



## **‘Tong breect been’: The Sins of the Tongue in Middle Dutch Religious Didactic Writings**

‘Tong breect been’: De zonden van de tong in Middelnederlandse religieuze didactische geschriften

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**Abstract:** This article concerns perceptions of harmful speech labelled as ‘sins of the tongue’ in three Middle Dutch religious didactic writings about the capital sins. These perceptions connect to a broader European trend of interest in and fear of the wicked ways of the tongue – metonym of human speech. I use notions of modern language theory to analyse perceptions of the sins of the tongue. The analysis reveals that according to Middle Dutch ecclesiastical textual sources about the sins of the tongue, harmful speech was often seen as the result of an untamed tongue. Because of its potential serious threat to the face (reputation) and grace (salvation) of the speakers, recipients and the subjects of the words, the tongue had to be controlled.

**Keywords:** Sins of the tongue, Middle Dutch pastoral texts about the capital sins, face and grace threatening acts, perceptions of harmful speech, Speech Act Theory/ zonde van de tong, Middelnederlandse catechetische teksten over hoofdzonden, face- en grace-threatening acts/ (spreek)handelingen bedreigend voorreputatie en zielenheil, opvattingen over schadelijk spreekgedrag, taalhandelingstheorie

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

‘Tongue breaks bone, even though it has none’ was a common proverb in the Middle Ages throughout Europe.<sup>2</sup> It means that words are able to inflict considerable damage, even though they seem innocent. For example, in Middle Dutch (‘Tong breect been, al heeft ze er geen’) the proverb appears in at least seven different texts, in the varying contexts of, for example, a song (*Antwerps liedboek*), a treatise about love (*Der minnen loep*), a Dutch commentary on Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* and a compendium in question-and-answer form (*Boec van Sidrac*).<sup>3</sup> The maxim’s popularity suggests that the ‘bone-breaking potential of the tongue’ had an important cultural significance in late medieval Europe.

This article investigates perceptions of the harmful potential of the tongue in the late Middle Ages. Late medieval textual awareness of the damaging potential of spoken words has already been the subject of different (case) studies, for example historical research on Middle English scolding women and seditious speech in cities of late medieval Flanders and literary research on the harmful potential of words in Middle High German short narratives.<sup>4</sup> However, Middle Dutch literature has been almost completely overlooked, although it offers a pivotal contribution to insights regarding medieval perceptions of harmful speech in late medieval Europe.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended version of the argument made in this article, see my book *De ongetemde tong. Opvattingen over zondige, onvertogen en misdadige woorden in het Middelnederlands (1300-1550)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> It is an expression that existed not only in Dutch and English, but also in Latin and for example Danish and Polish: – *Osse (ossa) caret glossa quandoque tamen terit ossa* / – *Tungen er ei been, dog bryder hun stundan been* / – *Język nie ma kości jak się skrzywi tak się sprości, ale czyni wiele złości*. For English, Spanish, German, Italian, French, Latin examples see: <http://operone.de>. The proverb originates from the Bible book Proverbs, chapter 25, 15, and the apocryphal book Wisdom of Sirach, chapter 28, 17.

