Wim Vandenbuusche, Jetje De Groof, Eline Vanhecke & Roland Willemyns

Historical sociolinguistics in Flanders: Rediscovering the 19th century

Introduction

Historical sociolinguistics is a relatively young discipline (Romaine 1982; Mattheier 1988) which, until a decade ago, was mainly practiced and elaborated in Germany. As a state-of-the-art overview article of the sociolinguistic activity in the Dutch language area recently observed (Hagen & Van Hout 1998), the absence of studies on the historical sociolinguistics of Dutch was in line with the situation in the rest of the world. Yet, there was, as they pointed out, one major exception, i.e. the so-called ‘Brugge project’ of the Centre for Linguistics of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. What is referred to here is a project which started in the early nineties of the 20th century as a sociolinguistic study of the linguistic situation in Brugge during the 19th century. Taking into account a number of relevant sociolinguistic variables for the language situation in 19th century Flanders – variables which had often been neglected or misinterpreted in the past – research was done into the linguistic behaviour of various actors in the language community, mainly though not only from the town of Brugge in West-Flanders. This was done exclusively – a novelty at that time as well – on the basis of original source material, never used for linguistic research before (Willemyns / Vandenbuusche 2000).

1 An overview of the German production is given in Mattheier (1998) and Vandenbuusche (2002a). Meanwhile, a number of consistent long-term projects in historical sociolinguistics have also been set up in other countries. For English, for example, cf. the projects of the ‘Sociolinguistics and language history’ team in Helsinki (Nevalainen / Raumolin-Brunberg 2003); for Norwegian, cf. Jahr (2001); for Portuguese, cf. Carvalho (2003). An introductory bibliography can be found on the homepage of the e-journal ‘Historical sociolinguistics and socio-historical linguistics’: www.let.leidenuniv.nl/English/staff/tieken/tieken.html.
Shortly after, the project has been enlarged to encompass other aspects and cover a larger geographic area. All four authors of the present article are affiliated with the research unit mentioned and have contributed to various aspects of past and ongoing research on the topic. Both detailed result reports and accounts of research-in-progress have been published over the past years in a large number of international as well as domestic scientific publications.  

The present article is the first overview in English summarizing the major findings and challenges of all the various parts of this research project. Although the research topics are interrelated, the paper has been subdivided in the following distinct paragraphs for the sake of clearness: ‘language planning’, ‘language and ideology’, ‘language and class’, ‘language and administration’ and ‘language and the media’. An introductory paragraph focuses on the complex political history of Flanders which determined its linguistic make-up during the 19th century to a great extent. 

Although the link to German historical dialectology may not be obvious right away, various sections of the project discussed here have, to some extent, been inspired by German research projects concerning the linguistic historiography of ‘das lange 19. Jahrhundert’. Both with regard to methodology and thematic focus, we profited from, among others, the German experience on the topics of ‘Arbeitersprache’ (KLENK 1997, MATTHEIER 1986, MIHM 1998, SCHIKORSKY 1990), ‘bürgerliche Sprache’ (CEREBIUM 1983, LINKE 1996) and corpus design (GROSSE 1989, HÜNECKE 1997). In MATTHEIER’s (1998) overview article of the impressive scholarly production so far in these domains further references can be found on studies which have largely inspired our own research. Also, it should be mentioned, that there has been a continuous and intense exchange of views with a number of the aforementioned authors and their research teams, for example in the context of the ‘Arbeitskreis Historische Stadtsprachenforschung’ (BISSER-BROOSEN 1999) and the ‘Graduiertenkolleg Dynamik von Substandard-varietäten’ in Heidelberg.

2 Cf. the reference section entries for the individual and joint publications of De Groof, Vandebussche, Vanhecke and Willemyns.
Historical background

As the official language of Belgium and the Netherlands, Dutch may be considered a pluricentric language. As of today the pluricentric or peripheral character of Belgian Dutch is simply a matter of scientific categorization. This used to be different in the 19th century, when it was not always sure which direction the standardization process of Dutch in Flanders was going to take.

From the very beginning of the Middle Dutch writing tradition a linguistic contrast between an easterly and a westerly shaped variety can be witnessed, the main feature of the east-west opposition being the presence (east) or absence (west) of the secondary umlaut and the completely different inflectional systems that resulted from it, giving way to structurally differing language varieties. The overwhelming majority of all texts displayed decidedly western language features and the written language of the Middle Dutch period was firmly western (specifically Flemish) in its roots even in the non-Flemish parts of the language territory. In the 16th century, though, the economic and political centre of gravity of the Dutch language area shifted to Brabant, and Antwerp, Mechelen and Brussels developed into the more important centres. During this period a standard variety of the written language was taking shape. It was mainly based on the language varieties of Flanders and Brabant (VAN DEN BRANDEN 1956).

This standardization process, though, would very soon change its course dramatically as a result of the revolt of the Low Countries against their Roman Catholic Spanish rulers, starting in the sixties of the 16th century. The political split of the language area, which occurred as a consequence of that revolt, had a dramatic impact on the evolution of Dutch. From 1585 onwards the Low Countries were divided into two separate parts (more or less present-day Holland and Belgium), each with its specific political, cultural, religious, and social development. The centre of gravity of standardization gradually passed to the North (more or less the present-day Netherlands) which had come out victoriously and as an independent nation from the war.

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3 A full account of the sociolinguistic history of Dutch in Flanders can be found in WILLEMYNs (2003).
against the Spanish rulers. The large number of (mostly wealthy, influential and highly educated) southern immigrants accounted for a permanent live contact with Southern Dutch, which was, at that moment, still the prestige variety of the language. Yet, it was gradually ruled out as far as its influence on the evolution of Standard Dutch was concerned.

