Corpus Planning in 19th Century Flanders and Its Consequences on Public Language Usage in the Administration

ABSTRACT: In the Low Countries language planning in the field of orthography started in 1804. Yet, in the course of the 19th century, both the spelling system and the political situation of the Low Countries changed considerably, as did the outcome of their interplay. The paramount factors involved seem to have been the educational/social variable, with other traditional sociolinguistic variables playing an important role as well. In the Southern Netherlands, though, two factors have to be added, viz., political loyalty and linguistic allegiance. The country was part of France through 1814, subsequently reunited with the Northern Netherlands through 1830, and part of an independent Belgium for the rest of the century. During that time five different spelling systems are to be discerned.

As part of a larger project on the linguistic development of 19th century southern Dutch, we tackled the spelling problem in two different ways in order to collect the solid data that were lacking so far. For one, spelling was part of the systematic analysis of a corpus of texts written by various social classes, which had never been used for (socio)-linguistic research before. Furthermore, we investigated the interplay between political change and the spelling policy/practice of city administrations. In this paper we concentrate on the second item. A study in the town of Willebroek, near Antwerp, yielded insights which are both completely new and very fascinating. They are based on an analysis of the minutes of the meetings of the bench of aldermen, as they were recorded by the subsequent city managers during the whole 19th century. The data are discussed within the larger context of linguistic development, standardization, language planning and language policy of the Low Countries in general and the Southern Netherlands/Flanders in particular.

This pilot study of the intriguing interplay between political and linguistic issues has been the prelude to a large scale investigation, involving the city administrations of Antwerp.
Introduction

According to James Milroy (1999: 34) "the idea that a spelling system should be invariant is a post-eighteenth-century notion. In the Low Countries language planning in the field of orthography did indeed start in the outgoing 18th and early 19th century. That doesn't mean, though, that an invariant spelling system emerged immediately after. Both our experience with the spelling "traditions" in use and our reading of contemporary orthographic manuals allow us to state that indeed the idea that spelling should be invariant was nonexistent before the 19th century. Yet so far traditional historiography of the Dutch language has paid no attention to this particular aspect.

From the 16th century onward treatises on spelling and grammar of (variants of) Dutch have come to us, some of which were well written, were linguistically substantiated or were inspired by well-founded language planning premises and assumptions. Most, though, were not. Yet, we strongly suspect that neither of them had a real influence, although we have to admit that to date no large scale diachronic investigation on spelling systems in use in the Low Countries has ever been carried out. Consequently, we do not know for certain how much variance used to be tolerated, nor by what factors (social class, education, regional origin, etc.) it was determined. On the other hand, our knowledge of the text tradition allows for the conclusion that, until the last quarter of the 18th century, there has never been a Southern spelling system as opposed to a Northern one, mainly because neither the North nor the South has ever had a more or less uniform system in the first place.

As far as the Southern Netherlands is concerned (this is the traditional term to refer to what is now Belgium) all language treatises from the second half of the 17th and from the 18th century advocated the spelling of the great (Northern) Golden Age writers, especially Vondel. That this was mere lip service can—among other things—be deduced from the fact that these grammarians continued to use their very personal orthography in their own treatises. As a matter of fact, all of them used spelling systems related to and/or influenced by their very own regional language variety (Smeyers 1959).
Since the political split of the Netherlands at the end of the 16th century, the Southern Netherlands have been governed by foreign rulers using French as the language of administration and government. Consequently, the social prestige language was French. This, as well as the fact that in the secondary schools Latin was the most important language, followed by French, with Dutch coming only in third place are only some of the reasons why there has hardly been any official interest in regulating the Dutch spelling system (Willemyns 1999).

The first official attempt is the Nederduytsche spraek-konst (Dutch Grammar) by Jan des Roches in 1761. Des Roches was the secretary of the “Imperial” Academy of Sciences in Brussels and the most important counselor of the Austrian authorities in the fields of language and education. He profited from his position by publishing a large amount of textbooks which were then officially introduced in the schools. A school reform plan of his, commissioned by the government, was accepted and officially introduced in 1777, including his grammar and spelling treatise just mentioned, as well as his Fransch-Nederduytsch Woordenboek (French-Dutch dictionary) from 1782 onward, the year it was published (Deneckere 1954; Smeyers 1959). As a consequence Des Roches’ orthographic system would be the official one in the schools of the Southern Netherlands for a long time. Yet, we do not know how well it was observed nor whether or to what extent it influenced the writing habits outside the school. The important thing here though is that 1777 is the year that saw the first official spelling norm in the Southern Netherlands or, actually, in the Netherlands at large (Willemyns 2001).

