Historical Sociolinguistics: Coming of Age?

1. Introduction

1.1 The concept of historical sociolinguistics originated in the eighties as a theoretical concept, as an idea or, rather, as something which should fundamentally be possible. As Suzanne Romaine (1982: 2) put it, in order to “test the ability of sociolinguistics to deal with historical data” and “to cross-fertilize historical linguistics with sociolinguistics in order to use the past to explain the present” (ib.: X). Romaine then lists some of the many methodological problems to be expected in trying to do so.

The term “Historical Sociolinguistics/Historische Soziolinguistik” appears – probably for the first time – in the handbook Sociolinguistics edited by Ammon, Dittmar and Mattheier in 1987/88. A whole chapter is devoted to it and that was quite a surprise since until then the topic had been mostly ignored. Previous research on language development in 19th-century Germany (Cherubim & Mattheier 1989; Wimmer 1991) and, more specifically research on what they called Arbeitersprache (working class language) is, by all means, to be considered historical sociolinguistic research, but it had never been labeled that way. On the other hand, for all practical purposes, Romaine’s Social-historical linguistics is the same as Historical Sociolinguistics as it was used afterwards.

Mattheier’s definition in the handbook chapter: “Historische Soziolinguistik sollte [...] bestimmt werden, als Wissenschaft von der Wechselbeziehung zwischen Sprachwandel und Gesellschaftswandel nicht nur in früheren Zeiten, sondern allgemein und auch in der Gegenwart” (Mattheier 1988: 1430) opens a lot of possibilities, yet apart from coining a name and bringing a new theoretical approach to the attention of the international linguistic community, the whole handbook chapter actually fails to give any additional advise on how to tackle the methodological problems to be expected. Consequently, even throughout the nineties the use of the term “historical sociolinguistics“ remains rather restricted and all contributions mainly stress the methodological problems. This is e. g. the case with the whole issue of the Sociolinguistica Yearbook for European Sociolinguistics for the year 1999. The fact that so much attention is devoted to methodology clearly indicates that we were in the presence of a young discipline still quite uncertain on how to proceed. As is often the case with a “hyphenated“ name either the first or the second part of the name gets particularly stressed. Jahr (1999: v) terms historical sociolinguistics as “an important subfield of historical linguistics”, as opposed to many others who rather
want to stress the sociolinguistic component. In view of the rather hectic development over the past few years the direction international research will take may soon become clearer.

1.2 Until some 15 years ago the internationally visible output on historical sociolinguistics was mainly restricted to the study of the social language history of German and English. Studies on other languages did exist but often remained unnoticed due to language barriers and the lack of fora for the exchange of research information. As a state-of-the-art overview article of the sociolinguistic activity in the Dutch language area 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, viz. the so-called >Brugge project< of the Center for Linguistics of the Vrije Universiteit in Brussels, initiated and coordinated by Roland Willemyns. What is referred to here is a project which started in the early nineties of the 20th century as a sociolinguistic study of the language 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 behavior of various actors in the language community. This was done exclusively – a novelty at that time as well – on the basis of original source material, never used for linguistic research before (Vandenbussche & Willemyns 1999; Willemyns & Vandenbussche 2000). We will get back to the >source< issue later on in this article.

1.3 There have been two triggers that got us started. The first was when Joshua Fishman asked to write a paper on the first Dutch conference for his book The Earliest Stage of Language Planning. Almost simultaneously a small monograph was commissioned on the author of the 19th century West-Flemish dialect dictionary Leonard De Bo, who belonged to the so-called West-Flemish particularists. They were a movement trying to obstruct the spread of the standard language for religious reasons. The research on this group was an eye opener since hardly anything of what was to be found in the own writings of the particularists appeared to match what was usually written ON them (Willemyns 1995). It turned out to be an astonishing case of ideological manipulation which will be discussed further on.

Our curiosity still increased through the research for the Fishman-paper. We learned a huge amount of facts we were not familiar with before and we learned them mostly through consulting so-called secondary sources (Willemyns 1993). Afterwards it appeared that most of our fellow linguists were not familiar with those facts either. As a consequence, it was clear that it was absolutely necessary to make two important

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1 Die historische Soziolinguistik [...] umfaßt dann in erster Linie [...] die Sprachgebrauchsgeschichte, die Sprachkontaktgeschichte und die Sprachbewußtseinsgeschichte (Mattheier 1999: 226).


3 The resulting publications are Willemyns (1993; 1993a).
methodological decisions, viz. to use as many primary sources as possible, preferably new ones and then to supplement that with data from secondary sources emanating from other disciplines than linguistics, in other words to proceed in a so interdisciplinary way as possible.

1.4 As a result of that experience as well as for other reasons, it was clear that extensive research on language usage and the extremely fascinating linguistic situation in the 19th century urgently needed to be done. Also, it was obvious that systematic research needed to go beyond the then usual meta-linguistic approach and to investigate all domains of language usage based on the variables traditionally used in contemporary sociolinguistics.

