

Chapter 6

Spelling and identity in the Southern Netherlands (1750–1830)

Rik Vosters, Gijsbert Rutten, Marijke van der Wal, and Wim Vandenbussche

1. Introduction

At the reunification of the Low Countries in 1815, after more than two centuries of political separation, Northern and Southern varieties of Dutch once again came into renewed and intensified contact. The language area had been split since the Northern revolt against the Spanish regime at the end of the sixteenth century, after which the North entered its Golden Age as the independent Republic of the Seven United Provinces, while the Flemish South remained under foreign control, as part of the Spanish, Austrian, and French empires. The brief reunion under the crown of William I of Orange, commonly known as the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815–1830), gave rise to a number of remarkable language guidebooks aimed at native speakers of “Flemish” Southern Dutch, setting out to teach them “Hollandic” Northern Dutch.¹ Given such publications, we might be tempted to look back upon Northern Hollandic and Southern Flemish as two distinct and mutually incomprehensible languages in 1815. However, while there must certainly have been communicative difficulties among users of different *spoken* varieties, the actual linguistic differences in written and printed texts are minimal. The main points of divergence between North and South in the early nineteenth century are minor orthographical issues, devoid of oral connotations. This chapter will examine these orthographical issues, situate them within the sociolinguistic landscape of early-nineteenth-century Flanders, and show how apparently insignificant differences were often portrayed as represent-

1. The most well-known example is Cannaert (1823). Moke (1823) also explicitly advertises itself as a Hollandic grammar to be used by Flemings. De Simpel (s.a. [1827]) is a detailed comparison of Northern and Southern language use, in defense of the former. Some Northern textbooks were adapted linguistically for Southern audiences (e.g., Delin and van de Gaer 1820).

ing an unbridgeable linguistic gap between the Northern and Southern Low Countries.

2. Spelling, identity, and ideology

Recent years have seen a growing body of literature dealing with sociolinguistic, discursive and ideological aspects of orthography.² The focus of many studies has been on present-day issues of orthographic choice, with research traditions in the critical analysis of transcription practices, and the development of writing systems for previously unwritten languages in different parts of the world (cf. Jaffe 2000: 500). The aim of the present chapter is to broaden and diversify this body of research by focusing on a case study in historical sociolinguistics, testing how the basic assumption of spelling as a socially conditioned phenomenon can be applied to the situation of Dutch in Flanders in the early nineteenth century. Our approach in the present contribution will be fundamentally sociohistorical and sociocultural, not regarding orthography as value-neutral technology, but rather emphasizing issues of identity and iconicity³ (cf. Sebba 2007).

We departed from an initial focus on orthographical standardization and variant reduction in Southern Dutch between 1750 and 1830 – however, along the lines of Milroy and Milroy (1985) and Milroy (2007), we will also attempt to foreground the workings of competing language ideologies with regard to linguistic standards. Our view of language ideology corresponds to that of Irvine (1989: 255), who defined it as “the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests.” As was also pointed out by Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 58), this outlook stresses ideology “as rooted in or responsive to the experience of a particular social position, . . . and it signals a commitment to . . . ask how essential meanings about language are socially produced as effective and powerful.” We will therefore be concerned not only with the way in which a dominant language ideology can “exert an influence on language attitudes and the way in which language structure and language use are thought of in the community” (Watts 2000: 33), but attempt

2. For instance, a 2000 special issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* (4:4) about non-standard orthographic representations of non-standard language varieties.

Pointers to more recent work can be found in the introduction to this issue (Jaffe 2000), as well as in Sebba’s (2007) monograph on spelling and society.

