

**From ‘dankgevingdag’ to ‘turkey party’:
Historical sociolinguistic perspectives on loan strategies
in Flemish-American heritage newspapers**

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Abstract. Within the domain of historical sociolinguistics, attention for heritage languages has been on the rise in the last decade (see e.g., Brown 2019; Litty 2019). The goal of this paper is to contribute to that growing body of research studying the role of sociolinguistic factors in heritage language use in the past, by looking at the lexical output of Belgian emigrants in the United States using heritage newspapers. We will investigate the borrowing patterns in three Flemish-American newspapers that were published in the 19th and 20th centuries and circulated widely within the Flemish-American communities. We focus on (1) borrowing rate (how many English-origin lexemes are transferred?), and (2) borrowing type (which loan processes are involved?). The findings are interpreted in terms of the social variables time and space to chart diachronic as well as regional differences, besides looking at differences between the newspapers more generally.

Keywords. heritage linguistics; historical sociolinguistics; Belgian Dutch; lexical borrowing

1. Introduction. Within the field of heritage language linguistics, studies often take a contemporary, synchronic perspective, focusing on language attrition (e.g., Montrul 2016), heritage-language education (e.g., Brinton, Kagan & Bauckus 2017), or charting the formal and structural features of heritages languages (e.g., Pascual & Cabo 2016). Recently, however, attention started to shift to studying heritage languages by relying on insights from (historical) sociolinguistics as well, thus (1) considering the impact of extra-linguistic factors, and (2) studying heritage languages in the past (cf. Brown & Bousquette 2018; Kasstan, Auer & Salmons 2018; Brown 2019). Johannessen (2018) for instance, argues that both language attitudes and the social processes of verticalization are factors that have triggered change in North Germanic languages in 19th-20th century America. In a study on letters from German-American soldiers written during the Civil War, Litty (2019) finds a steady increase in the use of English the longer the speaker resides in the English-dominant environment of his regiment. Kühl (2019), in turn, shows that New Denmark Danish in Canada differs linguistically from North American Danish due to a range of different socio-demographic variables.

Indeed, in the past decade a lot of work has already been done on understanding (historical) heritage languages from a sociolinguistic point of view (see also Salmons 2017; Hoffman & Kytö 2019; Moquin & Wolf forthcoming). Yet, there are still gaps that need to be filled. As such, the present paper aims to contribute to the growing body of historical heritage research from a sociolinguistic perspective by examining the lexical output of Belgian heritage speakers in three Flemish-American newspapers. The newspapers stem from three states in the U.S. (Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin) and cover a time period from 1885 until 1959. The goal is to discover the borrowing rate (how many items are transferred from English to Belgian

* This paper is based on a segment of my doctoral dissertation. First, I wish to thank my supervisors Wim Vandenbussche and Rik Vosters for their support. I further want to express my gratitude to the audience present at the 13th Workshop on Immigrant Languages in the America’s for their helpful feedback, as well as to the anonymous reviewers for their comments on a previous version of this paper. Author: Crombez Yasmin, Vrije Universiteit Brussel & FWO Vlaanderen (project 1119924N) (yasmin.crombez@vub.be).

Dutch?) and the borrowing type (which loan processes are at play?). To help explain the variation, the social variables time and space are taken into consideration.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we provide a brief overview of the historical context of the Flemish migration to North America, after which we zoom in on the Flemish language in North America. In the third section, we will briefly discuss the corpus, and in the fourth section we will outline the methodology. The results are presented in Section 5, followed by a conclusion in Section 6.

2. From the Old to the New World. Starting around the 1850s, approximately 150.000 Flemish emigrants crossed the ocean to start a new life in the United States or Canada. Like many other European migrant groups, most Flemings decided to make the move because of economic motivations: Europe was plagued by land shortage, crop failure, famine, and high poverty rates, while North America offered better wages, high employment rates, and free farming land as part of a favorable emigration policy toward Western Europeans (Cohn 2008; Caestecker 2014). Once the Flemish emigrants arrived in the U.S., they generally settled around the Great Lakes (e.g., Moline, Rock Island, De Pere, Milwaukee, Green Bay, Detroit...) where they formed (close) communities, keeping the Flemish language and culture alive through many clubs and organizations (Caestecker 2014; Van Landschoot 2014). As a result, North America became a home to Belgian Dutch as a heritage variety.