As a result of the Spanish War of Succession (1702-1713), the southern ‘Belgian’ territories were passed on from the Spanish to the Austrian branch of Habsburg, which ruled through the end of the 18th century. The consolidation of French as the more socially acceptable tongue continued, and Dutch lost most of its official status and of its standard language functions, except at the local level.

In 1795 the ‘Belgian’ territories were annexed by France. Their inhabitants were considered citizens of the newly created French Republic, and for the first time in history there was a massive official attempt to change the linguistic habits of the masses by suppressing the Dutch language (Dénecker 1975). The northern part of The Netherlands was overrun by French revolutionary troops as well, yet, here no conscious effort was made to rule out the vernacular language. After French troops had occupied Utrecht in February 1795, a „Bataafsche Republiek”, a French vassal state, was founded that same year. In 1806 it was replaced by the „Kingdom of Holland” of which Louis Napoleon, one of Napoleon’s brothers was the king. The political changes during the French time were, as De Bonth e. a. (1997: 369) state, „beneficial to the standardization of Dutch”. At any rate, it was during the French time that two of the main instruments for the standardization of Dutch were published, viz. Siegenbeek’s spelling and Weiland’s grammar.

As a result of the political wish of the victorious anti-Napoleon coalition Belgium and Holland were reunited as one United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1814-1830), meant to be a fortress on France’s northern borders (De Jonghe 1967). This union, although short-lived, was of the utmost importance to the Flemings, who suddenly rediscovered their language for administration, politics, the courts and education, areas where it had but seldom been used for almost two centuries. Although the reunification period was too short for the official policy of ‘Dutchification’ to really succeed, a
small group of cultural leaders and intellectuals were strongly influenced by both the Dutch standard language and the new linguistic opportunities. In this way King Willem’s relatively short reign was decisive for the eventual success of the Flemish Movement.

By 1830 Belgium had become an independent constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system dominated by the bourgeois elite, which secured its position by adopting a poll-tax system: out of 3.5 million people, only 46,000 had the right to vote (RUYS 1981: 47). For this bourgeoisie, French was a natural choice as the language of the state and so doing the only language used in the administration and indeed in public life in general. The government appointed only French-speaking civil servants and the discrimination of Dutch throughout the 19th century was generalized and very deliberate (WILLEMYNs / DE GROOF / VANDENBUSSCHE 2002). Hence, despite the fact that Dutch speakers constituted the majority of the population\(^4\), no legal means were provided for their language. A so-called Flemish Movement was started up almost immediately and fought a long lasting battle for cultural and linguistic rights for Dutch speakers.

It took until 1898, though, for the gelijkheidswet (‘equality law’) to declare Dutch and French the two official languages of the country. It took a complete century to finally achieve the so-called ‘Dutchification’ of the university of Ghent (in 1930), meaning that, at last, Dutch speaking university students were taught in their own language. Afterwards things developed considerably faster: two sets of laws in 1932 and 1963 guaranteed what had been the ultimate goal of the Flemish Movement, i.e., the official and complete ‘Dutchification’ of Flanders. The Walloons having been opposed to widespread bilingualism throughout the country, Belgium gradually turned to the territoriality principle model to accommodate the various linguistic groups. It is officialized the language frontier as a domestic administrative border, made it virtually unchangeable and accomplished the linguistic homogeneity of the language groups and regions. Revisions of the constitution in 1970 and 1980 provided for cultural autonomy and a considerable amount of self-determination for the linguistically divided parts of the country. Sub-

\(^4\) 2.3 million Dutch speakers as opposed to 1.2 million French speakers (RUYS 1981: 47).
sequent constitutional changes in 1988 (WITTE / CRAEYBECKX / MEYNEN 2000) and in 1993 (ALEN / SUETENS 1993) finally turned Belgium into the federal country it is now.

Language planning

Given the historical context sketched above, it comes as no surprise that language planning has been an important aspect of the standardization of Dutch in Belgium from the beginning of the "lange 19. Jahrhundert" onwards. Individuals, organizations, academies, political parties and the various successive governments have all tried to influence the language situation in accordance with their own particular views and agendas. Despite academic interest from historians and political scientists, these official and non-official interventions have thus far hardly ever been analysed from a purely (socio)linguistic perspective. The part of our project discussed in this paragraph tries to fill this gap, and serves as the backbone for the evaluation of the actual language use in the 19th century society as found in the archive sources (see below).

Before 1830

Up until the end of the Austrian rule over the Southern Low Countries (1794), no official language legislation was imposed on the inhabitants of these territories. The Spanish and Austrian rulers did display a personal preference for French, though, which was shared by the higher social classes. From 1795 onwards, the one nation, one language policy from the French rulers provoked a dramatic language-political change. After a failed attempt in 1794 to Frenchify all court and administrative life, a language law of 1803 stipulated that from 1804 onwards, all official documents were to be written in French. The press, literature and theatre in Dutch, also gradually became subject to a directed language policy, for the first time ever.

After the defeat of Napoleon, the Dutch monarch William I tried to re-implement the Dutch language in education, administration and the court

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through a series of language laws. This new language policy stirred a heavy debate in which both the opponents and advocates used arguments which would later return at the centre of the Dutch-French language struggle during the Belgian period. Adversaries referred to the status and prestige of French, to the poor development of the Flemish dialects, and continuously claimed that Dutch and Flemish were separate unrelated languages. They eagerly used the support found in the already cited fact „that our Flemings from the Southern provinces, understand with difficulty, or do not understand at all, the Dutch of the Northern provinces, which is mutual” (Defrenne 1829: 7). The advocates, on the contrary, underlined the common historical and linguistic background of both languages (the Northern and Southern varieties of Dutch) and praised the inherent grammatical features of Dutch (its alleged ‘structural simplicity’, for example).

