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Published in:
ITL - Review of Applied Linguistic

Publication date:
1989

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Jaspaert, K., & Kroon, S. (1989). Social determinants of language loss. *ITL - Review of Applied Linguistic*, (83-84), 75-98.

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SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF LANGUAGE LOSS

Koen JASPAERT & Sjaak KROON

1. Introduction

This paper mainly deals with the results of a pilot study in language loss of Italian immigrants in The Netherlands ¹. This pilot study was carried out as part of a large scale sociolinguistic research project in language shift and language loss of Turkish and Italian immigrants in The Netherlands and Flanders ². As an introduction to this research report, in Section 2, an overview is given of ethnic and linguistic diversity in The Netherlands, with special reference to Italian immigrants. Section 3 contains a discussion of some basic theoretical issues in the field of first language loss, that we encountered in setting up the research project. In section 4, finally, the pilot study is reported on. The operationalization of language loss and the choice of a point of reference are dealt with, and the design and the results of the study, mainly pertaining to possible social determinants of language loss are discussed. In a concluding section, we discuss the results of the pilot study in terms of their relevance for reconsidering the very nature of the process of language loss.

2. Linguistic and Ethnic Diversity in The Netherlands

The Netherlands are a multilingual country. This means that a lot of indigenous and non-indigenous languages and dialects are spoken

besides Standard Dutch. These languages and language varieties can be divided into two main groups. The first group consists of indigenous regional varieties, with or without language status. The second group consists of languages or language varieties used by ethnic minorities that, for various, but mainly economic reasons have chosen The Netherlands, and especially its big cities and industrial areas, as their temporary or permanent place of residence.

In this context we will not comment any further upon indigenous language variation in The Netherlands (cf. e.g. Donaldson 1983 and Van Hout 1984) but confine ourselves to an overview of linguistic diversity as a result of immigration of different ethnic minority groups. According to Extra & Vallen (1988) it is often erroneously suggested that immigration and multilingualism are recent phenomena in Dutch society. In their extensive overview it is shown that, as in other European countries, the number of immigrants in The Netherlands at any given time seems to correspond with the country's relative economic and cultural prosperity. Between 1600 and 1640 about 10% of the population of The Netherlands was of foreign origin. By the end of the 17th century this percentage had decreased to 6% and it remained at this level until the end of the 18th century. The number of immigrants declined very rapidly during the 19th century, a period of economic and political crises. With the economic revival of the sixties and seventies of the present century, however, the percentages grew again: from 2% in 1971 to 3% in 1978 and 4% in 1986. These figures only apply to residents without Dutch citizenship. The number of immigrants from the former Dutch colonies who most often are Dutch Nationals and who, therefore, are not included in official statistics on the numbers of foreigners in The Netherlands, estimated at about 3.5%.

About 1 million of the more than 14.5 million inhabitants of The Netherlands are members of non-indigenous groups, i.e. about 7.5% of the present Dutch population. Four main groups of immigrants can be distinguished (figures are from 1 January 1986). The first group con-

sists of some 535.000 immigrants from the former Dutch colonies (Surinam, the Dutch Antilles and the former Dutch Indies). Within this group the Moluccans hold a special position, not only from an ethnic, cultural and religious perspective, but also because of their involuntary 'repatriation' to The Netherlands in 1951. The second largest group of immigrants is constituted by about 340.000 so-called foreign workers from Mediterranean countries such as Turkey, Morocco, Spain, Italy, Yugoslavia, Portugal, Greece and Tunisia. The third group consists of some 28.000 political refugees from various countries. The fourth group is rather heterogeneous: it includes for example 30.000 Chinese immigrants, and immigrants from Western Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia, and gypsies and caravan dwellers up to a total amount of about 120.000 (cf. ABOP 1987).

These figures, unfortunately, do not tell us very much, neither about the languages and language varieties that are used by the various groups of immigrants, nor about possible effects of the immigration situation on their linguistic characteristics in terms of language shift or language loss. A national survey with respect to non-indigenous language variation and the sociolinguistic processes that appear in this context can be considered as deserving a high research priority³.

