

# ‘U is’ or ‘U bent’?

## Polite forms of address and verbal agreement in historical Dutch and Ibero-Romance\*

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### 1 Introduction

It is well-known that the (polite) forms of address in Dutch underwent a cyclic replacement by which the 2<sup>nd</sup> person nominative plural pronoun *ghi/gij* became the formal 2<sup>nd</sup> nominative singular pronoun (V(os)-form), and later the informal 2<sup>nd</sup> nominative singular pronoun (T(u)-form), replacing older *du*, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> person accusative plural pronoun *u* first became the accusative of the new singular V-form, and later the nominative V-form. The developments are summarised in Table 1 (adapted from van Leuvensteijn 2002: 289 and Vermaas 2005).

Table 1: Cyclic shifts in 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns in the history of Dutch

	Sg		Pl	
	Nom	Acc/Dat	Nom	Acc/Dat
Middle Dutch (c. 1150-1500)	<i>du</i>	<i>di</i>	<i>ghi</i>	<i>u</i>
1500-1700	<i>du, ghi</i>	<i>di, u</i>	<i>ghi</i>	<i>u</i>
17th/18th c.	<i>gij</i> <i>je/jij</i>	<i>u</i> <i>je/jou</i>	<i>gij</i>	<i>u</i>
today	T: <i>je/jij</i>	<i>je/jou</i>	<i>jullie</i> < <i>gij lieden</i>	<i>jullie</i> <i>u lieden</i>
	V: <i>u</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>u</i>

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A question that has not received much attention at all in the literature is how the verbal agreement with these pronouns evolved. There are two theories regarding the rise of nominative *u* that make different predictions with respect to this question. First, according to e.g. Vor der Hake (1911), the nominative use of *u* arose from the accusative one by semantic shift. Second, as proposed by Van der Horst (2008: 1094), the nominative use of *u* arose via an intermediate step, namely the epistolary forms of address consisting of a (possessive) pronoun and a honorific noun, *U.Ed.*, *U.E.* (*uw edelheid*, 'your honour') and *U.L.* (*uwe(r) liefde* 'your love / kindness') used in letters from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. These were first only used in writing, originally in chancery style for nobility, and then oralised as *uwé* [uw'e:] / ['uwɛ], and spread top-town through social classes (Kern 1911, Heeroma 1934). The first theory predicts that 2<sup>nd</sup> person agreement on the verb with subject-*u* should be older, as the accusative form of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun, when it is reanalysed as nominative, is still a 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun. Under the second theory, one would expect that *u(wé)* should first have occurred with 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement, as the form of address is a noun phrase.<sup>1</sup> Van der Horst bases this latter theory on a comparison with a similar development in German, where the new V-form *Sie* 'they > you(V)', argued to be a pronominalization of *Ihro Gnaden* 'your mercies' (e.g. Simon 2003), and goes with 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement on the verb.

Our paper departs from three observations. First, there is variation in present-day Dutch regarding the agreement morphology on the finite verb that goes with the V-form *u*:<sup>2</sup> where this morphology is not syncretic (as it is in most verbs), it varies between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement. In (1), this is illustrated for the verbs *hebben* 'have', *zullen* 'shall', and *kunnen* 'can'.

- (1) 2<sup>nd</sup> person: *u hebt/zult/kunt*  
 3<sup>rd</sup> person: *u heeft/zal/kan*  
 'you (V) have/shall/can'

Second, the earliest (pre-1600!) occurrences of *u* used as a nominative pronoun that are reported in the literature occur with 2<sup>nd</sup> person agreement on the verb (Paardekooper 1996). This is a problem for Van der Horst's theory of the devel-

<sup>1</sup>"Als een briefschrijver de geadresseerde met *Uwe Edelheid* aanspreekt, gebruikt hij een substantiefgroep met *Edelheid* als kern. Hier horen de persoonlijke, bezittelijke en wederkerende voornaamwoorden van de derde persoon bij." (van Leuvensteijn 2002: 290)

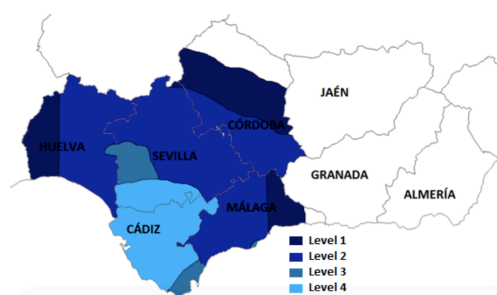
<sup>2</sup>We are not considering the variation in colloquial Belgian Dutch regarding the use of *u* in the present paper.

