

Standardization and prescriptivism in Dutch: past, present and future

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(De)standardiseerimine keeles ja kasutuses /
(De)standardization in Language and Usage
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Today

I. Historical standardization

models, blind spots and a perspective
from historical sociolinguistics

II. Standardization history of (Southern) Dutch:

myth of Southern language decay

III. Some recent evidence from Dutch historical sociolinguistics

- a. Pluricentricity and normative centers
- b. Influence from French
- d. Norms and usage more broadly

IV. A few concluding thoughts



Pluricentricity in language history

PhD project (2017-2021)

Research Foundation Flanders (FWO)

Dr. Iris Van de Voorde

(with Gijsbert Rutten)



Dialect contact in 16th-century Antwerp

PhD project (2022-2026)

Research Foundation Flanders (FWO)

Julie Van Ongeval

(with Bart Lambert & Chris De Wulf)



Historical Sociolinguistics
Research Program

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL



'If only I could speak French'

PhD project (2019-2023)

Research Foundation Flanders (FWO)

Dr. Charlotte Verheyden



Setting the standard

Research project (2020-2024)

Research Foundation Flanders (FWO)

Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)

Dr. Eline Lismont

(with Gijsbert Rutten)

Team members historical sociolinguistics

www.historicalsociolinguistics.be



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Traditional standardization models

Haugen (1966)

	Form	Function
Society	selection	acceptance
Language	codification	elaboration

“[t]he four aspects of language development that we have now isolated as crucial features in taking the step from “dialect” to “language”, from vernacular to standard” (Haugen 1966: 933)

‘minimal variation in form’ + ‘maximal variation in function’
(Haugen 1966: 931)

acceptance → propagation → implementation

“the activity of a writer, an institution, or a government in adopting and attempting to spread the language form that has been selected and codified” (Haugen 1987: 61)

(see overview in Joseph, Rutten & Vosters 2020)

Traditional standardization models

Milroy & Milroy (1985)

- diffusion, maintenance, prescription
- ‘intolerance of optional variability in language’
(Milroy & Milroy 1985: 26)
- role of standard language ideology

Joseph (1987)

‘language standards’ and ‘standard languages’
engineered versus circumstantial standardization

(see overview in Joseph, Rutten & Vosters 2020)

Traditional standardization models

Criticisms and blind spots:
(cf. Joseph, Rutten & Vosters 2020)

strong monolingual bias

role of ideology

linear versus cyclical nature

teleological perspective

question of the directionality of standardization

...

Standardization from above and from below

From above (cf. Rutten & Vosters 2021)

“Language standardization ‘from above’ occurs when language authorities seek to disseminate a standardized variety across a speech and writing community” (Rutten & Vosters 2021: 65)

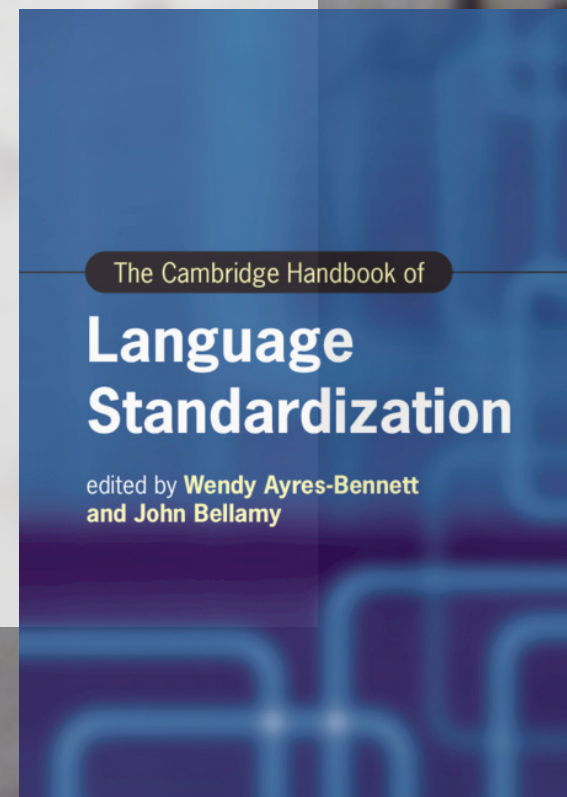
From below (cf. Elspaß 2021)

conventionalization and spread of usage standards (Elspaß 2021)

Haugen: new standard from existing variants has
“[t]o some extent... happened naturally
in the rise of the traditional norms”

but also: whose usage?

‘zombie variables’ – e.g. bipartite negation
(Elspaß & Langer 2012; Puttaert 2019)



A perspective from historical sociolinguistics

~ Sociolinguistics

Social dimensions of language variation and change in past societies

Uniformitarian principle and the danger of ideational anachronism

Labov's historical paradox:
we know that the past was different, but what
we do not know exactly is how different it was

(Auer et al 2015, Rutten & Vosters in print, Bergs 2012, Walkden 2019, Labov 1994)

A perspective from historical sociolinguistics

~ Historical linguistics

Expanding empirical basis and re-evaluating
traditional approaches to language history

Attention for the fragmented and biased nature
of the historical record

Text type: less formal, written (rather than printed) texts

Language users: men and women of diverging
social, educational and regional backgrounds

Language history from below

(Elspaß 2005, Auer et al 2015, Rutten & Vosters in print)

Histories of Dutch

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- **Eighty Years War**
 - **North:** **Republic** of the United Provinces (1581)
 - **South:** under **Spanish-**Habsburg, **Austrian-**Habsburg (1714) and **French** (1795) rule
- **United Kingdom of the Netherlands**
(1815-1830)





Histories of Dutch

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Myth of Southern language decay

- “In the South, from the 17th century onwards, the language had been through a very different development [from the North, and] had a tendency to **regress to its purely provincial character**” so that it “**shrivelled and impoverished** threatening to lose contact with Northern Dutch” (Wils 1956: 528-29, 2003: 33)
- “The Flemish-Brabantian **standardization** which had started in the Late Middle Ages, **stagnated** in the 17th and 18th centuries” (Geerts 1997: 563)
- “[Dutch in the South] had **lost prestige and functions** (Deneckere 1954) and, for lacking contact with the north, **no longer participated in the language standardization process** [...]” (Willemyns 2013: s.p.)

(see Vosters, Rutten & Van der Wal 2010 and Rutten & Vosters 2011; all translations are our own)





Histories of Dutch

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Myth of Southern language decay

- Linguistically not innovative, with **Holland** as the only real **center** of language norms

↪ **Case 1: pluricentricity**

- Strongly influenced by **French**, taking up the role of an **exocentric standard**

↪ **Case 2: contact-induced variation and change**

- Uncodified and **detached** from the **standardization** process in the North

↪ **Case 3: norms and usage**

(see Vosters, Rutten & Van der Wal 2010 and Rutten & Vosters 2011)



1. Pluricentric diffusion?

Pluricentricity

Haugen: “rival hypotheses concerning selection”
(Haugen 1982: 564, cf. Deumert & Vandenbussche 2003, Pickl 2020)

→ monocentric standardization

→ polycentric standardization

= one or there are multiple centers from which norms
spread

“[t]he term pluricentric(ity) indicates that a language
has more than one centre, i. e. several centres, each
providing a national variety with its own norms”

(Clyne, 1989, p. 358)

pluricentricity as ‘multiple centers’
or basis for national varieties?

=> historicized?