3. See section 5.2 below for a definition of this term.

to describe sociolinguistic representations operating in various discursive zones, including actual linguistic practices, as sites which allow language users to negotiate social identities.⁴

3. An emerging Southern identity

The second half of the eighteenth century sees a remarkable increase in the production of orthography guidebooks, grammars, and schoolbooks from the Southern Netherlands.⁵ Although these works have often been viewed as dispersed and not representing a uniform normative tradition, we have argued elsewhere that this is not the case (Rutten and Vosters 2010; Rutten and Vosters forthcoming; Vosters, Rutten and Vandebussche forthcoming). Most of these works are concerned with similar topics, such as purism and the battle against loan words, but many are also oriented toward the field of education, and consequently deal with basic writing and spelling instruction. Nearly all of these authors seem to be aware of trends in the Northern normative tradition at the time, and based on a limited number of orthographical issues, they often construct a framework of Northern usage as divergent from Southern practices. While some authors, like van Boterdael (1785) and the anonymous scribe of the *Snoeiymes* manuscript,⁶ *in theory* confess to the “superior” Northern way of spelling, they follow the older Flemish spelling conventions throughout their own work – for instance, using *ae* rather than *aa* forms to represent long /a:/ vowels in closed syllables. Others, such as

4. Cf. Narvaja de Arnoux and del Valle (2010: 3): “Por tanto, para el estudio del desarrollo y funcionamiento de los regímenes de normatividad es imprescindible identificar como objeto de análisis *las representaciones sociolingüísticas*, es decir, aquellas que, por un lado, se refieren a objetos lingüísticos ... y que, por otro, implican evaluaciones sociales de esos objetos y de los sujetos con los que son asociados. ... Son múltiples, en efecto, no solo las formas que adoptan sino también las zonas discursivas donde se manifiestan las representaciones sociolingüísticas: en los textos que regulan política y jurídicamente el uso del lenguaje ..., en los que definen los objetos lingüísticos (gramáticas, diccionarios, libros de estilo) y en los que los tematizan (artículos de opinión sobre, por ejemplo, el uso correcto), ... y en la propia praxis lingüística, entendida como acción en la que los interlocutores negocian sus identidades sociales.”

5. Verpoorten (1752), P.B. (1757), [Snoeiymes] (s.a. [1750s–1760s]), des Roches (s.a. [1761]), van Belleghem and Waterschoot (s.a. [1773]) Janssens (1775), Stéven (1784), [Dendermonde] (1785), van Boterdael (1785), and Ballieu (1792).

6. Cf. Vosters and Rutten (forthcoming).

P.B. (1757: 11), reject “Hollandic” prescriptions more radically, and clearly locate Northern *aa* spellings “outside of our language.”⁷ The differences mentioned are of minimal linguistic importance, and in addition to the *ae/aa* issue, other points of discussion included the orthographical representation of diphthongs (*ey* versus *ei*, *uy* versus *ui*), undotted *y* versus dotted *ij*, and the *-n* versus *-ø* spelling of the nominative singular masculine form of definite and indefinite articles (*den* and *eenen* as opposed to *de* and *een*), pronouns (*onzen* or *onze*), and adjectives (*goeden* or *goede*).⁸ It is important to note, however, that this discursive North–South opposition presupposed orthographical uniformity in Northern normative works on the presented issues⁹ – in reality, however, several influential authors such as Moonen (1706), Verwer (1707), ten Kate (1723) and van der Palm (1769) actually prescribed *ae* rather than *aa*,¹⁰ and also nominative *n*-articles have been attested in the Northern part of the language area during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Geerts 1966; Maljaars 1979; Rutten 2010). What we observe in eighteenth-century Flanders is a schematization of the discussion, where juxtaposed Northern and Southern spellings become increasingly symbolic markers for respectively Northern and Southern language identities. The widespread Flemish insistence on assumedly typical Southern spellings must be seen in the light of a larger but gradual articulation of “linguistic Southernness” during the second half of the eighteenth century, consolidating spellings such as *ae*, *ey*, *y*, and *den* as clear and fixed Southern choices (Rutten forthcoming). Various aspects of these regional identities based on orthographical choice will be-

7. The original reads: “Nota. de Hollanders gebruyken in sommige woorden, als *daer*, *waer*, *naer*, enz. in plaets van de *e*, noch eene *a*, en schryven aldus *daar*, *waar*, *naar*, enz. maer dat is buyten onze tael.” All translations are our own.

