DUTCH ORTHOGRAPHY IN LOWER, MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASS DOCUMENTS IN 19TH- CENTURY FLANDERS

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1. Introduction

The 19th century could be considered a forgotten chapter in the linguistic study of the development of Dutch in Flanders. Although many contributions have been published on external aspects of the Flemish language situation in the Late Modern period (Witte & Van Velthoven 1999 is a standard reference), there is to date no comprehensive description of the grammatical features of the language at that time, nor is anything known about social and stylistic variation in actual language use. In most cases, major scientific ‘Histories of Dutch’ (most notably Van den Toorn et al. 1997) pay marginal attention to the subject. Similar remarks have recently been made about research on the history of English (Görlich 1999:1) and German (Mattheier 1998:1), but the case of Dutch in Flanders is particularly striking.

It is generally agreed that the 19th century was a vital period for the development, standardization and even survival of the Dutch language in the present day area of Flanders (Van de Craen & Willems 1988). Due to territorial separation from the Northern Dutch provinces (which coincide with the current territory of the Netherlands) at the end of the 16th century, and under influence of the French-favouring policies of successive Spanish (1585–1714), Austrian (1714–1794) and French (1794–1815) rulers, Dutch could not develop towards a standard prestige language in Flanders. The nature of Flemish Dutch around 1800 is usually described as a collection of dialects, of which the functions were restricted to the informal and [-prestige]-areas. Contrary to the situation in Holland, there was no widely accepted standard Dutch which could be used for supraregional communication — in general, French was used for such purposes instead (De Vries et al. 1994). Common opinion has it that “Flanders’ native language was pushed down the social ladder, where the lower
middle class, farmers and workers mingled" (Witte et al. 2000:44); there is
evidence, though — as will become clear from this article — that the upper
classes, too, continued to use Dutch in everyday writing (see Vandenbussche
forthcoming).

Yet, at the end of the century in 1898, Dutch was officially recognized
(alongside French) as Belgium’s national language, and today, another hundred
years later, it is the official fully standardized language of all Flemings. This
phoenix-like restoration was largely due to the so-called ‘Flemish Movement’,
a socio-political and linguistic emancipatory movement whose actions and
merits have already been described in great historical detail (NEVB 1998).

However, the purely linguistic aspects of this evolution ‘from rags to
riches’ and the gradual growth of the language standardization process in
Flanders, have not yet been described on the basis of original sources, let alone
from a historical sociolinguistic point of view.

Over the past five years, our research team at the Free University of
Brussels has been working on the first research project which does take into
account these linguistic, social and stylistic aspects of standardization in 19th-
century Flanders (Vandenbussche & Willemyns 2000; De Groof in this
volume).

To this end we collected an original corpus of handwritten texts — meeting
reports — spanning the whole period between 1800 and 1900 and pertaining to
Flemish writers in Bruges from three distinct social classes. For the lower
classes we used documents of various assistance companies
(onderstandsmaatschappijen) for trade apprentices. These organizations can
be considered early precursors of our present day social security funds: they
guaranteed members and their families minimal financial support in the event
of illness, invalidity, pension and death (Michiels 1978). Our corpus contains
an extensive selection of meeting minutes written by apprentices in the trades
of shoemaker, wool weaver, tailor and brush maker. These documents are all
kept in the municipal archive and the folklore museum of Bruges. Similar
structures existed for the middle class oriented trade masters, and we were able,
accordingly, to select a large sample of meeting reports from the baker masters’
assistance company as our middle class corpus. In order to compile a database
of upper class meeting reports, finally, we were granted permission to consult
the archive of the Saint Sebastian archers’ guild, which was (and still is today)
one of the most prestigious high society circles in the town (Godar 1947).

Each of these documents has been digitalized — manually transcribed in
word processing format — and analyzed in search of standardization features
on the levels of orthography, grammar and style. We have thus been able to
describe for the first time the real impact of various language planning
measures throughout the 19th century on actual language users, and the possible differentiation according to the writers' social status. The successive models for a standardized Dutch spelling certainly ranked among the most controversial of these measures at the time (Couvreur & Willeyns 1998); in this article I will try to illustrate the extent to which these spelling norms had an effect on the everyday writer in the practice of writing meeting reports.

