"Arbeitersprache" in Bruges during the 19th century

Wim Vandenbussche

1. Introduction

1.1. The department of Dutch linguistics at the Free University of Brussels is currently involved in a research program about written language use in 19th century Flanders. Contrary to former contributions to this topic, this study is the first to go beyond the analysis of isolated texts written by members of the upper social classes. The project aims at a sociolinguistic analysis, in which the writings of all social layers are taken into account, especially the lower classes (also referred to as "the workers" or "the working class" in this article) which have been left without linguistic attention so far in the Dutch language area.

The inspiration for this approach was found in the ever growing number of German publications and projects dealing with "Arbeitersprache und bürgerliche Sprache im 19. Jahrhundert" (Cherubim & Mattheier 1989, Wimmer 1990, Cherubim et al. 1998). Next to other congresses, the annual "Tagung" of the "Arbeits-gemeinschaft Historische Stadtsprachenforschung" has become one of the central fora for this field of research which did not only render new insights into the standardisation process of the German language, but also provided historical evidence for the extreme social stratification of 19th century German which had formerly been ignored.

The Brussels project should eventually lead to a meticulous description and interpretation of social language variation in Flanders on all grammatical levels, during a period which was vital for the evolution, standardisation (and even survival) of the Dutch language in the Flemish area at that moment. In order to meet limitations of time and manpower, an ongoing pilot-study now focuses on the situation in the city of Bruges (Willemyns & Vandenbussche 1995).

1.2. We explicitly chose to work with original data which had never been edited or used for linguistic analysis before. An extended corpus of hand-written texts was assembled and digitalized, containing documents from three distinct social domains. A number of methodological problems had to be dealt with, especially in the realm of lower class speech, before this undertaking could be led to a successful outcome (Vandenbussche & Willemyns 1999).

The high degree of illiteracy among workmen in Bruges, and the subsequent many years of lack of scientific interest for "Alltagsgeschichte" dramatically re-
duced the volume of preserved lower class documents. Today, those sources are spread over different private and public archives, very often in such a deteriorated state that they can hardly be used for scientific research. The composition of our text corpus has, therefore, rather been a process of "collecting" instead of "selecting" materials. Consequently, criteria of paper and ink quality and readability have sometimes reigned over linguistic criteria.

We now dispose, however, of a body of texts from workers' organisations which covers the entire 19th century. These meeting minutes stem from three different "onderstandsmaatschappijen," the trade-linked predecessors of our social security funds (Pitomvils 1995: 433). The "lower class concept," however, was not a very homogeneous one at the time. Contrary to many other Flemish cities, Bruges was left almost untouched by the 19th century industrialisation wave (D'hondt 1989: 15-6). Consequently, the internal lower class hierarchy continued to be based on the medieval guild-system, with masters, apprentices and servants. Preserved election lists which contain detailed information about the amount of taxes a voter paid show that there existed a considerable financial gap between the members of these different grades. Therefore, an extensive sample of similar meeting minutes written by guild masters has been added to the documents written by servants.

1.3. The middle class corpus will consist of similar meeting documents from the remarkably vivid corporate life in the city. Most cultural circles, theatre and literature groups were patronised by members of the petty bourgeoisie. The archives also preserve minutes and letters from paternalistic middle class initiatives for the less fortunate citizens.

1.4. The collection of a consistent Dutch upper class corpus was feared to be problematic. For historical reasons, the prestige language in 19th century Flanders was French, not Dutch. Although virtually all Flemings spoke a Dutch dialect, there was no uniform standard Dutch which could perform the functions of a prestige variant (a detailed discussion of the language situation in Bruges is given in Willemyns' contribution to this volume). Bruges was no exception to this rule: the city was governed almost exclusively in French until 1898 (Vandenbussche 1995). To our great surprise, we found that the very well preserved records of the St. Sebastiaen archers' guild had been kept in Dutch unto the 1870s. This bowman company was, and still is today, one of the most prestigious upper class societies in Bruges. An extensive selection of these hand written books now figures as our upper class corpus, and completed our body of 19th century material.
1.5. As mentioned above, the German research on "Arbeitersprache" served as an important source of inspiration for our study. "Arbeitersprache" and "bürgerliche Sprache" have become coined terms in German historical linguistics, referring to the "Zwei-Sprachen-These," the assumed speech dichotomy between the upper and lower classes during the 19th century. At the centre of this thesis lies the idea that the language use of upper classes ("bürgerliche Sprache") was explicitly standard oriented, whereas the lower classes used a proper lower variety of German with specific characteristics ("Arbeitersprache") which distinguished them from the former group (Mihm 1998: 284-285).