8. As the <n>-forms are traditionally reserved for the accusative case, this phenomenon was often called *accusativism*. In spoken dialectal variation, this can be seen as an issue of morphophonology rather than orthography, as nominative <n>-forms appear in many Southern Dutch dialects in prevocalic positions or before <h>, <t>, <d>, <g>, , or <r> (Goossens 2008: 137–147). However, all of the aforementioned eighteenth-century Flemish publications prescribe *den*-forms across the board, regardless of the actual presence of an /n/ in pronunciation (cf. Couvreur 1940). In this way, the issue is perceived as being detached from the actual morphophonological variation in the spoken vernacular, and enters the orthographical arena, where the debate becomes schematized around stereotypical Southern <n>-spellings as opposed to Northern *ø*-forms.

9. We will further address this “myth of Northern uniformity” in section 7, as it plays an important role during the orthographical debates after 1815 as well.

10. Cf. van de Bilt (2009: 193).

come even more salient in the early nineteenth century, particularly during the period of the reunification of the Low Countries.

4. The United Kingdom of the Netherlands

The sociolinguistic landscape of Flanders underwent fairly radical change during the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. First of all, the role of Dutch vis-à-vis French was strengthened, as the government implemented a far-reaching Dutchification policy for administration and judiciary: from 1823 onward, Dutch became the exclusive official language of Flemish public life.¹¹ This not only stirred up ample language sociological controversy, especially among the francophone elite of the larger cities, but it also raised essential questions about the forms of Dutch to be used. The Northern provinces had an official norm for orthography and grammar: the works of Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805) had been sanctioned by the government for use in education and administration since the Batavian Republic (1795–1801). But the Southern provinces did not have any such official guidelines, and high government officials deemed it unnecessary to intervene in actual linguistic practices.¹²

This situation gave rise to extensive norm discussions among Dutch-speaking intellectuals, grammarians, and educators in Flanders. Theoretically, two extreme positions can be discerned. On the one hand, there was the so-called *integrationist* position to learn and take over Northern linguistic practices, without regard for Southern language conventions. This strategy was often related to the possible dominance of French in the Southern Netherlands, the idea being that a united Dutch language would serve as a better barrier against French than an emerging separate Flemish language could. Indeed, the linguistic distance between Northern Hollandic and the Southern language varieties was an oft-heard argument among the francophone opposition (Barafin 1815; Plasschaert 1817; Defrenne 1829). On the other hand, however, the *particularist* position took pride in the distinctiveness of

11. See de Jonghe (1967), van Goethem (1990), de Vroede (2002), and Vanhecke (2007) for more background on the policy and its implementation in Flanders. Cf. also Janssens and Steyaert (2008) for Wallonia.

12. For instance, A.R. Falck, Minister of Education, who wrote to his colleague van Maanen in 1822: “Overigens zoude ik van oordeel zijn dat vooralsnog geene verordeningen van gouvernementswege moeten plaats hebben ter verandering of wijziging, op hoog gezag, van het Vlaamsche taalgebruik” (Colenbrander 1915: VIII-2, 584–85).

Flemish Dutch, presenting it as a separate language and rejecting the norms of Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805), as they were not based on the language of the South.¹³

Obviously, the distinction between both viewpoints is not always clear, and in reality, nearly all authors took up a more moderate position somewhere in between both ends of the continuum (Vosters 2009). What is clear, however, is that orthography played a crucial part in these broader debates about North-South integration, as we will see in more detail in the next sections. Agreeing with Schieffelin and Doucet (1998: 286) that “[l]anguage ideology often determines which linguistic features get selected for cultural attention and for social marking . . . [i]n countries where nationness . . . is being negotiated,” the following section sets out to explore different social, political, and religious aspects of orthographical choice during the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands.

