# The language of the first vernacular version of the *Fasciculus temporum*

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Since the *editio princeps* in 1474 of what has been called the first bestseller in the history of printing and publishing, Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus temporum* has been reprinted many times both in the Latin original and in translation. Although no rendering of the text in the mother tongue of the author, Low German, has survived, two editions in German, one in Dutch, and five in French are extant[1]. The Dutch version, entitled *Dat boeck dat men hiet Fasciculus temporum*, is the oldest vernacular translation.[2] It was printed in 1480 in Utrecht by Johan Veldener. In the last paragraph of the prologue Veldener wrote for the book, he comments on potential difficulties the reader might encounter.

> Wi bidden den ghenen die dit boek leset dat hi nijt en corrigiere ... tensi dat hi eerst alt boeck doersiet. Dit en segghen wi nijt daer om recht off wi nerghent ghedwaelt en souden hebben mer om te avisieren ende te waerscuwen van die grote ende diverscher opinien der doctoren in deser materien. Ende veel tijt geschietet dat die setting des eens is een verwerding des anders. Mer in wat stede datmen dwaling vijnt dat vergheeft goedertierlicke ende corrigiertet uut de ghenen die wi navolghen.[3]

This apology to his readers for the mistakes and inconsistencies in the book must have been in part motivated by the difficulties inherent in the manuscript Veldener used as printing copy. In the absence at present of a single manuscript copy of *Dat boeck dat me hiet Fasciculus temporum*, it is not possible to attempt any precise delineation of the kind of problems Veldener struggled with. The purpose of this article is to shed light on one of the factors that might have contributed to the straits Veldener found himself in, namely the

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[1] Robert Werner in *Étude sur le „Fasciculus Temporum"* (Château-d'Oex 1937) lists the following translations: "[E]n 1481 déjà [...] Bernard Richel avait imprimé une traduction allemande sous ce titre: «Ein Bürdlein der Zit». Il parut aussi une édition allemande à Strasbourg: «Cronica von Anfang der Welt byes uff die Jar Christi 1487». Une édition en flamand date de 1480. Enfin, nous possédons une série de traductions françaises : «Petit fardelet des faits ..... translaté de latin en français par Pierre Farget» (Lyons, 1483); «Fleurs et manières des temps passés et des faits merveilleux de Dieu tant en l'Ancien Testament comme au Nouveau, et des premiers seigneurs, princes et gouverneurs temporels en cestuy monde» (Genève, 1495; imprimé par Cruze). Une autre édition, publiée aussi à Genève, en 1495, est plus complète et de quelques mois antérieure à la précédente. Il y eut une édition à Paris, en 1505, imprimée par Nicolas Desprez pour Jean Petit, et une édition , à Paris également, en 1513, de Jean Petit et Michel Lenoir."

[2] I would like to thank Laviece Ward, who brought this translation to my attention. I also benefitted from her expert knowledge of the *Fasciculus temporum* and its author, and of *Dat boeck dat men hiet Fasciculus temporum* and its compiler Johan Veldener.

[3] We beg the one who reads this book not to correct ... unless he first reads the whole book through. This we do not say as if we would have erred anywhere but to advise and to warn about the great and diverse opinions of the doctors in these matters. And many times it happens that the position of one is a corruption of the other. But in places where one finds error one forgives mercifully and corrects from the ones we follow.

