

## **Het is een kwestie van geduld...**

An anecdotal and theoretical exploration of the power dynamics and prejudices associated with Dutch accents in televised media.

## Introduction

My first time travelling to Italy for a family vacation we stayed overnight in the Gasthof zur post Brandenburg Hotel near Munich. I have a lot of fond memories of this place, one of them is the very old former owner of the hotel sitting underneath the grand stairs behind the check-in desk. Although I was 6 and did not speak a word of German, the owner of the hotel was immensely kind.

Another memory left me a bit confused. Turning on the television in the hotel room after 6 hours in the car was the highlight of that day. To my surprise however the voices of the characters in the movie did not seem to match the voices I knew. I realised not only the voices were different, they also spoke German. Not giving much thought to it back then, I later became curious as to why the Dutch television networks do not dub but subtitle the movies and series they air, the same can be said for the cinemas. However, I also started to notice that subtitles were being used when individuals were speaking Dutch. Using subtitles on native speakers is called 'interlingual subtitling' and exists for a couple of reasons.<sup>11</sup>

- Mostly intralingual subtitling is used when working with bad audio and/or inaudible voices.
- To make the content more accessible for the hearing impeded.
- However intralingual subtitling is also used when individuals with an accent are speaking.

This last category is especially interesting for my theoretical document. Subtitles are used to aid the audience in understanding what they are watching and listening to. Apparently subtitles are also needed to help the audience understand people who speak with an accent, even if they are speaking Dutch.

My project 'Het is een kwestie van geduld...' led me to interview fellow Limburgers that moved from the province to 'De Randstad' to pursue their dreams in the field of culture and business. This theoretical document will not elaborate and repeat their anecdotes, as they are a key part of my film. Rather I will be using some of their examples, like their frustrations surrounding intralingual subtitling, to get a deeper theoretical understanding as to why the Limburgers I interviewed may feel they are less Dutch. Why they struggle with prejudice surrounding their accent and possible changes, and how those prejudices may affect their careers. Looking at the 'Centre and Periphery model' alongside the impact of intralingual subtitling I hope to find out what the broad impact of having a nonstandard Dutch accent is.