<sup>3</sup> I have found the proverb in *Boec van Sidrac* (1300-1325), question 77; *Brabantsche Yeesten* (1316-1350), chapter 42, 4456; *Dietsche doctrinale* (1345), book 1 chapter ‘Van spraken ende tonghen te bedwinghene’ [About speech and restraining the tongue], 214-217 and book 2 chapter ‘Van scuvene gheselschap ende vrientschap der gherre die vele spreken ende voert segghen’ [About avoiding companionship of people who talk to much and are indiscrete], 1659-1660; Dirc Potter’s *Der minnen loep* (1411), book 1, 590-592 and 595-596; the poem *Swighen brinct vele rusten in*, and as an isolated maxim in manuscript The Hague, Royal Library, 70H48 (ca. 1450), f. 63v; *Gentse Boethius* (1485), the Middle Dutch commentary of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 702; *Antwerps Liedboek* (1544), no. 172 ‘Een nyeu liedeken’, 6; see also Veldhuizen, *De ongetemde tong*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> S. Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); J. Dumolyn and J. Haemers, ‘“A Bad Chicken was Brooding”: Subversive Speech in Late Medieval Flanders’, in *Past and Present* 214 (2012), pp. 45-86, and C. Kiening, ‘Verletzende Worte – verstümmelte Körper. Zur doppelten Logik spätmittelalterlicher Kurzerzählungen’, *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 127 (2008) 3, 321-35. See also C. Casagrande and S. Vecchio, *Les péchés de la langue. Discipline et éthique de la parole dans la culture médiévale*, trans. by P. Baillet (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991; E.D. Craun (ed.), *The Hands of the Tongue: Essays on Deviant Speech* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007); N.R. Miedema and F. Hundsnurscher, *Formen und Funktionen von Redeszenen in der mittelhochdeutschen Großepik* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 2007); E. Koch, ‘Formen und Bedingungen von Sprachgewalt in Katharinenlegende und -spiel’, in *Blutige Worte. Internationales und interdisziplinäres Kolloquium zum Verhältnis von Sprache und Gewalt in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. by J. Eming and C. Jarzebowski (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2008), pp. 15-30; M. Schnyder, ‘Aufgerissenes Ohr und gefesselte Zunge. Schweigen und Gewalt in der Literatur des Mittelalters’, in *Gewalt in der Sprache. Rhetoriken verletzenden Sprechens*, ed. by S. Krämer and E. Koch (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2010), pp. 215-24.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Wackers has done some pioneering research in 1994 about this subject in Middle Dutch language and literature: P. Wackers, ‘Opvattingen over spreken en zwijgen in het Middelnederlands’, in *Wat is wijsheid? Lekenethiek in de Middelnederlandse letterkunde*, ed. by J. Reynaert (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1994), pp. 288-303 and pp. 437-42. See also the case studies of Bax, ‘“Soe wee uwenhovede...”. Ritueel verbaal geweld en historische pragmatiek’, *Groniek*.

This article is a case study of three Middle Dutch pastoral treatises about the seven deadly sins: the fourteenth-century rhymed version of *Spiegel der sonden*, the fifteenth-century prose version of *Spiegel der sonden*, and *Des coninx summe* from 1408.<sup>6</sup> These texts are the only Middle Dutch examples in which sins of the tongue were treated systematically and in detail as a *distinct category* within the capital sins. These texts are part of a European tradition of religious didactic writings, in the wake of the work of the thirteenth-century Dominican Guillelmus Peraldus, who put speech behaviour in a very prominent position in *Summa vitiorum* (1236). He constructed the 'sins of the tongue' as the *eighth* deadly sin, diverging radically from the (already) standardised seven deadly sins. Although the Middle Dutch texts are closely related to *Summa vitiorum*, all three are unique in character. They discuss different categories of the 'sins of the tongue', in distinct writing styles and stress the importance of different speech matters.

## Corpus

The fourteenth-century rhymed version (manuscript) of *Spiegel der sonden*, the fifteenth-century prose version of *Spiegel der sonden*, and *Des coninx summe* were primarily meant to give religious instructions, and to prepare believers for confession – mandatory at least once a year since Lateran IV in 1215. The vernacular religious didactic writings have a practical character, concentrating on laymen in everyday life. They treat different relevant aspects of Christian life systematically and often cite the Old Testamentary Wisdom literature, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The Middle Dutch categories of the sins of the tongue contain speech acts such as lying, boasting, slandering, (false) swearing, flattery and seditious speech.<sup>7</sup> The tongue, metonym for the human capacity of speech, was held responsible for considerable damage in the spiritual realm. Committing 'sins of the tongue' put the soul of the speaker in peril. Often only confession would save his eternal life.

Both versions of *Spiegel der sonden* are adaptations of *Summa Vitiorum* (1236) of Guillelmus Peraldus, the prose version of *Spiegel der sonden* being an adaptation of the rhymed version. The adaptors are anonymous. The category of sins of the tongue in both versions of *Spiegel der sonden* contains fourteen subcategories of sinful speech behaviour, but the categories vary. For example, only the rhymed version of *Spiegel der sonden* includes the

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*Historisch Tijdschrift* 39 (2006), 487-501, and R. Schlusemann, "Scone tael". Zur Wirkmacht der Rede männlicher und weiblicher Figuren in der niederländischen und deutschen *Reynaert*-Epik', in *Redeszenen in der mittelalterlichen Großepik: Komparatistische Perspektiven*, ed. by M. Unzeitig, N. Miedema and Frans Hundsnurscher (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 293-310.