As to Italian immigrants in The Netherlands, our main point of interest there, the following remarks can be made (cf. e.g. Pasteels 1985 and Beukenhorst 1987). The first Italian immigrants in The Netherlands were the 'granito' and 'terrazzo' workers who moved in during the first half of the 19th century. Immediately after World War I a second group of Italians immigrated: the workers in the coal mines in the province of Limburg in the south of the country. A third group were the 'ice-cream' Italians who came before World War II.

Throughout the years the number of Italians in The Netherlands steadily increased. A firm growth of Italian miners and industrial

workers (especially in the textile factories in the East of The Netherlands) can be noticed in the 1950th and especially after 1960, when The Netherlands entered into a recruiting agreement with Italy. The highest number of Italian immigrants in The Netherlands, more than 21.000, was reached in 1981. After that year the figures show a steady decrease to about 18.000 nowadays. This tendency can be illustrated by figures from the cities of Amsterdam and Enschede, which show a decrease from 2.789 Italians in 1982 to 2.598 in 1985 in Amsterdam and from 1.056 to 884 in Enschede in the same period (cf. Brussa, Plebani & Van de Putten 1987).

As a result of the specific recruitment policy of the Dutch government, about two thirds of the Italians in The Netherlands are male. The regions of origin of the Italians immigrants appear to be closely related to the kind of work they came to do in The Netherlands. The miners came mostly from the North-East of Italy, the 'terrazzo' and 'granito' workers from Friuli and the 'ice-cream' Italians from Belluno and Toscane. After World War II Italian immigrants mostly came from South Italy or Sardinia or from urbanized regions in the rest of the country. Most of the Italians in The Netherlands live in the provinces of North and South Holland and in the province of Overijssel in the East. Nowadays many of them are working in the metal industry.

As to research into Italian immigrants conducted in The Netherlands, we want to confine ourselves here to an enumeration of some of the studies available. As early as 1962 Simons published an article about adaptation problems and social guidance of Italian immigrant workers in the Limburg mining district and the Twente region (Simons 1962). The integration of Italian workers in The Netherlands was studied by Brouwers-Kleywegt, Marinelli & Nuyten-Edelbroek (1976). This work was followed by a study conducted by Brassé & Van Schelven (1980) about the assimilation of three generations of pre-war immigrants in The Netherlands (Poles, Slovans and Italians), and a study

on the integration of Italian immigrant workers and their children in The Netherlands by Beukenhorst (1987). An in-depth ethnographic study is Bovenkerk, Eijken & Bovenkerk-Teerink (1983) who under the title 'Italiaans IJs' (Italian ice-cream) describe the life history of some families of 'stucchiarini', 'figuristi', 'terrazieri', 'granitieri' and 'gelatieri' in The Netherlands. An overview of some results of an educational project concerning Italian immigrant children in primary education in Enschede is given by Projectraad (1985), and the language situation of Italians in Nijmegen and their need for Italian language classes is reported upon by Van Kerckhoven & Van Weijenburg (1986). The language situation of Italians in The Netherlands in general, is described by Pasteels (1985). The results of a study about the so-called 'ethnic identity' of second generation Italians in Amsterdam and Enschede, finally, are reported on by Brussa, Plebani & Van de Putten (1986).

As compared to the vast amount of research that has been carried out with respect to linguistic characteristics, and especially language shift and language loss phenomena, in Italian minorities in other countries (cf. e.g. Bettoni 1986), little attention has been paid up till now to linguistic research in Italian immigrants in The Netherlands.

3. Problems in Language Loss Research

The sociolinguistic research project, which we are currently carrying out, is mainly focussing on the social conditions that influence the pace of the language loss process. As has been pointed out before, the project deals with Turkish and Italian immigrants ($n=800$) in The Netherlands and Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. An outline of the research design is to be found in Jaspaert & Kroon (1986).

In our research we define language loss as a form of language change that causes potential communication problems between individuals and the community of which they consider themselves a member. The first question to be answered then is what kind of data should be collected in order to be able to draw conclusions on the extent to which an individual has been affected by language loss. One could, of course, work with spontaneous language data. The analysis of this type of data, however, is very time consuming and it is often very doubtful whether the time invested will yield useful language loss results, especially when a quantification of language loss is the research aim. A related problem is that language loss need not be obviously present in spontaneous data. Loss that is compensated for in one way or another does not surface in the form of 'mistakes' and is therefore not easy to be detected. An alternative for working with spontaneous data is using language loss tests. In this way specific phenomena can be investigated and the use of concealing compensatory strategies can be avoided (cf. Jaspaert & Kroon 1987).

