Abstract. This article discusses the structure of working class language use (Arbeitersprache) in Bruges during the 19th century. It will be demonstrated that the written language of this 'silent majority' of the population was a defective and ill-construed code, displaying defects at all linguistic levels, and consequently testifying of semi-literacy or near-literacy. Through a set of representative text samples, we will discuss such features as inconsequent spelling, word omission, unfinished sentences, lack of coherence and stylistic unstableness. Through a comparison of examples from the beginning and the end of the 19th century, written by both trade servants and masters, it will be shown that defective language use was not limited to lower groups of the working class, nor to the earlier years of the century. At the end of this article, we will argue that a discussion of 19th century language use (and of 'Arbeitersprache' in particular) should not only concentrate on the writer’s social class; social processes like literacy and schooling, which go beyond class boundaries, may have a far higher explanatory value in these matters.

0. Introduction

0.1. The department of Dutch studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel is currently involved in a research program about written language use in 19th-century Flanders. Contrary to former contributions on 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 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 1998 and passim). Since the early 1980s, this field of research has provided not only new insights in the standardisation process of the German language, but also historical evidence for the extreme social stratification of 19th-century German, which had previously 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. In order to meet limitations of time and manpower, an ongoing pilot-study now focuses on the situation in the city of Bruges (Willemeys & Vandenbergue 1995).

0.2. We explicitly chose to work with original data which had never been edited or used for linguistic analysis before. An extended corpus of handwritten texts was assembled and digitalized, containing documents from three distinct social domains.

For the lower classes, we dispose of a body of texts from workers’ organisations which covers the entire 19th century. These meeting reports stem from three different onderstandsmaatschappijen, the trade-linked predecessors of our social security funds (Pittomvils 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: 15-16). 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 reports written by guild masters has been added to the documents originally written by servants.

0.3. The middle-class corpus consists 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.

0.4. 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 (De Vries et al. 1994: 114). Bruges was no exception to this rule: the city was governed almost exclusively in French until 1898. To our great surprise, earlier this year we found the very well preserved records of the St. Sebastiaen archers’ guild, all kept in Dutch until the 1870s. This guild was, and still is today, one of the most prestigious upper-class societies in Bruges. An extensive selection of these handwritten books now figures as our upper-class corpus, and completed our body of 19th century material.

0.5. As mentioned above, the German research on Arbeitersprache served as an important source of inspiration for our study. Arbeitersprache and bürgerliche Sprache have become standard 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 the upper classes (bürgerliche Sprache) was explicitly standard-oriented, whereas the lower classes used their own 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 conception of Arbeitersprache. On the basis of similar text excertion 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 genuine 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 the German research lies), but seems to be increasing instead.

Next to this linguistic discussion, we also want to open a debate on the class-bound character of Arbeitersprache. Klenk (1998) ends her discussion of Arbeiterschriftsprache carefully suggesting that its characteristics “sogar für mehr als nur die Arbeiterschaft, vielleicht sogar für die ganze Unterschicht des 19. Jahrhunderts typisch sind”. 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.

As a consequence, the following paragraphs have been structured as follows:

1. What are the differences and similarities between the written Dutch of lower-class servants at the beginning and at the end of the 19th century?
2. What are the differences and similarities between the written Dutch of servants and masters at the beginning and at the end of the 19th century?
3. On the basis of these findings, we will highlight six hypotheses for further research. They contain a proposal for the relativization of the term Arbeitersprache, and concentrate on other factors than the social class to which a writer belongs to characterise his language use.

1. The language of lower-class servants around 1830

1.0. In Vandenbussche (1996) we showed 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 inconsequence served as the only rule, and that each writer used his own spelling system. Grammatical and stylistic singularities reinforce this impression.
1.1. 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 inconsequences are likely to appear.

In Vandenbussche (1996: 164-165) the three main spelling cruces were identified as the representations of diphthongs, long vowels and a limited number of consonants. They can be summarised as follows:

a) [ei] and [æi] are spelt <ey>-<uy> and <eij>-<uij> (gemeenzaemheyd-gemeenzaemheijd; buyten-buiiten), irrespective of the phonological environment.