<sup>6</sup> The analysis is based on the following editions and manuscripts. The edition of the rhyme version of *Spiegel der sonden* is J. Verdam, *Die spiegel der sonden: De berijmde tekst naar het Münstersche handschrift* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1900), based on manuscript Münster, Universitätsbibliothek, 268 (third quarter of the fifteenth century). The edition of the prose version *Spiegel der sonden* is J. Verdam, *Die spiegel der sonden: De prozatekst naar het Oudenaardsche handschrift* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1901), based on manuscript Oudenaarde, Stadsarchief, 5556, f. 2-108 (1434-1436). The edition of *Des coninx summe*, is D.C. Tinbergen, *Des coninx summe* (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1900-1907), based on manuscript The Hague, Royal Library, 75 G 11 (1437).

<sup>7</sup> P. Bange, *Moraliteyt saelt wesen. Het laat-middeleeuwse moralistische discours in de Nederlanden* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2007), pp. 64-111. The seven capital sins are *superbia* (pride), *ira* (wrath), *invidia* (envy), *gula* (gluttony), *luxuria* (lust), *avaricia* (greed) and *acedia* (sloth).

speech sin treason (*verradenisse*), whereas the prose version *Spiegel der sonden* includes the sin of speaking too much and/or without restraint (*voel te spreken*).

The third text of the Middle Dutch corpus, *Des coninx summe*, is an adaptation of *Somme le Roi* (1279) by Laurent d'Orléans, the Dominican confessor of King Phillip III of France. The Carthusian Jan van Brederode made the adaptation. *Somme le Roi* is based on Peraldus' *Summa Vitiatorum*. In *Des coninx summe* the sins of the tongue category is not constructed as the eighth deadly sin, but as a part of the capital sin of gluttony – the structure of the seven deadly sins is kept intact. Based on the extensive attention the sins of the tongue received – a quarter of the total written exploration of the seven deadly sins – it was an important category and considered vital to both the earthly and the eternal life of people. *Des coninx summe* discusses ten sins of the tongue in total.

## Method<sup>8</sup>

In order to study the Middle Dutch perceptions of harmful speech, I base my analysis on several interrelated modern linguistic theories. The *specific* combination, which I will apply, has not been used before for medieval pastoral literature, or for any other medieval literature.<sup>9</sup> Rather than using, for instance, a method of 'close reading', these theories will provide tools and terminology that enable me to analyse systematically these perceptions of harmful speech.

I will, moreover, introduce a new linguistic concept that is relevant to the texts I have studied. A 'grace-threatening act' is my adaptation of what Brown and Levinson have termed 'face-threatening act'. In the medieval concept of the sins of the tongue not only could the face (reputation) be threatened by words, but one's 'grace', by which I mean 'salvation', could also be put in peril (see below).

Drawing on the premises of these linguistic theories, the following questions guide this article:

1. What are considered to be the harmful effects of words and how is the damaging potential of words depicted? My analysis is based on J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle's speech act theory. In the wake of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and Searle's *Speech Acts* (1969), a wide range of scholars started to focus on what effect words could have outside language.<sup>10</sup> Words not only refer to reality, but they can *create* reality as well. Austin uses the term 'performative' – an utterance is able to 'perform' a certain action. Therefore, in my analysis I focus on the *effect* words can have in reality according to Middle Dutch religious didactic writing, the so-called 'perlocutionary act'.

2. If there are effects considered to be harmful, what are they specifically? Paul Grice's theory of the cooperative principles provides tools to answer this question. He distinguishes four guiding principles in a speech situation: the maxim of quantity, relation, manner and

<sup>8</sup> See Veldhuizen, *De ongetemde tong*, pp. 34-43 for an elaborate exposition of the method and linguistic theories.

<sup>9</sup> See for other combinations of linguistic theories applied to medieval texts literature in note 4 and J.E. Godsall-Myers, 'Introduction', in *Speaking in the Medieval World*, ed. by J.E. Godsall-Myers (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 1-23; M. Bax, "Soe wee uwenhovede..." and A. Lobenstein-Reichmann, *Sprachliche Ausgrenzung im späten Mittelalter und der frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. by J.O. Urmson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), and J.R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

quality.<sup>11</sup> The damaging effects can be violations of these guiding principles. If someone violates one of the principles, he does not serve the purpose of a conversation and fails to cooperate with his interlocutor. Specifically, if he flouts the maxim of *quantity* in a conversation, he uses more words than necessary, or too few. Contravening the maxim of *relation* means to speak irrelevantly. The maxim of *manner* means to speak unambiguously. Lastly, an untruthful speaker violates the maxim of quality. According to Grice, the importance of the maxims can be different in other cultures or historical periods.