2.1. BELGIAN DUTCH IN THE NEW WORLD. In the case of the Flemish migration, there seems to be a decent number of historiographic studies (see e.g., Nauwelaerts & Caestecker 2008; Stynen 2014). When looking for linguistic accounts of Belgian Dutch in America, however, research is very limited: official numbers of how much, where and for how long Belgian Dutch was spoken in the U.S. are, regrettably, lacking. Though an unpublished study by Ostyn (1972) sheds some light on Heritage Belgian Dutch by looking at several linguistic features of ‘American Flemish’ in the *Gazette van Detroit*. Research by Collet (2016; 2019) further describes language ideologies that were present in the *Gazette van Detroit* during World War I. Regardless of there being little information available on the language use of Flemish emigrants, we might presume that many first- and second-generation Flemish families spoke Belgian Dutch at home as well as to friends and family (see models on language shift by Fishman 1964; Valdés 2000). This assumption seems (at least partially) validated by the many Belgian Dutch letters written by early emigrants to friends and family in Belgium, and by the several Flemish-American newspapers written in Dutch that circulated in the U.S. and Canada from as early as 1890. Consequently, it seems indeed fitting to characterize Belgian Dutch in North America in the 19th and 20th centuries as a heritage language: a language that is learned at home, has no official status in its environment, and connects speakers to their roots (Rothman 2009; Aalberse, Backus & Muysken 2019).

3. Corpus. To investigate the borrowing patterns of Flemings living in North America in the 19th and 20th centuries, we relied on a self-compiled corpus² made up of three Flemish-American newspapers. The first newspaper is called *De Volksstem* and was founded in 1890 in De Pere, Wisconsin as a reaction against the Bennet law of 1889 that stated that all education should be given in English (Stynen & Verdoodt 2015:13). It ran weekly from 1890 until 1919, and printed news from De Pere as well as from other places in North America where Flemings lived. The journal’s objective was to unite all Dutch-speaking, Catholic communities in the New Country by emphasizing the importance of the Flemish identity and language, as well as

² More specifically, this corpus is part of the Flemish-American Newspapers and Letters-corpus (FALN-corpus), compiled by the author of this paper as part of a doctoral dissertation.

by honoring the traditional values of the Old country and the Roman Catholic faith (Stynen & Verdoodt 2015:14).

The second paper included, the *Gazette van Moline*, was distributed weekly between 1907 and 1940 from Moline, Illinois. In line with *De Volksstem*, the *Gazette van Moline* was also intent on maintaining the Flemish language and identity, values and traditions. One of the first editions of the paper even clearly states that the Flemish language is crucial to the Flemish identity: “a Fleming who doesn’t know their mother tongue, is a maimed Fleming, yet he is not an English American either!” (my translation, *Gazette van Moline* 1907:4). The goals of the *Gazette van Moline* are further made clear through its slogan “Godsdienst – Eendracht – Vooruitgang” (Religion – Unity – Progress): preserve the Roman Catholic faith, unite all Flemings, and help Flemish emigrants progress in their new country.

The final paper used, is named the *Gazette van Detroit*. It first saw the light of day in 1914, just after the start of the Great War, and only recently ended its activities in 2018. Research by Collet (2016) found that the early editions *Gazette van Detroit* had a rather explicit Flemish nationalist tone, frequently printing editorials and articles on Flemish (language) rights both in the New and Old Country. Just as *De Volksstem* and the *Gazette van Moline*, the *Gazette van Detroit* issued news from numerous Flemish communities in North America.

In total, the newspaper corpus comprises 105 editions that were selected randomly per year from each newspaper. As can be seen from Table 1, the corpus ranges from 1890 until 1959 and consists of 145.612 words. The goal was to have approximately 2.000 words per year, spread evenly across the three newspapers if possible. For instance, for the year 1919 we transcribed roughly 666 words per newspaper, giving us a total of about 2.000 words, while for the year 1949 we had to include all 2.000 words from the *Gazette van Detroit*, as it was the only available newspapers for that year. The transcriptions cover local news sections such as “Stad, County en Omgeving” (*De Volksstem*), “Moline en Omstreken” (*Gazette van Moline*), “Stadsnieuws” (*Gazette van Detroit*), and other comparable sections to make sure content of the transcriptions across newspapers remained similar.