The use of tests in language loss research immediately leads to a second problem. Language loss tests are in essence language proficiency tests: they relate to the command of morphological categories, syntactic structures, lexicon, etcetera. Making decisions on the basis of the results on these tests about the existence or non-existence of language loss is a matter of interpretation. The same type of test, administered to Dutchmen in The Netherlands would certainly lead to conclusions about the degree of language proficiency of these informants, and not to conclusions about language loss. In the case of Italians, living in The Netherlands, however, the results of such tests are interpreted in terms of language loss. Such a language loss interpretation of the observed variation is only possible if it coincides with a non-linguistic social fact. In the case of Italians in The Netherlands this social fact is the immigration process, which caused a rupture between the immigrating group and the Italian speech com-

munity to which they adhere. The linguistic evolution of the immigrant group is no longer concurrent with the evolution in the 'home' community, as a consequence of which there will occur differences in language behaviour, potentially leading to communication problems between the immigrants and the home group.

A third problem is that language proficiency tests, even if there are good reasons to interpret their results in terms of language loss, can never be used directly as measures of language loss. Language loss is the difference between language proficiency observed at a certain point in time, and a certain degree of language proficiency that serves as a base line measure, as a point of reference. The choice of such a point of reference is decisive for the scope of the language loss interpretation that is given to language loss data.

Different points of reference are possible. One can, for example, work with a pre-test post-test design using as a point of reference an earlier degree of language proficiency of the group under investigation. Apart from practical problems that have to do with time and money, there are also methodological weaknesses in this approach. First of all measuring language proficiency in L1 may have a strong impact on the loss process. The confrontation with a certain amount of language loss may be all the stimulus the informant needs to remember aspects of the tested variables in an analogous test situation some months later. Then the design itself has disturbed the natural course of the process it hoped to track down. A second problem is that, especially when time intervals between measurements are as long as in primary language loss research, it becomes very difficult to distinguish between language loss and natural processes of language change.

Another possibility is working with a one shot design and ignoring the problem of the point of reference by implicitly taking 100% proficiency as a point of comparison. This solution is by far the most popular one in language loss research, although it gives rise to a number of serious problems concerning the interpretation of the data in

terms of language loss. In establishing the level of proficiency of the fully competent speaker to be introduced in the research design as point of reference, researchers very often use dictionaries and grammars. This common practice is not unproblematic: dictionaries and grammars almost always reflect a highly idealized form of language use. Using them for the determination of the point of reference results in including forms of language use that can hardly be considered common knowledge to all language users.

A third possibility is working with a control group in the country of origin. The language loss results of the group under investigation can then be compared to the results of the control group in order to arrive at a measure of language loss. Of course this solution also creates problems. The fact, for instance, that emigrants did not take part in the natural linguistic evolution in their country of origin may create differences between the experimental and the control group which are not due to what is commonly regarded as language loss.

As a consequence of this discussion it seems wise not to limit oneself to the use of only one point of reference in the establishment of a measure for language loss. By combining the results of different measures of proficiency with different points of reference, a much more reliable measure for language loss is likely to emerge (cf. Jaspaert, Kroon & Van Hout 1986).

A fourth problem that obstructs the measurement of language loss is the influence on language loss data of so-called interfering factors. As a consequence of this influence, language proficiency tests may show a good deal of variation that is in no way relatable to language loss, even when the social conditions for the loss interpretation are fulfilled. Some of these sources of variation, such as metalinguistic knowledge and test skill, are typical for research in which language tests are used. These factors may cause an individual to be credited with a greater language proficiency than he could show in unguided language production. As far as measuring language proficiency is concerned, a certain influence of metalinguistic knowledge may not be un-

acceptable. After all, the existence of a (positive) influence of metalinguistic knowledge on language proficiency is generally accepted. The relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and language proficiency is bothersome, however, when a language loss interpretation of the data is envisaged. When working with an estimate of the former language proficiency of the informants as a point of reference, metalinguistic knowledge (and test skills) will not influence the point of reference and the proficiency measure in the same way. This unequal influence will result in a lower language loss rate for those informants having extensive metalinguistic knowledge and/or test skills. Imagine, for example, that in using 100% proficiency as a point of reference, these factors have a strong effect on the test results. This would have as a consequence that informants with a high level of schooling, the typical group in which metalinguistic knowledge and test skills may be assumed, automatically would be attributed a higher level of proficiency, and thus also a lower degree of language loss than less educated people, although the real language loss situation may be the inverse. In our opinion, this problem can only be dealt with by choosing a point of reference relative to the degree of metalinguistic knowledge and/or test skill each informant has; for example by measuring these factors independently and using these measures as a weight coefficient for the point of reference measure, or by introducing in the design a control group in which a similar effect of these factors can be expected.