5. Spelling in context

In section 3, we discussed how a limited number of orthographical features developed into emerging markers of linguistic Southernness during the second half of the eighteenth century. After 1815, these features became even more salient, as the opposition between Northern and Southern Dutch became a central issue in language debates at the time. Minimal differences such as *ae*, *ey*, *y*, and *den* – as opposed to *aa*, *ei*, *ij*, and *de* according to the Siegenbeek (1804) norm – acquired *pragmatic salience* in the Southern provinces (Errington 1985; cf. also Hickey 2000). They do not represent direct pronunciation differences, but rather served as tools for indexing different social identities.

5.1. Linguistic and extralinguistic difference

As emphasized by Jaffe (2000: 502–503), “[o]rthography selects, displays, and naturalizes linguistic difference, which is in turn used to legitimize and naturalize cultural and political boundaries . . . , [particularly] in cases where the autonomy and status of the language in question is contested.” In this way, toward the end of the 1820s, when the general protest against the government’s economic and religious policies vis-à-vis the South grew,

13. Behaegel (s.a. [1820]: 16). However, cf. also Willems (1824: 2–3). The work of both authors is discussed in more detail in sections 5 and 6 below.

particularist authors deliberately used Southern spellings to signal their detachment from the North. The case of the West-Flemish grammarian Pieter Behaegel is interesting in this respect. When he published the first volume of his *Nederduytsche Spraakkunst* in 1817, he still opted for *ae*-spellings, which were perceived as distinctly Southern. However, in the second and third edition of his grammar, published in episodes from 1820 onward, he made the switch to Siegenbeek's (1804) *aa*, henceforth entitling his work *Nederduytsche Spraakkunst*, as a sign of his willingness to achieve a common orthography for North and South, for which both parties would need to make sacrifices (Behaegel s.a. [ca. 1828]: xxi). As this was no longer an option after Belgian independence, his work published after 1830 sees this change undone again, as can be seen from the title of his *Verhandeling over de Vlaemsche Spelkunst* (Behaegel 1837). A second remarkable example is the newspaper *De Antwerpenaar* (cf. Prims s.a.: 69–71). In 1827, an Antwerp-based bookseller asked permission to start a periodical with the said title, explicitly stating that it would use the Northern spelling, so as to signal its loyalty to the government. The plan was not a great success, and came to a swift end due to lack of funds. Less than a year later, however, the anti-Hollandic priest J.B. Buelens took over the idea, but turned the newspaper into a fierce oppositional weekly. The name continued to refer to the Flemish city and province where it was published and distributed, yet the spelling was changed into *Den Antwerpenaer*. The deliberate switch from *aa* to *ae* and *de* to *den* clearly signals the dissentient intentions of the editor.

Yet not only particularists used spelling to signal political distance or closeness. Southerners aiming to please the government were more than eager to show their willingness to adopt the official Northern spelling norms, even if that orthography was not mandatory in the Flemish provinces. Literary and linguistic societies bloomed, especially among civil servants and people from the judiciary, and participants were stimulated to use and promote the Dutch language by reading and writing poetry, or by attending and giving regular lectures about linguistic topics. Not only did these self-proclaimed linguists strictly adhere to the norms of Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805), but they also did not hesitate to report extensively to the government in The Hague about their ardent zeal for the mother tongue. A well-known figure in these circles was the public prosecutor H.J. Schuermans. After he gave a public lecture about the linguistic superiority of the Northern orthography in 1822, he sent a transcript of the text to the Minister of Justice, and only shortly after, received a significant promotion to the post

of deputy attorney general in Brussels.¹⁴ Also, just like the short-lived *De Antwerpenaar* in 1827, different newspapers explicitly opted for the Siegenbeek (1804) orthography in order to emphasize their political loyalty to the government.¹⁵

5.2. Iconization and religious opposition

According to Irvine and Gal (2000: 37), iconization is a language-ideological process which “involves the transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features (or varieties) and the social images with which they are linked. Linguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence.”¹⁶ We have already seen how political positions could be indexed by spelling choices, but the iconic role of orthography was most apparent in the religious opposition of Catholic Southerners against the Protestant North. This had not played any significant role before the reunification of the Netherlands in 1815,¹⁷ but gained ever more importance toward the end of the 1820s, and became a central issue in the spelling debates during the early years of the Belgian state.