3. In addition to Grice's maxims, speech can be seen as another specific (damaging) act: a face-threatening act. To what extent is harmful speech conduct constructed as a *face-threatening* act and to whom? For example, one may choose to violate one of the Gricean maxims on purpose, but with justification: someone might prefer telling their interlocutor a white lie – 'you look great in that suit' – in order to not embarrass them. This situation is theorised by Ervin Goffmann in his 'theory of face' and developed further in the 'politeness theory' of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. The theories emphasise that speech can be a face-threatening act, i.e. threatening to one's reputation.<sup>12</sup> People have an urge to save their speaking partner's face, and their own face. Therefore, Grice's maxims can be considered as less important than someone's 'face'.

To the analytic label *face-threatening act*, I add another category in the analyses of the sins of the tongue: *grace-threatening act*, a menace to the salvation of one's soul. The term *grace-threatening act* points to the effect that speech has on a person's soul (the speaker, the bespoken one, or the one who is spoken to). In this article, the assumption is that speaking is not just a social performance – in that it influences relations between people – but also a spiritual one. Spoken words also have an impact on the relationship between man and God. They are capable of tarnishing one's soul. Linguists do not take this kind of impact into consideration in their theorisation, but it is relevant in the corpus of Middle Dutch pastoral treatises.

Why is it important to introduce the concept of the grace-threatening act in addition to the face-threatening act? A short digression about the medieval worldview (specifically the medieval idea of original sin and salvation) is helpful here. According to medieval ideas about sin and salvation as reflected in these religious didactic treatises, the tongue is controlled by the soul. Not so much the tongue, but the soul is prone to doing evil and therefore has to be disciplined. This is the consequence of original sin. Since Adam and Eve were cast away from paradise, mankind has lived in a fallen world. Every man is sinful and his soul has to make a huge effort to act virtuously.<sup>13</sup> As specified by religious didactic treatises, control will be obtained through the believer's awareness of his sinful state and its consequences for eternal life. This awareness will lead to morally better behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> H.P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', in *Syntax and Semantics*, Part 3, ed. by P. Cole and J. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 41-58.

<sup>12</sup> E. Goffman, 'On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction', *Psychiatry* 18 (1955), 213-31; P. Brown and S.C. Levinson, 'Universals in Language Use: Politeness Phenomena', in *Questions and Politeness*, ed. by E.N. Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See also G.N. Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics*, Longman Linguistics Library 30 (London: Longman, 1983) and R. Lakoff, 'What You Can Do with Words: Politeness, Pragmatics and Performatives', in *Proceedings of the Texas Conference on Performatives, Presuppositions and Implicatures*, ed. by A. Rogers, R.E. Wall and A. Murphy (Arlington, VA: Center of Applied Linguistics, 1977), pp. 79-106.

<sup>13</sup> J. Decorte, 'Naar Zijn beeld en gelijkenis: de ziel', in *De middeleeuwse ideeënwereld 1000-1300*, ed. by M. Stoffers (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), pp. 201-32.

<sup>14</sup> Bange, *Moraliteyt saelt wesen*, pp. 47-54.

4. Are there relevant variables of the speech situation – setting/scene, participants, etc.? The damaging impact of words may depend on these specific variables.<sup>15</sup>

## The Untamed Tongue

In both the prose and rhymed versions of *Spiegel der sonden* as well as in *Des coninx summe* the tongue is depicted as a body part that the soul has difficulty disciplining. A certain amount of suspicion must always surround the tongue, for it can never be totally controlled. A moment of inattention can cause great harm to the speaker and others. Sinful speech conduct is the result of the speaker not being able to control his or her tongue.

An example of this underlying perception is the category ‘idle words’ (*ydel woerde*) in *Des coninx summe*.<sup>16</sup> This category encompasses firstly *multiloquium*, i.e. blurting out all words without rational restraint.<sup>17</sup> According to Grice’s linguistic theory, the speaker of idle words violates the maxim of quantity. In a speech situation, people are not as efficient as they could be in uttering words. Not only will the tongue blurt out all the words irrationally, it will behave in an immoral way (*turpiloquium* and *scurrilitas*). The inability to tame the tongue is not just an inability to filter words in a rational way; the maxim of quantity also has a moral connotation. Committing the sin of *ydel woerde* therefore involves more than mere chatter and jabbering. Subcategories of this sin include *curiosen woerden* [telling rumours], *onreynen boefliken woerde* [dirty and vulgar talk], and *spottelike speelwoerde* [jokes, mockery]. According to *Des coninx summe*, the sin of *idle words* may seem fairly innocent at first, but will gradually become more severe. It is the sin of the slippery slope.