- PhD Iris Van de Voorde (FWO - VUB & Leiden)
- Historicizing pluricentricity and pluri-areality
- ‘Consecutive monocentrism’: Flanders > Brabant > Holland
- 6 variables:
 - Long /a:/ in closed syllables
 - Wordfinal /k/
 - /t/ in d-stem verbs
 - Verbal schwa apocope
 - Negation
 - D- versus w- relativizers



ca. 460,000 words

Historical Corpus of Dutch

Diachronic:

4 periods: 1530–70, 1630–70

Diatopic:

4 regions:

North: Holland (C), Zeeland (P)

South: Brabant (C), Vlaanderen (P)

Multigenre:

3 genres: pamphlets, ego-documents, administrative texts



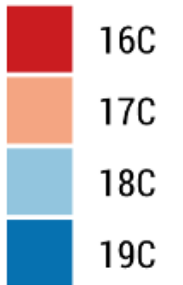
Compiled in Brussels (I. Van de Voorde, R. Vosters, W. Vandenbussche) and Leiden (M. van der Wal, G. Rutten)

<https://hcd.ivdnt.org/>

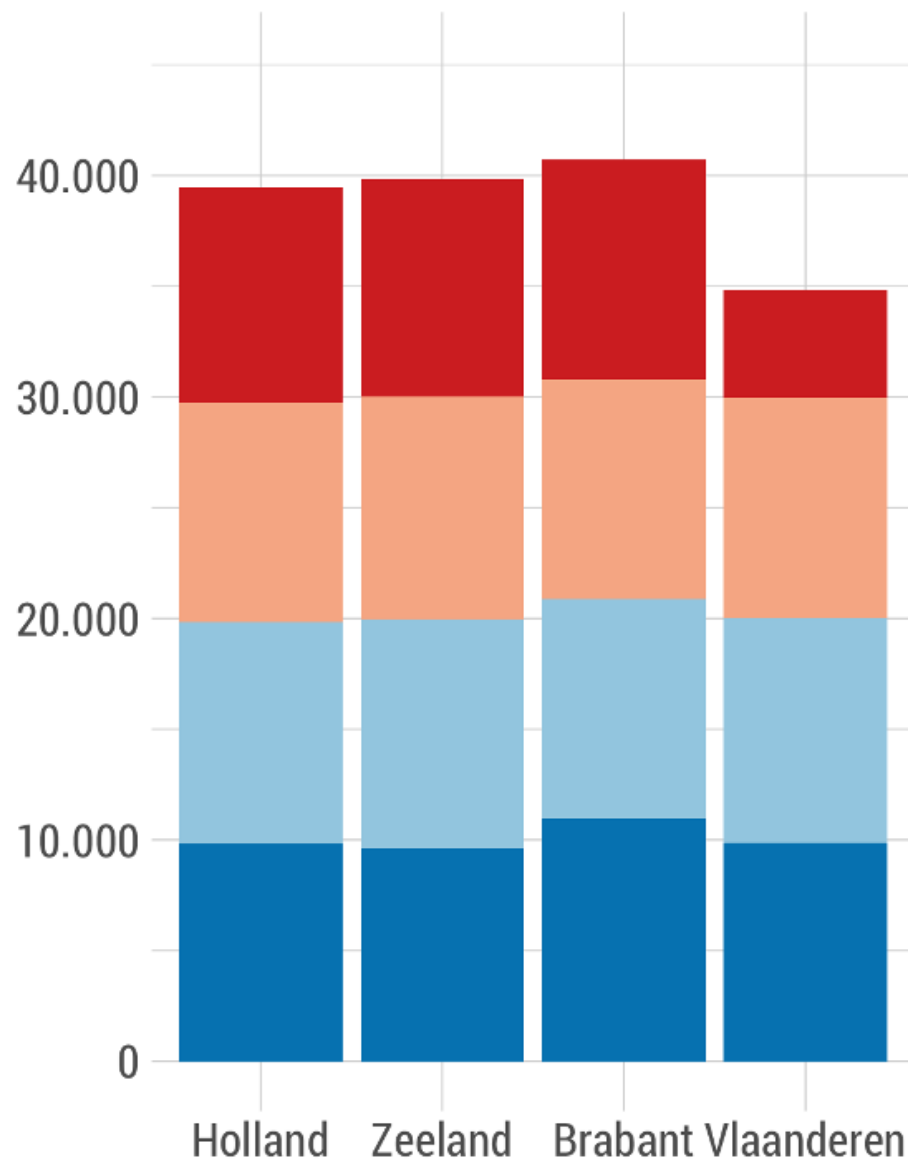
Historical Corpus of Dutch (HCD)