It is, in the first place, the (linguistic) history of Flanders that makes its 19th century so fascinating. After the political split of the Netherlands at the end of the 16th century, the Southern Netherlands (more or less present day Belgium) had been governed by foreign rulers using French as the language of government. Consequently, the social prestige language was French. In the course of the so-called “long 19th century”, both the linguistic and the overall political situation of the Low Countries changed considerably, as did the outcome of their interplay. At the beginning of the long 19th century, the Southern Netherlands were still part of the Austrian Habsburg empire. From 1795 through 1814, the country was annexed by France, subsequently it was reunited with the Northern Netherlands until 1830, and finally part of an independent Belgium for the rest of the century.

During all of these regimes, linguistic regulation and/or legislation was an important part of the general policy of the subsequent rulers.

1.5 Shortly after the Brugge-project our focus of interest has been enlarged to encompass other aspects and cover a larger geographic area. All members of our research unit have contributed to its various aspects. 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.

Various sections of our project have, to some extent, been inspired by studies of our German colleagues on 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< (Cherubim 1983; Linke 1996) and corpus design (Grosse et al. 1989; Hünecke & Hünecke 1997; Schikorsky 1990). 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< (Bister-Broosen 1999) and the >Graduiertenkolleg Dynamik von Substandardvarietäten<, headed by Klaus Mattheier, in Heidelberg.

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4 See the bibliography entries for the individual and joint publications of J. de Groof, W. Vandenbussche, E. Vanhecke and R. Willemsyn.
2. The Projects

Two major project lines are to be discerned. The “Brugge-project“ is mainly aimed at illustrating social variation, whereas the other one is a more general project on language planning, language policy and the influence of linguistic legislation on official language usage in The Netherlands, casu quo Belgium at large. Some of them are completely finished, other ones are still going on:

a) Starting project
   - Language Standardization Mechanisms in 19th century Dutch (Willemyns)

b) Brugge-project
   - Language use of the Lower Classes in 19th Century Brugge (Vandenbussche)
   - Culture and Language Policy as Elements of Language Planning: West-Flemish Particularism (Willemyns)
   - Social Differentiation of Standardization and Writing Traditions in Brugge from 1750 to 1830 (Vandenbussche)
   - Language Variation in 19th Century Newspapers in Brugge (Vandenbussche)

c) General Project
   - Language Planning in Belgium in the 19th Century: a Linguistic Analysis of Corpus and Status Planning (De Groof)
   - Language Use of City Administrations in 19th Century Flanders (Vanhecke)\(^5\)
   - Language Planning and Language Policy in the Judiciary and in Education in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1814-1830) (Willemyns)

The Brugge-project allowed for the investigation of a large number of variables in one and the same city over a particular lapse of time, and was helped by the fact that we had a large amount of all possible kinds of information at our disposal. Although the location of primary sources from the lower classes sometimes proved to be problematic, we were finally able to retrieve a fairly homogeneous corpus of handwritten lower class meeting reports of social security funds. Similar text collections from middle and upper classes were located as well and all this finally resulted in a uniform and highly comparable text database spanning the whole 19th century and representing the main social layers of society. Brugge is also one of Flanders-cities which are currently being thoroughly investigated as to administrative language usage.

Almost all of our corpora have been analyzed linguistically on spelling, morphology, syntax, and the lexicon as well as on dialect interference. Consequently, as far as Brugge is concerned, we have been able to carry out a full scale historically sociolinguistic syntopic study fully implementing the theoretical claims as made in the eighties, in spite of the fact that, at that time, they were thought to be almost impossible to ever implement.

\(^5\) As part of this project five master theses have been written on language choice, language usage, and spelling in the 19th century city administrations of the smaller towns of Willebroek, Grembergen, Jette, Geel, and Diest. Spot checks have yielded information on some fifty more communes in Flanders at large (Vanhecke 2005).
The more general project Flanders/ Belgium/ The Netherlands allowed us, among other things, to see how general principles work out in a practical situation, and, inversely, to contribute to theory building based on our experience.

3. Sources

"There is a great need for re-examining the textual traditions of many languages in greater depth and for paying attention to the location of texts in their socio-historical context, i.e. where they fit into the registers available at the time" Romaine (1988: 1463) says and it is obvious that in doing so, as we have repeatedly demonstrated in the past, it is possible to gain a deeper insight in the linguistic conditions of times gone by. Yet, more important still than re-examining texts is to build up a corpus of texts never examined before. Mattheier claims with good reason: „Einer durch Historische Soziolinguistik untermauerten Sprachgeschichtsbeschreibung müßte es jedoch darauf ankommen, die vielfältigen Varietäten und Stilstrukturen zu einer Zeit herauszuarbeiten und jeweils insgesamt als Möglichkeitsrahmen für die dann danach eintretende Entwicklung heranzuziehen“ (Mattheier 1988: 1434).