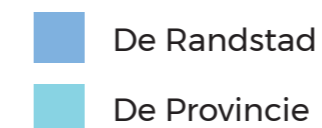
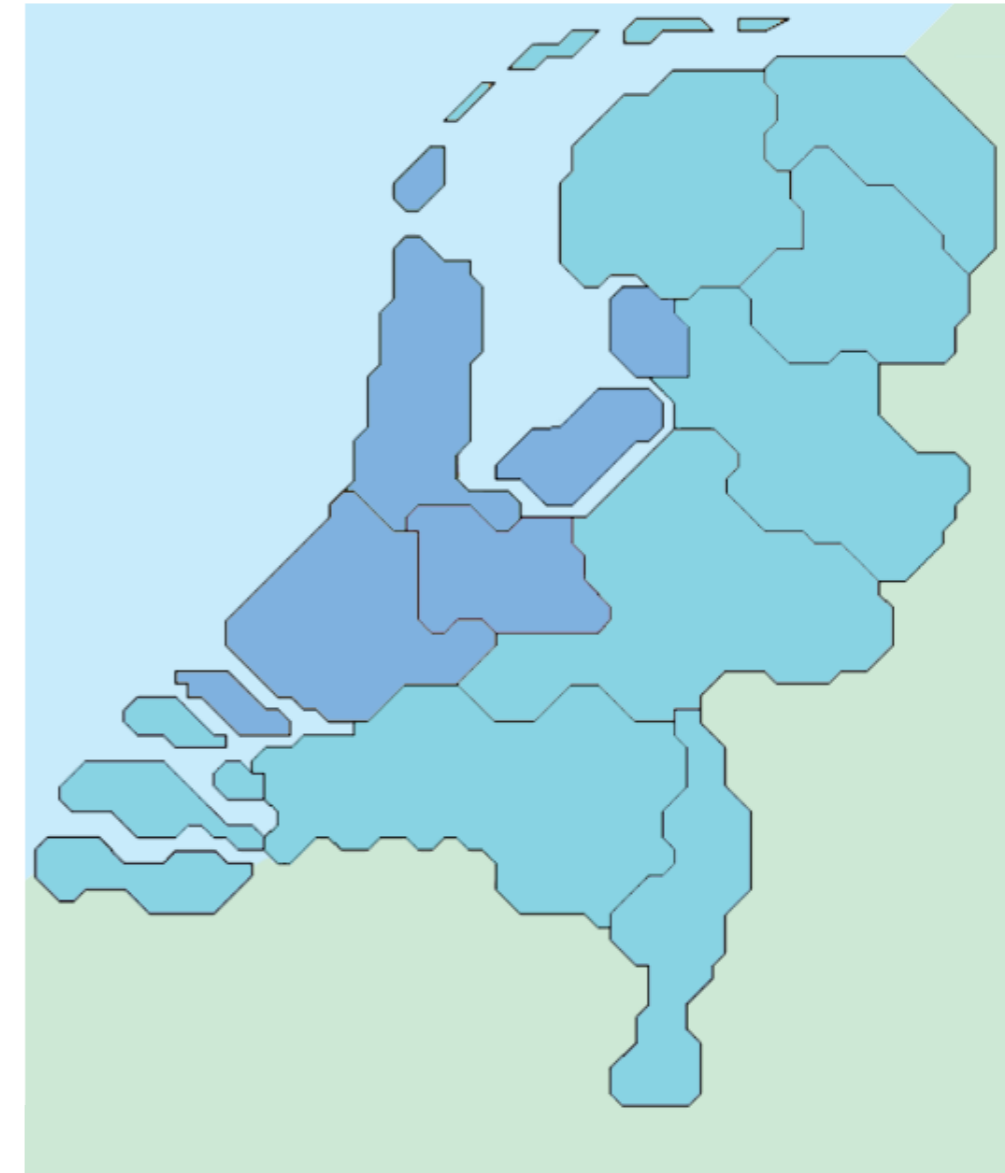
## The Centre- Periphery model

The centre-periphery model, also sometimes referred to as core-periphery model, is a spatial metaphor which describes and attempts to explain the structural relationship between the advanced or metropolitan 'centre' and the less developed 'periphery'. This model can describe a situation either within a particular country or, applied to the relationship between capitalist and developing societies. The centre and periphery model is often used in sociology to highlight economic underdevelopment and dependency. It assumes that underdevelopment is not a simple descriptive term but rather a concept rooted in a general theory of imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at the Netherlands from a socio economic point of view there are two very clear regions to be recognised. Namely 'De Randstad' and 'De Provincie'. De Randstad is not a city nor province, but rather a region spanning many cities and provinces and is located in the north west of the country. De Randstad has a population of 8.1 million which includes half of all living and working Dutch citizens. Important cities include Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague. This metropolitan region offers a broad spectrum of economic activities and is used as the global port of entry to Northwestern Europe. This important geographic location makes the region an important player in world economics. With a gross regional product (GRP) of 367 billion euros De Randstad is the fourth-largest metropolitan region in Europe after London, Paris and the Rhine-Ruhr. More than half of the Netherlands' gross national product is generated in De Randstad.<sup>2</sup>

De Provincie, unlike the name suggests and much like De Randstad, also encapsulates multiple provinces and cities. When looking at labour productivity throughout The Netherlands there is a clear divide between the two regions. De Provincie has, per province, a substantially lower share in the overall labour productivity. The only exception being Noord Brabant, which ranks third. However, most provinces in De Provincie rank lower than average. With Friesland and Drenthe having 15% less labour productivity than average. This means that per person per working hour De Randstad contributes a substantially more value to the Dutch economy.<sup>12</sup>

Keeping the above facts in mind when applying the centre and periphery model I can only conclude that De Randstad assumes the position of Center and De Provincie assumes the position of Periphery.