Word count per genre, period and region

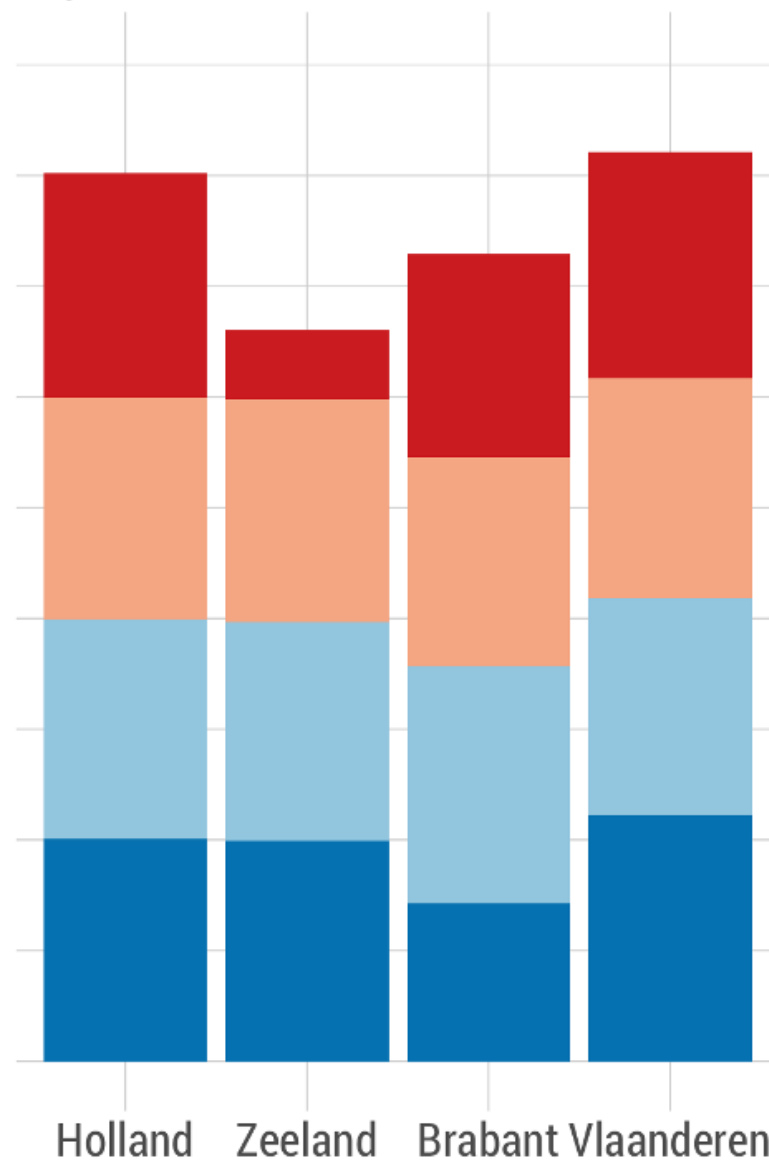
PERIOD



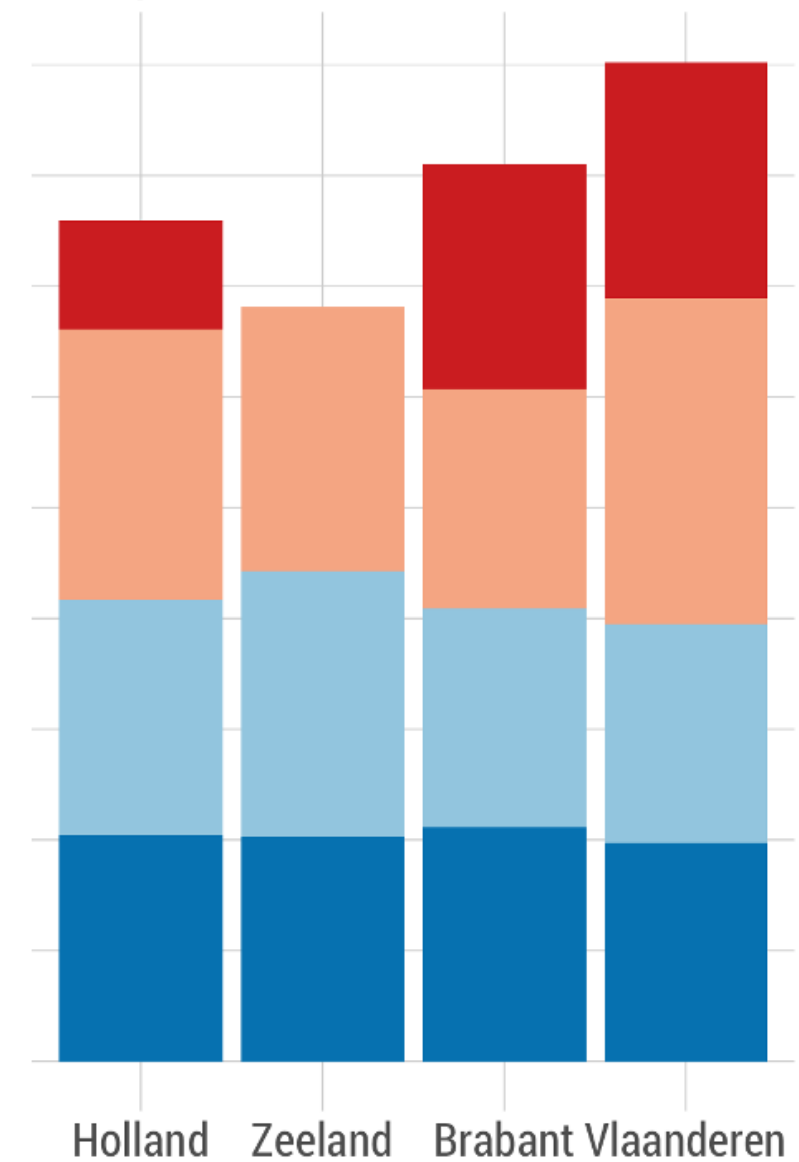
Administrative



Ego-documents



Pamphlets



Two linguistic features as examples

Spelling of long A

/a:/ in closed syllables

plaets — plaats ‘place’

daer — daar ‘there’

Relativizers

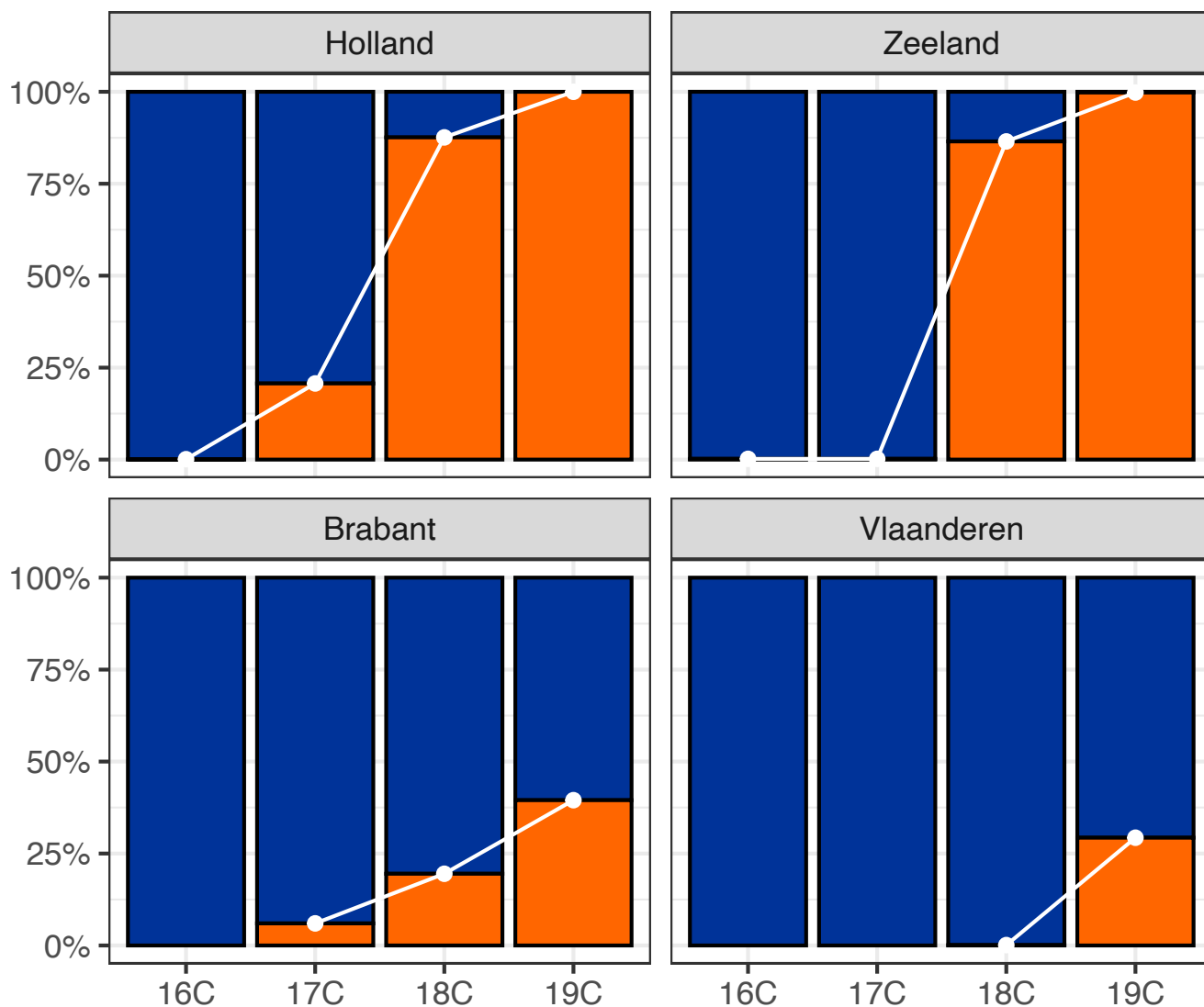
shift from d- to w-
forms

daar > waar ‘where’

daar + PREP > waar +
PREP, e.g. waarmee
‘with which’