Since we feel that, in our analyses so far, we have responded to both claims, we will use the issue of the sources as a guideline to give an overview of some of the research mentioned in this paper.

3.1 Let us start with a rather peculiar aspect of the source problem, viz. sources not searched for and, consequently, not used. During the very first project on 19th century language standardization the baffling conclusion was that known and printed sources on the particularist movement had been deliberately disregarded for ideological motives (projects I and 3).

Some background information is needed here. The standardization of Dutch in Flanders became an issue as soon as, in 1830, Belgium came into existence. Two factions were to be discerned: those advocating a domestic standardization based on the local varieties, called particularists and those insisting that the Flemings should take over as much as possible the standard language as it had developed in the Northern Netherlands. They were called integrationists and after a few decades it clearly appeared that the integrationist solution was victorious, a victory that was never more to be challenged afterwards (Willemyns 2003: 247-298).

In the province of West-Flanders, of which Brugge is the capital, of old a stronghold of religiously motivated aversion for the language variety of the protestant North, a particular branch of the particularist movement, united in the so-called Guild of “Sinte Lutgaarde“ (Couttenier 1998), was very active during the final quarter of the 19th century, vehemently attacking the standard language as it was used in Flanders, under the pretext that it was the “half heathen, half Jewish“ language of the >Hollanders<. Yet, for them the language aspect was only a by-product of a religious fundamentalist movement and their main

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6 The quote is from the most famous Flemish poet in the 19th century, the Roman-Catholic priest Gezelle.
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The purpose was to safeguard the ultramontane, catholic character of (West-) Flanders. They are usually called “the second generation” particularists and they admired the famous priest-poet Guido Gezelle as their spiritual leader; another one was the already mentioned author of the West-Flemish dialect dictionary, Leonard De Bo, he too, a catholic priest. They were convinced that promoting the West Flemish dialect to the detriment of any kind of supraregional Dutch (be it northerly or southerly flavored) was a necessary weapon in that religious battle (Willemyns 1997). Just one salient example will make this clear. During the founding meeting of the Guild, its chairman stated:

[...] 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; our translation).

The picture is clear: adapting to Standard Dutch 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 toward 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 good catholic citizens needed. The linguists of the Guild (De Bo and others) provided pseudo-scientific support for this claim. One characteristic example of De Bo’s line of thought:

“Truth and Falseness inevitably have their own language. The language of Truth, which has nothing to embellish or to hide, is simple, natural, cordial, and open-hearted; exactly the opposite applies to the language of Falseness. In Holland, as well as in Germany, Protestantism has been introduced and spread mostly by the way of preaching. Yet, Protestantism is a false doctrine and not the Truth and, consequently, the preaching of Protestantism could not [...] be simple, natural and open-hearted. The consequence had to be – as indeed it has been – that this language was stiff and twisted, that it became far-fetched, artificial, bombastic, full of wind and rhetoric. And isn’t it revealing, that those who would like to introduce this language in Belgium, are indeed all people who don’t think much of the Truth themselves; instinctively they sensed that this language was theirs, this language of falseness and arrogant ignorance” (SLG II: 19-27).

Since the use of a formal variety may sometimes be unavoidable, they advocated the use of French rather than standard Dutch. Both Gezelle and the Guild’s chairman Duclos explicitly denounced a supra-regional variety of Dutch in favor of French.

At this stage, the Guild’s double-speak appears in all clarity: toward 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 the Guild’s

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Chairman Duclos: “(…) French is what we prefer a thousand times to this kind of Flemish or whatever one wants to call it” (Allossery 1930, footnote 2 on page 133).
honorable linguistic intentions by the work of De Bo and others, all the while making sure (in the words of Gezelle) “Our whole movement has been, from the very beginning, a catholic one, an ultramontane one even [...] yet, it is of the utmost importance that we conceal our real purposes and our priestly considerations from the bulk of the population” (Westerlinck 1977: 476).

Scholarly preoccupation with this movement had, until recently, misrepresented their activities as well as their underlying intentions. Yet, the activities of this group, are extremely well documented, since every year they published a year book (SLG) not only containing very precise minutes of their gatherings, but also stating without any restraint the religious-ideological foundations of their involvement with language. Yet in almost all books on the history of the Dutch literature and the Dutch language, Gezelle an his followers are presented as pertaining to the Flemish Movement, i. e. the now very much admired group of people who defended the rights of the Dutch mother tongue against the supremacy of French. One of the most famous Gezelle-specialists, J. Boets, commenting on an article written by Gezelle to advocate the use of French (Gezelle 1885) instead of Dutch, bluntly states: fortunately this particular article is not very well known and has not damaged Gezelle’s reputation (Boets 1970: 175).