One methodological comment should be included at this point. I am well aware of the fact that the categorization of writers into various social classes is a highly sensitive issue, especially when one takes into account that the social and economic structure in Flanders (but also in the rest of Europe) during the 19th century was constantly changing (Witte et al. 2000). The rise of the middle class, the slow transition from a trade-based to an industrialized economy and the subsequent changes in the relative financial status of certain professions make it a perilous undertaking to define a clear social structure in 19th-century Bruges — it should be noted that this description is not available to date in the secondary literature on the history of the town (partial contributions can be found in Michiels 1978 and Van Eenoo 1959).

For this research, we have used the scribes' relative esteem for their own and other professions — as expressed in the corpus texts — as the main criterion for our broad three-class categorization (lower, middle and upper class). The members of the Sebastian archers' guild repeatedly identified themselves as the town's social and financial elite and explicitly cultivated this image with, amongst other things, philanthropic actions in favour of the lower classes (bread distributions, for example) (Godar 1947). This prestige-focused approach on the basis of text internal elements has further proved to be useful to distinguish between 'lower class' trade apprentices and 'middle class' trade masters (who could, alternatively, have been seen as belonging to one and the same 'trade class'). From their written 'behavioural code for members' it becomes clear that apprentices considered their masters to belong to a higher social class; the discussions included in the apprentices' meeting reports further confirm their poor financial status and their dire need for financial support in case of illness and invalidity. The masters clearly distinguished themselves from their subordinate apprentices on moral and/or financial grounds: they literally stated, for example, that their apprentices were not to be allowed in their assistance company.

2. **Spelling norms**

Stripped of all emotional, tactical and political elements involved (see De Groof in this volume), the controversy over the spelling of Dutch in Flanders throughout the first half of the 19th century came down to the conflict between
either adhering to Northern Dutch spelling standards or introducing specifically Flemish elements in the writing system.

This discussion gained momentum after the Dutch government officially imposed Siegenbeek’s model as the spelling standard for the Netherlands in 1804. In Flanders (which was subsequently under French rule until 1815 and under Dutch rule until 1830, before it become a part of the independent Belgian state), this decision was favoured by the so-called ‘integrationists’. Others chose to defend the existing Brabantic spelling system of des Roches, or the newly developed model of Behaegel. After Belgian independence, a special spelling commission developed a new model which very much resembled the existing Siegenbeek norm, and which was given force of law in Belgium from 1844 on. This rapprochement between Flemish and Dutch spelling standards eventually led to the acceptance of a common norm designed by de Vries & Te Winkel in 1864.

Each of these systems may have been influential to some extent in the region of Bruges, either due to its official status (Siegenbeek, Commission and de Vries-Te Winkel), its regional character (Behaegel) or its relative monopoly at the time (des Roches). A contrastive linguistic study of the different models remains to be written, however (Molewijk 1992 contains a ‘popular-scientific’ account of these spelling reforms). In Table 1 I have tried to bring together the spelling norms from the respective systems for fifteen distinct phonemes. (The reader will note that there are sixteen entries; for the [aː] phoneme a distinction has been made between the spelling in open and closed syllables, since the additional <a> spelling only occurred in open syllable position.)

This description is tentative and does not aspire to completeness: the phonemes were selected on the basis of the most frequent examples of spelling variation which were found in the research corpora. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the distribution of the spelling variants for each phoneme in the different models; for now, it may suffice to say that different spelling forms within one model can only be used in distinct and well defined circumstances, and that shared spelling variants across different models do not necessarily have the same distribution in each of these models.
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Table 1: Spelling norms for fifteen phonemes under five different spelling systems
3. Spelling reality

3.1 Lower class writers

None of the preceding models was ever adopted consistently by any of the lower class writers in our corpus. It is clear that the strict normative views of the successive spelling designers were either unknown or ignored, but this does not necessarily mean that the spelling of the Flemish lower class writers was normless or unsystematic. I contest the traditionally held opinion that the relative uniformity of written Dutch in Holland contrasted with absolute spelling chaos in Flanders (Suffeleers 1979:19), and I do so with respect to the upper, middle and lower classes.

A systematic analysis of the variants used for the cited phonemes shows that each of the lower class authors had developed their own spelling system (Vandenbussche 1999). The use of spelling variants for the same phoneme within the same text was a core element of these spelling systems. Variability should, in other words, neither be seen as chaos, nor as a deviation from existing official norms, but as an essential characteristic of the distinct spelling systems of all lower class writers.