Spelling long A

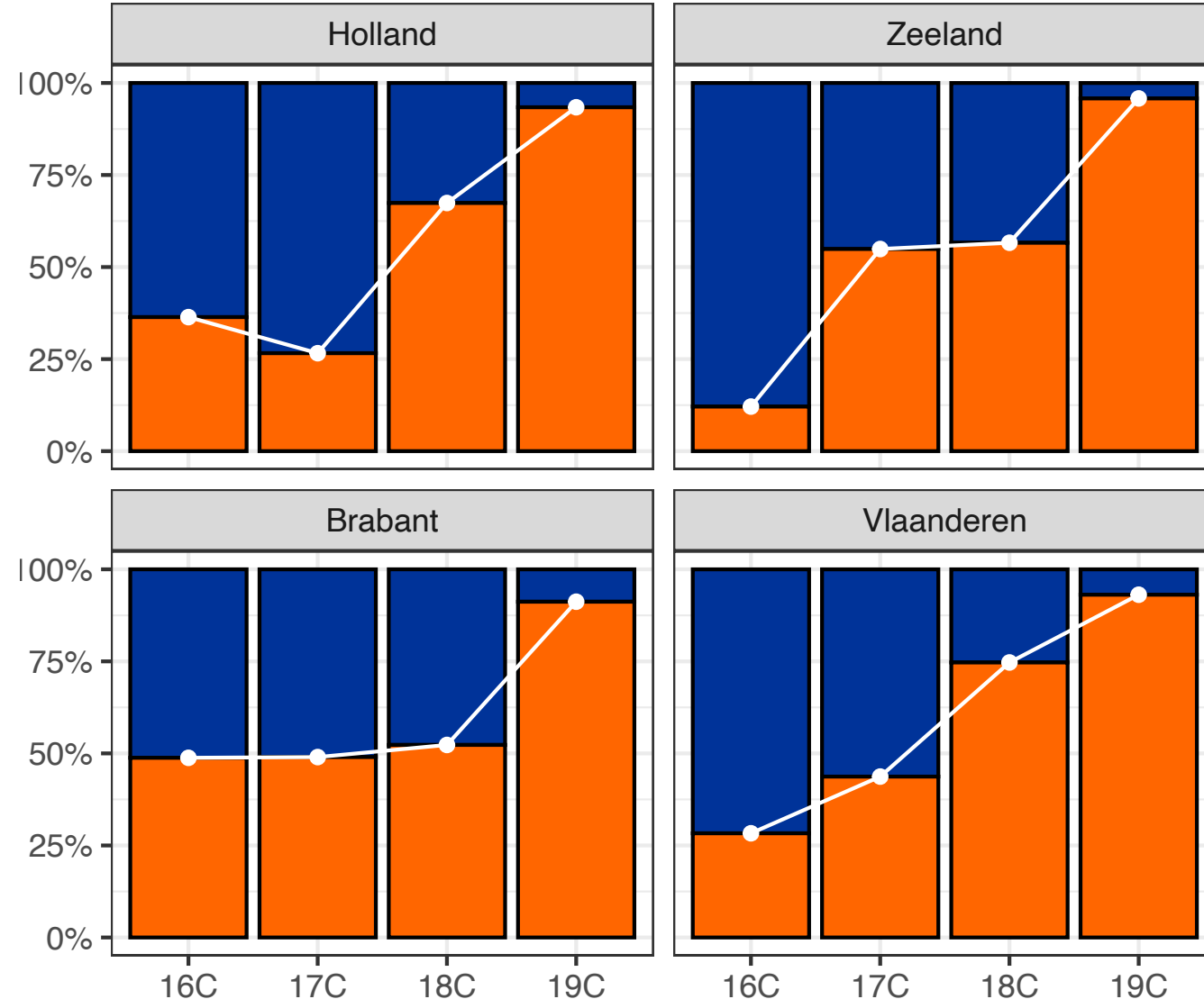
(N=25.373)



Variant ■ <ae> ■ <aa>

Relativizers

(N=1693)



Variant ■ d- forms ■ w- forms

Data based on:

Van Ongeval, J., & Vosters, R. (2021). Al “dat” wat “wat” werd. In N. Van der Sijs, L. Fonteyn, & M. Van der Meulen (Eds.), *Wat gebeurt er in het Nederlands?! Over taal, frequentie en variatie* (pp. 43–50). Sterck & De Vreese.

Van de Voorde, Iris (2022). *Pluricentriciteit in de taalgeschiedenis. Bouwstenen voor een geïntegreerde geschiedenis van het Nederlands (16de – 19de eeuw)*. PhD dissertation. Utrecht: LOT.

Pluricentric diffusion?

range of different
patterns
no one-size-fits-all

limited historical
validity of
pluricentric model

taking regional
variation seriously

2.
Contact-induced
change:
French influence
on Dutch

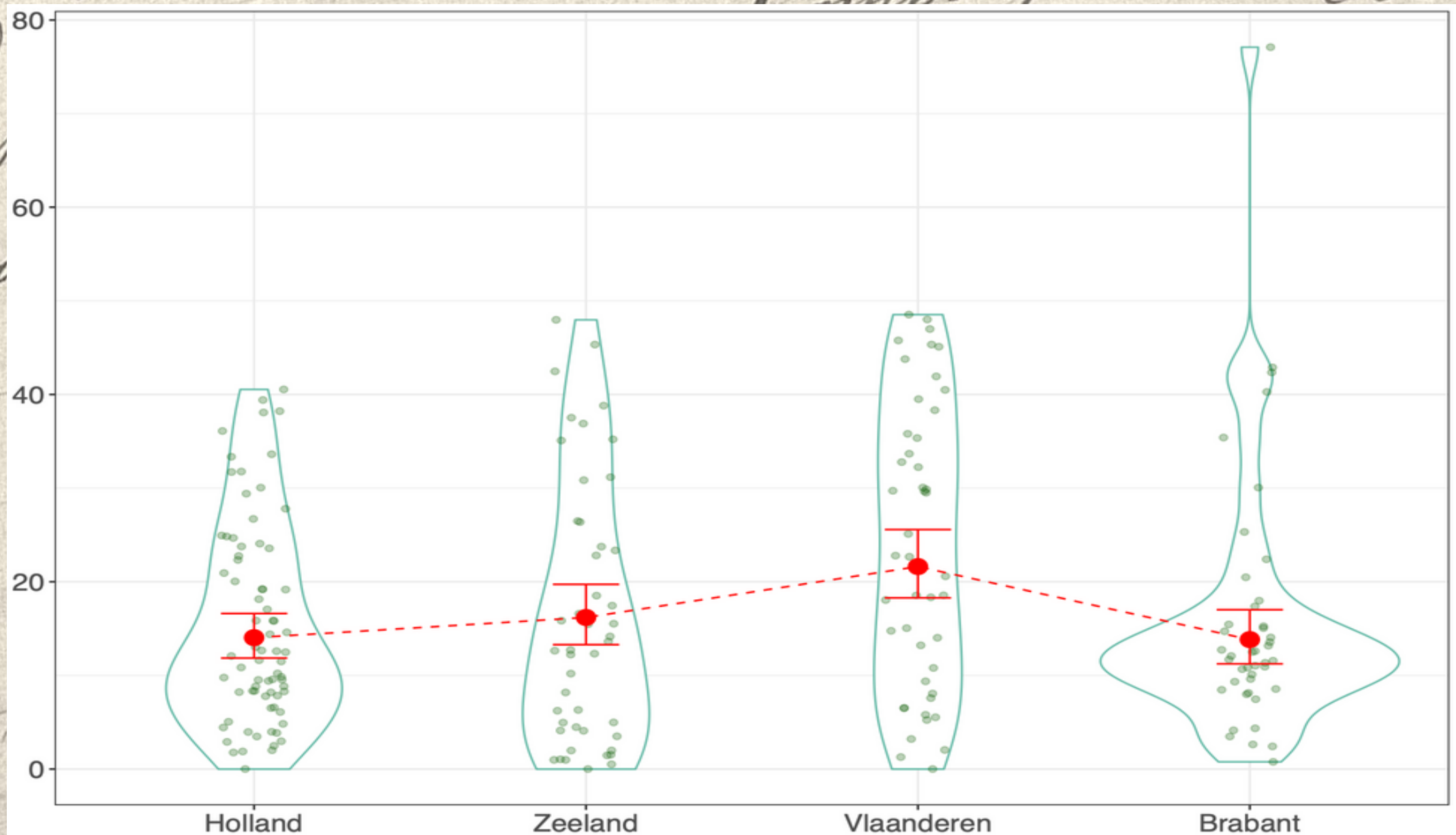
- PhD Charlotte Verheyden (FWO - VUB)
- French influence: lexicon (borrowings), morphology (loan suffixes), lexico-syntax ('komen te + INF'-construction)
- Ego-documents
 - World War I: self-compiled Southern Dutch
- Soldiers Letters Corpus (SDSL)
 - Napoleonic soldiers (Corpus Van Bakel)
- Historical Corpus of Dutch (HCD)



- Deconstruction of ‘Frenchification’

- Not a monolithic, unidimensional process of French influence
- Dependent on genre, region and century (e.g. suffixes)
- Strong inter- and intra-individual variation