opment of the verbal agreement with *u*.<sup>3</sup>

- (2) *ende u hebt in dese wech al 7 vame 6 vame ende bij lant komende 5 vamen*  
 'And you have in this way already 7 fathom, 6 fathom, and, coming onto the shore, 5 fathom.'  
 ([1599] *De tweede schipvaart der Nederlanders naar Oost-Indië* [...])
- (3) *Wat belangt de regeringe is off soude te lanck sijn te verhaelen, dat sult v alles verstaen godt ons met lijff in Nerlant helpende*  
 'Concerning the government, it is or would be too long to tell (all), you shall understand all of that, if God help us with life in the Netherlands.'  
 ([1599] *B. Journaal van Reijer Cornelisz.*)

The third observation comes from outside the Germanic sphere. To be more precise, Lara Bermejo (2015, 2016a,b) observes that in some Ibero-Romance (IR) varieties, such as Western Andalusian Spanish, the plural V-form *ustedes* has replaced the plural T-form *vosotros*, but the agreement of e.g. the reflexive pronouns, object clitics (*os > se*) and the finite verbs lag behind, varying between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement, as illustrated in (4). He also sketches a geographical diffusion pattern, whereby the centre of innovation is situated in the Cádiz province, which has more of the innovative 3PL features closer to the center (level 4) than those areas that are further away from it (levels 1 (furthest away, least advanced) to 3).

	Sg	Pl
Modern Peninsular Spanish		
T	<i>Tú</i>	<i>Vos-otros</i>
V	<i>Usted</i>	<i>Ustedes</i>
Modern Western Andalusian		
T	<i>Tú</i>	<i>Vos-otros</i> > <i>Ustedes</i>
V	<i>Usted</i>	<i>Ustedes</i>



- (4) *Ustedes sois hermanos.*  
 'You(3PL) are(2PL) siblings' (Lara Bermejo 2016b: 98)

As can be seen from Table 2, Lara Bermejo identifies a cline following which the *ustedes* phenomenon progresses from one syntactic context to another, whereby

<sup>3</sup> Examples quoted after Paardekooper (1996: 70).

Table 2: Extension of the innovative 3PL in the *ustedes* phenomenon (Lara Bermejo 2016a: 277)

	Stressed pronoun	Reflexive pronoun	Verbs	Accusative pronoun	Dative pronoun	Possessives
Stage 1	3pl	2pl	2pl	2pl	2pl	2pl
Stage 2	3pl	3pl	2pl	2pl	2pl	2pl
Stage 3	3pl	3pl	3pl	2pl	2pl	2pl
Stage 4	3pl	3pl	3pl	3pl	2pl	2pl
Stage 5	3pl	3pl	3pl	3pl	3pl	2pl
Stage 6	3pl	3pl	3pl	3pl	3pl	3pl

stage 6 sees full completion of 3PL, which manifests itself in Canarian and Latin American Spanish.

In the present paper, we report on a pilot study on the historical development of the verbal agreement going with the incipient use of epistolary forms of address and emerging nominative *u* in a corpus of letters (*Letters as Loot* from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c.; [www.brievenalsbuit.nl](http://www.brievenalsbuit.nl)), in order to determine how *u* could become a subject pronoun, and how the verbal agreement evolved with it. We argue that a very similar account to that proposed by Lara Bermejo (2016b) for the southern IR varieties is justified for the historical Dutch data as well.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Pilot study

### 2.1 Method

We searched the *Letters as Loot* corpus for forms of the verbs *hebben* 'have', *zijn* 'be' and *zullen* 'shall' and a form of *U*, *UE*, or *UL*, both in straight and inverted word order. In order to obtain clear results regarding the verbal agreement, we removed all the plurals (e.g., *ue. zijn* 'you(r honourables) are') because they are syncretic in all three persons. We further restricted the search to the verbs *hebben*, *zijn* and *zullen* because they do not have syncretic 2SG/3SG forms, as other verbs do), as in (5). Morphologically *heeft/zal* is syncretic with 3SG, while *hebt/zult* is unambiguously 2SG, as shown in (6).

(5) *jij loopt vs. hij loopt*

<sup>4</sup>We only focus on the verbal agreement, but note that there are indications that the possessive agreement may be worth looking at at a later stage, cf. example (9).

(6) *jij hebt/bent/zult* (dialectal *gij hebt/zijt/zult*) vs. *hij heeft/is/zal*

As we obtained too few data for all separate regions in corpus, we focused on the three regions with most data, Zeeland, Noord- and Zuid-Holland, and recoded the rest as “other”.