Newspaper	Period	Editions	Words
De Volksstem	1890-1919	30	44.526
Gazette van Moline	1907-1940	34	43.059
Gazette van Detroit	1916-1942 1946-1959 ³	41	59.061
Total			146.646

Table 1. Corpus overview

4. Methodology. The goal of this study was to discover the type and rate of borrowings used by Flemish heritage speakers in North America during the 19th and 20th centuries. To do so, we relied on a self-compiled, historical newspaper corpus containing data from three Flemish-American newspapers. Specifically, we manually read through the transcriptions, extracting all English transfers.

All lexemes that phonetically, graphemically or semantically seemed to represent English words were included. As such, when looking at Haugen’s (1950) taxonomy, this means that

³ No editions available between 1943 and 1945.

we have taken both importations and substitutions into account (cf. *Infra*). It is important to mention that we do not explicitly differentiate between loanwords and code-switches, as we interpret the process of borrowing to represent a continuum, following Matras (2009) and others. Though to account for possible differences related to assimilation, we have assigned all lexemes a ‘level of integration’ (cf. *Infra*).

In order to verify that the tokens were indeed transfers from English, we consulted the following works: *etymologiebank.nl* (a digital combination of etymological dictionaries), *Woordenboek van de Nederlandsche taal* (WNT – gtb.ivdnt.org), *Van Dale* online dictionaries, *Dialetloket* (dialectloket.be, a digital combination of dialect dictionaries), *Vlaams woordenboek* (vlaamswaardenboek.be), the online *Cambridge Dictionary* (dictionary.cambridge.org), and the online *Dictionary by Merriam Webster* (merriam-webster.com).

Once we collected the final set of lexical borrowings, they were assigned the following variables: the newspaper and newspaper section the lexeme appeared in, place of publishment (i.e., region), year of occurrence, lemma, loan process, loan type, and level of integration. Regarding the variables ‘loan process’ and ‘loan type’, we departed from the taxonomy of Haugen (1950) (see Figure 1). ‘Loan process’ contains two levels: importation, which we define as an item that has entered the target language without lexical morphological assimilations to Dutch, and substitution, which we define as a lexeme that entered the target language with lexical morphological changes to Dutch⁴. The result of the loan process is the variable ‘loan type’. An importation that is an (almost) exact reproduction from the source language, is categorized as a ‘loanword’, while a substitution can be categorized as a ‘loan blend’ or as a ‘loan shift’. A loan blend means that part of the lexeme is imported from English and part of it is substituted for Belgian Dutch (e.g., *farmgerief* < farm equipment, where equipment has been substituted for the Belgian Dutch morpheme ‘gerief’). A loan shift can again be divided into two levels: a ‘loan translation’, where all parts, except for meaning, of the original English lexeme are substituted for Belgian Dutch (e.g., *zachte dranken* < soft drinks), and a ‘semantic loan’ where the meaning has been borrowed from English and is added to a Belgian Dutch word (e.g., when the meaning of ‘free’ in the sense of costing nothing is added to the Dutch word *vrij*). Concerning ‘level of integration’, we designed a three-point ordinal scale. If an item belonged to a stretch of code-switching, it was assigned to level one, if a lexeme was not phonetically or morphologically integrated in Belgian Dutch, it was assigned to level two, and if it was adapted phonetically or morphologically to Dutch (e.g., *sermonen*, where ‘sermon’ has been given the Dutch plural *-en*), it was assigned to level three.

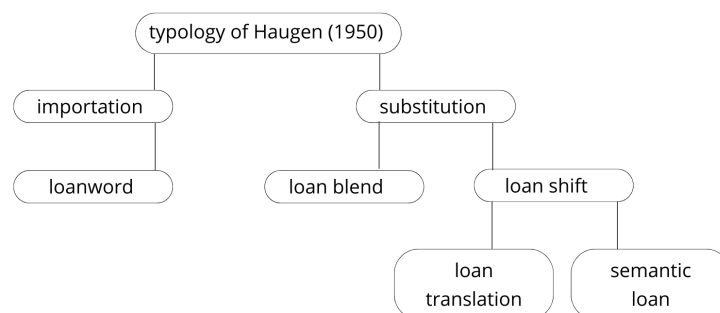


Figure 1. Taxonomy of borrowing according to Haugen (1950)

⁴ This means that English lexemes with Dutch inflections are categorized as importations, but compounds or derivations that are part English, part Dutch are categorized as substitutions.