It was perfectly normal for lower class writers to write the same word in two different ways in the same text or sentence. We can thus find *gemeensaemheid* ("association") next to *gemeenzaamheyd*, without any correction or attempt to make consistent spelling choices. A striking example of this spelling tolerance was found in the following text, which contains three successive identical formulae on the same page which were beyond any doubt written at the same sitting. Although the author could have copied the first example twice, the second and third versions contain divergent spelling forms; one also notes that certain words were suddenly capitalized or linked up with other words.

Dem zelve dag wierd Gereslooveerd En vast Gestel by deze Gemeenzaemheyd
Den Zelve dag wierd Gereslooveert Een vast Gestel by deze Gemeenzaemheijd
Den zelve dag wierd

als dat zal gegeven worden aen Agt Druck Een wessel
als dat zal gegeven worden aen Joseph Goorens, op wessel, de somme
gegeven aen Eugenius annoij, op wessel desomme

van 700 francs Capital tegen den penning sesen ten honderd
van 700 frfrancs capital, tegen den penning sesen ten hondert
van 700 f francs, Capital, tegen den penning sesen ten hondert,
voor den tyd van twee Jaeren beginnende met den twee-en-twintigsten novemhre 1814
voor den tyd van twee Jaeren beginnende met den twee en twintigsten Novemhre 1814
voor den tyd van twee Jaeren begennende met den twee en twintigsten Novemhre 1814

En Vervallende met den 17 Novembre 1816 memori
Endevervallede met den 17 Nove 1816 Memori
En de vervallede met dem 17 Novembre 1816 Memori

[The same day it was decided and stipulated by this association/
that will be given to Agt Druck/Joseph Goorens/Eugenius annoij a bill of exchange
worth the sum/
of 700 francs capital at an interest rate of six percent/
for the time of two years starting on the 22nd November 1814/
and ending on the 17th November 1816 Memori.]
(In the third example the introductory phrase was shortened to [The same day was/
given to...])
(Meeting minutes tailor apprentices, November 21st, 1814; our translation)

There were clear constraints on spelling variation, however. Analysis of
the corpus made it possible to predict where variants would most probably
occur (the fifteen cases cited above), but also to predict which allographs could
be used. An overview of all possible allographs which were actually used in
the whole corpus throughout the 19th century is presented in Table 2, which
should be interpreted as a maximal system capturing the greater part of all
tolerable spelling variation.

All writers applied their own restrictions within these limits; the
frequencies with which the variants were used also differed from writer to
writer. It is not surprising to see that most variants also occurred in one of the
different official spelling norms, which once more indicates that lower class
spelling was not inspired by chaos but rather by a certain tradition. In this
context one can refer to the remarks made by Milroy (1992:133-134) about the
spelling of Early Middle English authors: “[I]f the scribes really had used
variants ‘at will’, we would actually be unable to read the texts [...] there must
always be some order in any spelling system that we can read, even if it is a
variable system [...] it is our task to attempt to specify the constraints on
spelling under which they were working, always admitting that after we have
done this, there may well be residues of apparent randomness that we cannot
explain.”
Table 2: Allographs used in the corpus throughout the 19th century

Many of these ‘residues’ can either be explained as attempts to use formal or foreign terms with which the lower class writers were probably not familiar — and which, accordingly, were reconstructed in the best possible way, rendering e.g. refuest instead of refus (“refusal”) and gedisgrcutiers instead of gedisgratieerd (“disgraced”) — or as dialectal interferences (krus for kruis (“cross”) and alk for elk (“each”) reflecting the Bruges dialectal pronunciations [krys] and [alk]) (Vandenbussche 1999). It should be clear, however, that the writers did not attempt to write dialect. On the formal level these regional interferences were very modest (compared to, for example, the (fully intended) dialect transcriptions in Lootens 1868 and the description of the Bruges dialect in De Wolf n.d.). As far as functional aspects are concerned, their written variety may be defined as an ‘intended standard language’, a term used by Mihm 1998 (“intendiertes Hochdeutsch”) to refer to a variety which does not meet the formal requirements of a standard language (e.g. consistent spelling and grammatical correctness) but which is nevertheless intended by the writer
to fulfil the functions attributed to a standard variety (e.g. supraregional communication, prestige variety) (Vandenbussche forthcoming).