Diatopic and diachronic spread of 2SG verbal agreement with <i>U/UE/UL</i>								
region	17 <sup>th</sup> c.				18 <sup>th</sup> c.			
	2SG	3SG	total	%2SG	2SG	3SG	total	%2SG
Zeeland	7	6	13	53.8	4	4	8	50.0
Zuid-Holland	4	7	11	36.4	0	8	8	0.0
Noord-Holland	5	17	22	22.7	8	41	49	16.3
other	1	10	11	9.1	4	10	14	28.6

## 2.2 Factors influencing the variation in verbal agreement

We analysed the data using multiple logistic regression in Rbrul (Johnson 2009)<sup>5</sup>, and found that **region** is the strongest predictor of verbal agreement with *UE/UL/U*, besides inversion ( $p = 0.0115$ ). The model shows that Zeeland strongly favours 2SG agreement, while Zuid and Noord Holland prefer 3SG agreement. On the map, this results in a similar diffusion pattern to the one that Lara Bermejo (2015, 2016b) described for the agreement with *ustedes* in Western Andalusian dialects. It appears that the use of *u* with 3SG agreement was innovated in Holland and then diffused to Zeeland, where 2SG was initially more frequent, but is gradually replaced over time. Interestingly, this seems to suggest that in fact both theories regarding the origin of the nominative use of *u* may at least partially be right: on the one hand, *u* became used as a subject due to the (cross-linguistically common) shift from accusative to nominative, but initially kept the 2SG agreement. On the other hand, the 3SG agreement may still have arisen under the influence of the epistolary forms.

<sup>5</sup>Factor groups in the full model: region, period, gender, verb, inversion.

verbal agreement with U/UE/UL			
Input prob.	0.102		
Total N	136		
log-likelihood	-63.605		
	factor weight	% (2SG)	N
<b>region</b>	p = 0.0115		
Zeeland	0.805	52.4	21
Zuid-Holland	0.341	21.1	19
Noord-Holland	0.390	18.3	71
other	0.423	20.0	25
<b>inversion</b>	p = 0.0443		
straight	0.723	26.2	122
inverted	0.277	7.1	14



There is a second factor in the regression model that is significant at the  $p < 0.05$ -level, viz. **inversion**. 2SG agreement is significantly more frequent in subject-initial V2 (“straight” contexts), as evidenced by the factor weight closer to 1 (0.723), while 3SG agreement much more likely in inversion contexts, as in (7) (factor weight closer to 0, viz. 0.277). We will return to this in Section 2.3 below.

- (7) *dat sulke gedagten sijn nog nooit of sullen nooyt in myn opkomen daar voor heeft Ue myn te veel goeds gedaan*  
‘that such thoughts have never and never shall cross my mind, you have(3SG) done too much good for me, for such a thing to happen.’  
(J.D. Piest to J.D. Praetorius, 1781/02/01)

The other factors (period, gender and verb) could not be shown to be significant.<sup>6</sup> However, **adjacency** between the verb and the form of address may possibly play a role, though we have not been able to test this yet, due to restrictions of the search interface. Early examples of nominative *U* (i.e., not *UL/UE*) may indicate an influence, with non-adjacency correlating with 3SG agreement. Observe that in (9), there is even a 3SG possessive pronoun (*zijn*), besides the 3SG verb agreement.

<sup>6</sup>We observed that *UL* is the form that most frequently occurs with 2SG verbal agreement, and that it is mostly used by women, but disappears after 1700. The addressee of the women’s letters is typically the husband or another family member, so the fact that 2SG sticks here for longer may indicate that despite the introduction of a new pronoun, the informal 2SG agreement remains used in informal contexts. *UE* is by far the most dominant form, and is most frequently used with 3SG verbal agreement.

- (8) *want u zult hoope ik een wijf hebben voor mijne wederkompste*  
 'For you shall(2SG), I hope, have a wife before my return.'  
 (Maria van Reigersberch to Nicolaes van Reigersberch, 1624)
- (9) *Ik hoope u zijn geldt wel zonder verlies krigen sal*  
 'I hope that you shall(3SG) receive back your(3SG) money without loss.'  
 (Maria van Reigersberch to Hugo de Groot, 1627)  
 (data from van Leuvensteijn 2002)

### 2.3 Sketch of an analysis

In generative approaches, subject-verb agreement is analysed as a local dependency between a functional head, normally T (assigning nominative case to the subject), and the subject (checking T's  $\phi$ -features). Typically, this dependency involves the subject moving to (or through) SpecTP. Assuming a symmetric view of V<sub>2</sub>, there is a second position for subjects in Dutch, viz. SpecCP.<sup>7</sup> This is where the subject is found in subject-initial V<sub>2</sub>-clauses, while it remains in SpecTP in inversion contexts. In such contexts, SpecCP may be filled by a topic (amongst others).