This also applies to committing the sin of the *sonde der loghene*, the sin of lying, and especially the category of *rokeloos loghen* [careless lie, due to lack of taming the tongue]. According to *Des coninx summe*, such a lie escapes one’s mouth before one even realises it: ‘Die eerste hiet een rokeloes loghen, dat hem een man also qualic hoedet in sinen woerden, dat hem dicke een loghen ontsnapt onwetende. [The first (sin) is called careless lie, i.e. when one governs one’s words so poorly, often a lie escapes him without bad intent.]<sup>18</sup> Young men in particular are said to commit this sin: ‘Daerom seitmen: ‘Een jonc man, die hem niet en hoedt, is haest een loghen ontspronghen.’ [Therefore the saying goes: ‘A lie quickly escapes a young man who is not on his guard.’]<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> D. Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977). Dell Hymes points to the relevance of certain variables in a speech situation. He designed a ‘SPEAKING-model’ where S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G is an acronym with the different variables of a verbal interaction. ‘S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G’ refers to *Setting and scene*, *Participants* (interlocutors and audience), *Ends* (goal of verbal communication), *Act sequence* (form and order of verbal communication), *Key* (tone, manner), *Instrumentalities* (style of speech), *Norms for interaction and interpretation* (social rules), *Genre* (the kind of event). See for the use of Hymes’ SPEAKING-model by medievalists, Dumolyn and Haemers, ‘A Bad Chicken was Brooding’, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Des Coninx summe* no. 136, p. 293.

<sup>17</sup> *Des Coninx summe* no. 137, p. 294, first subcategory.

<sup>18</sup> *Des coninx summe* no. 151, p. 302. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>19</sup> *Des coninx summe* no. 151, p. 302.

Taking control of the tongue is a matter of life and death according to the rhymed and prose texts of *Spiegel der sonden*: ‘Life and death are in the hands of the tongue’ (Proverbs 18:21).<sup>20</sup> The tongue has the potential to cause extremely good effects, but it is inclined to do evil – to be ‘ghereet ten quaden’. The tongue is presented as an organ with bad intentions. Even if someone has been virtuous, if he fails to restrain his tongue for just one moment ‘he will quickly become sinful’ (‘hi wert zaen quaet’).<sup>21</sup> To emphasise this character trait of the tongue, a little salt is put on the tongue of young children during their baptism.<sup>22</sup>

## Sins of the Tongue: Grace- and Face-Threatening to the Speaker

Not only is the tongue presented as an organ prone to do evil, according to the rhymed and prose versions of *Spiegel der sonden*, but the owner of an untamed tongue will become sinful.<sup>23</sup> Words could be grace-threatening for the speaker himself: the tongue is presented as crucial to the well-being of the soul of the speaker. Thus uttering words by an untamed tongue can be constructed as a grace-threatening act to the speaker himself. *Des coninx summe* uses a metaphor for people who are committing the sin of *ydel woerde*: certain words are like flies (*vlyeghen*) creeping in a full cooking pot, spoiling what is inside.<sup>24</sup> The polluted pot refers to the place the soul of the speaker is kept in. In the prose version of *Spiegel der sonden* a person who cannot restrain his tongue is compared to an unclosed vessel: ‘Die sine tonge niet en bewaert, is gelijc den vate dat onbedect staet. Hier af staet in der Bibel: “Dat vat dat geen decsel en heeft, sal vuyl werden in corter tijt, want sant ende ander vuylheit valter in”.’ [Someone who does not control his tongue, is like an open vessel. The Bible says: ‘A vessel without a cover will soon be polluted, because sand and other dirt falls into it’].<sup>25</sup>