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language of *Dat boeck dat men hiet Fasciculus temporum*. The 1480 translation dates from the period in the history of Dutch when the written language as it was established in the Late Middle Ages in and around Utrecht was introduced as a medium of written discourse in the Northeastern area of the Low Countries. The main thesis of this article is that the anonymous translator[4], whose vernacular was a northeastern Middle Dutch dialect, had to write a written form of Middle Dutch, which was not native to the area where that dialect was spoken. He had to learn that written language in order to translate texts in this newly introduced standard and to follow its norms. What is interesting, and what ultimately accounts for the problems Veldener was confronted with, is that these norms were on the whole followed, but with certain exceptions. In other words, even though the translator was in all likelihood well grounded in the standard, there are occasional mishaps that are indicative of the spoken variety of Middle Dutch which was the native language of the translator. In what follows I will examine some of these exceptions and prove that, as far as we can judge, scribal origin of the translation is to be situated in an area of the Low Countries where an emerging written variety of Middle Dutch coexisted with a northeastern spoken variety. The linguistic evidence will also show that the anonymous translator of the *Fasciculus temporum* quite plausibly belonged to the circle of authors connected with the *Devotio Moderna*. The context in which these kind of translations arose is in some respects - at least superficially - of an unusual kind. Nevertheless, *Dat boeck dat men hiet Fasciculus temporum* has not attracted much attention. A review of the scant secondary literature reveals but a handful of brief characterizations of the translator and his language. Whereas the Dutch historian Jan Romein assumes that the translator was a native of Utrecht because of the printing locale[5], the Flemish linguist Willem de Vreese is of the opinion that he used an "[a]lgemeene, meer Zuid- dan Noordnederlandse schrijftaal, Zuidhollandsch-Utrechts gekleurd." A third opinion is voiced by Claudine Lemaire, who states that "[u]it de taaleigenaardigheden blijkt dat de auteur van de tekst in de Oostelijke Nederlanden dient te worden gezocht". I hope to prove that both Romein's and De Vreese's assumptions are inaccurate and that Lemaire's characterization can be made more precise. But in order to do this, I must first, however briefly, sketch the sociolinguistics of Medieval Dutch.

If we consider Dutch as it was spoken in the last quarter of the fifteenth century we may regard all its numerous forms as falling under the general label 'Late Middle Dutch'. This term is an abstraction, embracing under one convenient heading a large number of interrelated varieties of the spoken language. No single variety is to be regarded as more strictly or fittingly described by the term 'Late Middle Dutch' than any other. All evidently bore very marked resemblances; though the student of dialects will tend to be more concerned with the differences between them than with their resemblances, it should be noted that the exploitation and interpretation of these differences is only possible within some sort of controlling framework or similarity or relatedness.

Even though we are justified in assuming the existence of spoken varieties of Late Middle Dutch, and indeed in making certain statements about them, we have in fact no shred of direct information about any single feature in any of them. Whatever we may claim to know is derived indirectly; by making a study of written material and drawing certain conclusions from it, and by studying still surviving forms in spoken Dutch and then drawing conclusions about the earlier stages by a process of extrapolation. And there can be no doubt that it is written material of the Late Middle Dutch period itself which provides us with the bulk of what we believe we know about the spoken language of that time. The fact that modern scholars feel able to speak with some confidence of various kinds of regional differences in the spoken language rests not merely

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[4]"Wie de vertaling en de nieuwe bewerking gemaakt heeft, is onbekend. In ieder geval mogen wij het uitgesloten achten dat Veldener zelf de pen ter hand heeft genomen." Hellinga, p. 156.

[5]Romein (1932), pp. 114-115.

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on the circumstance that these once existed, but on the fact that there are regional differences in written Middle Dutch. More importantly still, it rests on the making of far-reaching assumptions about the correlation between a given variety of the spoken language and the corresponding variety of the written language; otherwise it would be impossible to draw conclusions about the one from facts available only or mainly in extant specimens of the other.

It may be advisable therefore to consider this matter in some detail and begin by considering features in written Middle Dutch which almost certainly do correlate with features in spoken Middle Dutch. Certain variants appear in two or more varieties of the written language which may be assumed to testify to the parallel existence of variants in the corresponding varieties of the spoken language. Thus variant written forms like *sulc, selc, sulch* ; *-t, -st, -ste* ; *hem, him, hom,* will usually entitle us to assume that there existed a corresponding diversity in the spoken language, of which we may then say that we have evidence that it had (according to locality or other factors) three different words for 'such,' two different ways of forming 'the second person singular present indicative of the verb,' and three different forms of 'the accusative case of the personal pronoun, third singular'.

We should note however, that though they strongly suggest such diversity in the spoken language, the written forms offer us no very precise information about the way their equivalents sounded in the appropriate varieties of the spoken language. For example, the exact phonetic value of letters is in doubt : a spelling *sulch* does not even enable us to say whether the pronunciation of the scribe who wrote it was, say, [sʌlk], [sʌlç], or [zulk], all three of which spellings are in any case themselves phonetically imprecise. Indeed, as we shall see, any such statement as *sulch* represents or stands for [zulk] runs the grave risk of lacking any meaning whatsoever.