## Own experience

My own experience moving from Limburg (the periphery) to Rotterdam (the center) to pursue a Bachelor of Arts at Willem de Kooning academy initially left me feeling like an outsider, even though my classmates came from all over the country and even from other countries. I quickly noticed that most people I knew from the periphery tended to assume a more 'centre identity' by for example changing their accents. They then also tended to compete with fellow periphery students in how much more of a 'centre identity' they possessed. It seemed almost no periphery student I knew wanted to be associated with their 'periphery identity', going as far as sometimes confirming others in reinforcing prejudices about other individuals from the periphery.

A fast and effective way to change your own identity to suit a more centre identity is to change your accent. From my experience my accent is one of the biggest contributors to being stigmatized as, in my case, a Limburger. Prejudices surrounding a Limburg accent consist of being less intelligent and more gullible than people from other parts of the country. These prejudices are often used as subjects by stand up comedians in theatres, as entertainment on television and as a way to highlight differences between the centre and periphery by populist news media. These prejudices then become reality and start having very real consequences, like the representation of different Dutch accents. Changing the way you speak when two or more languages exist in a conversation is called code switching. I will elaborate on this phenomenon later in this document.

Interviewing a linguist, a television host, a vocal coach and different film actors I have learnt many different explanations as to why these prejudices have real life consequences. The most prevalent one being that having an accent makes you 'bias' or rather 'not neutral'.

Explaining this further is Marieke Strijbis in my interview with her.<sup>3</sup> Marieke is a vocal coach working with the NOS (the governmental news agency). She says speech can be interpreted as vibrations. Each letter having different frequency. A limited amount of frequency is deemed neutral and

allowed. The other frequencies or pronunciations are deemed incoherent and are therefore not neutral. Depending on the message the speaker is trying to convey, the acceptable frequencies might be more restrict or relaxed. For example Lex Uiting, television host from Limburg, says that presenting a 'personality' show grants more freedom in accents.<sup>4</sup> However this argument is short lived as he finds himself contradicting his own argument, stating that his career has progressed to where he now himself is a host of a news network without having changed his accent to a more 'center' accepted accent. This tells me that the implementation of 'acceptable frequencies and pronunciation' is highly subjective and that the norm is based on the personal views of the producer or network, rather than a set of rigid rules.

The consequences stemming from the lack of representation of 'periphery accents' and how these accents are being stigmatized in popular media have a direct effect on career chances and income. According to Jan van Ours, professor labor rights at the university of Tilburg, individuals that have a strong regional accent could earn up to 15% less than their standard Dutch speaking counterparts.<sup>5</sup> This according to Gelbert Kraaykamp, professor of sociology at the Radboud university in Nijmegen, could be explained because the above mentioned prejudices also play a role when managers make decisions about who to promote.<sup>5</sup>

Another inconsistency I found when comparing 'De Randstad' and 'De provincie' is the discrepancy of governmental investments in 'art and culture', business and public transport between De Randstad and De Provincie. For the past 10 years, and possibly longer<sup>6</sup>, investments have been mainly focused on De Randstad. Focusing, for example, on better public transport connection in places where the existing systems are superior to those in more regional places<sup>7</sup>. Or investments in art and culture institutes like museums and theater groups that are primarily focused in 'De Randstad' leaving institutions in 'De Provincie' with insufficient funds to expand their business or broaden their audiences.<sup>8/9</sup>

## The unintended consequences of subtitling the periphery

When talking about subtitling it is important to specify the definition. There are two types of subtitling, open captions and closed captions.<sup>11</sup>

- Open captions is meant primarily as a means of translation and is displayed as white text with a maximum of two lines on the screen.
- Closed captions has the primary goal to aid in accessibility for the hearing impaired. Today about 90% of all programs on the NPO have closed captions.