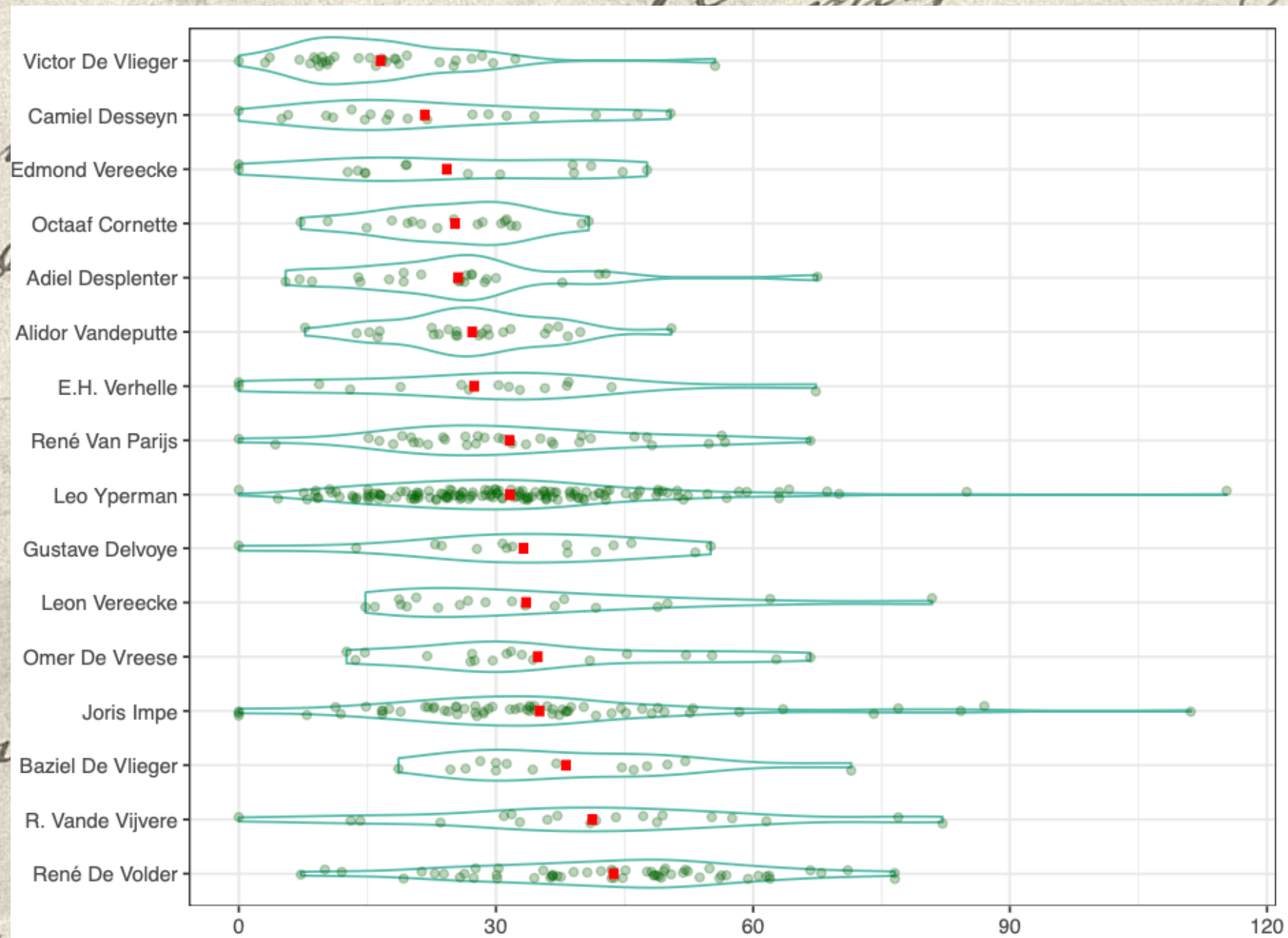
Observed and predicted loan suffix frequencies (per 1,000 words)



- Deconstruction of ‘Frenchification’

- Not a monolithic, unidimensional process of French influence
- Dependent on genre, region and century (e.g. suffixes)
- Strong inter- and intra-individual variation

Loan suffix frequencies per letter
and per scribe (per 1,000 words)



3. Norms and usage

- Assumed lack of normative tradition and idea of normative chaos in South
 - Lively normative tradition in Brabant and Flanders from 18th century onwards
 - Strong pedagogical focus (e.g. P.B., Verpoorten, Des Roches)
 - Awareness of Northern tradition, alongside Southern innovations



(Rutten & Vosters 2013, Vosters et al. 2014, Rutten & Vosters 2016, Lismont, Rutten & Vosters 2023, Lismont 2025)

Impact?

assumed influence of prescribed language norms on actual usage

→ first and foremost ideological (metalanguage)
discursive imposition of standard language ideology

Milroy (2001: 535):

‘effect of standardization has been the development of consciousness among speakers of a “correct”, or canonical, form of language’

→ growing ideology of normativity and uniformity
may impact actual language use

Previous research

Influence

(e.g. Langer 2001, Hinrichs, Szmrecsanyi & Bohmann 2015)

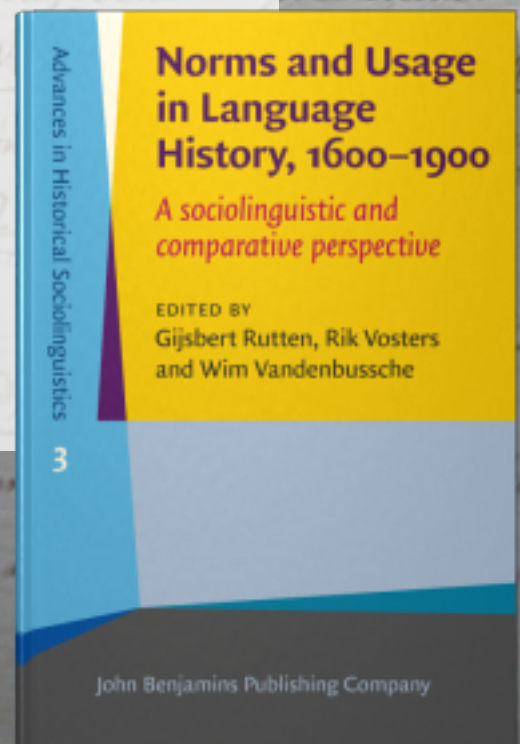
<--->

No influence

(e.g. McLelland 2011, 2014)

No one-size-fits-all answer

Need for more systematic accounts



Towards a systematic account

1

Chronology of changes

(cf. Anderwald 2016; Moschonas 2019; Vosters et al. 2014)

2

Nature of the variable

(cf. Takada 1998: 296-299; Ayres-Bennett 2004: 224;
Vosters et al. 2014: 94; Krogull 2018: 268)

3

Envelope of variation

(cf. Ayres-Bennett 2004; McLelland 2014;
Krogull, Rutten & van der Wal 2017)

4

Metalinguistic salience

(Labov 1972; Woolard 2008)

The Cambridge Handbook of

Language Standardization

edited by Wendy Ayres-Bennett
and John Bellamy

Setting the standard:

Norms and usage in Early and Late Modern Dutch (1550-1850)