A common argument centered around the supposedly typical Hollandic penchant for change, which had caused them to forsake the Catholic faith of their forefathers, and which had likewise caused them to abandon the purity of the original Dutch language. As Behaegel (s.a. [ca. 1828]: xvi) stated: “It must be that the radical shift in religion and thought, and the great appetite for change, which had captivated the Dutchmen since long, . . . eventually caused a great overhaul of the language among them.”¹⁸ Language change is thus related to a change in religion, and both are condemned. Catholic

14. The text of his lecture was sent to C. van Maanen in May 1822, and Schuermans was promoted in September 1822 (van Hille 1981: 245). For the transcript, see Colenbrander (1915: VIII-2, 576–580).

15. For instance, the Ghent-based *Staat- en Letterkundig Dagblad* of Johan Hendrik Lebrocq, which appeared from 01.03.1820 until 29.08.1820.

16. Cf. Sebba’s (2007: 161) notion of iconicity, and Irvine’s (1989) indexicality.

17. Cf. for instance *Tyd-Verdryf* (1805–1806), a linguistic periodical by the West-Flemish particularist Vaelande, pseudonym of F.D. van Daele.

18. In the original: “Doch het kan niet anders zyn, of de omwenteling van godsdienst en gedachten, en de groôte zucht naar verandering, waar van de Hollanders reeds lang zwanger gingen, . . . moesten eyndelyk by hun eene groôte vervorming der taale te weeg brengen.”

Southerners rallied around Flemish spellings as symbols for their culture of old and considered Northern orthographical practices to be inherently reflective of the protestant heresy.

One telling example concerns the spelling of /got/ ‘God,’ which was written as *God* according to Siegenbeek (1804), but still appeared as the more archaic *Godt* in the South. Petrus van Genabeth (1831: 72–73) recalls the story of a Northern teacher who encountered fierce resistance among Southern colleagues against spelling *God* without a final <t>. It was argued, in fact, that this Hollandic *God* spelling, rather than Flemish *Godt*, allowed for a regular plural suffix <en> to be added (*Goden*, as opposed to **Godten*), while the one God was, of course, singular by nature.¹⁹ On these grounds, this ‘orthographical heresy’ of the North was rejected, until the ingenious teacher managed to convince his audience that a three-letter *God* should be accepted out of respect for the Holy Trinity. This incident might sound trivial or unbelievable to a modern observer, but other, less anecdotal instances confirm such delicate interweaving of spelling and religion.

A good example can also be found in the *Nieuwe Vlaemsche spraekkonst* of the Southern Roman Catholic priest and grammarian F.L.N. Henckel (1815). When addressing the issue of the article *den* versus *de* for the nominative singular masculine case (cf. section 3 above), he expresses his rejection of the Northern \emptyset -forms using the example of *de Paus* ‘the Pope’. As \emptyset -forms in the South only appeared in the *feminine* of the nominative singular, Heckel (1815: 135) argued that the Northern spelling *de Paus*, instead of Southern *den Paus*, was blasphemous, as it “would attribute an unnatural gender to the Holy Father, causing disciples to stray.”²⁰

6. The myth of Southern language decay

Up until now, we have focused on social aspects of orthography during the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, looking at examples where spelling choices were used to mediate different political and religious identities. In

19. Similar discussions about the spelling of /got/ can already be found in Moonen (1706) and in Huydecoper (1730). In fact, the “no-plural” argument was originally put forward by Pieter Boddaert (1694–1760), while other justifications for *Godt* spellings also point at the symbolical value of a tetragrammaton (cf. *deus*, *Gott*, *dieu*, ...). See de Bonth (1998: 147–148).