To determine the borrowing rate and type, as well as the influencing factors, we relied on descriptive statistics. In the next section, we will first discuss the overall normalized frequency of English lexemes over the years and per region, then we will look at the influence of loan process and loan type as well as at the impact of the level of integration.

5. Results. In total we found 3.130 lexical borrowings in the corpus, coming from 914 different types, including assimilated and non-assimilated items. According to the normalized frequency of the borrowings, Heritage Belgian Dutch contains 21 English transfers per 1.000 words in general in our corpus. When including the variable year, Figure 2 shows that the number of borrowings stays relatively stable in the first 30 years, but steadily increases starting from the 1920s, to decrease again around the 1950s. If we then look at the normalized frequency of the borrowings in each of the newspapers separately, we notice that *De Volksstem* contains 19 borrowings per 1.000 words, the *Gazette van Moline* almost 16 per 1.000 words, and the *Gazette van Detroit* nearly 27 per 1.000 words in general, hinting at possibly different borrowing profiles for each of the newspapers.

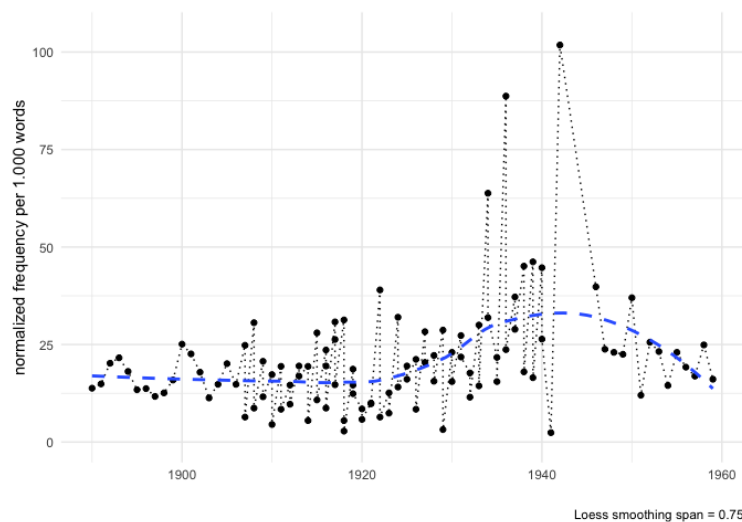


Figure 2. Overall relative frequency of borrowings per 1.000 words/year

Figure 3 depicts the normalized frequency of borrowings per 1.000 words over the life span of *De Volksstem*. The English transfers in *De Volksstem* seem to increase gradually, starting with approximately 15 borrowings per 1.000 words and ending with almost 25 transfers per 1.000 words. In contrast, the *Gazette van Moline* and the *Gazette van Detroit* seem to experience a period of notably intensified use of English (see Figures 4 and 5).