In the Northern Netherlands many treatises and essays on orthographic practice were written during the second half of the 18th century. Yet, it was only during the time of the Napoleonic rule that the first officially consecrated corpus planning instruments were created, viz., Siegenbeek’s spelling¹ and Weiland’s grammar² (De Vries, Willemyns & Burger 1995:100 and 155).

Interplay of political regime and spelling system

In the course of the 19th century, both the spelling system and the political situation of the Low Countries changed considerably and so did the outcome of their interplay. Our understanding of what happened is now based on solid data, generated through a larger research project on the linguistic development
of 19th century southern Dutch which was launched at the *Vrije Universiteit* in Brussels by Willemyns in 1994 (Willemyns and Vandenbussche 2000) and in which the research group tackled the spelling problem in two different ways. For one, spelling was part of a systematic analysis of text corpora of the Lower Classes (the so-called *Arbeiersprache*) and, subsequently of the Lower Middle and Upper Classes, which had never been used for (socio)linguistic research before. In the second place the interplay between political change and the spelling policy/practice of city administrations was investigated. In this article we will mainly concentrate on the second item and we will, therefore, briefly summarize the relevant data from the first sub-project mentioned.

Traditional language historiography holds 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 1864.3

Analyses of an extensive corpus of original handwritten documents from the 19th century (the first ever to include texts from all social classes (Vandenbussche 1999) now show that the written language use of the majority of the Flemish population remained largely unaffected by these language planning activities. Most Flemings did not conform to an official spelling system, nor to any of the unofficial norms. The data demonstrate that many writers made use of highly individual spelling systems instead, which yet should not be described as “chaotic” but, as Vandenbussche has established, rather as “variable within clear limits” (Vandenbussche 2002). This holds true for members of the Lower, the Middle and the Upper Classes alike, albeit not to the same extent. Toward the end of the 19th century, standardized spelling did eventually spread in Flanders, apparently from the higher toward the lower social classes. Crucial factors which may have influenced their sensibility for standardization issues are the quality of the writers’ school education, the nature of their working environment (so-called “handarbeiorientierte” or “schriftorientierte Arbeit”), and the relative need for external communication in their personal and professional life. In the view of our research group, we need to envisage a new model of the spread of standardized orthography in Flanders, not based so much on official decisions but rather on the societal needs and expectations of each individual social group (Vandenbussche 2001).
Yet in some specific cases two additional factors are to be added, viz., political loyalty and linguistic allegiance. And this brings us to our main theme, viz., the way city officials reacted to language planning measures and spelling norm changes. A large scale investigation, involving the city administrations of the Flemish province capitals Antwerp, Brugge, Gent and Hasselt, was started as of January 1, 2002 and has, consequently, not yielded usable data so far. Yet, a more concise pilot study in the smaller town of Willebroek, near Antwerp, yielded insights which are new and very fascinating. They are based on a linguistic analysis of the minutes of the meetings of the bench of aldermen, as they were recorded by the city manager, the highest ranking city official, throughout the 19th century, i.e., during a period covering different political regimes as well as different spelling systems (Vanhecke 1998). We will discuss these data within the larger context of linguistic development, standardization, language planning and language policy of the Low Countries in general and the Southern Netherlands/Flanders in particular. We will, therefore, start with a short overview of the main facts in the political development as well as in spelling planning measures.