20. In Dutch: “Niet *de* Paus, gelijk de Hollanders willen in den noemer van ’t enkelvoud; want volgens onze grondregels ... zou men den Paus een oneigen geslacht toeschrijven, en den leerling leeren doolen.”

the next part of this contribution (sections 6 and 7), we will shift our focus to the metalinguistic representation of orthographical differences in North and South, along with the actual differences in practice. We will discuss two “language myths”²¹ about early-nineteenth-century Dutch, showing how they operate in metalinguistic publications of the time (sections 6.1 and 7.1) and testing their validity in two exploratory corpus studies (sections 6.2 and 7.2).

6.1. Discourses of linguistic inferiority

The first language myth concerns the idea of language decay in the Southern Netherlands. The lack of authoritative linguistic norms was often emphasized, which would have resulted in complete chaos in actual writing practices, thus rendering Southern Dutch unfit for use in official or formal situations. This caused a lot of anxiety when the government of William I decided to Dutchify Flemish public life – in the words of de Coninck van Outryve, the later Minister of Domestic Affairs:

Flemish [Dutch] is only known in those provinces to such an extent that it can be used at home, for the day-to-day worries of life. ... I hold the belief that the Dutch language should first and foremost be taught in these provinces, because that language is not known there; at least not in such a way, that it could be used by enlightened men for important discussions. (Colenbrander 1915: VIII-2, 422)²²

Of course, lamentations about the state of the mother tongue were not new,²³ nor were they typical for the Southern Low Countries, but they gained particular intensity after 1815, and responded specifically to the double opposition between Dutch and French, and between Northern and Southern varieties of Dutch, which characterized the linguistic situation in Flanders. The lin-

21. Cf. van der Horst (2004) for the specific myth of Southern linguistic decay. See also Watts (2000) for a more general approach to language myths in previous centuries.

22. In the 1817 original: “Men verstaat in die provinciën het Vlaamsch voor zooverre die taal in de huishoudelijke, in de gewone behoeften des levens te pas komt. ... Ik ben van oordeel, dat men in de allereerste plaats in deze provinciën de Nederduitsche taal moet doen leeren, omdat men die taal daar niet kent, ten minste zóó niet kent, dat van dezelve door verlichte mannen in eenige belangrijke beraadslagingen gebruik kan worden gemaakt.”

23. Cf. for instance P.B. (1757: 3): “Try to read a hundred different ... books, and you will find a hundred different spellings”. In Dutch: “[W]ant leést honderd verscheyde schriften, zelfs boeken, gy zult honderd verscheyde spellingen vinden.”

guistic downfall of Flemish Dutch was usually framed historically as a result of the political separation of the Low Countries at the end of the sixteenth century,²⁴ and was always seen in relation to the dominance of French in the higher layers of Flemish society under Spanish, Austrian and French rule. In this way, the Flemish lawyer J.B. Cannart (1823: 40–41) complained that most Southerners had never really learned the basic rules and principles of their mother tongue for lack of practice, as many had simply abandoned the language completely. Similarly, de Foere (1815: 44–45) and many others regretted “the detrimental influence of France” during the previous decades.²⁵

Orthography played a central role in this image of Southern linguistic decay, and apart from complaints about French loan words, this decay was usually equated with orthographical chaos. Complaints centered on the absence of a fixed orthographical norm and the lack of consistency in actual writing. J.F. Willems (1824: 33–34) summarized the opinion of many, by stating that “it is said that . . . there is little to no uniformity and consistency in the writings of Flemings of our age.”²⁶ He himself agreed that the situation was indeed chaotic, and also added that “the Flemish spelling has not been fixed to the level of a general Flemish standard by anyone up to the present” (Willems 1824: 34).²⁷ Very similar viewpoints can be found in the aforementioned 1822 public lecture of Henri Schuermans.²⁸ Not surprisingly, such arguments often appeared in integrationist discourses, serving clear rhetorical purposes: “By emphasizing that the South had no tradition of its own, no basis, no language culture, nothing, [integrationists] strength-

24. Cf. Gubin (1982: 331): “La coupure politique entraîne une évolution linguistique séparée au Nord et au Sud. Au Sud, les dialectes flamands subissent une décadence de plus en plus marquée, tandis qu’au Nord s’instaure une langue commune cultivée. [L]’usage du latin comme langue savante et la mode croissante du français limitèrent très fortement le développement d’un flamand commun cultivé.” This image pervades a large part of the historiographical literature of the twentieth century, and many similar accounts can be found.