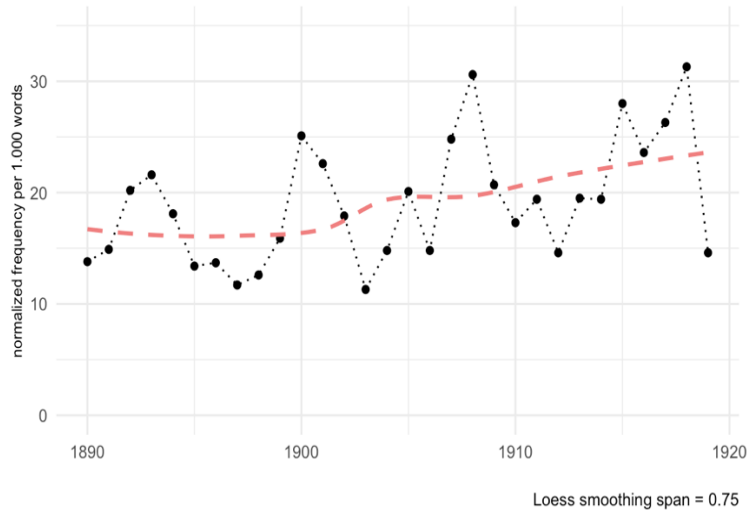


Figure 3. Relative frequency of borrowings in De Volksstem per 1.000 words/year

In the *Gazette van Moline*, we observe a surge in English items starting around the 1920s, when the number of borrowings climbs from roughly 10 lexical borrowings to nearly 25 per 1.000 words (Figure 4). For the *Gazette van Detroit*, the increase in borrowings starts around mid-1920s: from 15 English transfers per 1.000 words in the 1910s, to almost 50 transfers around the start of the 1940s (Figure 5). It is important, however, to remark that the results concerning the *Gazette van Detroit* are slightly skewed because of two reasons: (1) the corpus misses the editions from 1943 until 1945, explaining the drop in Figure 5, and (2) the editions of 1936 and 1942 contained articles fully written in English that were included in the analysis, explaining the high number of English borrowings for those years.

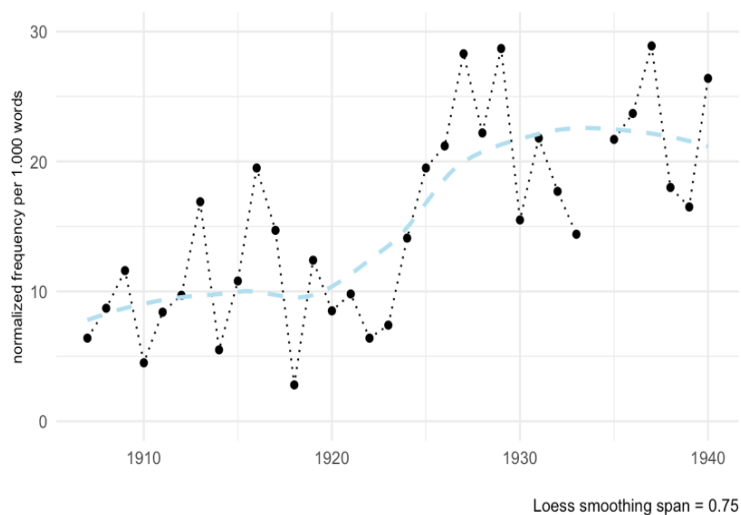


Figure 4. Relative frequency of borrowings in the Gazette van Moline per 1.000 words/year

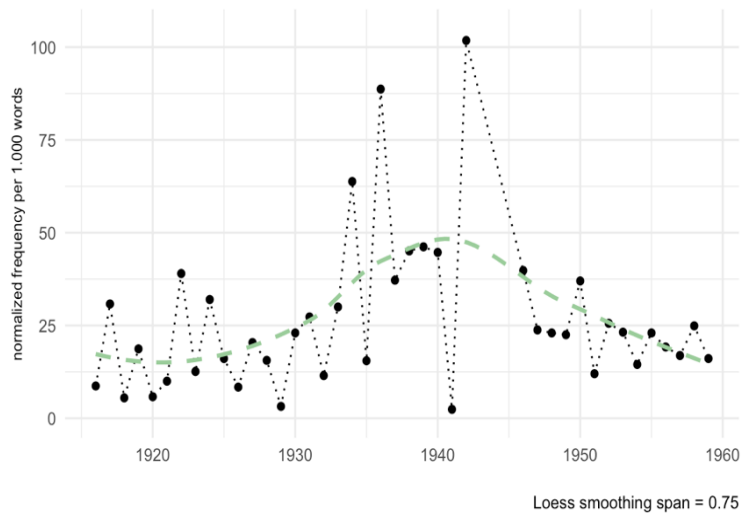


Figure 5. Relative frequency of borrowings in the Gazette van Detroit per 1.000 words/year

The increases witnessed in the *Gazette van Moline* and the *Gazette van Detroit* might potentially be a result of the social process called ‘verticalization’ as described by Salmons (2005): political, economic and social powers shift from socially constructed regional control, to state or national control, and with that shift the dominant language, in our case English, gains more territory, speeding up the process of language shift as well. For many immigrant groups in the U.S., this process started around WWI when institutions such as churches, schools, newspapers began to verticalize (see for instance, Auer 2022; Natvig 2022). These results seem to suggest that this holds true for the Flemish communities as well. Additionally, they support Johannessen’s (2018) argument that verticalization process triggered language change in American-Germanic heritage languages (cf. Supra).