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

c) The major problems with consonants concern phoneme pairs in which voicing is the distinctive feature. Different graphemes normally represent those distinct phonemes; but here, only one grapheme is used for both the voiced and the voiceless variant:
   - [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-konnen), whereas the <ck> and <q>-spelling can occur in word-medial and word-final position (deken-decken; clerck-clerq).

1.2. Although the majority 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 (refuest instead of refus, gedisgecrutiers instead of gedisgratieerd) should be seen in the same light.

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

The majority of the reports, though, have a very formal sounding 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 and 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 takes on many different grammatical forms, which have been discussed in detail in Vandenbussche (1996: 167-169). 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 sentence — is also frequently observed. Finally, extreme dislocation of sentence constituents also renders the texts difficult to interpret.

2. The language of lower-class servants around 1870

2.0. The named characteristics of the servants’ language use around 1830 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 standard of
writing proficiency 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 association of 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 rank.

2.1. *zoo riepen de comvraeter als gelyk als dat ik moeste gedikereert worden van de wollewevers en met de Rikerase en ik in de erstaeme genaemt het Paradys in de kamer waer al de Comvraters by waeren een zilver krus overmy hals gelyt en een eereeken 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*

The chairman’s language use is also characterised by the familiar spelling problems. 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; wollewever-wollewever*); the full original text harbours a large number of other examples.

Part of the apparent spelling chaos is due to dialect interference on the phonological and lexical level. *Gedikereert, krus* (or, in other excerpts, *sluten, goedgekurt and ze moesten*) are in fact meticulous phonetic transcriptions of the Bruges rendering of *gedecoreerd, kruis* (or *sluiten, goedgekeurd and ze moesten*). The author did make regular 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 reports: *rikerase* stands for *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, insufficient internal coherence, and wrong conjunctions (Vandenbussche, forthcoming).

2.2. *Is het niet schoon, ja, zelfs edel, Hulde te brengen, aen onzen Deken; die door moed en zelfsopffering, den eersten stichter is geworden, van een der schoonste en bloeijenste Maetschappijen der stad Brugge, onder kenspreuk de*
Broederliefde; en die nu dezelve met zooveel wijsheid bestuert. Ja eerveerde 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 proportional to the social in-group status. Our second author produced a very fluent text, which is correctly structured and consequently 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.

2.3. 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 had 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.

3. The language of trade masters

3.1. An analysis of the baker masters’ reports between 1819 and 1826 reflects the same heterogeneous writing quality found in servants’ texts from the 1870s. Some masters wrote grammatically correct sentences with consequent spelling choices. Others, however, shared the writing difficulties of the lower grades; such difficulties 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 [ei] are written now as <eij> and <uij>, now 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.

3.2. 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 zusammengebrauchten Stil.

Ten huyse van Deken Jonckeere ter presentie van alle De sorgers Deken ende greffier dat alle De sorgers hun verbinden aen alle Conparise die den Deken zal noodig vinden te houden die Aengaende het ambacht
[At the house of President ('Deken') Jonckeere in presence of all members ('sorgers') President ('Deken') and Secretary ('greffier') that all members commit themselves in all meetings ('Comparine') which the President will find necessary to hold which concerning the trade]

After the two introductory clauses, the writer omits the verb of the main clause: after greffier we expect werd er beslist dat ('it was decided that'). What follows after greffier 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, ‘to participate in’), and in the last subordinate clause which qualifies Conparise he merges two possible constructions for this clause into one ungrammatical one. Either he should say die het ambacht aangaan ('which concern the trade') or aangaande het ambacht ('concerning the trade'), but he ends up with die aengaende het ambacht ('which concerning the trade') instead.
3.3. At the end of the 19th century, however, the written production of the guild masters contains no more traces of zusammengebrochener Stil; but on the level of spelling we still find the same persisting difficulties.

Our corpus does not yet contain literary prose, but all reports are written in simple clear structures. There still are dialectal grammatical influences (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 for 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 structures, to build correct sentences and to think in coherent units. Apparently, this quality was generalised among the trade masters earlier than among the servants.

4. Six working hypotheses for future research

4.1. *Arbeitersprache* should not be seen as a uniform 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 based on 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 orthographical and structural defects reflect the most spectacular side of a continuum, ranging from erroneous attempts at sentences to almost perfectly structured texts.

4.2. The term *Arbeitersprache* raises problems from a sociological point of view. For different reasons, the 19th century language varieties found in our corpus cannot be determined exclusively in terms of class.