After revolutionary French armies had expelled the Austrian rulers, the Southern Netherlands were annexed by France in 1795 and remained part of France through 1814. Subsequently, they were reunited with the Northern Netherlands through 1830, and part of an independent Belgium for the rest of the century. As far as the spelling norm and practice during that time is concerned, the following can be discerned:

a) in the North:
- prior to 1804: intuitive orthography
- from 1804 through ± 1864: the Siegenbeek-system
- from 1864 onward: the De Vries and Te Winkel-system

b) in the South we have a more complicated picture:
- prior to 1814: intuitive orthography and/or Des Roches’ system
- from 1815 through 1830: Siegenbeek (not compulsory) + intuitive orthography
- from 1830 through 1840/44: back to the situation prior to 1814
- from 1840/44 through 1864: the “committee-spelling”
- from 1864 onward: the De Vries and Te Winkel-system
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Let us discuss this in greater detail:

a] from 1795 through 1814, during the annexation to France, French is the only official language and its use is obligatory in all official circumstances from 1804 onward; yet: the vast majority of the population has no command of French and, consequently, cannot obey the ruling of the French masters (Deneckere 1975); this is also the case in many town halls of (mostly) smaller communes.

b] from 1814 through 1830 the Netherlands are reunited as the "Vereenigd Koninkrijk der Nederlanden" (United Kingdom of the Netherlands). Until 1824 the use of Dutch as an official language is encouraged, but not compulsory. Yet, from 1824 through 1830 Dutch is the only official language in Flanders (De Jonghe 1967).

c] from 1830 onwards, French is the undeclared sole administrative language of newly created Belgium. Its use is not compulsory, albeit many city and other administrations appear to use it to the detriment of the Dutch majority language. From the sixties and seventies onward, when the first language laws are approved in parliament, the official use of Dutch slowly increases. Yet, it takes until 1898 for the "Gelijkheidswet" to proclaim French and Dutch as Belgium’s two official languages.

d] yet, during all that time, documents are written in Dutch in all Flemish city halls (in quite varying quantities) and, consequently, those who wrote them had to make a decision on the orthography system in which to write them. It is, therefore, interesting to have a closer look at the possible interplay of spelling, political regime, and allegiance.
During the consecutive political regimes mentioned, an official orthography was or was not compulsory. During the reunification period the Siegenbeek system was obligatory in the North, but not in the South. The government never issued a decree to make it compulsory for the Southern part of the realm (De Groof 2002). To a certain extent, therefore, its usage may have been a sign of political allegiance. A Royal Decree of January 1, 1844 officialized the so-called “committee-spelling” and by Royal Decree of November 21, 1864 the De Vries and Te Winkel-system was made compulsory.4

The so-called “committee-spelling” resulted from a struggle on the orientation of the spelling system opposing particularists and integrationists2 (Willemyns 1993). The dissolution of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830 meant the end of the orthographic unity based on the Siegenbeek-system and had given way to a renewed feeling of uncertainty and insecurity as far as the norm of the spelling was concerned. In order to remedy this situation the Belgian government, strongly lobbied by integrationist organizations, held a competition and installed a committee to judge the entries. This jury unanimously rejected all twelve entries and, in 1839, published a system of its own, known as “de commissie-spelling” (the committee-spelling).6 With few exceptions the committee-spelling mirrored the Siegenbeek-spelling in use in Holland and in so doing the committee practically reintroduced the orthographic unity between the North and the South.

Although there was fierce opposition from particularists (the city councils of Antwerp and Brussels in 1840 even refused to use it), the government made the committee-spelling official by Royal Decree on January 1, 1844 after the Flemish province Governors had assured that most writers and schools had adopted it already (Couvreur-Willemyns 1998:2804). In order to fully grasp the impact of this, one has to realize that at that moment orthography was still considered an integrated part of the language or, even more to the point, the spelling was the language. Taking over a spelling system (e.g., that of the Netherlands) consequently was felt as taking over the language. The symbolic value of this decision was enormous. It explains why the particularist opponents experienced it as a harsh defeat, whereas its integrationist supporters cheered it as a decisive victory. And from that moment onward indeed, the particularist tendency never again succeeded in really influencing the views of the mainstream Flemish cultural elite (Willemyns and Haeseryn 1998).
The Willebroek case study

We will now, as an example and a case study, have a look at how all this affected our corpus of Willebroek texts on two different levels, viz., language choice and language use. We should indeed not forget that, apart from having the choice of various systems to write Dutch, there was also the widely used possibility to write French. Until recently it was assumed that this was what all Belgian communes did from 1830 onwards. Our research proved this to be untrue and our pilot study in the smaller town of Willebroek, near Antwerp, reveals a much more complex situation (Vanhecke 1998). First of all we will deal with the matter of language choice, i.e., Dutch or French, followed by an overview of the results of the investigation into the spelling matter.