The role played by this particularist movement surely stresses a dimension of our understanding of language evolution and language planning underestimated so far, viz. the influence of religious fundamentalism and the use made of linguistic means to achieve its goals. It enabled us to put behind us the persistent myth that Gezelle, De Bo and other West-Flemish particularists were advocates of the Flemish Movement. They were not, not even “in their own, particular way” as it was often phrased.

3.2 Fortunately, the afore-mentioned way of treating sources, is the exception rather than the rule. In most cases where sources are abundantly in existence and yet not analyzed, it is because their existence may not be widely known or because of the lack of interest in a historically-sociolinguistically founded language history.

This way of treating sources was at the origin of the existence of yet another persistent myth. In practically all treatises on the 19th century, be they linguistic or not, it is proclaimed that the Flemish upper classes use French, the lower classes the local, Flemish dialect and that almost nobody made use of the Dutch standard language, and certainly not in writing.

This, we found out (projects 3 and 4), is definitely not true: the real picture is much more subtle and differentiated. The sources corroborating our findings are abundantly available and their existence is mentioned in scholarly publications, yet they had never been used for (socio-) linguistic research.

Our corpus consists of a large number of very varied original hand-written documents, spanning centuries, and pertaining to one of the most prestigious upper class archers' guilds of Brugge, the Guild of Saint Sebastian. Next to meeting minutes, shooting contest documents, informal personal correspondence between members, formal letters to befriended guilds, and official requests to the town's council and administration we find cash books, obituaries, drafts of banquet speeches, songs and poems which have been preserved in the guild's archives. The authors of these documents can be identified relatively easily. Due to their high social status, we can identify their functions and even
their linguistic behavior in various parallel social and political networks. This allows us to compare the language use of upper class members in exclusive private circles, in the more overt setting of town council meetings and in the explicitly public domain of election propaganda (Vandenbussche 2001).

Our findings demonstrate that the roles of French, Dutch and the local dialect were definitely less clear-cut than was assumed so far. Instead of the cliché dichotomy between 'formal French' and 'informal dialect' with little or no room for standard Dutch, we find that the upper classes in Bruges displayed a highly varied variety choice governed by social, political and pragmatic considerations (Vandenbussche 2004).

The guild documents demonstrate in the first place that, contrary to the general belief (e. g. Deneckere 1954), the Frenchification of the Flemish upper classes did not take place during the 17th and 18th century, but only after Belgian independence. This corroborates the outcome of other investigations within our projects, all indicating that 1830 was the annus horribilis and that the summit of real Frenchification in Flanders was reached in the period between 1830 and 1850 (De Groof & Vanhecke 2004). For other upper class archers' guilds elsewhere too, the turn of the half-century was the crucial moment for the growing impact of French over Dutch.

Anyway, the interesting thing is that Dutch was indeed used next to French for highly formal purposes by writers from the most prestigious social elite groups in 19th century Flanders. This implies that the upper class writers had a sufficient command of the Dutch language to use it for all purposes, another fact ignored until very recently.

It is extremely exciting now to compare this with another domain, viz. the linguistic behavior of this particular group in the city council, a political body working almost exclusively in French until the final decade of the 19th century.

There is an impressive body of sources proving that the majority of the council members was very negative when it came to adopting Dutch as one of the official languages of the local government (Vandenbussche 1995). Their opposition to the use of Dutch was justified with the fallacy that Dutch was inappropriate and not sufficiently elaborated for use in formal official domains. Moreover the councilors claimed that an insufficient command of Standard Dutch prevented them from using it for those purposes.

How can this striking opposition in the linguistic behavior of the upper class in various domains be accounted for? The answer may lie in the pragmatic value of the language varieties concerned. In the setting of the city council, French was first and foremost the language which was unknown by the majority of the population. Its use both spoken and in writing may have served as a barrier against political participation by the lower and (part of the) middle classes. The symbolical value of French as a tool for social and political exclusion in the Bruges city council, therefore, was apparent.

In the archers' guild, on the other hand, financial obligations and a strict membership policy guaranteed its exclusive upper class character (Godar 1947). Since members found

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8 Our corpus of city council documents demonstrates that Brugge's city council was one of the very few to discuss its own linguistic behavior. Most of the other city councils who – contrary to Brugge – did indeed switch their vehicular language, did so without a single word of comment or explanation.
themselves among an equally wealthy and elite public, there was no pressing need to
distinguish oneself through language choice. As to the quality of Dutch as written in the
Guild, it strikes us as “well-structured with >propar, clear and unmistakable administrative
expressions< with a >well-known meaning< - both in formulaic and more personal texts“
(Vandenbussche 2004: 42). This proves that at least two of the alleged and frequently used
arguments against the use of ‘official Dutch’ were false. It is not true that upper class
members were not able to write coherent and well-structured Dutch texts, nor is it true that
the Dutch language lacked the refinement and precision to meet all formal requirements
for official documents.