Many authors, however, have tried to elaborate and criticise this interpretation of "Arbeitersprache." On the basis of similar text excerpt and analysis, we too want to question the usefulness of the established term "Arbeitersprache" as a linguistic concept. In this article, we will try to present evidence for the hypothesis that it cannot be used to refer to a proper language variety with unique, stable characteristics, and that it should indeed be considered as a "Varietätspektrum," "keine linguistische sondern eine soziolinguistische Einheit" (Mattheier 1989). Comparing text samples from a number of lower class writers, it will be argued that in Flanders too the synchronic qualitative differences between them were too large to maintain the idea of a homogeneous common language variety. Our data show that this variation did not disappear towards the end of the 19th century (where the gravity point of German research lies), but seems to be increasing instead.

Next to this linguistic discussion, we also want to question the class-bound character of "Arbeitersprache." Klenk (1998) ends her discussion of "Arbeiterschriftsprache" carefully suggesting that its characteristics are typical "sogar für mehr als nur die Arbeiterschaft, vielleicht sogar für die ganze Unterschicht des 19. Jahrhunderts." We are firmly convinced that the grammatical and orthographical problems of the workers were not solely theirs. It will be argued that authors from very different social backgrounds shared identical writing problems, regardless of the class they belonged to. We will, therefore, suggest a different paradigm within which these writing problems can be interpreted.

1.6. In this article, we will first analyse the language of lower class servants in Bruges around 1830. Next, a similar study will be made of their successors' texts around 1870. A description of the language used by trade masters at the beginning and end of the 19th century will complete the empirical chapters.

On the basis of our findings, we will discuss "Arbeitersprache" as both a sociological and a linguistic problem. We will argue that it is neither desirable nor possible to describe the language varieties generally thought of as "Arbeiter-
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“sprache” in terms of social class. It will become clear that the "class paradigm" should be abandoned, in favour of a "literacy paradigm."

2. The language of lower class servants around 1830

2.1. In Vandenbussche (1996) we demonstrated that style, grammar and spelling of lower class writers in the early 19th century were in no way connected to the cultural elite's familiar discourse. The workers' idiom seemed to conform to the generally accepted idea that the Dutch used in Flanders was "chaotic," whereas the Northern realisation was governed by strict spelling and grammar rules (Suffeleers 1979: 19). On the level of spelling, it looks as if that inconsistency served as the only rule, and that each writer used his proper spelling system. Grammatical and stylistic singularities reinforce this impression.

2.2. Close reading revealed, however, that the established idea of total chaos is an exaggeration, based on superficial observation. Many spelling difficulties always occur within a similar linguistic context. Consequently, there is a certain order to the chaos, and one can even predict where spelling inconsistencies are likely to appear.

In Vandenbussche (1996: 164-5) the three main spelling cues were identified as the representations of diphthongs, long vowels and a limited number of consonants. They can be summarised as follows:

a) [ei] and [ai] are spelt <ey>-<uy> and <eij>-<uij>, gemeenzaemheid-gemeenzaemheid, buiten-buijten, entirely independent of the phonological environment.

b) [a:] and [e:] in open syllables are spelt <a>-<e> and <ae>-<ee>, betalinge-betalinge, pretenderen-pretendeeren.

c) The major part of the consonant problems refer to phoneme pairs in which voicing is the distinguishing feature. The different graphemes which normally represent those distinct phonemes are used for both the voiced and the voiceless variant, rendering the following oppositions:

- [z] is spelt <s> and <z> in the word initial position, sal-zal, and between vowels weesen-weezen.
- [X] is spelt <ch> and <g> following a vowel sound before [t], acht-agt and in word final position, zich-zig.
- [t] is spelt <t> and <d> in word final position after [r], [l] and [n], geresolveert-geresolveerd, gestelt-gesteld, geteekent-geteekend.
- [p] is spelt <p> and <b> in the word ampt-ambt.
[f] is spelt <f> and <v> in the word ontfangen-ontvangen.
d) [k] can be spelt <c> and <k> in word initial position, connen-konen, whereas the <ck> and <q> spelling may occur in the word initial and final position deken-decken, clerck-clerq.