How did this concept of ‘consistent spelling variability’ evolve throughout the 19th century? There is no evidence that writers changed their spelling habits when a new official norm was adopted, nor of an overall partial move towards the official norm around 1900. Some writers from the second half of the century even displayed more variation than their colleagues fifty years earlier. In the writings of certain authors we can, however, distinguish a growing personal standardization. This should not be understood as the gradual approach towards an existing official norm, but rather as the ongoing limitation of the personal tolerance of variability. In other words: the basic philosophy of consistency (‘one character for one phoneme’) became ever more apparent in certain lower class texts, too, but this need not result in a system consistent with the official spelling guideline.

Variable spelling was combined throughout the 19th century with the so-called zusammengenbrochener Stil or Stilzusammenbruch (Mattheier 1986). This concept (lit. “stylistic breakdown”) from German sociolinguistics refers to authors’ inability to control the stylistic and grammatical properties of the text-type used — be it letters or official meeting minutes — which results (among other things) in syntactical anomalies, the omission of constituents and, in some cases, the loss of text structure. The co-occurrence of variable spelling and Stilzusammenbruch is believed by certain German authors to be typical of Arbeitsprachen (Klenk 1997, Mattheier 1990), exclusive lower class varieties in the 19th century. At first sight, the simultaneous presence of these linguistic features in Flemish and also in English (Fairman 2000) lower class texts seems to confirm this universalist conception. Then again, the everyday life of a Flemish trade apprentice had so little in common with that of a German mineworker or an English pauper that one can justly question the existence of a uniform shared lower class identity from a sociological point of view; the shared characteristics in their written output should, in any case, not be attributed to the factor ‘class’ as such.

3.2 Middle class writers

Since the middle class writers displayed the same amount and identical patterns of spelling variation and since no official guideline was ever fully adopted by any of them either (Vandenbussche 1999), there is no evidence at this stage to support the claim that middle class writers spelled better or more consistently than their lower class colleagues, either at the beginning or at the end of the 19th century. Once again, the influence of the spelling
standardization movement seems not to have reached this part of the population.

There is more to this claim, however, than the simple observation that lower and middle class spelling were virtually identical. Despite the strong correspondences between lower and middle class texts until 1850, a striking qualitative divergence was noted towards the end of the century on the level of text and sentence structure (Vandenbussche 1999). The Stilzusammenbrüche which were also present in the middle class meeting minutes during the first decades of the century — albeit in a more idiosyncratic way — disappeared almost completely after 1850, rendering a text image which came very close to the texts produced by upper class associations.

The implications of this are at least threefold:
- until 1850, the combination of variable spelling and zusammengebrochener Stil was found in both lower and middle class texts. This contradicts the traditionally held views of an exclusive Arbeitersprache, at least as far as Flanders is concerned. Further research is needed to confirm whether similar patterns also occurred in middle class English and German.
- the stylistic and grammatical standardization movement had little impact on the lower classes during the 19th century, but did successfully reach the middle classes from 1850 on. This may indicate a phased diffusion from the upper towards the lower classes.
- standardized spelling may have been considered less important or seen as less of a hindrance for ‘getting one’s meaning across’ than stylistic and grammatical correctness.

3.3 Upper class writers

Research on the upper class material is not yet complete, so that it is not possible to pronounce a full judgement on the spelling behaviour of the higher social echelons in Bruges. Texts from the first quarter of the 19th century indicate, however, that there was also a considerable degree of spelling variation in the formal meeting reports of one of the most prestigious upper class associations in Bruges (the Sebastian archers’ guild mentioned above). These writers used exactly the same spelling variants as their socially inferior colleagues, for vowels, diphthongs and consonants alike. For some phonemes, though, the stage of consistent variable choice had already been reached (see Table 3).

Apart from a few syntactical anomalies, neither massive loss of style control nor incoherent text structures occurred. The persistence or evolution of this text pattern during the rest of the century is the subject of ongoing research.
Table 3: Comparison of spelling variants used by Lower/Middle Class writers until 1900, and by Upper Class writers around 1820.