As a result of our research on this particular issue, we are now in a position to
reconsider some of the traditional assumptions about the actual use and the pragmatic
value of French, Dutch and dialect in Flemish upper class texts from the 19th century.
Instead of a strict dichotomy between formal French and informal dialect, members of the
upper class appear to have used or avoided specific languages or varieties, depending on
whether they wanted to include or exclude certain interlocutors in specific socio-political
contexts. General sociolinguistic assumptions about High and Low prestige varieties
should be complemented with considerations of power and solidarity, social inclusion,
and idiosyncratic, i.e. domain-specific linguistic choices.

3.3 One more reason why wrong assumptions on the 19th century situation are often
made is that, in spite of the fact that a great many sources are used, they appear not to be
sufficiently diverse to allow for a balanced picture of a situation. In our projects on
language planning and language policy, one of the problems tackled is the language policy
designed and elaborated by King Willem I, during the reuniﬁcation period 1814-1830.

3.3.1 In absolutely each and every treatise and language history, in every publication
where this particular period is mentioned, it can be read that Willem’s language policy has
been a failure. We were, therefore, rather astonished ourselves as we found out that this
has absolutely not been the case.

The language policy during the United Kingdom has been well documented and
analyzed by two very distinguished scholars, the linguist M. Deneckere (1954) and the
historian A. de Jonghe (1967), on the basis of tons of documents. Yet, they have probably
been mislead by meta-linguistic statements in which attitudes are more prominent than
facts. What we did was using the archives of city halls, courts of law and schools, primary
sources which made it possible to establish the factual language usage in the
administration, the judiciary and education (projects 6, 7, and 8).

As of 1 January 1823 Dutch had been declared the compulsory language in public life
(administration, education, and the judiciary) in the Dutch speaking southern parts of The
Netherlands (= present day Flanders). This legislation was the King’s personal
achievement and was more radical than any of his advisors had suggested. Yet, both in the
administration and in the judiciary real problems, predicted by many, did not occur. It
appeared, on the contrary that a lot of magistrates and city administrators were eager to
switch to Dutch even before it was compulsory (De Groof & Vanhecke 2004).

The main reason for the general believe that King Willem’s language policy eventually
failed is that the reunification ended with French being completely reinstalled immediately
after Belgium’s secession in 1830. Our scrutinizing of an immense amount of primary
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sources (De Groof 2004) has enabled us to establish that the King’s language policy, in spite of the initial scepticism, was fully carried out and implemented. There can be no doubt that Willem’s objectives were met: official Flanders, public Flanders did actually function in Dutch by the end of the reunification period. This is an extremely remarkable achievement, the more so since the government had so little time at its disposal to devise, promulgate and implement the language decrees (Willemynts & De Groof 2004).

3.3.2 The real problem was that Belgium’s two main political movements, the progressive liberal bourgeoisie as well as their reactionary opponents, most of all the clergy, fiercely opposed the King. He was attacked from two sides and that sealed his fate, the more so since he didn’t receive the support he needed from his Northern subjects either (De Jonghe 1967: 267).

This particular research also demonstrates that, in general, both in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands and afterwards in Belgium, town hall administrators initially behaved >politically correctly<, i.e. their language choice tended to correspond to what was expected by their new political leaders (Willemynts, Vandenbussche & Vanhecke 2005). Yet, political preference appears to have been more important still. Willem’s language regulations were turned into practice before they were compulsory, whereas very often Napoleon’s regulations during the annexation to France (1795-1814) were only hesitantly complied with or even not at all. The beginning of the Belgian regime then, is quite particular. Contrary to both preliminary situations, there existed no official linguistic legislation now. The fact that the switch to the language which had been banned by King Willem was so prompt and so massive can only be explained by the general political atmosphere. The use of Dutch could easily be interpreted as a sign of loyalty toward the former king. As soon as the situation had calmed down, the use of Dutch as an administrative language increased again.

Furthermore, and apart from the reasons for switching languages, we were quite impressed by the fact that in most cases the town hall clerks did possess the linguistic competence necessary to switch from one language to the other in no time. We know too little about education in general and the training of civil servants in particular, but one thing is obvious: their training in Dutch cannot possibly have been so poor as was always assumed! Another argument for that, although it is not possible to go into detail here, is that we found how they were also able to cope with three different changes of the Dutch spelling system: every time they reacted promptly and competently, as is demonstrated by Vanhecke (2005).