In order to account for the variation in IR dialects, Lara Bermejo (2016b) argues that the replacement of *vosotros* by *ustedes* proceeds in three steps: (i) 3PL *ustedes* is merged as a topic (in SpecCP), doubled by the regular 2PL subject in SpecTP, (10); (ii) 3PL *ustedes* in SpecCP is doubled by a covert 2PL clitic in SpecTP, triggering 2PL agreement on the verb<sup>8</sup>, (11); and finally, (iii) *ustedes* is reanalysed as a subject, and triggers 3PL agreement in SpecTP, (12).

- (10) *Ustedes(,) vosotros no la conocéis.* (Lara Bermejo 2016b: 101)  
 'You(3PL) you(2PL) do not know(2PL) her.'
- (11) *Ustedes ø sois hermanos.* (Lara Bermejo 2016b: 98)  
 'You(3PL) ø(2PL) are(2PL) siblings.'
- (12) *Ustedes me han pedido un crédito.* (Lara Bermejo 2016b: 104)  
 'You(3PL) have(3PL) asked me for a credit.'

<sup>7</sup>We assume a very simplified model here, with TP and CP serving as abbreviations for a possibly more fine-grained structure as would be assumed under a cartographic analysis.

<sup>8</sup>Lara Bermejo uses Uriagereka's (1995) "big DP" hypothesis for this, which Rubio Alcalá (2014) proposes to extend to account for clitic doubling, with the head of DP being filled by the clitic, and the complement by the topic.

We argue that this proposal in terms of doubling of a topic by a covert pronoun can be transferred to account for the variation in verbal agreement with subject *u* in historical Dutch, as well. Our quantitative analysis suggested that 3SG is gaining on 2SG agreement, and that 2SG agreement is preferred in straight V2-clauses. Under our adaptation of Lara Bermejo's proposal, 3SG *u* is a full pronoun (in the sense of Cardinaletti & Starke) used as a topic in SpecCP in straight V2-clauses, and the 2SG agreement with the verb is mediated by a null pronoun in SpecTP (13).

(13)  $[_{CP} u[3SG] [_C [_C zult_i[2SG]]] [_{TP} \emptyset[2SG] [_{VP} een\ wijf\ hebben] [_{T[2SG]} t_i]]]$

The assumption of a null doubling pronoun in this position is justified by the ample occurrence of overt pronouns in exactly this position, doubling a pronoun in SpecCP in (Southern) Dutch dialects, like *gie* in (14).<sup>9</sup>

(14) *Ge kent gie da.* (Haegeman & Van de Velde 2008: 163)  
'You(2SG/Pl) know you(2SG) that.'

In inversion contexts, *u* appears in SpecTP, and triggers 3SG agreement on the verb, (15).

(15)  $[_{CP} daarvoor [_C [_C heeft_i[3SG]]] [_{TP} Ue[3SG] [_{VP} myn\ te\ veel\ goeds\ gedaan] [_{T[3SG]} t_i]]]$

Over time, the null pronoun in SpecTP (13) was lost, and *u* was reanalysed as a subject, with a trace in SpecTP in straight V2. 3SG agreement spread to some extent, helped along by the syncretism between 2SG and 3SG agreement found in most verbs. It is possible that the fact that epistolary forms of address when spelled out should trigger 3SG agreement, added to this.

(16)  $[_{CP} u_j[3SG] [_C [_C zal_i[3SG]]] [_{TP} t_j[3SG] [_{VP} een\ wijf\ hebben] [_{T[3SG]} t_i]]]$

This proposal leads us to expect that embedded clauses, too, should show significantly more 3SG agreement in sentences with subject *u* in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c. Dutch. This hypothesis is corroborated by the diffusion of agreement patterns with *ustedes* in the southern IR varieties, where third person agreement is found in embedded before main clauses (Lara Bermejo 2016a: 266-7). We leave this for fu-

<sup>9</sup>This example is from the West Flemish dialect of Lapscheure, which has been extensively described and analysed by Liliane. Particularly the doubling of subject pronouns is one of her long-standing research interests.



ture research. The fact that the variation between 2SG and 3SG agreement has stabilised in the present-day language seems to reflect a certain degree of lexicalisation: 2SG with *zijn*, (preferred) 3SG with *hebben*, for instance.

## Dedication

With this contribution, we would like to thank Liliane for everything she has done for both of us, and keeps doing, for her generosity, always open door, and open ears throughout the years, for being a wonderful colleague, a mentor, a second mother, and a friend. Besides, she is one of the reasons there is an atmosphere within our research group DiaLing that encourages fruitful collaborations such as this one, across language and framework boundaries.

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