William’s language policy failed in the end. The reticent attitude of the heavily Frenchified Liberal group (who supported his economic policy) certainly contributed to this failure, as did the fierce opposition from the Catholic clergy who put Northern Dutch on a par with Protestantism. Both groups joined forces, organized petitions against the language legislation, and, eventually, forced the Dutch King to redraw his language laws on the brink of Belgian independence.

**From 1830 onwards**

Belgium emerged as a state which advocated *de iure* full freedom of language choice, but became *de facto* fully Frenchified in the official administration, the court, the army and the educational system. A new, emerging, non-Frenchified middle class (trained during the time of the reunification with The Netherlands) objected to this Frenchification of public life and gave rise to the Flemish Movement in the 1830s. First perceived as harmless (its initial main activities were literary, not political), the Movement gradually became an influential political player from the 1840s onwards. Its leaders demanded laws which would guarantee the basic right to use one’s own language in the domains listed above.

Although the Movement reunited people who shared a longing for linguistic emancipation, the group was far from monolithic from the very on-
set. As a matter of fact, it reflected all the common oppositions of public life at the time, most notably the ideological divide between Catholics and non-Catholics. This opposition would continue to determine many of the discussions within the Movement up until the last quarter of the 20th century.

The Movement’s main political aim (and, eventually, realisation) was the introduction of the ‘territoriality principle’ in Flanders. Whereas people used to have the choice between speaking French or Dutch in all spheres of public life (i.e. the ‘personality principle’), the Movement accomplished that all official administration, court and education in Flanders had to be organized in Dutch. This political and social (r)evolution has been described in great detail (cf. NEVB 1998) and need not concern us further here. The ‘extra-linguistic’ language legislation has most certainly contributed to the gradual standardization process of Dutch in Flanders, but we will mainly focus on the ‘internal-linguistic’ planning activities that were used and implemented to support this standardization and the integration of Northern and Southern Dutch. It will become clear that the government was only marginally involved in this process. Especially where the attempts to change the attitudes towards the language issue were at stake, a large share of the planning activities was initiated by non-official actors.

Language planning measures

As far as the orthography issue was concerned, the government did participate in the attempts to arrive at an official spelling system. The paragraphs below on ‘language and ideology’, ‘language and class’ and ‘language and government’ each deal with detailed aspects of this discussion; it may suffice here to say that the question of orthography has been a lively one from the very beginning of the existence of Belgium, dominated by social and ideological issues. The Belgian government adopted its first official spelling for Dutch in 1844 (the Committee-spelling), and changed to the DE VRIES-TE WINKEL-spelling in 1869; both choices came down to an approach towards the spelling system for Dutch which was used in The Netherlands at the time (cf. VANDENBUSSCHE 2002b for an overview of these systems). The integrationist fraction hoped that this gradual adoption
of the Northern spelling system would also convey the prestige of the Northern Dutch language to the written language in Flanders.

The wish to elevate the status of Dutch was at the heart of all integrationist attempts to reinforce the contact with Northern Dutch. The bi-annual ‘Dutch Congresses’ on Dutch language and literature, organized from 1849 onwards, were seen as a further means to this effect (Willemyns 1993). Philologists from both Flanders and the Netherlands discussed a variety of linguistic and literary topics at these meetings, but the Flemish talks stood out for their frequent status planning nature. For the integrationists, it was vital to stress and spread the opinion that the language used in Flanders and Holland really was one and the same language. The fact that this was achieved through lectures on corpus planning issues is very much in line with Fishman’s (1993: 337) claim that ‘ […] at most congresses the corpus-planning emphases merely serve as rather transparent masks for the status-planning passions that are just a little below the surface.”

One of the few substantial projects that ever sprung from these congresses was the compilation of the joint Flemish-Dutch Dictionary of the Dutch Language from 1849 onwards. This crucial step in the standardization of Dutch (VAN STERKENBURG 1992) involved discussions on the status and acceptability of typically Flemish (peripheral) vocabulary in what was to become the ultimate directory of ‘correct’ Dutch vocabulary. Typically Flemish words were, eventually, only marginally introduced.

The establishment of a „Flemish Academy” for linguistics and literature in 1886 was a further consecration of the integrationist goals. Besides „linguistic science” and Dutch literature, the Academy was also supposed to act for language legislation and to stimulate the emancipation of the Flemish people. As such, it called for a fully accepted standard language in Flanders. Yet, by underlining both the language union of North and South and, at the same time, the vital respect for the Flemish component of this standard language, the Academy tried to find a compromise position „in the middle” of the heated language-ideological debates.

A critical evaluation of these language planning activities (Congresses, Dictionary and Academy) reveals a discrepancy between the ambitious goals of the Flemish Movement (extending the functions and status of Dutch in
Flanders) and the structural inadequacy of the everyday Flemish Dutch language in the 19th century for this task. The endless norm debates remained very theoretical and never reached the necessary point of adopting and spreading a distinct codified norm (apart from orthography). Although it was decided quite early that the norm was to be the Northern Dutch one, the various issues of standardization caused too many ideological discussions in the socially divided Flanders for the standard to be implemented and used. The impressive work by non-official actors in the debate (language purification manuals, etc.) may – for lack of any official support – at its best have influenced the linguistic attitudes of a small part of the language community.

Language and ideology

In the preceding paragraph reference was made to the great impact of ideological factors on the language debate in 19th century Flanders. One of the most striking examples in this respect concerns the Saint Lutgard Guild (‘Sinte-Luitgaarde Gilde’), a Bruges-based society which was active between 1874 and 1877. Although often defined as an apogee of particularist action – ‘the Guild defended the rights of the West Flemish language within the broader Dutch language’ (COUTTENIER 1998) – close reading of the society’s annual proceedings revealed that this organisation had a political and religious hidden agenda which has rarely been observed in language planning situations. Contrary to popular belief, the Saint Lutgard Guild was not intended to promote the prestige of a dialectal language variety, nor should its actions be understood as an effort to realize the goals of the Flemish Movement (social, cultural and political promotion through linguistic emancipation). The Guild was first and foremost a tool for the spread and sustainment of ultramontane power and the language issue was exploited as one of the means to achieve that goal; over 70% of its members were clergymen. Despite our well-documented knowledge of the political conflict between liberals, moderate Catholics and fanatic defenders of ultramontanism at the time, the latter movement has hardly ever been

6Cf. WILLEMYNS (1997).
discussed as a determining force behind an influential segment of the particularist movement. The Guild’s meeting minutes allow us, however, to describe in great detail the underlying ideological strategies, motives and discourse of its alleged linguistic actions, on the basis of original primary sources.

