

Honorifics cannot be cheap

In Aalberse (2009) and Aalberse & Stoop (2015) we argue that the exceptional loss of the T-pronoun *thou* in English and *du* in Dutch is in part the result of inflectional economy. Both the English V-form *ye/you* and the Dutch V-form *jij/gij* combined with more economical inflection than the T form. Since both English and Dutch were acquired by many adult speakers who find inflection challenging and since negative politeness was greatly valued the normally very robust T pronoun was lost.

Whereas I argued before that inflectional economy boosted the use of the V-pronoun in more informal context, I will go a step further in this talk: V-forms that are inflectionally cheap are less effective as V-forms, hence the title 'honorifics cannot be cheap'. One form of support for this statement is the distribution of inflection with the modern V-pronoun in Dutch *u*. The pronoun *u* has both second and third person qualities (Bennis 2007, Aalberse 2009). Often second and third person are syncretic and therefore the difference does not surface, but if a verb distinguishes second and third person inflectional, the pronoun *u* combines with the least economical form of inflection. For example, the modal verb *kunnen* ('can') has a dedicated second person form *kunt* and a more generic singular form *kan* (which can both be used in the second and the third person). In case of modal verbs there is a strong preference for the dedicated second person form. In the search engine sketch engine (Kilgarriff 2014) the Dutch corpus shows 95% of the *u*-subject combines with the dedicated second person form for the verb *kunnen*, whereas in a verb like *hebben* where second and third form are distinct and non-overlapping, the second person form is only used in 30% of the cases.

The two central questions in this talk will be:

- 1) What constitutes inflectional economy?
- 2) What makes non-economical forms more polite?

In answering the second question I will make use of the work of Simon (2003, who shows that in Bavarian German polite forms *sie* that overlapped with singular forms were replaced to make them distinct from singular forms and hence more polite.

References

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