

Flemish Words Made in Detroit, MI

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This paper focuses on American Flemish, an immigrant language that emerged in the early 20th century. It adopts a corpus-based approach and focuses on the lexical innovations characterizing American Flemish. The corpus is composed of issues, published between May 1916 and February 1919, of the Flemish immigrant newspaper, the *Gazette van Detroit*.

In the 1910s, the *Gazette van Detroit's* readership stretched from Detroit, MI to Chicago and Moline, in the state of Illinois, and crossed the Detroit River into South-Western Ontario. These were dynamic centres of Belgian, mainly Flemish immigration, which would continue to take in new members well into the 1960s. Most of the immigrants were land-hungry Belgians from the provinces of East and West Flanders, who settled mostly in rural areas attracted by good and cheap farming land. Urban centres, like Detroit and Chicago, on the other hand, attracted merchants and tradespeople, who made up only a very small percentage of the Flemish immigrants. Most of the immigrants were, at least for modern standards, poorly educated, having at the most received an elementary school education up until grade 6.

The immigrants brought with them their East and West Flemish dialectal varieties but also “a kind of linguistic diasystem or supra-dialectal variant [...] given the name Flemish or South Netherlandic” (Ostyn, 1972: 36). This supra-dialectal variant was made up of Netherlandic features, for instance lexical items and syntactic patterns also present in North Netherlandic, but also contained numerous South Netherlandic particularisms, items and patterns only used in Flanders. It was used for communication between speakers of different dialectal varieties but, since it was felt to be more formal, also as a written language. In the U.S., it acquired the characteristics of a transplanted language, adopting new items and structures resulting from sustained contact with American English and progressive language loss.

Ostyn (1972: 37) convincingly argues that this transplanted South-Netherlandic with its restructurings due to language loss and transference should be given a new name: 'American Flemish,' in keeping with the long-standing linguistic tradition of using the adjective 'American' to qualify immigrant languages in the U.S. (*cf.* 'American Norwegian' (Haugen, 1953)).

The paper examines the lexical characteristics of American Flemish and identifies various types of lexical innovations resulting from transference, and language attrition, i.e., a decline or loss of mother-tongue skills.

References

HAUGEN, E. (1953): *The Norwegian language in America: a study in bilingual behavior*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

OSTYN, P. (1972): *Language loss and linguistic interference in American Flemish*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Rochester: University of Rochester.