It is remarkable that most earlier contributions on the Saint Lutgard Guild are innocent of any reference to the following statement of the Guild president concerning the essential motivation behind the Guild’s ‘linguistic’ actions:

[... ] why is it that we so dearly love our West Flemish language of old? It is because we are deeply convinced that to wrap the pure Flemish Virgin in the robe of that language is the only possibility to save her from the poisoning influence of wicked godlessness and moral corruption. (SLG 1875: 57, translation Willemyns 1997).

The proceedings provide ample explicit references to the identity of this ‘corrupting’ influence. It concerns no more or less than Protestantism as a whole and – by ‘logical’ extension – any tool which can be associated with the Protestant community, including the language of the Protestant Netherlands. As such, the diphthongisation of Germanic ĭ and ŭ in Dutch and German (which does not occur in West-Flemish dialects) was condemned as a heathen feature, inflicted upon those languages by the followers of, respectively, Calvin and Luther (SLG 1877: 77-86). Pseudo-linguistic arguments like these fitted within an encompassing campaign to diabolise the Northern variant of Dutch: it was „the language of Falseness” reflecting all the alleged intrinsic wicked characteristics of Protestantism, as opposed to the Catholic West-Flemish „language of Truth, which has nothing to embellish or to hide, [which] is simple, natural, cordial and open-hearted” (SLG 1876: 19-27, translation Willemyns 1997).

So far, the picture is clear: adapting to the Northern Dutch standard would allow the population to understand the ‘heathen’ message, a risk which had to be avoided at all cost. The strategy and the rhetorical turns which were used to achieve this isolation, however, are fascinating. As far as the discourse towards the West-Flemish population was concerned, the Guild
members went to great efforts to convince their ‘flock’ (many of which were illiterate) that the West-Flemish dialect was a language of its own which could perform all the necessary communicative functions for good catholic citizens. The famous *West Vlaamsch Idioticon* – a dictionary of the West Flemish dialect – and a „Flemish grammar”, both written by the prominent Guild member LEONARDUS DE BO (1869, 1873), provided pseudo-scientific support for this claim.

This analysis is not based on Hineininterpretierung (as suggested by DEPREZ 2000): some of the Guild’s contemporaries already saw through the Guild’s strategy and described in great detail the ideological and premeditated character of its activities. In a critical article in the magazine ‘Revue Brittanique’, for example, it was spelt out that:

The Flemish clergy was effectively too strictly directed, too intellectually disciplined, to persist in such an adventure [i.e. fighting the unification of the Dutch language which they considered as hostile to their religion and their identity] without a previously well designed plan [...]. To firmly ground its domination in Flanders, it was necessary for the clergy to isolate the country... This complete, absolute isolation has been achieved to a large extent thanks to this creation of a language alleged to be special and it is to that language that the clergy owes for a good part its omnipotence in the Flemish region. (*Revue Brittanique*, January-February-March 1878, quoted in ALLOSSERY 1930: 152, translation WILLEMYNS 1997)

This type of criticism was typically countered by the aforementioned assertion that the Guild only defended the rights of West-Flemish in the creation of a supra-regional Flemish Dutch. It would be naive to assume, however, that the Guild’s local idiom was intended as a contribution to the struggle of the Flemish Movement, or as a powerful nation-wide alternative for the Northern Dutch standard. It was impossible for the Flemish population to achieve social, economical and political promotion with the dialectal variety the Guild advocated. Moreover, the Guild had no problems whatsoever with the leading function of French in Flemish society and Guild president DUCLOS explicitly denounced a supra-regional variant of Dutch in favour of French in 1879:
(D)o you really believe that we intend to abandon our language for a new so-called mother tongue? Forget it! Rather we’ll learn to read and write French, French is what we prefer a thousand times to this kind of Flemish or whatever one likes to call it. (letter quoted in ALLOSSERY 1930: 133, translation WILLEMYNS 1997)

At this stage, the Guild’s double-speak appears in all clarity: towards the mass of the population the locally powerful, but supra-regionally impotent Flemish dialect was propagated, whereas critical Flemish activists had to be convinced of Guild’s honourable linguistic intentions by the scientific work of DE BO and others, all the while making sure (in the words of the famous poet GEZELLE who was seen by the Guild’s members as their ‘master’) „that we conceal our real purposes and our priestly considerations from the bulk of the population” (quoted in WESTERLINCK 1977: 476).

Although GEZELLE’s relation with the Guild was rather complex (he did not believe in the artificial creation of a West-Flemish language, see WILLEMYNS (1997) for an extensive discussion), he did support their ideological agenda and their ‘concealed’ views on the unnecessary supra-regional Flemish standard:

The Fleming... whenever his native vernacular does not suffice, for example when addressing the outside world... does not use an imposed Flemish language or highbrow Dutch as his brethren in Holland do, no, he simply switches to French. [...] In Flanders an official Flemish language, a language after the model of Dutch, which is usually called ‘cultivated Hollandic’ nowadays, is not in use and will never be used. (GEZELLE 1885: 114-116)

Language and class

Corpus issues

Thus far, we have dealt with theoretical norms and ideological intentions related to language use. How these meta-linguistic discussions related to the actual written language in 19th century Flandes was unknown up until the beginning of the present project. Descriptions of the social stratification of

the language at the time, for example, hardly ever went beyond the sketchy opposition between ‘pauper Dutch’ and ‘highbrow French’. By analysing original texts from, respectively, lower, middle and upper class scribes in Bruges, we hoped to obtain a more precise insight in the actual quality and variability of the written Dutch language that was used in everyday life.