3.4 Let us come now to the last case study we want to discuss. Our analysis of various corpora of, for example, craftsmen, upper class archers or particularist intellectuals made clear that training and a „schriftorientierte“ profession, i.e. a profession in which a lot of writing is involved, are the paramount factors determining the quality of the linguistic output. How important school education and training is has mostly been demonstrated in our craftsmen’s corpus. Masters and apprentices alike appear to have had identical problems producing texts and the social distance between both groups did not guarantee a more sophisticated language usage in the former group. Writing quality is generated through personal school training as is demonstrated by the fact that some particular norm deviations persist throughout the end of the 19th century in both groups. It takes until the
last quarter of the 19th century for the quality of middle class writing to improve significantly. By the same time, upper class writers had mastered all problems. In the lower class though, spelling and style problems persist, albeit that in some individuals progress is undeniable (Vandenbussche 1999).

Anyway, the fact that the writing of the middle class guild masters in Brugge was characterized by the same orthography and style features as the lower class texts until at least the middle of the 19th century 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 “Stilzusammenbruch” (corrupt style) and extreme spelling variability in Germany at that time constituted a proper “Arbeitersprache”, a distinct working class-specific variety as such (Mattheier 1986; Klenk 1997).

The socio-historical research supporting this case study made it clear that the paramount factors which influenced the scribes’ levels of literacy were not so much >class< or >rank<, but rather more general factors which influenced social life during the 19th century: constantly evolving requirements in the scribes’ social lives, requisites of the new industrial era, emancipation of various social groups and the democratization of the school system. The case study on lower and middle class writers clearly established that language history should not only focus on the written production of a numerically small elite, but also on the actual real life language written by the very large segment of the lower ranks of society which has too often been neglected or forgotten in many a language history so far. It is only through the study of everyday language usage at the heart of the language community that the true impact of prescriptive norms and idealized grammar models can be assessed (Vandenbussche 2006).

4. Let us conclude that we took the issue of >the sources< as a guideline in this paper for various reasons:

- it is absolutely vital for this type of research: no sources, no historical sociolinguistics.
- the highly diverging way of handling (or even ignoring) sources demonstrates that we urgently need clear guidelines as to locating and using sources, in order to keep historical sociolinguistics on the right track and to avoid repeating the errors of the past.
- we have demonstrated beyond doubt that it is perfectly well feasible to locate a sufficient amount of sources, differentiated enough to investigate the influence of the usual sociolinguistic variables.
- the history of many languages is written on the basis of only a very small portion of the primary sources available. Language historiographers are known to readily copy from each other and from secondary sources. Fact is, though, that they cannot be expected to analyze all the primary sources themselves. They have to be provided with the relevant information by historical (socio-) linguists, carrying out research on the micro level. We have demonstrated that this is what the purposeful use of “new” sources allows for.
finally, we have demonstrated that it is feasible to build both syntopic and diatopic corpora allowing to decide whether particular findings may be generalized of not. Suffice it to say that in our project 8 we located and identified such a huge amount of primary sources on the reunification period that we needed to hire supplementary people just to manage and to classify them.

5. State of the art, recent developments and outlook

5.1 Until the end of the nineties the amount of books and articles referring to 'historical sociolinguistics' in their title is rather low (Kielkiewicz-Janowiak 1992; Machan & Scott 1992; Milroy 1992). Yet, a look at the more recent lists of the larger linguistics publishing houses reveals a definite boom in that particular field. Some recent examples are: The History of English in a Social Context: A Contribution to Historical Sociolinguistics by Kastovsky & Mettinger (2000), Historical sociolinguistics by Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) and Social Networks and Historical Sociolinguistics by Bergs (2005). There even exists a real electronic journal now with the broad title Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics.9

As far as some languages are concerned an unprecedented amount of attention is given to social stratification in language history: whereas, in the case of English, e.g., Görlach's English in Nineteenth-Century England: An Introduction (1999) went no further than publishing some texts taken out of various language registers, Fairman (2000; 2002) and Sokoll (2001) go straight to the heart of the matter with studies on pauper letters10, exploring social variation in early 19th century language. This trend is confirmed by the kind of papers presented at recent gatherings of the ICEHL (International Conference on English Historical Linguistics). A number of research units working on English corpus linguistics is actively promoting the historical-sociolinguistic analysis of original sources. One has to be mentioned by name because of its outstanding efforts, viz. the >Research Unit for Variation and Change in English< of the university of Helsinki11. New impulses and interesting new data are also being provided through recent research on historical pragmatics and language ideology in English12. One of the paramount catalysts for historical-sociolinguistic research in the field of English is the team headed by Tieken Boon van Ostade who, at the University of Leiden, is performing pioneering research in the field of language codification.13

After having concentrated mainly on German and English for a rather long time, major publishing houses are now making room for studies on the historical sociolinguistics of

9 http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/
10 Further references are to be found in the bibliography section of the e-journal Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics, mentioned above.
11 http://www.eng.helsinki.fi/varieng/team2/index.htm
12 See Journal of Historical Pragmatics (http://www.es.unizh.ch/ahjucker/JHP.htm) and Bex & Watts 1999.
13 See http://weblog.leidenuniv.nl/let/eng/codifiers/ for recent information on their projects.