In Willebroek the Country Clerk’s Office registered birth and death certificates from 1796 onward. Through 1815 it did so exclusively in French (i.e., during French rule). Yet, from then onward, until today, it used Dutch exclusively. It is interesting to see that French was used before the 1804 decree made that language compulsory. On the other hand, they switched to Dutch almost immediately after French rule and continued to use that language even after 1830, when Dutch had once again lost its function as a language of administration.

We notice the same policy of anticipation as far as the minutes of the Bench of Aldermen is concerned. Until March 1820 they were written in French. In 1819 the government of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands had announced its intention to proclaim Dutch the exclusive administrative language in Flanders, starting from 1824 onward. Anticipating once more forthcoming legislation, the Willebroek city administrators started to gradually use Dutch after March 1820 and ended up with the exclusive usage of that language in 1823.

The situation changed once more after Belgian independence, when there was no doubt that the Government meant French to be the exclusive language of administration, both in Wallonia and in Flanders (Willemyns, De Groof and Vandenbussche 2002). From 23 May 1831 onwards, the Willebroek minutes were drafted in either Dutch or French (some of them even in both languages in the same document) but everything meant to be proclaimed to the population was written right away and exclusively in Dutch.
Two years later, i.e., from 1835 onward the use of French diminishes gradually and it is completely abandoned in 1865. In other words, Dutch is the exclusive language of the Willebroek city administration more than 30 years before the Gelijkheidswet (1898) proclaims the administrative equality of both languages (Willemyns 1999). A similar complex pattern seems to emerge from an ongoing investigation of Aldermen minutes in the East-Flemish commune of Grembergen.

Let us now turn to the spelling

During the reunification period the Siegenbeek-spelling was introduced in Flanders, but it was, as mentioned before, never made compulsory. Consequently, people were exposed to different spelling systems. Mainly in schools with teachers from the North, Dutch was taught according to the northern spelling and grammar.

In our corpus, the Dutch texts emerging from 1820 onward are written almost exclusively in the “southern” Des Roches-spelling. Starting in early 1823 we see how Siegenbeek is gradually introduced and how this system is the only one in use by the end of the year. In others words, it seems as if the introduction of the “new” official language was the trigger for the introduction of the “new” official spelling. Yet, strangely enough, some of the minutes of 1824 return to the Des Roches-spelling. Since the handwriting remains the same, we have no idea how to explain this relapse. At the end of 1824 then, this same writer changes back to Siegenbeek and maintains it exclusively until late 1830.⁷

With Belgian independence, i.e., late 1830, early 1831 Siegenbeek is dropped and the Des Roches-system is reinstalled until 1844. The fact that a new clerk was appointed in 1839 does not change anything in this strange behavior. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether these changes were initiated by the clerk and/or city manager themselves or whether there has been pressure from someone or something. At any rate, since no official spelling norm existed prior to 1844, we know that the habit is not influenced by some kind of accommodation to an official norm either. During the period of the United Kingdom, the clerk may have felt some moral obligation to use the Siegenbeek system and then have dropped it of his own free will in 1830. Yet, the opposite may have been true as well. One of the things which are investigated
in the larger project that just started is how this Willebroek behavior compares to the practice in other larger cities.

As far as the consistency with which the various systems are used, we notice quite a lot of irregularities and forms deviating from the norm. Some examples: sometimes names of days or months are in upper case and sometimes they are not; sometimes French loan words in Dutch are written the “Dutch” way, sometimes the French way: personeel/personneel, functie/fonctie. There are also some idiosyncrasies: de andere/d’andere. Partly this is to be explained by uncertainty with regard to the valid norm and its multiple changes but partly also by the fact that even professional writers were not extraordinarily concerned with an absolutely consistent spelling; the notion “spelling mistake” definitely had a different connotation than it does today. On the other hand, it is obvious that the amount of spelling “variation” does not even remotely match the amount we found in our non-professional Lower Class and Lower Middle Class corpus. Finally, the fact that the alternation of writers and city clerks (three different hands in the period 1844-1863) does not correspond with the alternation of spelling systems in use is a clear indication that the clerks must have forged some kind of an agreement as to which spelling system to use.