It should be stressed that this comparative corpus based approach was new in the discussion of the evolution of 19th century Dutch, not in the least because, for the first time ever, original lower class documents were taken into account in this context. Two major methodological setbacks – which will sound familiar to many historical sociolinguists – had to be dealt with, however. The location of primary sources from the lower classes proved to be problematic. To date, there are no centralized and edited collections of lower class documents available in the Dutch language area; the ‘Taalbank’ project of the Institute for Dutch Lexicology (Leiden, The Netherlands) should, eventually, solve this problem. Until the fairly recent interest for ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ many lower class documents were not considered to be of any historical importance and were, accordingly, neglected or destroyed. Although the municipal archive of Bruges (understandably) does not file its documents according to the class of the writers and the text type, we were able to retrieve a fairly homogeneous collection of handwritten lower class meeting reports in its vast collections. Similar volumes of formal minutes from middle and upper class associations were then located and transcribed in other archives in Bruges, which finally resulted in a uniform and highly comparable text database spanning the whole 19th century and representing the town’s three main social strata.

The social identification of the various scribes was not always an easy task, due to the constant changes in the town’s social structure during the long 19th century. The town also was characterised by a ‘medieval’ artisan economy until the 1890s, having ‘missed’ the industrial revolution. The provenance and the nature of the selected archive documents facilitated the location of scribes on the social ladder, however. The lower and middle class corpora stem from social security funds from distinct professional categories (apprentices and masters from various trades) – text internal evidence illustrates the sharp financial and moral divide between both associations. The
upper class corpus pertains to one of the most prestigious archer’s Guilds in the town characterized by high financial and social status.

Orthographical and stylistic norms of the lower and middle classes

As far as orthography is concerned, our corpus analysis yielded results which prompt us to reconsider the effect and importance of some of the language planning measures discussed above. None of the official spelling reforms was ever adopted by the lower class scribes, for example. All scribes used their own spelling system, instead. Each of these personal spelling norms was apparently inconsistent and chaotic: it was common to find the same word written in various different ways within the same text and sentence (e.g. *gemeenzaamheid* ('association') next to *ghemeensaemeijt* and *ghemeensaemhuyt*). Yet, a comparison of the various spelling forms for the same word in our corpora showed that this extreme variability was anything but chaotic: it was not only possible to predict in which specific phonological contexts spelling variation was likely to occur, but also to define the limited set of possible spelling variants for one and the same grapheme (Vanden-Bussche 2002b). It should further be noted that there was a gradual tendency over time to limit the tolerance of spelling variability among lower class scribes. They never adopted an official spelling norm, however, despite the many corpus planning efforts at that time and the fact that the Belgian state officially settled the spelling issue by the adoption of the De Vries & Te Winkel norm. To the lower classes in Bruges, conforming to the official standardized orthography remained a non-issue up until the end of the 19th century. Similar comments can be made about the stylistic quality of these lower class texts: although the assistance companies continuously produced an impressive amount of meeting minutes and written rules and regulations, many pauper scribes were hardly able to control the stylistic properties of these formal documents. Their texts are, accordingly, characterized by *zusammengebrochener Stil*: after the introductory formula the scribe fails to maintain the formal style of the text type and the texts disintegrate into incoherent structures (reminiscent of Middle Dutch) with unfinished sentences, missing verbs and conjunctions and dislocated constituents. These formal and stylistic non-standard features occurred throughout the 19th cen-
tury in lower class texts (as much at the beginning as at the end) and were apparently a generally accepted feature of formal writing in this group. Given the massive production of this zusammengebrochener Stil and the fact that the scribes never attempted to correct their texts, it seems that the style and grammar rules from the official language planners did not reach the poor mass of the population in Bruges before the 20th century.

Middle class writing in Bruges was characterised by the orthography and style features of the lower class texts until the middle of the 19th century. This is a remarkable finding in its own right, since German researchers on 19th century language use have repeatedly come to the conclusion that the combination of extreme spelling variability and zusammengebrochener Stil in Germany at that time constituted a proper Arbeiter sprache, a distinct class-specific variety as such (Mattheier 1986, Klenk 1997). Equally interesting, however, is the striking qualitative improvement in the middle class corpus after 1850 on the levels of style and grammar. As the "shaky" text structures gradually give way to neat and well-formed sentences around 1900, one gets the impression that the (economical and social) rise of the middle class was accompanied by a growing concern with intelligibility. The improvements in their written texts most certainly contributed to this effect, although standardized orthography was apparently considered to be of less importance – idiosyncratic spellings continued through 1900 in middle class texts, too.

From 1800 onwards, the upper class meeting reports contained hardly any traces of spelling variation or stylistic breakdown anymore. The fact that these features – typical of lower class writing until 1900 and of lower and middle class writing until 1850 – were also omnipresent in (Dutch language) upper class reports between 1750 and 1800 need not concern us in detail here. It does provide reason to believe, however, that our various corpuses may reflect the gradual spread through society of a growing concern with stylistic and grammatical uniformity, from the highest towards the lowest social classes. Future research in historical pedagogy will have to establish the link between the improved writing proficiency and the increased quality of writing education, especially where the lowest social classes are concerned. Advances in historical sociology might further provide insights in the
role of adopting writing standards for the creation of a ‘respectable’ social identity.