Both open and closed captions are subjected to a set of rules. The rules for both types are very strict. Therefore the translated or subtitled text seen on screen is usually summarised by the subtitler to make the subtitles adhere to these rules.

- Open captions for example can only be shown for a maximum of 6 seconds on the screen, with a maximum of two lines consisting out of on average 66 characters including punctuation and spaces. It consists on average of 11 characters per second (6x11=66).
- Closed captions have different rules. Because the target audience for closed captions on average read faster, they get 13 characters a second. Closed captions need different colours to identify the different speakers (such as blue, green and yellow). Where when using open captions answers such as 'yes' and 'no' are often left out, in closed captions they must be included.

Intralingual subtitling is subject to the same rules as open caption. Because of the limited time the subtitler has to its disposal when translating accents or dialects authenticity and emotion are often at stake. But when do we decide to use intralingual subtitle, and who gets to decide?

While talking to Frans Hinskens<sup>10</sup>, professor linguistics at the Radboud university in Nijmegen, who specialises in regional accents and dialect, I found out that the Dutch language is made up out of millions of small variations in pronunciation and therefore countless accents. Some accents and dialects are not within the accepted norm and are therefore deemed unintelligible. Most of these variations in accents are really small and not really noticeable on a micro level but still differ from one another. Zooming out from the micro level to a more regional view we can conclude that there are strong regional accents.

Accents occur when the local language or dialect becomes secondary to the standard language and can be seen as a transitional stage between the fading out of the local language or dialect. Individuals speaking with an accent can be unintelligible for an audience that is from another part of the country. However this is rarely happens when talking face to face, differences in accent are highlighted in televised media. But when do we decide who is unintelligible and, more importantly, who is it that gets to decide? When applying the 'center and the periphery model' to the medium of televised media we could divide the Dutch public into two groups, namely the subtitler and the subtitled. But who is the subtitler and on what bases does he or she decide when to subtitle?

To answer this question I reached out to former television producer and creative director at CCCP Rogier Cornelissen and a television producer Maarten Remmers. Both created televised media for the NPO (the Dutch public broadcaster). Asking them what the procedure for subtitling is when creating televised media for the NPO, they told me that there was no procedure. They themselves, in the role of producer, get to decide on what is and is not unintelligible.

This 'non-procedure' has an inherent flaw, namely that most production houses creating media for Dutch television are located in Hilversum and Amsterdam. Both cities located in 'De Randstad' and therefore the center. Making a center focused accent the norm for standard Dutch.

Drawing from my own experience, anecdotes from family and friends and the individuals I have interviewed for my documentary, being intralingually subtitled is very offensive. Seeing as the use of open subtitles is mainly used as a means of translation, when used intralingually on speakers when audio is not compromised it implies that the accent in question is foreign. The subjective nature of the approach producers take to intralingually subtitled also means that whether or not an accent is subtitled differs from television show to television show. One producer might decide that having a speaker with a regional accent is perfectly comprehensible while the next show on the same network created by a different producer might subtitle that same speaker.

Looking deeper into intralingual subtitling within Dutch speaking countries I found that there is a procedure for subtitling in place in Belgium. The VRT (the Belgium public broadcaster) has put in place a procedure to specify when someone gets subtitled. They recognise that intralingual subtitling is highly offensive to the speaker. The VRT receives letters from people outside Antwerp (the center region of Belgium) asking if speakers with an Antwerp accent can also be subtitled. Seeing as the people outside of Antwerp (the periphery) were being intralingually subtitled for their regional accents and found intralingual subtitling to be humiliating.

Their protocol now demands that intralingual subtitling is only implemented when communication is at stake<sup>9</sup>. The final verdict is made by the producer, the net management, the department of translation and subtitling together. In some cases a focus group is called upon to weigh in on the final decision.

To conclude I approached the NPO with the same questions I asked Rogier and Maarten, is there a procedure in place that dictates when a speaker is intralingually subtitled? Their answer was also no, stating that individual producers are tasked with the practice of intralingual subtitling. This in my opinion does not do justice to the diversity of the Dutch language.