Defining the borders of different social classes is a troublesome task, which has inspired many scientific analyses. In the context of our research, some authors stress the unity of servants and masters, others label them as distinct 'strata' within a common social class, and still others claim that masters are to be distinguished as belonging to the 'petty bourgeoisie' (Crossick & Gerhard-Haupt 1995).

The historical dimension of our study contributes to this confusion: throughout the 19th century, the concept of class underwent continuous
change. As a result of the ongoing industrialisation, new professional categories arose, while the importance of other (more traditional) professions decreased simultaneously. Whereas masters were considered as belonging to the lower middle classes until 1850, their position was gradually taken over by merchants and small industrialists towards the beginning of the 20th century. Social patterns and inter-class relationships should, consequently, be redefined whenever one uses texts from a different period. This obviously confines the validity of these analyses and observations to specific contexts.

The actual ‘class consciousness’ of the writers does not allow for clear definition of classes either. The firm in-group sentiment of the baker masters in our corpus, 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).

Next to the societal and historical aspect, the regional dimension further blurs a straightforward definition of *Arbeiter*. Although they were separated by a relatively small distance, there were clear-cut differences between the everyday experiences of a trade servant in Bruges and a factory worker in Ghent (Scholliers 1996). In turn, these Flemish situations were entirely set apart from, for example, the mine workers’ society in the *Ruhrgebiet*, not only as to what concerns the nature of the occupation, but also on a social meta-level: both regions had an entirely distinct political, philosophical and linguistic character.

4.3. Across all class-internal differences, whether they are 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 (Mattheier 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 holds for an possible polarisation between masters’ and servants’ language use.

Consequently, a new descriptive paradigm should be introduced. We propose to abandon the strict focus on class-membership, in favour of
describing an author’s personal language use in terms of literacy, and of his
relative mastery of 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 sliding scale from illiterate to literate. Some authors may display a
constant move towards the positive pole during their life, while for others the
process has suddenly been broken off.

4.4. 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 sparse 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 yielded 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.

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 1970b).

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 manpower 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.

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 devoted to 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 Scriptures.
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 provided the only rudiments of literacy training, which explains the long-lasting tradition of these so-called *abecedaria* in the history of religious education (Burger 1927, De Clerck et al. 1984).

The process of learning to write is generally thought of as proceeding in three stages: graphemization — learning how to form letters and acquiring the correspondence between sign and sound —, standardisation, and elaboration (Read 1986, Luelsdorff 1991). From our data it has become clear that for many writers this process was broken off at the first stage, as abecedaria did not go beyond the first objective.

4.5. It may be useful to go beyond the personalised dimension of the literacy paradigm. Our corpus consists of public material, ‘written-to-be-read’, destined for the other members of the insurance fund. Their acceptance of the variable grammatical and orthographical text quality feeds speculations concerning the social judgements on limited literacy.

There is reason to believe that illiteracy or limited literacy did not provoke social censure within the lower classes. Our corpus even provides one example of an illiterate person who was elected to the highest position in the assistance companies. In this respect, consequent spelling and grammatical correctness were 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 non-corrected. Assuming that the minutes of a meeting are normally re-read, it is hard to believe that a writer would have overlooked errors like *slock* 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.
4.6. 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 masked the social stratification of the process. In a revealing analysis, Callewaert (1963: 214-215) distinguished the evolution for 4 different social layers throughout the first half of the 19th century, which yielded the following data:

Table 1 - Percentage of illiterates per social class

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>1797-1815</th>
<th>1815-1830</th>
<th>1830-1840</th>
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<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 workers)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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How should these results, which explicitly link literacy to differences in class and timing, be combined with our data and linguistic analyses?

We propose to refine the model of a general sliding scale of literacy into independent continua for each class, which underwent a subsequent phase of expansion and reduction, not simultaneously but at different moments in time. Metaphorically, these evolutions could be represented through the image of springs which are first compressed close to the pole of illiteracy, then stretched to their full length, followed by a gradual compression towards the other pole of full literacy.

For the upper classes, the right pole had apparently already been reached around 1800. At that time, the fully stretched spring of the 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 interwar period. This visualisation once more stresses the impact of the temporal context on text analysis.
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# VARIATION IN (SUB)STANDARD LANGUAGE

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