Variety choice of the upper classes

In the preceding paragraph we briefly mentioned that the upper class scribes in our corpus used Dutch in formal meeting reports during the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. Common opinion has it that the Frenchification of the Flemish elite started during the same period and came in full swing from 1794 onwards, when the country came under a 20-year French rule. Our 19\textsuperscript{th} century data firmly contradict this received view, however: our sources show that the highest social circles of the town prominently used Dutch throughout the whole 19\textsuperscript{th} century. As such, our findings call for a careful reinterpretation of the alleged sharp social divide between speakers of Dutch and French. Although French most certainly figured as the most prestigious variety in the society at that time, there seems to have been an important place for Dutch, as well, in the lives of upper class citizens. Their alternating use of Dutch and French was determined by both the pragmatic effect of specific varieties in various social contexts, and by the wish to create a distinct social identity of power or solidarity through language choice.

Town politics in Bruges was dominated by members of the upper classes for the greater part of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The preserved transcriptions of the town council meetings illustrate how this elite firmly advocated the use of French when responding to the growing demand for the Dutchification of public life by the Flemish Movement. As far as the make-up of official documents is concerned, a fixed cluster of arguments against the use of Dutch was repeated over and again:

- The French part of the town population „that was unfortunate not to master both French and Dutch” had rights of its own which should not be attacked. Official census data show that this percentage of monolingual French speakers varied between 1,72 $\%$ and 2,59 $\%$ of the population in the period 1880-1890.
- The town was said to be unable to pay for the translation costs of all French documents.
French words were allegedly better understood and had a more precise meaning in official matters. It was even put point blank that the Dutch language was not elaborated or refined enough to serve any official purpose.

Whenever the issue of the language use in the council meetings was addressed, however, most council members virtually refused to even consider the possibility of introducing Dutch as the compulsory language. The single council member who took the side of the Dutchification was told that he should „wait a little longer” with his „radical persecution of French speakers” since „he was still young and would be able to present new propositions at a later time.” The main real reason for this reluctant attitude towards Dutch was voiced by a council member who chided one of his colleagues for intentionally using Dutch „to be understood by the working class”: „Speak to the council, not to the people, this is not a political rally”. Apart from its evident social prestige, French was also very much a tool of isolation towards the lower social classes.

Our study of the archives of the mentioned upper class archers’ Guild revealed that the town elite did know Dutch very well, however, that they used this language throughout the nineteenth century and that the quality of their written language was far higher than they pretended in, for example, the town council. The main condition for using the language appears to have been the extra-linguistic setting in which the writer found himself: in a closed upper class atmosphere „among equals” and without the risk of lower class contact, the town elite had no problem whatsoever with the use of Dutch. A few figures may illustrate how Dutch never disappeared from the upper class’s linguistic repertoire: all the archers Guild’s official meeting reports were written in Dutch until 1867, the financial registers with incomes and expenses were kept in Dutch until 1925, the register of members was in Dutch at least up until 1886 and the overview of debts up until 1870. It should be noted, moreover, that the transition to French after these dates was far from consistent: for almost each document type, there remained occasional instances at which Dutch was used; this illustrates that the knowledge and the quality of the Dutch language never disappeared among this social group. Although it is unclear when the Frenchification myth was
Historical sociolinguistics in Flanders: Rediscovering the 19th century initiated, it was most certainly upheld by the Guild members themselves during the twentieth century. Contrary to what was found in the archives, the main printed history of the Guild (published in 1947) states that, from 1865 onwards, ,,the spokes language of our Guild is the French language. All speeches, all discussions, almost all correspondence are held in the French language” (GODAR 1947: 396; our translation).

Further remarkable evidence about the upper classes’ linguistic repertoire was found in documents which are closely related to the elite’s influential political position. We were able to consult a large archive of election propaganda from the last quarter of the nineteenth century (i.e. at the height of the alleged upper class Frenchification). These election newspapers were explicitly directed at the richer citizens of Bruges (up until 1897, the right to vote depended on the amount of taxes one paid). Not one of the preserved election newspapers and posters was written in French. Some articles were set in an intended Standard Dutch, instead, but the major part of these sources contained either transliterated dialect or a language which was heavily dialektisch geprägt. Apart from the fact that this variety has never been associated before with written upper class language use (it was even entirely absent from previous discussions of the overall written repertoire during the nineteenth century), any dialectologist is bound to be struck by the meticulously close dialect transcriptions the authors were apparently able to produce.

It appears, in sum, that both the composition of the written variety continuum in 19th century Flanders and the distribution and use of the various varieties at play at the time should be carefully reconsidered. General sociolinguistic assumptions about High and Low prestige varieties should be complemented with considerations of power and solidarity, social in- and exclusion and idiosyncratic (i.e. domain-specific) linguistic choices.

Language and administration

It has been demonstrated above that Belgium became a fascinating arena for Dutch language planning during the nineteenth century, both induced by

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the state and individuals. Especially in the field of orthography one can witness the rapid succession of various official and non-official norms which were followed to highly varying extents by the different strata of Flemish society. This evolution stands out, however, for the close interplay between political change and the spelling policy of the respective rulers.

Different regimes can be linked to different norms and, as such, the use or denial of certain orthography conventions may be indicative of political allegiance or opposition. Detailed analyses of contemporary comments on the various language norms have confirmed, namely, that orthography was viewed as far more than a mere convention: not only was spelling considered as the very heart and soul of the language, it was also commonly identified with the ideological background of the rulers which installed the specific system, to the extent that there actually occurred a ‘spelling war’ between the assumed ‘Catholic’ (i.e. proper Flemish) and ‘heathen, Protestant’ (i.e. northern, Hollandic) spelling norms...

Ongoing research is currently investigating the spelling behaviour (and the possible political significance thereof) of the official chanceries in the towns of Antwerp and Bruges during the French (until 1814), Dutch (1814-1830) and Belgian (from 1830 onwards) rule. A pilot study of the town council records from the town of Willebroek, near Antwerp, already revealed a number of remarkable insights in this respect, which wet the appetite for the upcoming results.