A last point we want to discuss here is the lack of information on language-structural aspects of the language loss process. In order to be able to measure the degree of language loss adequately, it is important that the language proficiency tests that are used contain the linguistic elements that are most susceptible to loss. It is, however, far from evident which elements are likely loss candidates: research on primary language loss has hardly proceeded beyond formulating hypotheses on, and giving salient examples of structural aspects of language loss (cf.

e.g. Andersen 1982). There is an almost total lack of reliable empirical data in this respect. Language loss research, therefore, runs the risk of working with tests that can hardly show variation due to language loss. As long as structural language loss research does not provide more insight in the way the language loss process proceeds, the construction of a fairly extensive test battery, including very diverse tasks and items, seems to be the safest way to measure language loss.

4. A Pilot Study in Italian Language Loss

4.1 Introduction

Before carrying out our main research we decided to do a pilot study. The aim of this pilot study was twofold. First of all we wanted to test and improve the test battery which we designed (especially the language loss tests) and secondly we wanted to test the usefulness of the idea of working with a point of reference in analysing and interpreting language loss data. The pilot study was carried out in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, and Perugia, Italy.

4.2 Language Loss Tests and Points of Reference

Due to its scope (interviewing 800 informants from two ethnic groups in two countries), working with spontaneous data in our research was practically impossible. We therefore decided to draw up language loss tests. In order to overcome the problems caused by the unavailability of sufficient information with respect to the structural-linguistic way in which the language loss process proceeds, we developed five different tests, in which a large diversity of linguistic elements and skills could be tested. These tests are: a correction test,

an editing test, a lexical test and two comprehension test. A short description of each is given below (cf. Jaspaert & Kroon 1987).

The 'correction test' (COR) consisted of seven sentences incorporating 21 errors. Both interference errors and errors relatable to the complexity of Italian as such were included (cf. the different hypotheses formulated in Andersen 1982). An example sentence gave an indication of what had to be done.

The 'editing test' (EDIT) consisted of a 189 word text taken from an Italian popular magazine. In random places in the text 36 words from another text in the same magazine were inserted. The informants were asked to strike out the superfluous words.

The 'lexicon test' (LEX) was a vocabulary test of 25 items. The words were chosen from the IBM word frequency list of Italian (Bartolini, Tagliavini & Zampolli 1971). The items were randomly selected from all words with a frequency of 3 (the lowest frequency class that is incorporated in the list), that were not inflected or declined forms of more frequent words. The informants were asked to either translate or describe the words under investigation.

'Comprehension 1' (COMP1) consisted of 16 sentences, each referring to one photograph. The informants were asked to decide for every sentence whether it was, in view of the photograph, 'true' or 'false'.

In 'comprehension 2' (COMP2) the informants were asked to decide to which of 15 photographs a certain sentence applied. The test contained 12 items.

In both comprehension tests we tried to keep interference stemming from visual details down to a minimum. In other words, the test concentrated on a good understanding of lexical, morphological and syntactic aspects of the sentences. The correction and editing tests were administered as written tests, the others as oral ones. The order in which the tests are presented here reflects a declining appeal to metalinguistic knowledge and tests skills. Moreover, the specific test skills that were needed, differ from test to test. The correction and editing tests, for example, appealed to the ability to find and correct

linguistic errors in a written text, where as in the comprehension tests the informants needed to be able to combine oral stimuli with visual information.

Since the pilot study was mainly directed at improving the adequacy of the tests, one of its aims in this respect was providing insight in the expected variability of items. It is clear that items which do not show variability, can not be said to be affected by language loss. Through the pilot study, we were able to eliminate these items and replace them by items of a type that had shown to be possibly affected by language loss. From the analysis of the test results, one of the comprehension tests (COMP1) turned out to be unreliable. The test will therefore not be used in our main research and we will not comment upon it here any further (cf. Jaspaert & Kroon 1987).

