



Style shifting in commercials

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Abstract

^ This paper presents a quantitative analysis of style shifting in a corpus of Flemish radio and television commercials. Previous research draws attention to *styling processes* in advertising language, as discursive actions indexing social meanings. It will be shown that the exploitation of different stylistic varieties in our corpus can be analyzed along the same lines. The analysis presented here focuses on the use of 'tussentaal' (literally: 'in-between language') in the corpus, which is an informal variety of spoken Belgian Dutch, situated between the regional dialects and standard Belgian Dutch. In order to give a detailed account of the stylization processes, the style shifts between standard Dutch and *tussentaal* within a single spot are investigated. Furthermore, it will be argued that complementing the quantification of stylistic features with a *statistical analysis* considerably improves the analysis. More specifically, using a linear regression, the effect of a number of sociovariational factors on the style shifts in the commercials is investigated. The significant factors are then interpreted sociolinguistically, drawing on the concepts of stylization and audience design. Finally, it will be shown that the analysis can be extended to incorporate *multilingualism* in the commercials.

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1. Introduction

15 This paper discusses a quantitative analysis of style shifting in a corpus of radio and television commercials, broadcast in Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The Flemish language situation is characterized by a stratified continuum of stylistic varieties: between the

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supraregional standard variety and the local dialects, several intermediate strata exist.¹ A particularly conspicuous intermediate variety is the so-called *tussentaal* (literally ‘in-between language’), which basically functions as the spoken language variety for less formal situations. 20 Focusing on *tussentaal* features, the stylistic choices in the commercials are investigated. Previous research shows how the advertising genre typically exploits the stylistic resources of a language (e.g. Bell, 1992, 1999, 2001; Piller, 2003). While similar stylization processes are found in our corpus, it will be argued that a detailed study of the Flemish commercials requires an analysis of the style shifting processes between the standard variety of Belgian Dutch and *tussentaal* within a 25 single commercial. Further, in order to find out *why* and *how* the spot-internal style shifts occur, a quantitative study of the linguistic features can be enhanced by a *linear regression analysis*. This analysis allows for the *statistical exploration* of the correlations between the stylistic varieties and a number of functional or extralinguistic factors (such as the spot medium). The significant results can then be interpreted as responsive and initiative style shifting processes (Bell, 1999; see also 30 Coupland, 2001; Milroy and Gordon, 2003). Finally, it will be attempted to interpret the smaller number of *multilingual* spots (*viz.*, English and Netherlandic Dutch commercials) along the same lines.² This article is structured as follows. In section 2, a brief introduction to the language situation in present-day Flanders is given. Section 3 proceeds with a concise overview of previous advertising language research. Next, the corpus used and the research method are introduced. In section 5, the 35 statistical analysis and the results are discussed. Section 6 briefly discusses the multilingual spots, followed by a conclusion (section 7).

2. The present-day language situation in Flanders

As mentioned, in Flanders, in informal speech, *tussentaal* is often used. This ‘in-between language’ is a stylistic variety that contains both characteristics from the supraregional standard variety, Belgian Dutch, and the local dialects. For many Flemish speakers, *tussentaal* seems to be 40 the more ‘natural’ style, as opposed to standard Belgian Dutch, which is often considered as an external, artificial linguistic norm. This can be traced back to the standardization process in Flanders, which is marked by a century-long struggle against French cultural and linguistic imperialism. In the course of this process, and given the initial absence of a native Belgian Dutch standard language, the existing Netherlandic Dutch norm was adopted as the standard variety and 45 propagated explicitly. Although the actual norm for standardized Belgian Dutch that emerged over the last 50 years differs to a certain extent from Netherlandic Dutch, for many Flemish, even this indigenous standard variety seems to be reserved for formal situations (see e.g. Jaspaert, 1986; Van den Toorn et al., 1997; Geeraerts, 1998; Geeraerts et al., 1999). Thus, *tussentaal* functions de facto as the supraregional spoken variant in Flanders. Yet, because this *tussentaal* 50 is not internally homogeneous (some of its features have a wider distribution than others, as

¹ It should be clarified that we use the term ‘stylistic variety’ to point at a section of the linguistic continuum, as demarcated by the Flemish dialects on the one side and the standard norm on the other. The term ‘variety’ can also be used to refer to a regional variety or a *national* variety (e.g. Belgian Dutch). We follow Biber (1988, 1995) in reserving the term ‘genre’ for a collection of texts sharing similar extralinguistic features, such as the audience or purpose (e.g. ‘the advertising genre’), while ‘text types’ are based on language internal characteristics (e.g. ‘informational interaction’). ‘Register’, then, is used to refer to linguistic variation which is conditioned by the situational context, such as the ‘spoken register’. See e.g. Moessner (2001) or Lee (2001) for an in-depth discussion of the terminology ‘genre’, ‘text type’ and ‘register’.

² Although both in The Netherlands and in Flanders, Dutch is spoken, the two regions have developed separate indigenous standard varieties. Since for Flemish speakers, Netherlandic Dutch is an ‘external’ language variety, its use in our corpus is considered as ‘multilingualism’. See section 2 for more details on the Flemish language situation.