Yet, even at this point it is still not easy to pinpoint the real main points of interest in the field. In many cases it seems to be the personal interests of the 'pioneers' which prevails. In spite of the very >general< titles of, for example, the books by Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) and Bergs (2005) mentioned before, they actually are very specialized analyses of Tudor and Stuart English and morpho-syntactic variation in 15th century English letters respectively. The fact that even as of today historical-sociolinguistic papers at linguistic conferences almost always start with an overview of all the methodological problems the researchers experienced is a clear indication that the field is still in full expansion (cf. Dionne 2005; Nordlund 2005). We can easily understand, therefore, why the editors of Sociolinguistica not only deemed it necessary to devote the entire 1999 issue to methodological problems but also wished to continue their efforts in this field by wanting to thoroughly discuss recent developments in the 2006 issue.

5.2 Although historical sociolinguistics is manifestly here to stay, its practitioners often continue to work in >splendid isolation<, despite the many methodological problems they share.

Following the early conceptual publications on the nature of historical sociolinguistics and its methodology, the 'founders' of the discipline typically set up a number of regionally isolated projects on national language histories in the mid 1990s (Brussels, Heidelberg, Helsinki, for example), focusing on language change and language use in times of great political and societal impact/ changes in European history. These projects were almost always restricted to the sociolinguistic history of one language in one specific region (German in Germany, Dutch in Flanders, English in England). As such, even as of today, European historical sociolinguistics still overwhelmingly tends to concentrate on one language at a time.

Certain scholars, however, have repeatedly claimed that >true< historical sociolinguistics needs intense international and cross-linguistic collaboration. The challenge here is not only to coordinate current ongoing research, but even more to establish research contacts between the pioneer researchers of the 80s and their first and second generation followers.

Mattheier, for example, puts this international dimension at the heart of the discipline and claims that >European historical sociolinguistics< is to be concerned with the study of the history of language structures, language use, language contact and language awareness in a broad European context. „Eine historische Soziolinguistik Europas muß hier ansetzen; etwa mit einer Studie über die Typen der Standardsprachenentwicklung in Europa oder über die Auswirkungen von Städtebildung und Verstädterung auf die soziolinguistische Konstellation, aber auch mit einer vergleichenden und typisierenden Analyse der Rolle von Sprachlichkeit bei der Ausbildung ethnischer Identitäten“ (Mattheier 1999: 233).
5.3 If a European historical sociolinguistics in the sense of Mattheier (1999) is to be, the time to act has now come. In the following we will discuss five good reasons for doing so as soon as possible.

a) For the first time in the European research community we now have the opportunity to bring together three generations of scholars in historical sociolinguistics, to allow the transfer of knowledge and skills from the pioneer generation (who will retire soon) and the senior generation (who has hands-on experience in all practical and theoretical issues surrounding historical-sociolinguistic projects) to the junior generation-in-training. Given the age pyramid in the research community, the ever growing number of young researchers and the enormous potential for this type of research in the new member states of the EU, it is crucial to seize this opportunity immediately.

b) Across all nation and language specific individual projects, a striking amount of common features appear to emerge from the publications and research accounts so far. On the level of methodology, there is a consensus that young researchers in historical sociolinguistics are required to learn and master a series of varied skills in a very short time in order to tackle theoretical and methodological questions that are inherent to the discipline. The definition of social class in a historical context, the assessment of school practices and the type and quality of education of a particular scribe, the importance of linguistic skills for one's social identity, the influence of (continuously changing) social networks and language norms on linguistic production, gender issues, the influence of new media and text types, and language contact phenomena are but some of them. Common practical problems include the treatment of historical sources (issues of electronic techniques to sample and store historical data, corpus building etc.) and the correct interpretation of writing systems (palaeographic aspects, standards of editing, etc.).

c) Despite the intrinsically European dimension of these first 'isolated' experiences in historical sociolinguistics, there are hardly any institutionalised international scholarly collaborations in the field. There used to be a substantial lack of contact between the individual 'national' teams and quite often this is due to (bridgeable) language obstacles.