Beside investigating the borrowing rate, we also wanted to discover how the different borrowing types are distributed across the corpus. From Figure 6, it immediately becomes clear that the Flemish-American newspapers contain predominantly importations. All three newspapers use more unassimilated borrowings, or loanwords, as opposed to substitutions, where part of the English lexeme has been substituted for Dutch.

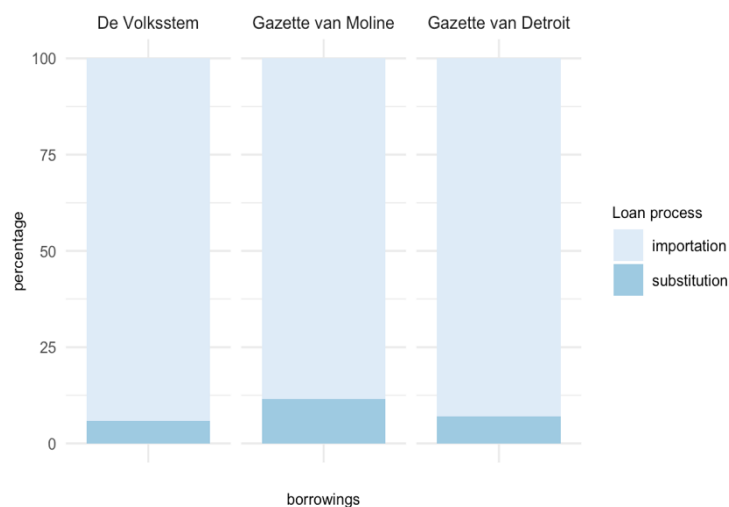


Figure 6. Relative frequency of loan processes per newspaper

When zooming in on the loan types within the substitutions (Figure 7), we observe some notable differences between the newspapers. *De Volksstem* shows a clear preference for loan blends (N = 36/44 when looking at tokens, 21/27 when looking at types), i.e., a compound made up of an English and a Dutch morpheme (e.g., *farmgerief*). In terms of tokens, the *Gazette van Moline* contains an equal number of loan translations (e.g., *drijfweg*) as loan blends (N = 31/81). Though there is also a fair amount of semantic loans (N = 21/81) in the *Gazette van Moline*, note that nearly all refer to the same item: the Dutch word *vrij* which has adopted the meaning of ‘free’ in the sense of not costing any money. When analyzing the types, the picture differs: most of the types are loan blends (26/42) and there are only two semantic loans. Finally, more than half of the tokens in the *Gazette van Detroit* consist of loan translations (N = 64/113), a little less than half of loan blends (N = 43/113), and the semantic loans also refer to the Dutch lexeme *vrij* (N = 6/113). The distribution is similar when only including types. These results thus seem to confirm what was suggested above, that each newspaper has its own borrowing profile.