The pilot study was also a necessary step in the solution of the earlier mentioned problem of selecting a point of reference. Since we do not have any knowledge of former proficiency of our informants, and introducing a second measuring moment being impossible for practical reasons, we could not use a longitudinal design. In view of the tests constructed, we could either establish a norm to which the response pattern of every informant could then be compared, or we could try and establish approximately for every single informant what would have been his/her competence if he/she had stayed in his/her country of origin.

The first solution has as its most important drawback that no attention is paid to differences in proficiency related to social and geographic factors which occur in any speech community independent of processes of language loss. The second solution creates problems of a more methodological nature : the establishment of these hypothetical individual levels of proficiency would entail a massive matching procedure in which the proficiency of each informant is compared to an informant similar in every respect but migration history. Such a matching

procedure is, in view of the large sample with which we work, practically unrealisable.

We decided to combine the two approaches mentioned above in the construction of one point of reference. First of all we tried to avoid as much as possible the inclusion in the test of items that showed regional variation. Secondly, through the pilot study we tried to discover which social factors explained variation in testing results. Subsequently we established a point of reference, not for every individual informant, but for every subgroup of informants that was formed by combining the values of relevant factors.

In the pilot study, that was carried out in the Dutch city of Nijmegen, thirty informants, of various age groups and social and educational backgrounds, were interviewed. Most of them had little or no contact with the rest of the Italian community in The Netherlands. They were all first generation immigrants, so as to avoid having to make a distinction between actual language loss and processes of incomplete learning.

As was pointed out earlier, one of the aims of the pilot study was to find out on the basis of which factors the control group for establishing a point of referent had to be sampled. On the other hand, in order to check the adequacy of the tests as language loss measures, it was important to have an idea of the way the control group scored on the test. To overcome this paradox - we could not carry out the control group sampling without the data of the pilot study, and we needed control group data in order to evaluate the Nijmegen pilot study data - we decided to introduce in the pilot study some preliminary control group measurements. To this end 15 interviews were conducted in the area of Perugia, Italy. Since we expected the factor 'level of education' to be a very important factor in the establishment of the control group sample, we had people interviewed with both high and low educational background⁴.

4.3 General Results

The results of the pilot study (both the Nijmegen and the Perugia data) are presented in table 1. From the data in table 1 it appears that the amount of language loss that occurs in Nijmegen, is minimal. Especially if one takes into account that the educational background of the control group is on the average higher than the educational background of the experimental group, and that level of education is considered one of the main factors influencing language proficiency, the difference between the control group and the experimental group is very small. It is very unlikely that this minimal difference between the two groups should be regarded as an indication of the fact that the tests themselves are not fit to measure language loss.

Table 1: Mean scores and standard deviations on four language loss tests in Nijmegen (experimental group) and Perugia (control group)

		maximum	experimental group	control group
COR	X	20	9.03	12.81
	s		4.06	3.52
EDIT	X	36	19.43	28.27
	s		10.65	5.82
LEX	X	25	19.73	23.00
	s		4.81	1.73
COMP2	X	12	10.87	11.64
	s		1.38	0.50

As was pointed out earlier, we took great care to incorporate a lot of variation in testing procedures as well as in linguistic elements tested in our research design. It is highly improbable that the Nijmegen informants could have suffered a great deal of language loss that does not show up in our results. Therefore, we are inclined to believe that language loss is not as important a process as is generally accepted, not in the least by persons in an immigration context themselves.

Of course, this conclusion does not mean that immigration does not have any other effect on language proficiency than what we see here. One should keep in mind that what is tested here is mainly loss of competence. It may very well be the case that a number of performance problems occur in spontaneous language use. These forms of language loss, however, do not form a part of this study.

A second striking fact in the data in table 1 is that, with the exception of the correction test, the average scores of the control group are very high and the standard deviations are low. This observation leads us to conclude that the linguistic elements we selected for testing are not particularly sensitive to sociolinguistic variation. This is a desirable condition in that working with such linguistic elements diminishes the importance of the matching procedures used to sample the control group.