2.2. Although the major part of the spelling difficulties can be reduced to one of the three categories quoted above, there still remain a number of idiosyncrasies, which differ from author to author and which are harder to interpret. The influence of the writer's dialect on his written production may help to solve the problem. The vowel change from <geld> to <gald>, for example, is easily explained by the Bruges dialect form [halt]. Lacking knowledge of official terminology may also explain the presence of bizarre terms like almentatie and resolitie. The fact that the writer uses these terms continuously instead of the correct forms 'alimentatie' and 'resolutie' is probably not due to repeated writing errors. He may simply be trying to imitate the administrative style and vocabulary, in an attempt to make his report sound more official. The frequent deformed renderings of French terms (refüest instead of 'refus,' gedisgrutiers instead of 'gedisgratieerd') should be seen in the same light.

2.3. If the spelling of lower class writers already distinguished them from the cultural elite's language use, grammar and style still reinforced this difference. As opposed to the high sounding phrases of the middle class rhetoric, we find a workers' idiom with a very Middle Dutch-like structure, characterised by lacking punctuation, dislocation and omission of constituents, confused internal coherence, misused conjunctions, and digressive formulations.

The major part of the minutes, though, has a very formal introduction. It mostly contains well-known traditional formulaic expressions in which the date and the location of the meeting are announced, and which are copied in every new document. However, when actually reporting on discussions and decisions taken, the writer tries to maintain the formal tone of the introductory lines, but fails to do so and falls back into an incoherent faulty language use.

This acute stylistic rupture has also been observed in 19th century texts of German workers and is known as "Stilzusammenbruch" (Mattheier 1986: 248). This phenomenon comes in many different grammatical forms, which have been discussed in detail in Vandenbussche (1996: 167-9). Next to the already mentioned Middle Dutch-like features, we can add the compression of a great number of different ideas, which would normally fill an entire paragraph, into one hardly intelligible sentence. The opposite, repetition and paraphrase within the same
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sentence, is also frequently seen. Finally, extreme dislocation of sentence constituents also rendered the texts difficult to interpret.

3. The language of lower class servants around 1870

3.1. The characteristics of the servants' language use around 1830 mentioned above were shared by all authors in our corpus. Apart from a considerable amount of author-specific variation, one could state that there was a common degree of writing quality among the members of this social group. Around 1870, however, the situation had changed, as the two following excerpts will illustrate. The first text was written by the chairman of the wool weaver servants, the second most likely by an ordinary member. Though belonging to the same association, the first had a higher social prestige because of his superior functional rank.

[Text 1: Chairman's text]
zoo riepen de camvraeter als gelyk als dat ik moeste gedikereert worden van de wollewevers en met de Rikeras en ik in de erstaeme genaemt het Paradys in de kamer waer al de Comvraeters by waeren een zilver krus overmy hals gelyt en een eerteeken af geleeszen die daer in een vierkante kaeteker gaende den dag verleep in vrugtden en pliszeer by ons en ieder vas zeer wel gezint en alk ripen gelyk de Wollewevers de Wollewevers van Brugge

Even the president's language use appears to be characterised by the spelling problems already mentioned. For one and the same sound, he uses different forms within the same text, and even within the same word. In the quotation above, we can point at the spelling variants for long [a:] and [e:], comvrater-comvraeter, wollewewer-wollewewever; the full original text harbours a large number of similar examples.