It is true, of course, that when a certain writer wrote *sulch*, it evidently carried for him an indication of the most unequivocal kind of his own pronunciation of the word. For any reader of the *sulch* area it would have equally unequivocal phonetic implications, but each would interpret it in the light of his own pronunciation of the word. Whenever a reader's pronunciation diverged from that of the scribe, say because of some local usage, the written word *sulch* would have correspondingly divergent phonetic implication. To one reader it might indicate [sʌlk], to another [sʌlç]] and so forth, and all we can safely say is that to any contemporary reader who used the word in his own speech, the sign *sulch* conveyed, among other things, exactly that reader's pronunciation of it.

These preliminary observations about spoken and written Middle Dutch raise questions concerning the relationship between the written and the spoken medium and the ways in which they may be subjected to linguistics analysis.

It may perhaps at this stage be worth considering another matter with which we are confronted if we attempt to analyze written language as a co-equal of spoken language, namely the problem of so-called internal orthographic variation. Even in texts which can be considered originals (that is to say not copied) the language is very often far from homogeneous. More than once it turns out that the scribe does not unvaryingly spell. This inconsistency can be interpreted in different ways. In *Dat boeck dat men hiet Fasciculus temporum*, for instance, where we encounter the word for 'brother' written as *broder*, but other times as *broeder*, it could be that what is represented in writing are two different phonetic variants, which the anonymous translator is familiar with in his dialect, or of which he knows one in his dialect and the other from a variety he learned later. The variant he acquired later might also be part of the written language that is typical for a particular area; for our translation this could be the written standard as it was established in Utrecht. Also a developing standard, in our case that of the *Devotio Moderna*, can be considered as a second language. It is moreover also possible that the stem vowel of *broeder*, for example, could have a phonetic realization between [oː] and [uː], and that this is the reason why the writer could not decide on a single orthographic representation, but instead has chosen to alternate two graphemes. Finally, we should remember the well-known phenomenon that a copyist often takes over the inconsistencies of his model.

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Before we turn to more examples of these inconsistencies in the Dutch *Fasciculus temporum*, one final issue needs to be addressed, namely the status of northeastern Middle Dutch (Noordoostmiddelnederlands). With this term Dutch linguists characterize the spoken language of the area north of Limburg and East of Utrecht (the language of the Dutch provinces of Gelderland, Overijssel, and Drente). The standard reference work on Middle Dutch grammar remains inconclusive on the issue: in the volume on morphology, Van Loey states that

> De taal in Gelderland, Overijsel, Drente en Groningen is, strikt genomen, geen m[iddel]n[eder]l[ands] meer: ze vertoont allerlei kenmerken, die nadere verwantschap met het niet ver oostwaarts gelegen Nederduits duidelijk maken, met, in de schrijftaal, vele westelijke vormen.[6]

In the volume on phonology, on the other hand, *Noordoostelijk* figures as the fifth dialect group within Middle Dutch, along side Flemish, the dialect of Brabant, that of Holland and that of Limburg.[7] For the present purposes the issue can be clarified as follows: in its spoken form the language of this area fits in more properly with the Low German dialects, whereas the written language is a form of Middle Dutch, albeit influenced by the spoken language of the area. Van Loey, in another context, has formulated it thus:

> In diesem Osten *sprach* man eine Sprache, die sich stark dem Mittelnieder-deutschen annähert, wiewohl man das westliche, mit östlichen Formen durchsetzte m[ittel]n[ieder]l[ändische] schrieb.[8]

Of the characteristics Van Loey then proceeds to list as unique features of this Middle Dutch language variety the following three occur in *Dat boeck dat men hiet Fasciculus temporum*:

> 1. *old* in words like *olde* (cf. other Middle Dutch varieties *oude*; German *alte*)
> 2. *a* in words like *apen* (cf. other Middle Dutch varieties *open*; German *offen*)
> 3. *u* before nasal + consonant in words like uns (cf. MD *ons*; G *uns*)