The Royal Decree of January 1, 1844 makes the so-called “Commission spelling” compulsory. Almost immediately and until a new system comes into effect, the Willebroek clerks of the Bench of Aldermen switch to this Commission-spelling. It is quite obvious that this cannot be a coincidence. They too still display minor inconsistencies, as did their predecessors.

From 1864 onward then, the De Vries&Te Winkel-system is made compulsory. Once again the Willebroek writers conform to the new rule almost immediately. Also, and for the first time now, we notice a considerable decrease in the amount of “irregularities” (Vanhecke 1998:104). Our working hypothesis, which is currently being investigated, is that it is only from the last third of the 19th century onward that spelling consistency is aimed for and that “variation” may be seen as “making mistakes”.

Conclusions and research desiderata

1. Language choice in the chancelleries of smaller cities is completely different from what we expected on the basis of the prevailing assumptions. Ongoing
research will establish if these conclusions are to be generalized and whether the practice in larger cities matched that of the smaller ones.

2. In spite of the many successive spelling systems, the scribes appear to have been well informed about them. This is remarkable in its own right.

3. The clerks and scribes must have made some kind of an agreement as to which spelling system to use, since the alternation of different “hands” does not correspond with the alternation of spelling systems in use.

4. The spelling inconsistency is rather restricted and the amount of spelling “variation” does not even remotely match the amount we found in our non-professional Lower Class and Lower Middle Class corpus.

5. It remains unclear whether switching to another orthography at the onset of a new political regime is an expression of political allegiance, but it seems a plausible assumption. Ongoing research based on a considerably larger corpus from many more chancelleries will establish this.

6. It will also shed light on the matter of whether pressure has been exerted and by whom, but the really remarkable thing is that the scribes had the competence to adjust to new rules, regardless of whether they were forced to adjust or not.

7. Finally, corpus planning appears to have been quite successful, at least in the professional scribes examined so far. This, too, is a very promising assumption for further research.

NOTES

1. M. Siegenbeek. 1804. “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'].

2. P. Weiland. 1805. “Nederduitsche spraakkunst” ['Dutch Grammar'].

3. We refer to the so-called “De Vries en te Winkel-spelling” published in 1863 (“De grondbeginselen der Nederlandsche spelling. Ontwerp der spelling, voor het aanstaande Nederlandsch Woordenboek” door M. de Vries en J. te Winkel ['The principles of the Dutch orthography. Draft of a spelling system for the forthcoming Dutch Dictionary']). It was
officially adopted in Belgium in 1864 and made compulsory in education, administration and all public instruments and deeds (Suffeleers 1979:36).

4. 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 “Nederlandske Taalunie” that takes care of the fact that the spelling of Dutch will always be the same in both countries.

5. From 1830 onwards, the year Belgium officially came into existence, a so-called Flemish Movement tried to improve the position and the status of Dutch. Several problems emerged simultaneously, one of them being that the Dutch language as it had been preserved in the southern parts was not at all prepared to assume the functions its advocates had in mind. Among other things it needed standardization, and the inevitable consequence seemed to be a steady rapprochement with the northern norm. Yet, not all Flemish activists agreed on the fact that strengthening ties with the Dutch was a necessary, or even a desirable, evolution. Two factions may be discerned: those advocating domestic standardization (on the basis of the local dialect varieties), called particularists, and those insisting that the Flemings should take over as much as possible the standard language norms existing in the North. They are called the integrationists.

6. It was published in the “Moniteur belge” (the official Gazette) of September 8, 1839. It is also known as the “Willems-spelling” after the committee-chairman, the famous Jan-Frans Willems, the so-called “Father of the Flemish Movement”.

7. It is important to stress that both handwriting and signature of all the minutes in our corpus have been controlled meticulously. Unless explicitly mentioned otherwise, changes in language or orthography are never due to a different hand or author.

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