Part of the apparent spelling chaos is due to dialect interference on the phonological and lexical level. Gedikereert, krus, sluten, goedgekurt and ze mosten are in fact meticulous phonetic transcriptions of the Bruges rendering of "gedecoreerd," "kruis," "sluiten," "goedgekeurd" and "ze moesten." The author did make re-gular attempts to ban the Bruges influence, however, by using Dutch words which do not exist in his dialect. The 'neck,' for example, is called nekke in Bruges, but the writer uses hals, which can be found frequently in many Dutch dialects, but not in his (except for one marginal idiomatic expression, "aan de hals brengen," meaning 'to kill').

We also find unfortunate attempts to use unusual or foreign words in the minutes: rikerase refers to "decoratie," erstaeme was meant to be "estaminet." From a detailed grammatical and stylistic analysis of the present example, we
retain that it contains, among others, omissions of sentence constituents, problematic passive constructions, lacking internal coherence, and wrong conjunctions (Vandenbussche 1998).

[Text 2: ordinary member's text]
Is het niet schoon, ja, zelfs edel, Hulde te brengen, aen onzen Deken; die door moed en zelfsopoffering, den eersten stichter is geworden, van een der schoonste en bloeiende Maatschappijen der stad Brugge, onder kenspreuk de Broederliefde; en die nu dezelve met zooveel wijsheid bestuert. Ja eerweerde Deken het inrichten zulker Maatschappijen van onderlingen bystand voor zieken en gekwetsten is een der schoonste en edelmoedigste daden, die ooit in de zamenleving uitgeoefend is geweest, tot voordeel en troost van den lydenden werkman

Writing quality and the mastery of literacy was clearly not in accordance with the social in-group status. Our second author produced a very fluent text, which is correctly structured and consistently spelt. Apart from a very small number of irregularities, he conforms to the Northern Dutch standard language as it was used in Holland. Features which betray him as a Fleming are his use of a different article for male and female nouns (den and de as opposed to the unique article "de"), and the forms eerweerde (‘eerwaarde’) and bestuert (‘bestuurt’) which contain regional vowel renderings.

3.2. The differences between the two texts, both written by people with an identical lower class status, is enormous: on the one hand, we have a defective, fragmentary and irregular text, on the other one a nearly perfectly standardised passage. This indicates that, over two generations, the nature of language variation within the lower class may have become even more complex. A considerable segment of the servant authors still struggled with the same problems as their colleagues did around 1800. Others, however, had apparently experienced the benefits of a movement towards standardisation, and came very close to the point of perfect mastery of literacy. As a consequence, we can no longer talk about lower class language as a relatively fixed variant with common distinctive features, but we need to introduce the image of a continuum of which the make up and evolution will be discussed further on.

4. The language of trade masters

4.1. An analysis of the master bakers' minutes between 1819 and 1826 reflects the same heterogeneous writing quality found in servants' texts from the 1870s. Some masters wrote grammatically correct sentences with consistent spelling
choices. Others, however, shared the writing difficulties of the lower trade grades; they occurred under identical linguistic environments, and similar solutions were used to solve them. First of all, we can list a number of spelling problems:

- Long [a:] and [e:] in open syllables are both spelt <a> and <ae>, <e> and <ee>
- Diphthongs [ei] and [ai] are now written as <ei> and <ui>, then as <ey> and <uy>
- [z] is represented as <s> and <z> between vowels and in word initial position
- [t] in word final position after [l], [r] and [n] is both written as <t> and <d>
- [k] is spelt as <k>, <c>, and <ck> in the same phonological environment.

4.2. An identical twin-image of the servants' problems was also found as far as grammar and style are concerned. In the following representative quotation we once more meet a number of deviant constructions which were typical for the "Stilzusammenbruch."

Ten huys van Deken Jonkeere ter presentie van alle De sorgers Deken ende greffier dat alle De sorgers hun verbinden aen alle Conparisie die den Deken zal noodig vinden te houden die Aangaende het ambacht

After the two introductory clauses, the writers omit the verb of the main clause: after griffier we expect 'werdt er beslist dat.' What follows after griffier is the subject of the sentence, and here the author once more gets into trouble with the verbal forms. He leaves out the verb of the subject clause 'deel te nemen,' and in the last subordinate clause which qualifies comparitie (note the spelling) he merges two possible constructions for this clause into one ungrammatical one. Either he should say 'die het ambacht aangaan' or 'aangaande het ambacht,' but he ends up with die aengaende het ambacht instead.

