘woman’. This tile was posted by Omroep Brabant during the (national) annual celebration of Mother’s Day and contains the text “Ja, d’n allerliefste vrouw da is toch oew moederke” (Yes, the sweetest woman is your mother, right?).

Someone replies to this hyperdialectism in the comments:

Hee Omroep Brabant, let nou eens ‘n bietje op als je zo nodig dialect wilt gebruiken! D’n vrouw is geen Brabants. Het is gewoon de vrouw. Je gebruikt d’n of den nooit bij vrouwelijke zelfstandige naamwoorden.

[Hey Omroep Brabant, pay attention if you want to use dialect! *D’n vrouw* is not Brabantish. It’s simply *de vrouw*. You never use *d’n* or *den* preceding feminine nouns.]

This speaker confronts Omroep Brabant with its use of the hyperdialectism and labels it as erroneous Brabantish by invoking grammar conventions, that is, the masculine gender suffix does not align with feminine nouns. Although such explicit metalinguistic evaluations of the use of the gender suffix are missing in the comments on the RoekOe Brabant tiles, interview data reveal that the creator of the tiles, George, also receives comments on dialect use and especially on the use of the gender suffix: “I have also received comments about *unne* or *unnen* . . . or *d’n* followed by a noun starting with a consonant . . . that there should not be an *n* . . . but I do pronounce it that way, so yes, I do write it.” For example, the hyperdialectism *d’n vrouw* ‘the woman’ is also used in the RoekOe Brabant tiles (see fig. 3). Therefore, George was asked to comment on his own use of hyperdialectal forms in the tiles:

Sometimes you have those sentences where I can’t put enough Brabantish in, so that it is actually a Dutch sentence. I find that a pity. Then I think, yes, I do have a Brabantish page, why should I put a Dutch sentence in it, I don’t



Figure 9. Omroep Brabant Instagram account, May 10, 2020

like that. I think that's wrong too [i.e., *d'n vrouw*], only then it's *de* again . . . *de vrouw*, again too Dutch and then I think oh *den vrouw*. . . . But then again, it was a short sentence and I did write *den* to make it a bit more Brabantish . . . but I also don't think it sounds weird.

Based on this response, it appears that a deviation from Standard Dutch is deliberately sought. Even if an utterance is (known to be) ungrammatical, it can still be used to emphasize locality. This may lead to a clash between speakers who adhere to normativity and those who do not. Whereas the former notice hyperdialectisms immediately and may also be annoyed by it, the latter see no problem in using nontraditional forms that at least appear to be dialectal. Therefore, hyperdialectisms can even be used consciously. The reflexive loading of the gender suffix may also vary based on inter- and intra-individual differences, that is, on the dialect knowledge of single speakers and the (probably genre-specific) extent to which they are aware of the suffix. Interestingly, a high level of awareness does not necessarily lead to linguistic choices that are in line with (authentic) grammatical expectations, as metalinguistic data show that the masculine gender suffix may serve as a linguistic identifier to index Brabantishness irrespective of its original grammatical function. In future research, it would be worth exploring whether this shift in function also occurs outside the (written) online context, and if speakers are able to reflect on it.

Conclusion

In the present-day context of dialect loss and change in the Netherlands, social media provides a valuable site to examine how dialect evolves and is still used. The aim of the current article was to study how a specific linguistic feature of the southern Dutch Brabantish dialect, the adnominal masculine gender suffix, is deployed in a specific type of social media posts: tiles on Instagram. In this case study, the Instagram page of RoekOe Brabant was examined using the three dimensions of the total linguistic fact: linguistic form, situated use, and metalinguistic awareness (Silverstein 1985). The findings reveal an extensive use of hyperdialectisms (i.e., overgeneralizations of the masculine gender suffix) at the expense of the expected uses of the gender suffix according to grammar descriptions.

However, a qualitative analysis of the interactional context and metalinguistic statements was needed to accurately uncover the precise meaning of these hyperdialectisms. Are they just a reflection of limited dialect knowledge, or do they carry social meaning? It turns out that the gender suffix functions as a recognizable linguistic feature that is linked with a specific way of speaking,

in this case in a written modality (Johnstone 2016). This way of speaking represents the social persona of the local, that is, *de Brabander* (cf. Agha 2003). Interestingly, indexical linking is not only a linguistic process but also a cultural one (i.e., languagecultural) on interrelated levels. The (i) predominance of hyperdialectisms combined with (ii) the overall aim of RoekOe Brabant to convey a local convivial and bon-vivant image, (iii) the use of other local linguistic features (such as nonstandard spellings and dialectal verb forms), and (iv) the use of nonlinguistic semiotic signs (such as the Brabantish flag, colors, and local food) together ensure the indexing of a local Brabantish identity: *Brabanderschap* ‘Brabantishness’. The morphological gender suffix becomes enregistered as it is no longer (only) tied to grammatical gender but acquires a different function by (co)creating a clear and magnified place-based identity to which people can relate (similar to, e.g., the previously mentioned soft *g* pronunciation that not only marks a phonological north-south contrast between speakers but also a contrast between their personalities; cf. Cornips et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, metalinguistic statements reveal interindividual differences in the extent to which recognizability is actually achieved. It appears that for some speakers, the use of the suffix, even if it is not grammatically expected, can add a local flavor to the language. For others, however, the use of hyperdialectisms is a reason to regard the language use as wrong or inappropriate, which stands in the way of conveying an authentic local image. In any case, the mediated discourse context examined in this article reveals that there is compelling evidence for the enregisterment of grammatical gender in which the morphosyntactic function gives way to a social function for indexing Brabantishness.

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