A third remark we want to make here is that the comprehension test was probably too easy: not only the control group but also the experimental group have a very high average score and a low standard deviation. The conclusion here seems to be that, if this test is an adequate language loss test at all, it measures a stage in the language loss process which the Nijmegen informants have not reached yet. As a result of this outcome we decided to make the comprehension test more difficult in the final version of the questionnaire.

4.4 Correlations with Independent Factors

In table 2 the correlations are presented of the four tests with a number of social factors which were expected to have a possible influence on language loss.

Table 2: Correlation coefficients between dependent and independent variables (above line Pearson's R; below line eta's) with 100% proficiency as a point of reference

	COR	EDIT	LEX	COMP2
social background	.17	.12	.14	-.21
age	-.29	-.28	.09	-.17
stay in The Netherlands	-.49 *	-.29	-.35 *	-.45 *
education	.72 *	.74 *	.52 *	.17
proficiency in Dutch	.08	.14	-.24	-.18
contact with Italians	-.01	.12	-.20	-.21
nationality of partner	.37	.33	.13	.26
proficiency in other languages	.38 *	.26	.32	.35

In these figures the control group has not been taken into account. They are really correlations between social factors and the language proficiency of Italian immigrants in Nijmegen. Only when one adopts a 100% point of reference these results can be interpreted in terms of language loss.

In table 3, the correlations of the same social factors with two tests are given after the test scores have been corrected on the basis of the scores of the control group. Since on the comprehension and the lexicon test, the average control group scores neared the maximum, it

was useless to incorporate them in table 3: a perfect control group score functions in exact the same way as a 100% point of reference, so that the correlations after correction would more or less equal the correlations already presented in table 2.

Table 3: Correlation coefficients between dependent and independent variables (above line Pearson's R; below line eta's) with controlgroup as a point of reference

	COR	EDIT
social background	.04	.07
age	.09	.21
stay in The Netherlands	.33	.25
education	-.40	-.66 *
proficiency in Dutch	.00	-.11
contact with Italians	-.03	-.15
nationality of partner	.32	.31
proficiency in other languages	.44 *	.44 *

As can be inferred from the tables above, no multivariate analyses were used at this point. We felt that the number of informants was too small to use techniques such as multiple regression or multivariate analysis of variance.

The social factors used in the analysis are in most cases self-explanatory. Social background stands for the profession of the informant's father. We used a three value categorisation (1 uneducated laborer; 2 craftsman, shop owner, farm owner, etc.; 3 clerical profession, teacher, etc.). Education was measured in years of school attendance. Proficiency in Dutch and contact with Italians are based on five point self rating scales. Nationality of partner distinguished between those with an Italian partner and those with a partner of

another ethnic background. Proficiency in other languages (than Italian and Dutch) is a dichotomous factor indicating whether the informant has any knowledge of such a language or not.

In table 2 education and length of stay in The Netherlands are the main factors influencing the test scores. Knowledge of other languages also correlates rather well with the tests, but this relation should probably be explained as a side effect of the influence from education.

In an earlier analysis, in which no control group was used (cf. Jaspaert & Kroon 1987), we interpreted the predominance of education and length of stay in The Netherlands as an indication of the occurrence of two sources of variation in our data. We related the influence of education to sociolinguistic variation and the effect of the length of stay in The Netherlands to variation due to language loss. Hence the idea of sampling a control group on the basis of education. We expected the introduction of control subgroups for different levels of education to do away with most of the correlation between the tests and education. We already pointed out, however, that the overall results of the control groups seemed to indicate that there was only very little sociolinguistic variation included in the test results. The correlations between education and the tests in table 5 seem to corroborate this result: even after the introduction of control subgroups differentiating in levels of education, education (as well as proficiency in other languages) remains the most important explanatory factor for the variability in the results. This would mean that people with a higher education can maintain their language proficiency in an immigration context longer than people with a low level of education. We find this to be an intriguing result, which needs further investigation. On the basis of our present data, we cannot offer more than some speculations on why this is so. It may be that people with a higher education have more tools at hand to maintain their language than people with low education. They have in most cases higher salaries, which enable

them to travel back and forth between The Netherlands and Italy more often, or to keep into contact with their families in other ways. They are also more accustomed to the written code of the language, which in an immigration context offers a lot of chances for contact with the language. Or maybe their education provides them with a better insight in the structure of language and this insight makes retention easier. The influence of the factor proficiency in other languages can also be interpreted in this way.