4.3. At the end of the 19th century, however, the written production of the guild masters contains no more traces of "Stilzusammenbruch;" on the level of spelling, we still find the same persisting difficulties. Our corpus certainly does not contain literary prose: there still is dialectical grammatical interference (wrong prepositions in idiomatic expressions, for example), but none of them prevents the reader from understanding the contents of the text.

At this point, it becomes very clear that the great leap forward as to the clear understanding of our study material was not the persisting influence of standardisation, but rather the growing ability to express one's ideas in transparent struc-
tures, to build correct sentences and to think in coherent units. Apparently, this quality was generalised among the trade masters earlier than among the servants.

5. “Arbeitersprache” as a sociological problem

5.1. Defining the borders of different social classes is a troublesome task, which has been the subject of many scientific analyses. Yet, it is vital to be able to attribute an exact social status to an author's profession in order to make valid synchronic and diachronic comparisons between authors of similar or different social ranking. Although the practical information needed for the analyses can be phrased in simple straightforward questions, the makeup of such a theoretical "class checklist" turns out to be an extremely complicated matter. Who could be considered as a worker at the beginning and the end of the 19th century in Bruges? Does the term "trade master" refer to the same sociological concept in 1830 and 1890? In terms of social ranking, what is the relationship between an industry worker and a trade servant? Each of these simple questions leads to a number of different possible answers, depending on the variables one chooses to stress. As to the question whether masters and servants belonged to the same social class, there are authors who stress the unity of both groups, whereas others label them as distinct "strata" within a common social class, and a third party claims that masters are to be distinguished as belonging to the "petty bourgeoisie" (Crossick & Gerhard-Haupt 1995).

The actual "class consciousness" of the writers themselves is too variable to be of any actual help. The firm in-group sentiment of the master bakers in our corpus, for example, and their conviction that only masters had the right to join their company, was not shared by all colleagues from other trades (D'hondt 1989: 16). The historical dimension of our study contributes to the confusion: throughout the 19th century, the concept of class underwent continuous change. In broad terms, the reason for this evolution could be described as the transition from a pre-industrial to an industrialised society. All over Europe, this process was accompanied by the rise of two new social classes: the proletariat and the "petty bourgeoisie." The crux in this matter is to visualise the interaction between the old and new social structures at every distinct moment during the 19th century. In order to place our different authors in their social framework, one should need to analyse the pattern of coexistence, merging, transition and actual replacement of "old" and "new" social groups for each date on which a text was written.

The specific social identity of Bruges among the greater Flemish cities in the 19th century also causes problems for comparative analyses with writers from those other towns, and for comparisons on an international level. We already
mentioned the relatively modest impact of industrialisation on Bruges, which allowed for the prolonged functioning of the medieval guild structures, and explains the relative absence of a factory proletariat. Within the framework of a generalising three level social model (lower/middle/upper class) it is perfectly possible to compare the synchronic writings of lower class authors in Bruges and its neighbouring towns, although there were clear cut differences between the living worlds of a trade servant in Bruges and a factory worker in Kortrijk, Antwerp or Ghent (Scholliers 1996). In turn, these Flemish situations were entirely set apart from, for example, the mine worker's society in the Ruhrgebiet, not only as to what concerns the nature of the professional occupation, but also on a social meta-level: both regions had an entirely distinct political, philosophical and linguistic character.

Collaboration between linguists in the realm of "Arbeitersprache" in different cities, be it on a national or international level, who only define the nature of their object of research in terms of "Klassenzugehörigkeit," is therefore bound to remain fruitless. I do believe, however, that such a collaboration can go beyond the level of reciprocal methodological assistance, if the focus of attention be directed to other personal variables than class.

6. From a class paradigm to a literacy paradigm

6.1. "Arbeitersprache" should not be seen as a uniform proper language variety. At its best, this interpretation presents a simplified and reductionist account of a far more complex linguistic situation, isolating one way of writing from a whole spectrum. Although it may very well fit findings on the basis of very text-specific corpora within strict geographical and temporal limits, our data indicate that the written production of lower class writers covered a broad range of varieties. We believe, therefore, that letters full of orthographic and structural defects reflect the most spectacular side of a continuum, ranging from hardly intelligible to almost perfectly structured texts.