Traditional language historiography holds it that the controversial issue of the spelling of Dutch in 19th century Flanders was settled officially in a gradual succession of government decisions, resulting in the adoption of one single orthography norm for Belgium and Holland in 1864. We know, however, that, as far as private language use is concerned, in Flanders (like in many other countries, cf. Milroy 1999) the idea that spelling should be invariant was not commonly accepted by the larger part of the language community before the 19th century. There is, in other words, a sharp divide between official language planning and the spread and adoption of these measures by the language users in their personal correspondence.

The state made its first official attempt at regulating spelling in 1777, when the spelling by Des Roches was officially introduced in the schools of
the Southern Low Countries. In the Northern Low Countries the first officially consecrated corpus planning instruments were created some 30 years later, during the time of the Napoleonic rule: SIEGENBEEK’S spelling was published in 1804, WEILAND’s grammar in 1805 (DE VRIES / WILLEMYNS / BURGER 1995: 100, 155). Contrary to what has been claimed up until the present day, this spelling system was effectively laid down as the only official norm by the Dutch rulers at the time: DE GROOF recently discovered conclusive evidence from the official state newspaper (in which all laws and decrees were published) which proves that the SIEGENBEEK system was to be regarded as the only official norm from 1804 onwards for Republic of The Netherlands, a decision which was confirmed in 1821 (i.e. after the reunion of the Low Countries) for both the Northern and Southern Low Countries (DE GROOF / VANHECKE 2004).

After the founding of Belgium in 1830, a Royal Decree of 1844 officialized the so-called ,,committee-spelling", a system which closely resembled the SIEGENBEEK norm. In 1864, finally, the DE VRIES and TE WINKEL-system was made compulsory in Flanders; 19 years later (in 1883), The Netherlands equally adopted this norm.

How did city officials react to these language planning measures and spelling norm changes, and which conscious decisions regarding orthography did they take when they wrote documents in Dutch? In the Willebroek corpus (starting from the early 1820s) a clear transition from the DES ROCHES system to the SIEGENBEEK system has been accomplished by the end of 1824. Apart from some changes back and forth between both systems, the latter is exclusively used from 1824 up until 1830 (as

9 M. SIEGENBEEK: „Verhandeling over de spelling der Nederduitsche taal en bevordering van eenparigheid in derzelve” [Treatise on the spelling of Dutch and on how to increase its Uniformity], 1804.

10 P. WEILAND: „Nederduitsche spraakkunst” [Dutch Grammar], 1805.

11 In Holland the same spelling was introduced in education right away but its use was only officialized by decree in 1883. In 1947 both countries agreed that future new spelling systems would only be allowed after they had been approved by parliament in both countries. Currently it is the ,,Nederlandse Taalunie” that takes care of the fact that the spelling of Dutch will always be the same in both countries.
commissioned by the Dutch rulers). It should be stressed that the town clerk
appears to have mastered this system quite well (the irregularities are far
closer to the amount found in personal correspondences), and that he was
able to switch from the former system without any noticeable problems;
changes in orthography in the corpus are never due to a change of town
clerk. After the Belgian independence (1830s), in the absence of any official
spelling norms, there is an abrupt return to the DES ROCHES system, for
reasons which remain unclear so far. Whether the SIEGENBEEK norm
effectively conveyed a pro-Hollandic allegiance in the eyes of the scribe, and
the return to DES ROCHES was a marker of changed political circumstances,
remains to be clarified by the ongoing research in this domain. A similar
rapid and full adoption of the official norm occurred when the so-called
‘Commission-spelling’ was made compulsory in 1844. The clerks appear to
be able to switch to the new norms without any problems, a situation which
repeated itself when the DE VRIES & TE WINKEL-system was made
compulsory in 1864.

In all, corpus planning appears to have been quite successful, the scribes
appear to have been well informed about the many successive spelling
systems and they appear to have had the capacity to adopt these systems
almost immediately. There, moreover, must have been a certain consensus
about the consistent use of a particular norm across the various scribes.
Whether these choices should be interpreted as a sign of political loyalty
remains to be investigated.

Next to the adoption of language norms, however, the actual language
choice was equally controversial at the time. The internal variation in the
Dutch language went hand in hand with the conflict between Dutch and
French, and all town scribes also had to make deliberate choices about which
language to use for their official documents. During the French rule, the
French language was compulsory from 1804 onwards, during the Dutch rule
(started in 1815) the Dutch language had to be used exclusively as from 1823
only. After 1830, both languages could be used, although it is commonly
assumed that Dutch lost virtually all prestige in this respect and gave way to
French.
The Willebroek chancery scribes clearly anticipated the French and Dutch directives: in the records of birth and death certificates, French was used earlier than expected (from 1796 onwards), and a radical switch to Dutch already occurred in 1815 (i.e. right after the change in regime). The minutes of the town council followed suit: the French versions changed to Dutch from 1820 onwards. The results for the Belgian period, however, are far more striking. Common opinion has it that Dutch remained the ugly duckling in administrative matters up until 1898 when the ‘Equality law’ declared Dutch to be equal to French in official administrative matters. In Willebroek, however, Dutch was used next to French from 1830 onwards already and all administrative communication directed at the general public was exclusively Dutch. The share of French gradually becomes smaller until the full Dutchification from 1865 onwards, more than 30 years before the Equality Law. Ongoing spot checks in the archives of 30 Flemish towns and villages will have to demonstrate whether this was the general pattern in the rest of Flanders as well. For now, we can only refer to another detailed case study in the East-Flemish town of Grembergen, where similar language choice patterns were followed, which equally defy the generally accepted view on these matters so far.