**Research Foundation Flanders (FWO
2020-2023)**

Joint PhD Brussels-Leiden

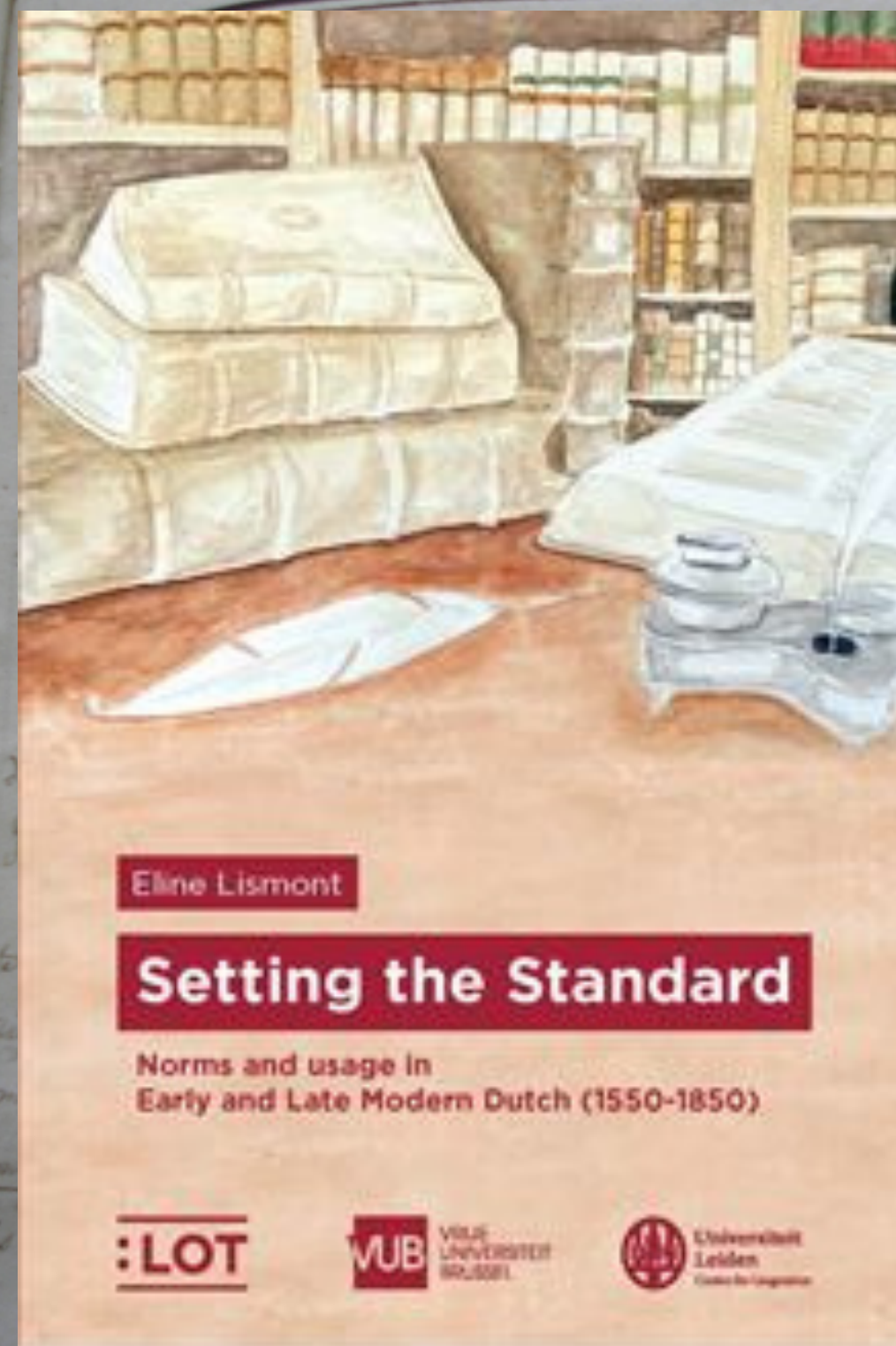
Eline Lismont

**Supervisors: Gijsbert Rutten & Rik
Vosters**

**Case: orthographical representation of
long A**

<ae> v. <aa>

(Rutten & Vosters 2013, Vosters et al. 2014, Rutten
& Vosters 2016, Lismont, Rutten & Vosters 2023,
Lismont 2025)