4. Discussion
How should we interpret the corresponding spelling problems of lower, middle and upper class writers? What is the key to the apparent phased social stratification of increasing writing quality during the 19th century? I believe that the answer to both questions is to be found in the history of writing education in Flanders, and in the patterns of literacy acquisition in 19th-century Bruges.
Although there was no direct link between writers' social class and the quality of their written language, there most certainly was a connection between relative wealth and the availability of quality writing education. The richer the parents, the better the schools they could afford for their children. Expensive daytime schools offered a full language curriculum with composition and grammar exercises, whereas Sunday schools for the poor hardly rose above the level of alphabet learning (Michiels 1978, de Clerck et al. 1984).

One effect of this layered system is reflected in Figure 1 (based on Callewaert 1963), which convincingly shows that literacy in Bruges gradually spread from the highest towards the lowest social classes in the second half of the 18th and the whole of the 19th century. The graph illustrates the percentage of illiterate people for four different social classes during the first half of the 19th century in Bruges and indicates that in Bruges the general literacy level — and, presumably, the quality of writing education — rose first among the higher social classes. Whereas the large majority of the middle classes (here further divided into ‘middle class’ and ‘skilled workers’) was fully literate around 1850, the lowest social classes (roughly corresponding to ‘unskilled workers’) only reached the level of full literacy at the beginning of the 20th century.
As indicated earlier, I have been able to show (Vandenbussche 1999) that the spelling and style problems of the lowest social classes during the last phase of the acquisition of literacy (second half of the 19th century) were identical to those of the middle classes during their last phase of the acquisition of literacy, half a century earlier (first half of the 19th century). There is reason to suggest, therefore, that the lower and lower middle class texts may provide examples of transitional varieties, which should be located on a sliding scale between literacy and illiteracy. The lower and middle class language in the research corpora could then be considered as reflecting two phases of this literacy acquisition, which started at different points in time for each class. If our hypothesis about the transitional character of literacy-linked varieties is right, one of the future results of our ongoing research may be the discovery of consistent examples of these frequent spelling and style problems in the writings of the Flemish upper classes before 1800.

Literacy percentages may reveal the educational profile of different social classes, but they also convey information about the importance attached to the mastery of reading and writing in these groups. Next to the need for a detailed analysis of Flemish pauper education, it is therefore necessary to clarify the sociological impact of literacy in the lower, middle and upper classes. I assume that upper class life in Bruges contained a substantial written core by the beginning of the 19th century. Lower and middle class writers, on the contrary, may still have lived in cultures which were to a large extent orally based; many of their writing problems are indeed typical of writers in the transition from an oral to a written culture (Fairman 2000).

This is reminiscent of the German distinction between writers whose professions were either handarbeiterorientiert or schriftarbeiterorientiert (Mihm 1998); an insight into the evolution of the lower and middle class professions in Bruges on the continuum between both poles would most certainly contribute to a better understanding of the research data. The professional obligation to become literate probably did not imply immediate ‘perfection’ on the levels of spelling, grammar and style. During the first years of this transition not all class members may even have felt the need to be literate, as long as someone was able to write and perform the expected written tasks.

The relative importance of standardization in different socio-professional contexts (once a literate culture had been adopted) is a third factor which may partly explain the social stratification of writing quality. By the end of the 19th century many associations may have felt the need to perform certain written tasks, but depending on the amount of external communication and the intended reading public, a high degree of stylistic and grammatical standardization was not always required. Our data show this standardization
should, in any case, not be understood in the traditional present day sense of the word. The process did not involve the acceptance of a single norm for spelling and grammar, but rather a growing concern with intelligibility. Consistent spelling was of little importance in this respect, but a sound text structure was.

5. Conclusion

In sum, spelling standardization (in the present day sense of minimal variation in form) was unimportant to the majority of the 19th-century writers in Bruges. Whereas lower and middle class writers continued to use a variable spelling system up until 1900, there are indications that upper class writers, too, may have shared this custom for a long period into the 19th century. In the light of these findings the virulent controversy among contemporary spelling designers in 19th-century Flanders is reduced to a sterile theoretical discussion which took place above the heads of the actual writers. To these language users, the ‘war on spelling’ was a non-issue. There are indications, however, that — due to the growing impact of supraregional communication — a certain need for standardization was felt in the realm of style and grammar, first among the higher and, soon afterwards, among the lower social classes.

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