It happens, for example, that scholars involved in historical sociolinguistic research in one specific multilingual setting are not aware of the findings of other teams working on similar questions at the same time in another multilingual area. In other cases, they simply are not aware of each other's existence: scholars studying class-specific language use in, say, Germany, were initially largely uninformed about simultaneous research on that topic in Flanders, to name but one example. Also, although there is an extensive and very successful historical-sociolinguistic tradition in German linguistics, its findings are hardly ever mentioned in English language sociolinguistics, mainly because there are always published exclusively in German. One practical example: between 1987 and 2004 there have been seven conferences on “Historische Soziolinguistik des Deutschen” (Historical Sociolinguistics of German) in Rostock. Outside of Germany this has passed largely unnoticed since the sole language of the conferences was German. The same kind of
language obstacle has prevented the international community of becoming familiar with the results of historical sociolinguistic research in France (Branca-Rosoff & Schneider 1994).

d) Currently there is still a complete lack of any regular forum on historical sociolinguists. We are mostly acting in the margin of larger conferences, publications and organizations. So far, there have been no series of conferences, summer schools or colloquia on the topic: the few occasions where information exchange does take place are when academic papers are presented at the world conferences on historical linguistics (International Conference on Historical Linguistics; ICHL) or sociolinguistics (Sociolinguistics Symposium; SS). The only electronic journal devoted to historical sociolinguistics (cf. above) is very much centred on the English language and there is no specific linguistic association for historical sociolinguists worldwide. There is, in other words, a great need for the creation of some permanent platform between the researchers involved, through specific conferences, publications and, at a later stage, maybe a scientific organization.

e) A common research agenda should be set. Overlooking the sociolinguistic past of language communities in Europe, it appears that many languages (across territorial and linguistic borders) were affected by similar major pan-European historical events which were characterized by fundamental and lasting cultural, political, social and economic >transformations<. Examples include (but are not limited to) the 18th and 19th century nation-building processes, the 19th and early 20th century industrialization, the 20th century social movements (emancipation, student revolutions, the >ecological turn<) up until the major geopolitical changes in former eastern Europe on the brink of the 21st century. The study of these phenomena could be at the heart of European >historical sociolinguistics< or >socio-historical linguistics<, in order to explore data and to tackle aspects of Europe’s multilingual and multicultural language history that had been left unattended so far.

5.4 During very recent years we noticed some, albeit mostly isolated, attempts to establish contact between researchers from various different language communities. Jahr (1999) gives a broad overview of recent findings in historical sociolinguistics in many different countries, whereas in Deumert & Vandenbussche (2003) the standardization process of all Germanic languages is analyzed in depth systematically as well as comparatively. Braunmüller & Ferraresi (2003) compiles a number of unrelated studies on specific aspects of multilingual development in Europe. Three successive conferences in Sheffield (2001) and Bristol (2003; 2005) respectively, gave researchers from the whole Germanic language community14 an opportunity to discuss historical-sociolinguistic aspects of standardization, language purism and social stratification. Cross-linguistic

14 A written report on these conferences is to be found in Linn & McLelland (2002), Langer & Davies (2005), and Elspaß, Langer, Scharloth & Vandenbussche (2006).
research of the historical aspects of discourse and society was on the agenda of a series of conferences Organization in discourse at the university of Turku in Finland.

Unfortunately, in the second, revised edition of the International Handbook Soziolinguistik/ Sociolinguistics (Ammon/ Dittmar/ Mattheier/ Trudgill 2004-2006) no impetus is given for the elaboration of a 'European Language History' and the chapter on historical sociolinguistics as it appeared in the first edition has even been reduced to one single overview article, viz. Romaine (2005).

5.5 At this very moment (i.e. December 2005) the foundations have been laid for an international network, meant to bring together both experienced and junior researchers in our discipline and encourage (or urge) them to collaborate intensively. One of the paramount initiatives in this respect is the Historical Sociolinguistics Network (HiSoN) that was started in 2005 in the aftermath of the afore mentioned international conference in Bristol. The founding members are researchers from the universities of Augsburg (Stephan Elspaß), Bristol (Nils Langer), Brussels (Wim Vandenbussche) and Zürich (Joachim Scharloth) and some hundred researchers have joined already, many of them being founding fathers of the discipline. Among other things HiSoN intends to organize, on a regularly basis, conferences and workshops on specific themes; a yearly summer school with seminars and training specifically stressing the interdisciplinary character of historical sociolinguistics is envisaged. Among the colleagues from other disciplines we are eager to cooperate with we mention in the first place historians who have been working, from a historical perspective, on issues involving language and language change and shift. Although the work of those historians involving the so-called linguistic turn may, up to a certain point, be considered to be part of historical sociolinguistics (an excellent example would be the monumental work of Burke & Porter (eds. 1987, 1991, 1995), they are hardly ever mentioned, let alone used in linguistic publications in our field.

Also, HiSoN plans to set up a publication series and intends to occasionally edit thematic issues of a journal. Most of all it sees itself as an organization eager to establish contacts between researchers from various language communities in Europe, on the basis of shared cultural, social, political and economic factors which shaped their respective language histories.

6. Bibliography


16 Website HiSoN: http://www.philhist.uni-augsburg.de/hison/
17 Apart from the collections mentioned Burke also published (in 2004) a standard work on the social language history of Europe between 1450 and 1789.
18 The first Multilingua issue of 2007, for example, will be edited by HiSoN and devoted to lower class writing.