Self-praise also is presented as a grace-threatening speech act in the prose version of *Spiegel der sonden*. Someone who brags about himself is like a chicken exulting over her freshly laid egg. When someone hears the cackling chicken, he knows there is a new egg so he could harvest it and take it away from her. God will do the same with someone who boasts and brags about his virtues and accomplishments: He will take his virtues and accomplishments away from him.<sup>26</sup> Note that the sin of boasting is not about lying and hence is no violation of the Gricean maxim of quantity. The chicken has spoken the truth about having an egg, because she really laid one. This speech act is harmful to the grace of the speaker not because he lies, but because he praises himself. The prose version of *Spiegel der sonden* in this respect refers to

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<sup>20</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (rhymed), 14869-14870, *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 248, 13-14 and *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 272, 11-16. Reference to Proverbs chapter 18, 21. See also Proverbs 13, 3 and 21, 23. Craun also points to the importance of this quote in the late Middle Ages: E.D. Craun, ‘Introduction: Marking out Deviant Speech’, in *The Hands of the Tongue*, p. ix.

<sup>21</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (rhymed), 14851-14854. See also *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 248, 27-28.

<sup>22</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (rhymed), 14708-14715. Reference to Jacob, chapter 3, 7-8. See also *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 248, 3-12.

<sup>23</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (rhymed), 14851-14854. See also *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 248, 27-28.

<sup>24</sup> *Des coninx summe* no. 136, p. 293.

<sup>25</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 246, 29-35. Reference to Numeri chapter 19, 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 267, 23-column 268, 6.

King Solomon who said ‘Een ander mont moet die prisene, mer niet dijns selven mont’ [another mouth has to praise you, not your own].<sup>27</sup>

One probably would not expect ecclesiastical sources such as *Des coninx summe* and both versions of *Spiegel der sonden* to pay particular attention to reputational effects of harmful words and not just to effects on eternal life. However, according to these texts not only was the speaker’s salvation at risk, but also his good reputation. In addition to a grace-threatening act, harmful speech is constructed as a face-threatening act. Words could inflict harm to the face of the speaker as well. In *Des Coninx summe* the *ghewoenlike loghen*, the everyday lie, is not just harmful in a religious way, but in a social way as well. A liar ‘vertoernt god daermede ende maket hem selven ongheacht’ [he makes God angry (grace-threatening) with it (his lies) and his respectability (face-threatening)].<sup>28</sup> The sin of perjury also threatens the speaker’s reputation, as is emphasised in *Des Coninx summe*. The sinner will be known as being ‘without honour or loyalty’.<sup>29</sup> People will say about the perjurer: ‘That man is without honour or loyalty,’ and ‘His words are not convincing.’ The category of perjury includes not only people lying under oath in court, but anyone who has broken a promise or wedding vow.

The prose version of *Spiegel der sonden* as well as *Des Coninx summe* points to boasting as a face-threatening act to the speaker: ‘Selden pleget men hem te geloven, die hem selven prijs geven’ [people seldom tend to believe someone who praises himself].<sup>30</sup> The intended perlocutionary effect on the listeners of the boasting was gaining more respect and appreciation: ‘Look what I have done.’ The real perlocutionary effect will be the opposite, the prose version of *Spiegel der sonden* claims. People will not believe his self-praise. According to *Des Coninx summe*, someone who brags about himself (the speech sin *roeminghe*) is often considered foolish (‘dwaes ende onwetende’). He is compared to a dancing pig at court or a donkey playing a harp.<sup>31</sup>

## Sins of the Tongue: Grace- and Face-Threatening to Others

Sinful words can inflict damage to the soul and reputation not just of the speaker, but of other participants of the speech situation as well. Mocking, *spottelijke speelhoerde*, for example, is constructed in *Des coninx summe* as a grace-threatening act to people who are afraid of becoming the focus of mockery.<sup>32</sup> Because they are consumed with the fear of being ridiculed, they fail or are hesitant to do good things and be virtuous. They do not want to stand out or be an easy target for derision. Therefore, as Jan van Brederode rants about mockery in *Des coninx summe*, a scoffer is nothing less than a murderer – he murders the soul of other people.

Flattery is also constructed as a grace-threatening act to other people in *Des coninx summe*. Flatterers are able to tarnish the soul of those who are being flattered. They put people ‘to sleep’, i.e. they divert them from the awareness of doing evil things. Flatterers point to everything a person does well, so this person will not pay attention to his sins anymore.

<sup>27</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 267, 23-26.

<sup>28</sup> *Des coninx summe* no. 151, p. 303.

<sup>29</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 156, p. 306.

<sup>30</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 267, 30-31.