### **Adopting a center identity in The Netherlands**

Changing the way you speak when two or more languages exist in a conversation is called code switching. Code switching can be defined as switching back and forth between languages even during the same sentence. Research on this socio-linguistic phenomenon suggest that code switching mostly occurs subconsciously<sup>13</sup>. However, code switching is not limited to speech and can also manifest itself as a behavioural adjustment. For example, people of colour have, in America, often used code switching as a strategy to successfully navigate interracial interactions. A paper written by Courtney L. McCluney et al.<sup>14</sup> state that research on black people using code switching concludes that codeswitching is used to propel any negative stereotype that may be limiting them in a specific environment. Through my own research I have come to find out that there are many negative stereotypes surrounding Limburgers in De Randstad and The Netherlands as a whole. This has led me to the deduction that Limburgers may as well use codeswitching to propel certain negative stereotypes.

The desire for individuals from Limburgs decent to conform to a more centre identity is not common. Although there might not be shared historical or cultural values that bind Limburgers together, there is a shared identity. This identity originated from a shared opposition to the national norm<sup>15</sup>. This opposition is a 'us' versus 'them' scenario. It came into existence when the region of Limburg integrated into The Kingdom of The Netherlands in 1867. From that point on Limburgers have a shared opposition towards the culture of the west, the culture of 'Holland' (De Randstad), that is seen as the norm. As mentioned in the previous chapter 'The unintended consequences of subtitling the periphery' being intralingually subtitled while the audio is not compromised makes the subtitled individual appear as 'foreign'. This further devalues any feelings of belonging to 'Holland'. I speculate that the 'us' versus 'them' scenario that has always played out in Limburg, is still very much alive. Although I do not have scientific evidence for this deduction, I do have my own experiences to draw from and the interviews I conducted.

### **The representation in the diversity of the Dutch language and diversity in general within the NPO**

A core objective for the NPO is to be recognizable for all Dutch citizens. The NPO tries to implement this objective in their programming, whether that be the subject of a series or film, the hosts, guests or story arcs in fictional series. They aim towards a continuous afford towards more diverse representation within their channels. This is not a new objective as diversity has been a talking point for the NPO for more then thirty years<sup>16</sup>. But why is this process taking so long? What structural reform within a company takes more than 30 years? And what, if anything, has changed in these 30 years.

To try and measure this move towards a more inclusive representation within the programming of the NPO, the NTR together with the University of Utrecht's Gender and Diversity hub investigated the progress. The results show persistent patterns of dominant groups represented as the 'experts' and individuals that 'provide meaning and bring order'. Non-dominant groups are mostly displayed as 'victims' or as a way of displaying the 'human interest' aspect in a political debate. Gender studies professor dr. Rosemarie Buikema says that currently hosts and guest are presented in ways that mostly confirm stereotypes. And when displaying minorities, the NPO, fall back on role-confirming patterns and imagery. The persistence of role-confirming programming on the NPO may subconsciously lead to the norm for what makes a great story and or program. There are however exceptions and not all programming is role-comfirming. Programs such as 'De nieuwe maan' show a big step towards inclusivity<sup>17</sup>.

In conclusion, over the past thirty years we have observed that the Dutch public broadcasting company, the NPO, has been trying to be more inclusive. Some concluding this 'mission' is more of a marketing strategy then an actual objective<sup>16</sup>. Inclusive programming can aid in a more inclusive view on society. Representation in gender, ethnicity, culture, sexual preference, age and social class are very important. I would like to add diversity of language to this list of representations. This because I believe that not only the diversity of the Dutch languages, or accents, is underrepresented, it is often a continued target for stereotyping and misrepresentation. Furthermore, language as a whole is in my opinion underrepresented. In my interview with Frans Hinskens I found out that in the near future more and more Dutch citizens will be brought up with two or more languages. This will result in an even more diverse pallet of the Dutch languages and need to be included in a discussion about inclusivity and diversity.

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