Precept corpus

74 works
from full grammars to basic spelling guides

Northern and Southern Netherlands

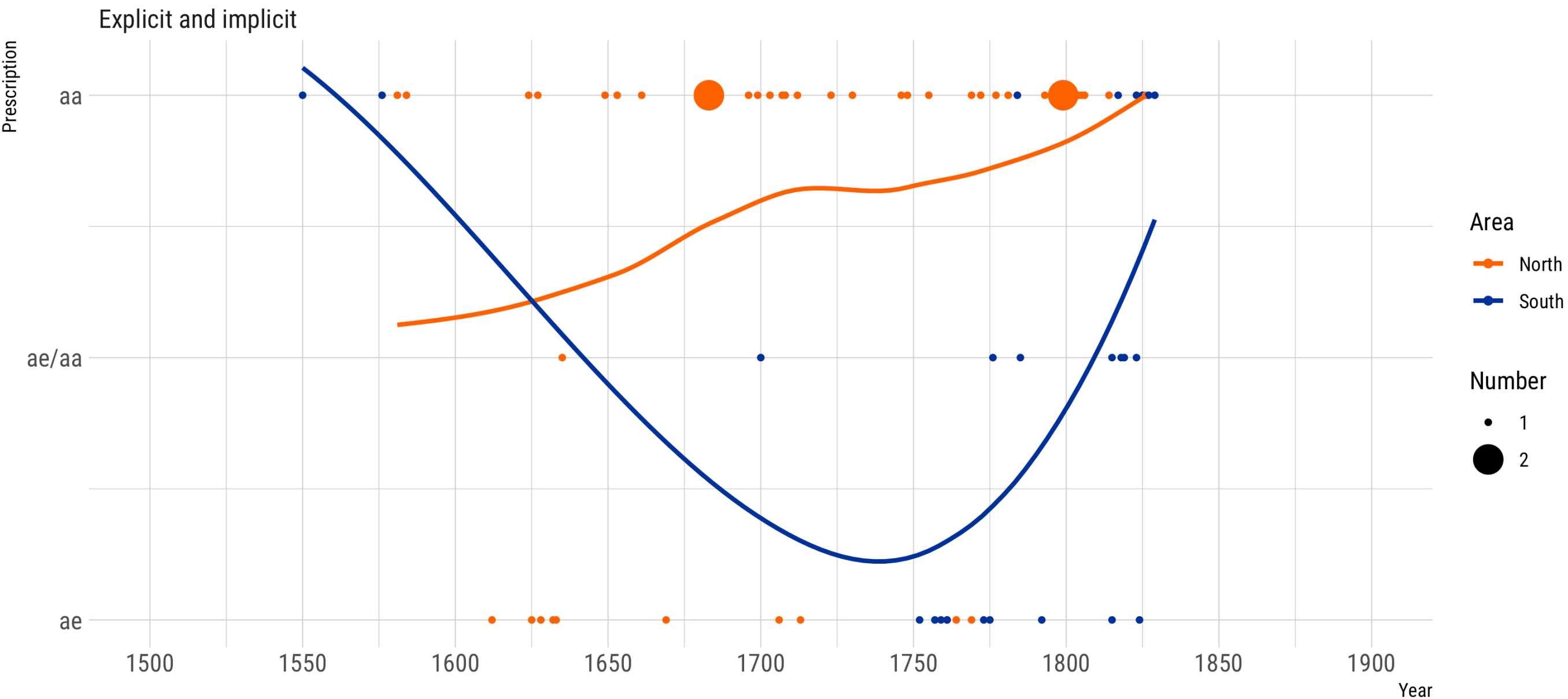
1550-1830

L1 target audience

Usage corpus

Historical Corpus of Dutch

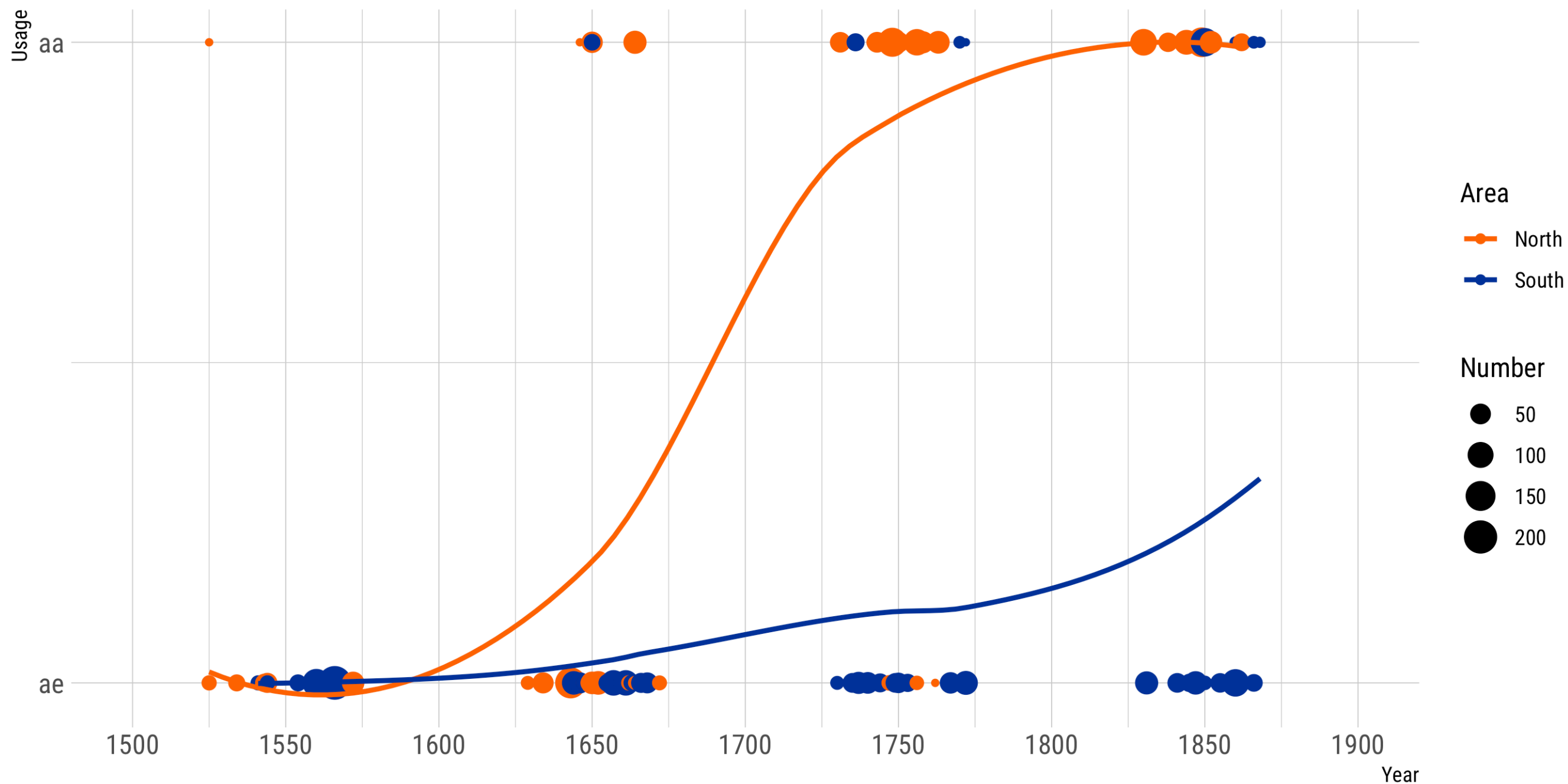
Prescriptions long A per year and per language area



LOESS smoother span: 1.0; only prescriptions <aa> and <ae>

Lismont, E., Rutten, G., & Vosters, R. (2023). Dutch prescriptivism in a historical-sociolinguistic perspective. Measuring the effect of institutionalized prescriptivism. In J. Beal, M. Lukač, & R. Straaijer (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Prescriptivism*. Routledge.

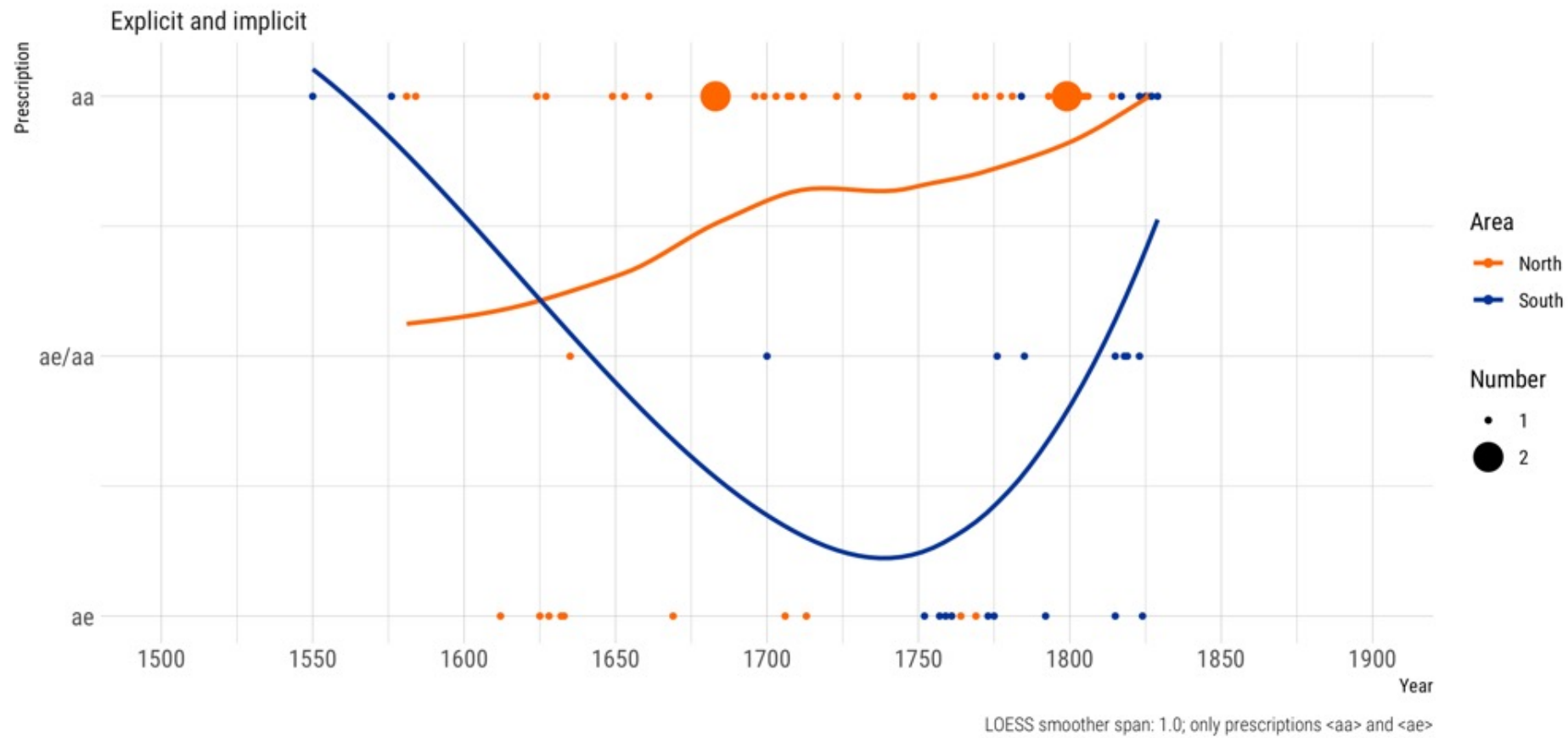
Usage long A per year and per language area