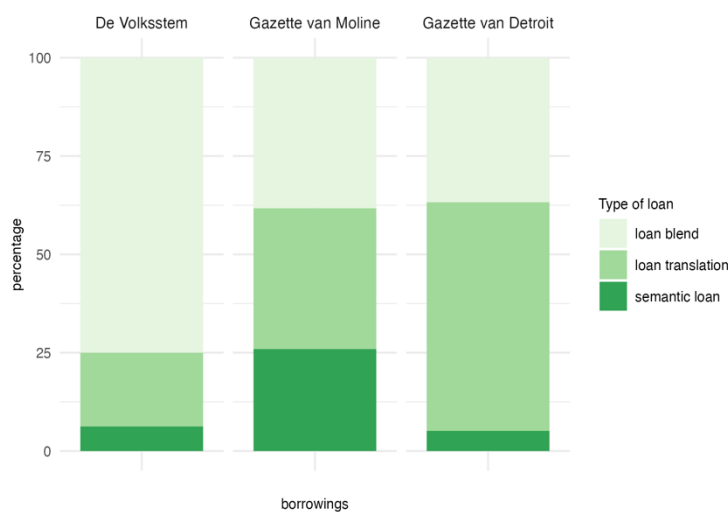


Figure 7. Relative frequency of loan types per newspaper

Finally, Figure 8 presents the distributions of the borrowings according to their level of integration. In line with the results regarding loan types, the majority of the transfers are not integrated. *De Volksstem* contains approximately 89 per cent unintegrated lexical borrowings (N = 717/802), nine per cent are English lexemes assimilated to Dutch, either by Dutch inflections or because they are an English-Dutch compound (N = 72/802), and less than two per cent are code-switches. Similarly, in the *Gazette van Moline* most of the English transfers are also unassimilated in any way (N = 605/724), nearly fifteen per cent are integrated borrowings (N = 97/724), and only three per cent are code switches (N = 22/724). Contrary to the other two newspapers, the *Gazette van Detroit* includes more code-switches (N = 382/1583) than integrated English items (N = 133/1583), viz. 24 per cent vs. 8 per cent, but is still made up of unassimilated lexical borrowings for the most part (N = 1068/1583).

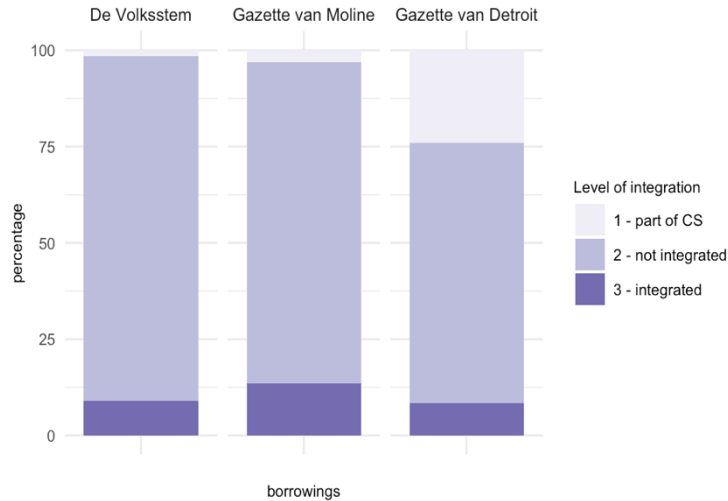


Figure 8. Relative frequencies according to level of integration per newspaper

6. Conclusion. The goal of this paper was to investigate the borrowing rate and borrowing type in Heritage Belgian Dutch in late 19th and early 20th century North America by using a corpus of three Flemish-American newspapers that were published at different times and in different regions. Regarding the *borrowing rate*, we found that the further in time the newspapers go, the more English borrowings occur. This seems in line with results of Litty (2019) mentioned above: the longer the speaker lives in an environment where English is the dominant language, the more English transfers happen. Especially around the 1920s, the number of borrowings seem to increase rapidly, which might be a result of the verticalization processes (Salmons 2005; Johanessen 2018; Natvig 2022). Concerning the variable *borrowing type*, our study showed that Heritage Belgian Dutch contains predominantly English importations, so for the main part unassimilated lexical borrowings, and to a lesser extent different kinds of substitutions, depending on the time and region. Indeed, when studying the borrowing patterns of Flemish-American communities, we discovered that each newspaper has its own, distinct borrowing profile. The earliest newspaper, *De Volksstem* seemed to have an apparent preference for loan blends: almost 80 per cent of the substitutions were English-Dutch compounds. In the *Gazette van Moline*, there seemed to be more variation as there were equally as many loan blends as loan translations, while in the *Gazette van Detroit* more than half of the substitutions were loan translations.

There still remains much to discover regarding language contact between English and Heritage Belgian Dutch, nevertheless we hope that this study contributes to the study of heritage languages from a historical sociolinguistic point of view. Despite the relatively narrow scope of our investigation, our study has demonstrated that the inclusion of sociolinguistic factors is useful in understanding the incorporation of lexical borrowings into heritage varieties. Future research might want to explore lexical borrowing in ego-documents as well to investigate the impact of other sociolinguistic factors.

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