In order to get a better understanding of this phenomenon we will have to carry out more detailed analyses. For one thing our control group sample will have to be more carefully constructed, and we certainly will have to take into account the correlations between the different independent variables we are using. We will pay special attention to all this in the analysis of the final results of our research project⁵.

On the whole there seems to be little difference between the correlations in table 3 and the corresponding figures in table 2. It is quite normal that the introduction of a control group results in slightly lower correlations. By controlling for education in this way, we removed some of the systematic variation that was present in the original proficiency measures. The surprising conclusion here seems to be that the introduction of a control group does not change the correlations a great deal. Of course, heretoo, the results from the actual inquiry will have to be awaited before more definite statements can be made, but it looks as if a 100% point of reference may not be such a bad solution after all, especially when one takes care to exclude sociolinguistic variation from the data. The little difference between the two types of measures is of course to a great extent due to the remaining influence of education. If the above conclusions on the effect of education on language loss are true, then the introduction of a control group replaces one type of linguistic variation influenced by education by

another one dominated by the same factor, leaving the correlation structure between dependent variable and social factors more or less intact.

Another remarkable outcome is that the contact factors seem to have little effect on language loss. As it was operationalised in this study, the factor contact with Italian can be interpreted as a measure for the opportunities an informant has to use Italian. From another part of our research (cf. Jaspaert & Kroon 1988) we know that the scope of these opportunities correlates highly with the scope of use of Italian. As a rule members of the Italian group use Italian when everyone participating in the interaction masters Italian. This would actually mean that in this case the adagium 'Practice makes perfect' does not hold. Extensive use of Italian does not seem to lead to a more elaborate proficiency in that language. It is true that the factor nationality of the partner, which also could be considered as a contact factor, does correlate with language loss, but the effect is opposite to what one would expect: those having a partner not belonging to the Italian ethnic group actually do better than those having an Italian partner. Of course, some reservations are warranted here, too. In our limited sample there is a certain interaction between education and nationality of the partner, so that this strange correlation between language loss and nationality of the partner may very well be spurious. Nevertheless, even after correction for level of education the expected correlation would probably not emerge. The fact that the pilot study was carried out in the city of Nijmegen, a city with a very small Italian population may also be responsible for the lack of correlation between contact factors and language loss. It is clear that in such a situation contact factors do not get their full scope of variability. So, again, these results should be interpreted as indications which need corroboration in the main inquiry.

5. Conclusion

Even though it that the results of the pilot study cannot be considered as hard research outcomes, they are quite remarkable. We found that:

1. much less language loss occurred than expected;
2. the loss we did register does not seem due to the opportunities for using the language, or not even to the frequency of language use;
3. level of education seems to be an important factor in explaining language loss.

We find these to be strange outcomes for a study that concentrated on a form of linguistic change that is commonly believed to be a regressive process. If language loss really is a process of gradual erosion of language skills due to limitations in use, we would expect to find much more loss with people who, like the Nijmegen informants, have little ethnic contacts and thus also few opportunities to use the language. In explaining variation in language loss we would rather expect contact possibilities to play a crucial role than a factor such as education.

In the light of these data we are awaiting with impatience the results of the main body of our research project. If the same tendencies are noticeable, it may mean that the very nature of the process of language loss has to be reconsidered.

NOTES

1. This text is part of a paper that had been prepared for the 1987 AILA Conference, but, due to circumstances was presented at the Conferenza nel quadro dei lunedì linguistici, Università di Roma, Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio, Rome, June 8, 1987.
2. The project is carried out in the Faculty of Letters of the University of Brabant (P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands). It is supported by the Foundation for Linguistic Research, which is funded by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), by the University of Brabant and the Belgian Fund for Fundamental Collective Research (FKFO).
3. First steps towards exploring the possibilities for such a survey are currently been undertaken at the Department of Language and Ethnic Minorities of the University of Brabant.
4. The interviewing in Nijmegen and Perugia was done by Catia Cucchiarini, who in 1986-1987 worked as a research assistant in the project.
5. In order to create a more reliable point of reference we have also been collecting language proficiency data in Rome and Cagliari.

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