6.2. Across all class-internal differences, be they conscious or subconscious, synchronic or diachronic, domestic or international, we note that different authors can share the same writing characteristics, problems and solutions. The same holds true for members of different classes. We can refer to the German research which focused on the writings of Franz Haniel, a 19th century captain of industry, in which it became clear that this man had the greatest difficulty with mastering the German case-system (Matttheier 1985). As a consequence, the language characteristics in the analysed body of texts should not be defined in
terms of class-varieties. We believe the opposition between "bürgerliche Sprache" and "Arbeitersprache" to be misleading; the same applies to an eventual polarisation be-tween masters' and servants' language use.

Consequently, a new descriptive paradigm should be introduced. We suggest to abandon the strict fixation on class-membership, in favour of describing an author's personal language use in terms of literacy, and of his degree of mastering writing skills. It appears that the writers' different degrees of grammaticality and orthographical correctness are part of a broad continuum. Together they constitute a pattern of transitional varieties, each of which has its specific place on the gliding scale from illiterate to literate. Some authors may display a constant move towards the positive pole during their life, whereas for others the process has suddenly been broken off.

6.3. How are these qualitative differences to be explained? One way would be to link an author's degree of literacy to his personal school history, through a reconstruction of his individual educational profile. We have not been able, though, to do this for our "lower class" authors. Given the limited personal information available on these people, and the tracewise preserved archive material on "education initiatives for the poor," it is most unlikely this will ever succeed.

We are very well aware that this is a major problem throughout our research, which it will never be possible to solve. Yet, this does not lead us entirely into the realm of speculation. Former research on the poorer social layers in Bruges rendered clear indications of the actual nature and form of lower class education. Moreover, secondary literature on mother tongue education provides extended information on which manuals and methods were used.

It was impossible for working class children to enter the normal primary and secondary school circuit, for the simple reason that these schools were too expensive. Although there actually was an official "high quality" school for the orphans and the poor in Bruges, few workers' children attended its classes, as their man-power was needed during daytime to contribute to the family budget. One can easily understand that they lacked the strength or the courage to attend lessons before and after work or during the whole weekend. In this context, one should always remember that primary school attendance was made compulsory in Flanders as late as 1914, and that there used to exist serious qualitative and financial differences between the different schools (De Vroede 1970).

As a result, most children received their only basis of general education in the so-called "Sunday schools." These classes were supervised by the clergy and entirely directed towards religious education. Bible and catechism were the main
school books used, and writing education used to be limited to dictation from, or literal copying of, the Bible. In the lace-schools for the poor, alphabetisation was actually reduced to "knowledge of the alphabet." In this respect, we can refer to a very popular type of schoolbook, usually called "Kruisken A.B.C.," which contained the alphabet in different types of character, each time preceded by a cross, and followed by a list of prayers and "frequently asked questions about faith." Different sources indicate that for many workers these booklets have been the only means of writing education, which explains the long lasting tradition of these so-called "abecedaria" in the history of religious education (Burger 1927, De Clerck e.a. 1984).

Learning to write is an extremely complicated cognitive process, in which the acquisition of "regular correspondences between phonemes and graphemes" sets a major benchmark. Some authors refer to this skill as "graphemisation" (Read 1986, Luelsdorff 1991), others prefer the term "alphabetic writing" (Pontecorvo & Orsolini 1996). "Abecedaria" were explicitly directed towards this objective, beyond which some of the authors in our corpus never managed to go. This is plainly illustrated by the total absence of punctuation in their texts, a skill which is acquired after the alphabetic phase (Feneiro & Zucchermaglio 1996). It is doubtful that the Sunday schools devoted any further attention to rules of grammar, style and text construction. The frequent occurrence of "Stilzusammenbruch" is most obviously related to this neglectful form of writing education.