<sup>31</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 140, p. 296 and *Des coninx summe*, no. 141, pp. 296-297.

<sup>32</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 139, p. 295.



Flatterers pave the way to hell with honey. Instead of warning people or correcting them and opposing their bad behaviour, they excuse sins – as an animal's behind is covered by its tail. They charm and delude people, so they will not rely on their own judgement and moral compass anymore: 'Hi ghelovet hem bet, dat si hem segghen, dan dat hi selve van hem selven ghevoelt' [He believes more what they say about him, than how he feels about himself].<sup>33</sup>

Speech sins are also depicted as face-threatening to other participants of the speech situation. A striking example in *Des coninx summe* is the sin of *detractio*, malicious slander. *Detractio* is translated in Middle Dutch as *oftreckinge*, literally 'tearing up' or 'ripping up'. The people who commit the sin of the tongue violently and painfully 'diminish' a person in the eyes of the beholder, by giving negative personal information about someone to others: 'Want si trecken enen mensce of ymmers sijn goet gherucht ende maken hem minre in ander luden herten, dan hi te voren was' [because they (slanderers) deprive someone of his good name and diminish him in the hearts of others].<sup>34</sup> *Detractio* is face-threatening to the subject of the slander, because his good name is tainted. As a perlocutionary effect of slanderous words, he will be seen as less of a man, less 'dependable, worthy, prudent' etc.

In *Des coninx summe* Jan van Brederode presents a fascinating example of a slanderous remark, which seems innocent on the surface but is deep down utterly face-threatening: 'Of course, he is a righteous man and I absolutely appreciate him, but he has one flaw that bothers me.'<sup>35</sup> The moment these words are uttered, the cognition of the person who is spoken to is transformed. As an effect of the subtle but devastating words of the slanderer, he will inevitably consider the subject in a less positive light. The perlocutionary effect of *detractio* is the diminishment of the person in the eyes of the one who heard the slanderous words. *Detractio* is no innocent gossip, but a speech act in which negative personal information about someone is shared with others, with loss of face as a consequence.

An important aspect of *detractio* as a face-threatening act is the disclosure of personal information. According to *Des coninx summe*, slanderers are like dung beetles (*wederhoppen*), because they like to poke around somebody else's dirt.<sup>36</sup> The beetles avoid the smell of flowers and prefer the smell of excrement. Likewise, slanderers occupy themselves with other people's misery, rather than their blessings or achievements. Note that this face-threatening speech act is not about 'spreading lies' about somebody. Truth is not an important factor. *Detractio* is about disclosing negative, but true, personal information about someone – the 'dirt' is real. However, slanderers or *quaetsprekers* tend to exaggerate the negative personal information.<sup>37</sup> A face-threatening speech act in the rhymed version of *Spiegel der sonden* concerning other participants in a speech situation is 'committing perjury in court'.<sup>38</sup> It also contains an important public aspect, i.e. the specific setting of a court of law. In contrast to *detractio*, in this situation 'truth' does play an important role: the maxim of quality is violated. The speech sin is

<sup>33</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 145, p. 299.

<sup>34</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 149, p. 301. See for *detractio* in Latin tradition, Casagrande and Vecchio, *Les péchés de la langue*, pp. 239-41.

<sup>35</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 149, p. 301.

<sup>36</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 147, p. 300-301. See also E.D. Craun, *Lies, Slander and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature. Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 137. John Gower also uses this metaphor of slander in *Confessio amantis*.

<sup>37</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 148, p. 301.

<sup>38</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (rhymed), 15848-15863.

face-threatening to the aggrieved party, but also to God himself: ‘den richter vor wien hi zweert’ [the judge before whom he (the perjurer) pledges his oath]. According to the rhymed version of *Spiegel der sonden*, the perjurer blasphemes God and brings shame (‘ugliness’) upon Him: ‘hi doet daer mede Gode blasphemie ende lelichede’. Even third parties are damaged in this respect: the judge is disgraced, because as a result of the false statement his verdict is compromised.

Moreover, much attention was paid to the responsibility of listeners to and victims of the speech sins. They had to make efforts to stop the damaging effects of the sinful words and to help others to restrain their tongue. For example, according to the prose version of *Spiegel der sonden*, an important factor in the devastating effects of rumour are ‘the feet which carry it’.<sup>39</sup> It is grace-threatening to them, because the Lord hates people who spread rumours. They too had to make efforts to stop the damaging word-of-mouth buzz. Moreover, the rhymed version of *Spiegel der sonden* expected an attitude of suspicion towards flatterers. It is much better to be reprimanded by the wise than to be flattered by the fools.