The occurrence of lexical items exhibiting these features, however, is sporadic. The overwhelming majority of items conform to the norms of the western variant of Middle Dutch, which the anonymous translator was undoubtedly able to produce in writing. The evidence of his near-native competence is therefore not surprising. The occasional occurrences of items displaying northeastern features is more significant. Under the hypothesis formulated above they allow an approximation of the background of the translator. While we can never know in all certainty who he may have been, this evidence points to the sociolinguistic situation he might have been involved in. The very nature of this translation with its uneven mixture of predominantly western Middle Dutch forms and a handful of northeastern spoken Dutch features brings the following scenario to mind. We are dealing with a native speaker of northeastern Middle Dutch who has trained and quite probably lived in Utrecht, and is therefore familiar with the written standard of Utrecht and surroundings, that is to say the western Middle Dutch orthographhic traditions and western

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[6]Van Loey (1976), p. 5.

[7]"Met deze vage term wordt bedoeld de taal ten N. van Limburg en ten O. van Utrecht." Van Loey (1980), p. 129.

[8]Van Loey (1970), p. 255.

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Middle Dutch vocabulary. Given this scenario, we can expect to find strong evidence of western Middle Dutch forms. This is clearly the case. We also expect this native speaker of a northeastern variant of Middle Dutch to make mistakes in his rendering of Western Dutch phonology. Rather than dismissing them as simply scribal errors, these slips of the pen are indicative of the Middle Dutch dialect the translator spoke.

The possibility that our translation may be the work of a diglossic language user, that is to say one who uses one variety as a speaker but another, more prestigious variety as a writer becomes even stronger when we consider the following. Our anonymous translator's more or less successful attempt to render the text in a western Middle Dutch form also provides us with evidence of what is known in language contact theory as hypercorrection. The essence of hypercorrection is the replacement of a lower-prestige-language form that is presumed, on the basis of analogous cases where the lower-prestige language differs from the higher-prestige one, to be 'incorrect', but were the two languages do not, in fact differ — so that the lower-prestige-language form is actually 'correct' to start with, which makes its 'correction' 'incorrect' (i.e. hypercorrect). Many native speakers of General American English, are capable of simulating a more prestigious dialect of English by inserting the palatal glide [j] before a stressed vowel [u] in words like *duty* and *new*. However there are other words in which American English [u] corresponds to British English [u]; a native speaker of British English is able to keep these words (including their *u*'s and *ju*) straight because learning which words are pronounced which way is simply part of learning British English, but the native speaker of American English, of course, has no such knowledge, and so he is likely to hypercorrect by replacing American English [u] with [ju] for words where British English also has *u*: cf. *noon* and *noodle*, hypercorrect [nju:n] and [nju:dl].

|  | **American English** | **British English** | **Hypercorrect** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *news* : | [nu:z] | [nju:z] | |
| *noon* : | [nu:n] | [nu:n] | *[nju:n] |

Close inspection of the language of our anonymous translator reveals a few of these hypercorrect forms. A particularly striking case involves the so-called vocalization of [l] in Middle Dutch. This phenomenon accounts for the variant forms *holden/houden* listed above as feature (1) among the northeastern traits. The northeastern Middle Dutch form *holden* preserves the original [l] (cf. English *bold* and German *halten*), while the other dialects of Middle Dutch, including the emerging standard, have undergone vocalization, the change of [l] to [u]: *holden>houden*. *Dat boeck dat men hier Fasciculus temporum* has occurrences of *houde*n (overwhelmingly), occasional cases of *holden*, and rare instances (only two could be identified in the text) of *boulden*. The form *boulden*, just like the form [nju:n], is the result of hypercorrection.

| **Written Middle Dutch** | **Northeastern MD** | **Hypercorrect** |
|---|---|---|
| *houden* | *holden* | * *boulden* |

It further strengthens my main argument in this article that we are dealing with a native speaker of northeastern Middle Dutch, who has lived in Utrecht long enough to be familiar with the orthographic traditions of the written variety, but who, through occasional slips of the pen, shows that he has not fully mastered the language he has learned as an adult. It also proves that the translation is not the work of a native speaker of western Middle Dutch, but of a native of a northeastern dialect with less than perfect knowledge of the written standard.

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What I wish to have shown in this brief discussion is that the inconsistencies we encounter in our text are not arbitrary, as a superficial first reading of the book would seem to suggest. Relating those apparent inconsistencies to the sociolinguistic background of the translator, it is possible to account for them.

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