6.4. On the other hand, it may be useful to go beyond the personalised dimension of the literacy paradigm. There is reason to believe that illiteracy or limited literacy did not provoke social sanctioning within the lower classes. Our corpus even provides one example of an illiterate person who was elected for the highest position in the assistance companies. In this respect, consequent spelling and grammatical correctness became irrelevant from a social point of view, at least for the "in-group." This attitude was probably reinforced by the fact that upward social mobility from the lower to the middle classes was as good as impossible. This hypothesis may help to interpret the striking number of letter additions, omissions and changes in the texts, which were left uncorrected. Assuming that the minutes of a meeting are normally reread, it is hard to believe that a writer would have overlooked errors like stock instead of 'slot', brugg instead of 'brugge' and zierk instead of 'ziek.' Moreover, in one and the same report we have found three successive identical formulas, which were beyond any doubt written at the same moment. Although the author could have copied the first example twice, the second and the third version contain divergent spelling forms. No attempt was made to correct the "errors" and unify the spelling image.
For a full understanding of the social and economical relevance of literacy, it may be useful to move away even further from the individual writer, by inquiring into the general function of literacy in the 19th century industrialisation process. Scholars in this area need to reconcile two apparently paradoxical findings. Literacy seems not to have been of major relevance in the earliest stages of industrialisation; other, often physical skills were of greater use to the worker (Graff 1987). Our data confirm this hypothesis; the tolerance of inconsistent and ungrammatical writing behaviour may partly be due to the non-literate nature of economical needs. On the other hand, yet, we note a slow long term rise and generalisation of writing capacities, as the process of industrialisation gains momentum (Clifford 1984). Interpreting this evolution as a response to a new, paradoxical need for literate workers is not necessarily correct. Among other factors, the decline of illiteracy should also be seen in the light of the emancipation of the working classes. In retrospect, one can only speculate about the exact share of those different elements.

6.5. Original census data show how the widespread illiteracy in Bruges gradually decreased towards the end of the 19th century: whereas 55.6% of the population was illiterate in 1866 (Michiels 1978: 156), this number shrunk to 48.2% in 1880, 40.4% in 1890, and 38.6% in 1900. However, these average percentages obscured the social stratification of the process (Ruwet & Wellemans 1978). In a revealing analysis, Callewaert (1963: 214-5) distinguished the evolution for four different social layers throughout the first half of the 19th century, which rendered the following data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>1797-1815</th>
<th>1815-1830</th>
<th>1830-1840</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I (upper class)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II (middle class)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III (skilled workers)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV (unskilled w.)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How, then, could these results, which explicitly link literacy to differences in class and timing, be combined with our data and linguistic analyses? Apparently, the generalisation of literacy in Bruges started at the top of the social ladder, and progressed step-by-step among the lower social classes in the course of the 19th century. The gradual alphabetisation of each social class could metaphorically be represented through the image of a spring, which can be stretched along the literacy continuum. First, it is compressed close to the pole of illiteracy, with a low writing quality which is shared by all members of that class. Then the spring is stretched to its full length, with a variety of writing qualities, ranging from hardly intelligible to perfectly literate. Finally, there is a gradual compression towards the other pole of full literacy, with a high literacy level among most members of the class.

Callewaerts' statistics indicate that the expansion/reduction process of the spring set in at different moments in time for each class. For the upper classes, the right pole had apparently already been reached around 1800. At that time, the full-stretched spring of middle classes had started its compression, a process which would last throughout the second half of the 19th century. For the lower classes, the general state of literacy only came about during the 20th century interbellum. This visualisation once more stresses the impact of the temporal context in text analysis.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to provide arguments in favour of a literacy-centred approach to lower class and middle class texts from the 19th century. The writing problems shared by authors from different social, regional and temporal backgrounds should not primarily be considered as class markers. We believe that they constitute a series of linguistic features that are typical for transitional varieties on the continuum between illiteracy and literacy. Our approach meets the severe methodological problems caused by the fact that both in space and time the 19th century concept of class was constantly changing. Contrary to the class-centred paradigm which has been used so far, the literacy-centred paradigm does allow for reliable comparative research. It is our firm conviction that the greatest benefit for research on 19th century language use is precisely to be expected from such comparative analyses, especially when the researcher has sufficient background information on the author's educational history at his disposal. As often in historical linguistics, however, this factor is beyond the linguist's control.
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Bibliography


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