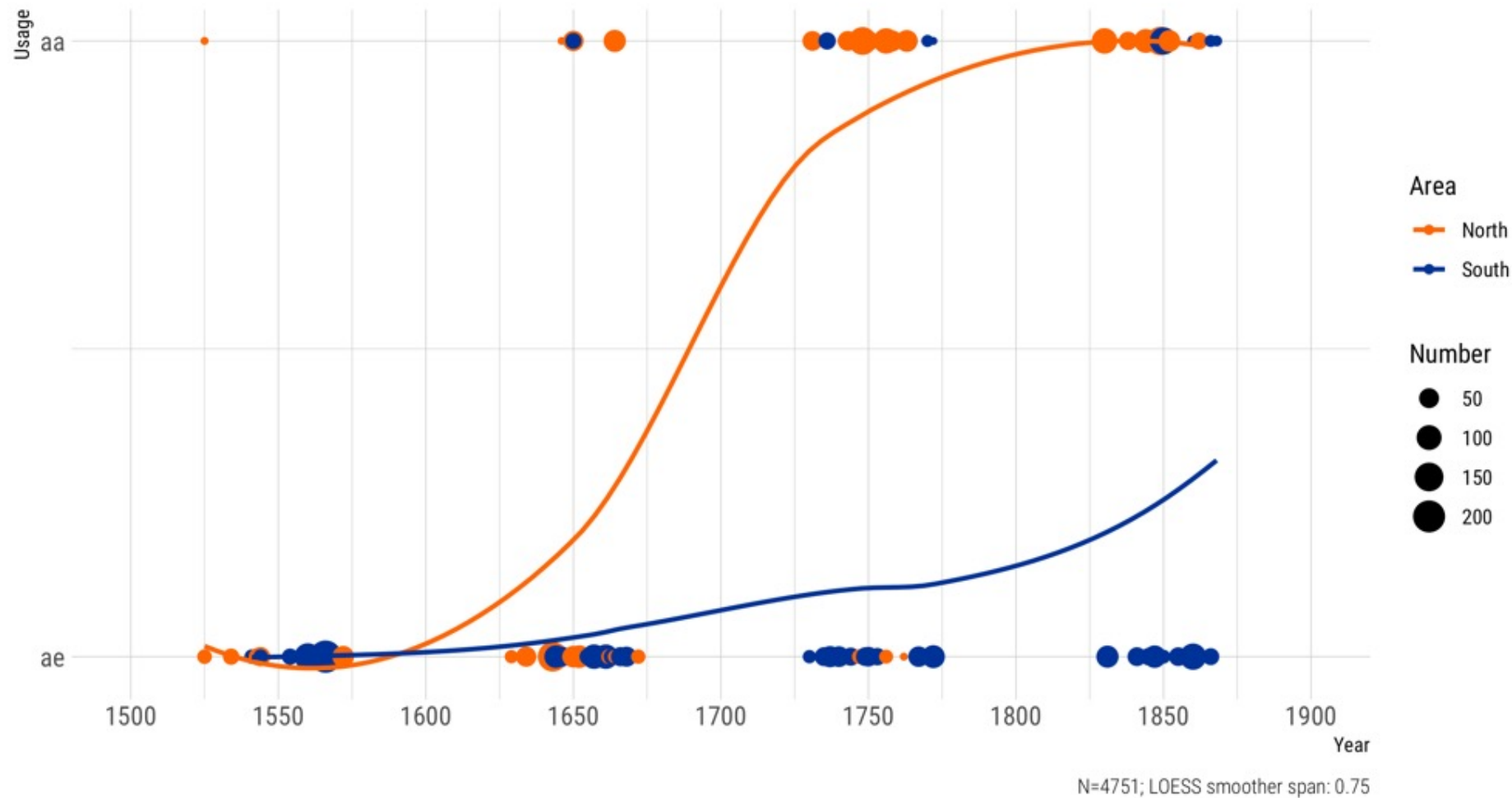
N=4751; LOESS smoother span: 0.75

Lismont, E., Rutten, G., & Vosters, R. (2023). Dutch prescriptivism in a historical-sociolinguistic perspective. Measuring the effect of institutionalized prescriptivism. In J. Beal, M. Lukač, & R. Straaijer (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Prescriptivism*. Routledge.

Prescriptions long A per year and per language area



Usage long A per year and per language area



Lismont, E., Rutten, G., & Vosters, R. (2023). Dutch prescriptivism in a historical-sociolinguistic perspective. Measuring the effect of institutionalized prescriptivism. In J. Beal, M. Lukač, & R. Straaijer (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Prescriptivism*. Routledge.

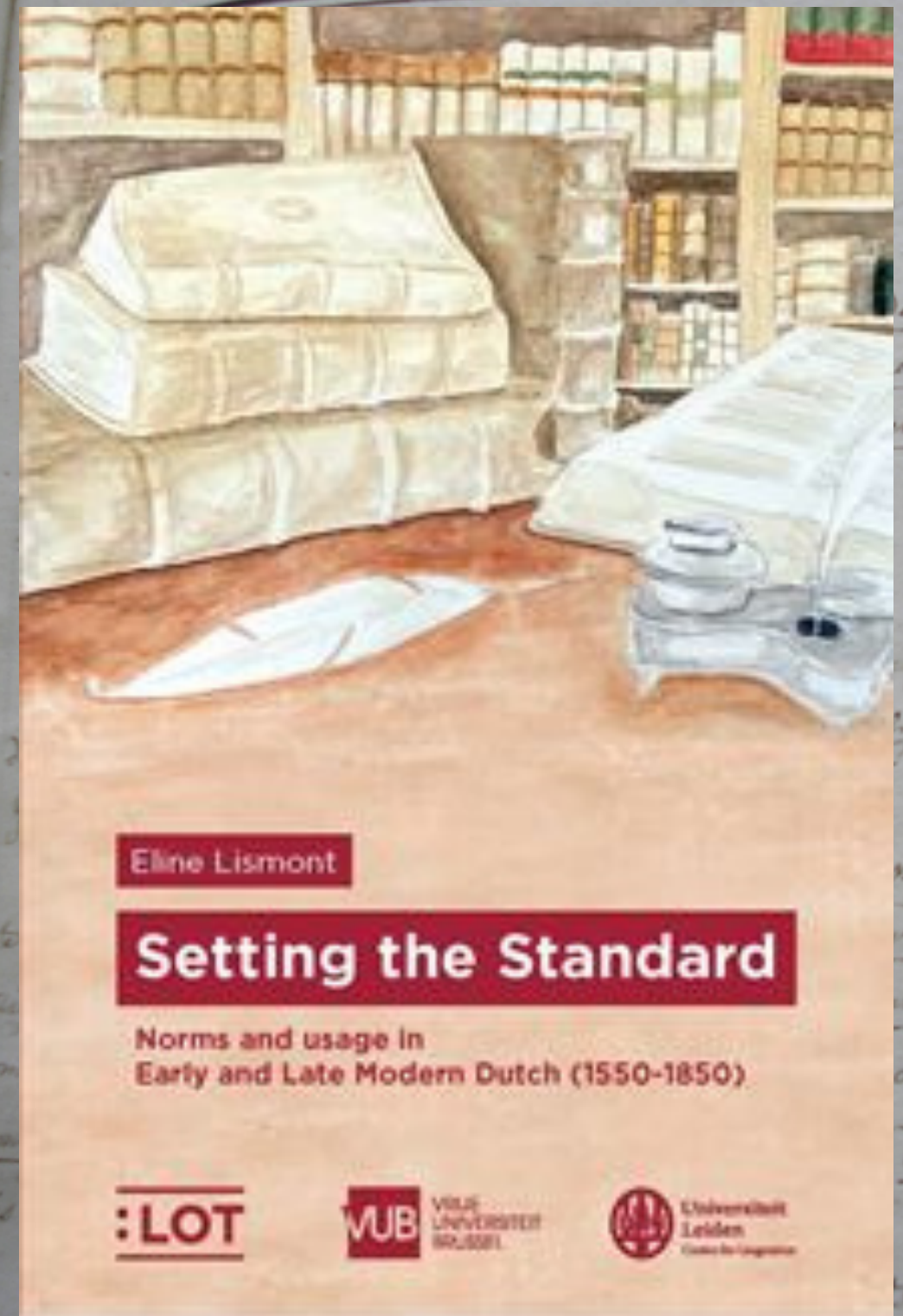
Setting the standard: Norms and usage in Early and Late Modern Dutch (1550-1850)

Different **scenarios** of
potential prescriptive success

But often limited to
(temporarily)
accelerating or
slowing down
ongoing changes

Genre-specific effects

(Rutten & Vosters 2013, Vosters et al. 2014, Rutten
& Vosters 2016, Lismont, Rutten & Vosters 2023,
Lismont 2025)



Concluding remarks

Standardization as a
historical process

|

Classic models valuable, but
important blind spots

|

Strong language ideological
component

|

Reflection on
prescription today:
language regulation
→ language advice

Thanks for your attention!

**Standardization and prescriptivism
in Dutch: past, present and future**

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