15970 In Ecclesiasticus so staet:  
 beter eist vanden vroeden ghedoghen  
 verspreken, dan te zine bedroggen  
 vander ghecken smekernie.<sup>40</sup>

[The book Wisdom of Sirach says:  
 it is better to tolerate rebukes of wise men,  
 than to be deceived by the flattery of the foolish.]

In this quote a binary opposition is made between the good speech act of (wisely) reprimanding and the sinful speech act of flattery or, from the perspective of the listener, between being reprimanded and being flattered.

The prose version of *Spiegel der sonden* emphasises the responsibility of the listener with regard to blasphemous words. Anyone who tolerates blasphemy in his home is also to blame: ‘S. Gregorius bescrivet in sinen *Dyaligo*, dat alle die geen die dat gedogen dat in oer huys blasphemie geschiet, sijn alle dier misdaet mede deelachtich’ [as Saint Gregory describes in his *Dialogues*, anyone who tolerates blasphemy in their home, is also accountable for this crime].<sup>41</sup> *Des coninx summe* problematises the role of listeners. A listener can be held accountable for somebody else’s speech behaviour only if he chooses to be part of the speech situation. For example, a listener who consciously listens to bad words and even encourages them – for example by laughing at ‘dirty talk’ in the category of ‘ydle words’ – commits a sin.<sup>42</sup> This speech act needs listeners in order to constitute the sin. The social position of the listener is also an important variable in the ‘sin-factor’ of dirty words, according to *Des coninx summe*. Especially

<sup>39</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 263, 24-26. Reference to Proverbs chapter 6, 16-19. See also Casagrande and Vecchio, *Les péchés de la langue*, pp. 248-249.

<sup>40</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (rhymed), 15970-15974.

<sup>41</sup> *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), column 250, 13-17. See also ‘blasphemy’ in *Spiegel der sonden* (prose), p. 249, 22-26.

<sup>42</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 138, pp. 294-295.

'high lords and good women' are addressed and warned in this respect. If they are angry instead of amused in response to dirty words, the speakers will be forced to restrain their tongue.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

The expression 'Tongue breaks bones, even though it has none' seems forgotten nowadays and appears to have lost its currency. In modern Dutch the expression 'Schelden doet geen pijn' – scolding does not hurt – is commonly used, renouncing or possibly fending off (by saying the opposite) the danger of the damaging power of spoken words. In modern English we find expressions that even use the same metaphor of breaking bones, but applied to an entirely different end: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me' or 'Hard words do not break bones'. In this article, the aim was to investigate late medieval perceptions of harmful speech, the bone-breaking potential of spoken words in Middle Dutch religious didactic writings about the sins of the tongue as a distinct category. In order to analyse these perceptions, a number of insights by linguistic scholars are combined and applied to the Middle Dutch corpus.

Boiled down to its essence, in Middle Dutch pastoral sources about the sins of the tongue harmful speech was often seen as the result of an untamed tongue. Words were not considered as harmless signifiers but as grace- and face-threatening acts. They were seen as instruments capable of inflicting considerable 'spiritual' and reputational damage – not only to the speaker but to other people as well. Attention was also paid to the effects on the recipients of harmful speech. Because of its grave potential danger to the face and grace of the speakers, recipients and the subjects of the words, the tongue had to be tamed. A sin of the tongue often is 'just a slip of the tongue', but with serious consequences for the speaker as well as other participants of the speech situation.

It is important not to overlook these Middle Dutch sources in studying late medieval perceptions of speech behaviour in Europe. The late medieval Low Countries contained one of Europe's most urbanised and economically developed areas – especially in Holland and Flanders. This more complex society was in need of different rules of behaviour regarding verbal conduct. Middle Dutch writers of pastoral and ethical literature played an important role in this demand for verbal regulation, especially in times of protests against local and central authorities. By underlining the danger of the wicked tongue to one's spiritual welfare and reputation, these writers legitimised the measures of the local and central authorities to suppress dangerous and seditious speech.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Des coninx summe*, no. 138, p. 295.

<sup>44</sup> Dumolyn and Haemers, 'A Bad Chicken was Brooding', pp. 48 and 54. See also Bange, *Moraliteyt Saelt Wesen*, p. 31.

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