Language and media

Just like many of the topics discussed earlier in this article, the influence of the printed press on the standardization process of Dutch in Flanders during the 19th century has never been analyzed before in a systematic corpus-based project. We are, in other words, yet unable to say to which extent the newspapers functioned as keepers and/or distributors of certain language norms. We do not know, for example, if (and how) they responded to the successive official spelling guidelines, nor how they dealt with the widespread spelling variation at the time. Given the fairly general presence of (printed) media as significant standardization actors in a large number of standardization histories (Deumert / Vandenburg Hesse 2003), however, we

12 Haest (1982), however, dealt with the specific issue of ‘gallicisms’ in newspapers from Antwerp during the 19th century.
believe that it may be worthwhile to look closely into the linguistic
behaviour of Flemish newspapers in the socio-historical context described
above.

Our main convincing argument for this research is found in 19th century
texts from language planners: one of the most commonly repeated
reproaches by the language gardeners in the late 19th century was the claim
that the professional media scribes were responsible for the degeneration of
the Dutch language in Flanders during the 19th century on the lexical,
morphological and syntactical level. This opinion was most explicitly voiced
by one of the foremen of the language purifiers, HYPPOLIET MEERT:

„Our newspapers are the most ruinous of all for our language feeling. They
daily dispose of carriage loads of annoying blunders. They incessantly give
the most comical proofs of the most helpless ignorance on the level of
language knowledge [...] The most amusing of this is, that these
newspapers are involved in daily disputes on language questions.” (MEERT
1941 [1899]: 10).

It should be noted, moreover, that the same MEERT (1894a,b,c)
frequently used newspaper excerpts in his language advice columns to
illustrate the ubiquitous „phantasms from the pathology of language” in
Flemish Dutch. Even his fellow language gardeners from the opposed
particularist side subscribed to this opinion and referred to their „enemies” as
„newspaper, chronicle and other gallic dish-cloths” (as the particularist
authority DÉSIRÉ CLAES put it, quoted in WILLEMYNS / HAESERYN 1998:
2937). HAESE (1982) found that there was reason to approach this firm
reprimand with carefulness, as far as the specific issue of French interference
in the journalists’ language was concerned; the amount of Gallicisms found
in her selection of newspapers from the town of Antwerp between 1700 and
1900 was far smaller than could be expected from the language gardeners’
criticism at the time.

There are, however, many other linguistic factors which may (or may not)
have influenced the quality of the newspaper language at the time, and which
were discussed in the preceding paragraphs:

- integrationism vs. particularism
- extreme vs. moderate integrationism/particularism.
- various official orthography guidelines
- unofficial metalinguistic literature and spelling/grammar/style norms
- ideological and political stratification of the norm debate

It is important to point out that the integrationist orientation of the debates on the norms for Dutch was far from being commonly accepted at that time. The discussion on the language issue was, on the contrary, in full swing during the 19th century. It is, accordingly, extremely likely that the different standardization views and practices will be reflected to a certain extent in the corpus, especially since (as remarked by MEERT) the issue of language standardization – and the direction it was supposed to take – was fiercely discussed by various newspapers at the time.

We therefore intend to prepare a digital corpus of original newspapers from Flanders, covering the whole 19th century and compromising the various dominant ideological positions at the time (see figure below). In line with our earlier research, we will limit this case study to the situation in the town of Bruges.

We intend to analyze to which extent these newspapers followed one or more of the official language norms, whether they changed their writing...
policy when the norms changed, or if they used a different norm of their own altogether. The easiest level to check this is spelling, but we also have access to a number of style guides written in the „don’t write... but write” tradition which provide prescriptive advice.

We will further try to describe the breadth of the stylistic continuum in the newspapers. We know (as discussed above) from limited checks in the election press that certain journalists were able to diversify their style according to subject or the reading public. How should the newspaper style be defined on the continuum between dialect and intended standard? Did they use a regionally flavoured variety? Can one distinguish signs of a growing „norm consciousness”? We will compare this writing praxis with the newspaper’s theoretical claims on the topic of standardization.

We will, finally, equally try to provide conclusive evidence about the influence of the frequently cited ideological aspects of the linguistic debate on the actual writing behaviour of the heavily politicized press. Comparing the different ideological backgrounds of the newspapers and the views of the politicians they supported with the newspaper’s writing practices should clarify to which extent language political views were implemented in ‘their’ newspapers.

Whether newspapers have played an active and authoritative role in the diffusion of the standard norm in 19th century Flanders is yet still unclear. It is hoped, however, that our ongoing research will allow us to answer this question in the near future, and thus contribute to a better understanding of the fascinating history of Dutch, in the line of the projects discussed in this article. As for all other domains discussed above, this will once more necessitate a return to the original archive sources in order to check and – if necessary – correct our traditional conceptions of this period of our language history (WILLEMYSN 2002). We do hope that this overview has illustrated that the language use and quality of certain traditional „standardizers” did not

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13 The notion of „intended standard” – as used by MIHM 1998 („intendiertes Hochdeutsch“) – is used to refer to a variety which does not meet the formal requirements of a standard language (e.g. consequent spelling and grammatical soundness), but which is nevertheless intended by the writer to fulfil the functions attributed to a standard variety (e.g. supra-regional communication, prestige variety).
Historical sociolinguistics in Flanders: Rediscovering the 19th century

conform to the present day scholarly „communis opinio“. Other groups, which were neglected so far in the standardization discussion, seem to have played a specific role in the process, instead (VANDENBussche 1999, 2002b, 2004). It was also found that the effect of official standardization actions (which are traditionally presented as highly important and influential) was anything but straightforward: in certain domains, they only had a minimal impact on certain parts of the language community and were even neglected by the majority of the writing population; in others, they seem to have been followed and even anticipated in an exemplary fashion.

It is our conviction that we will, once again, be able to draw support and inspiration from German research for our ongoing projects in this domain. It is also our hope that our projects may serve a similar purpose for our German colleagues from historical sociolinguistics and – dialectology.

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Herausgegeben von
Helen Christen

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