25. In Dutch: “den hoogschaedelyken invloed van Frankryk.”

26. “Er bestaen, zegt men, geene Vlaemsche Spel- of Spraekkonsten van doorgaende gezag, en in de schriften der Vlamingen van onzen leeftyd kan men geene, athans zeer weinige, overeenkomst en stelselmatigheid aentreffen.”

27. “[D]e Vlaemsche spelling [is], tot heden toe, nog door niemand op vaste gronden van algemeenen Vlaemschen aerd gebracht”.

28. “[In onze zuidelijke provinciën] bevinden wij ons in de grootste verwarring en onzekerheid omtrent de zoogenaamde Vlaemsche spelling, daar wij geene gezaghebbende noch algemeen gevolgde spelling en spraakkunst in de zuidelijke provinciën voorhanden hebben” (Colenbrander 1915: VIII-2, 578).

ened their argument in favor of a closer connection to Northern Dutch” (van der Horst 2004: 73).²⁹ However, even authors who were much less in favor of the South surrendering to the Northern norms of Siegenbeek (1804) sketched a similar situation, using the supposed orthographical disorder as a justification for their own particularist linguistic endeavors. It is ironic to read Behaegel’s (1817: 250) complaint that “[t]here are, in our regions, almost as many ways of spelling, as there are people who worked on improving the spelling,”³⁰ while he himself did not hesitate to publish three enormous volumes about orthography in slightly over ten years.

Overall, these lamentations about the poor state of language and orthography in the Southern Low Countries all share a similar negative view on linguistic variation. Milroy (2007: 138–139) relates this to the standard language ideology:

There is usually also a tradition of popular complaint about language, bewailing the low quality of general usage and claiming that the language is degenerating. This too contributes to keeping the standard ideology prominent in the public mind. In standard language cultures, the alternative to all this is too terrible to contemplate: it is believed that if these efforts at maintenance are neglected, the language will be subject to corruption and decay, and will ultimately disintegrate.

As became clear from the metalinguistic comments discussed earlier, this standard ideology was also prominent in early-nineteenth-century Flanders. After French lost its dominance in the written domain, the native Southern variety of Dutch was not considered to be a valid alternative for formal and written communication. Assumed variability in orthographical practices was seen as a major linguistic shortcoming, which caused a significant number of Southern intellectuals to turn their gaze toward Northern writing practices.

6.2. Southern spelling in practice

In spite of the warnings of important figures such as de Coninck van Outryve (see section 6.1 above), William I carried through his plans to Dutchify public life in the Flemish provinces. In fact, recent research has shown that the

29. “Door te onderstrepen dat het zuiden zelf geheel geen traditie had, geen basis, geen taalcultuur, niks, versterkten zij hun argument pro aansluiting bij het noordelijke Nederlands.”

30. In the original: “Men ziet in onze landstreéken bynae zoo veel wyzen van spellen; als er verscheydene persoónen zyn, die zich op het verbeteren der spelling toegelegd hebben.”

actual transition from French to Dutch in 1823 took place rather smoothly, in both local administrations (Vanhecke 2007) and the judiciary (van Goethem 1990). This already casts doubts on the purported language problems.

We set out to investigate to what extent the myth of Flemish linguistic decay could be observed in actual language use. More specifically, we returned to four of the spelling issues discussed earlier, and investigated their occurrence in a corpus of handwritten documents from the period:

1. the orthographical representation of /ɛi/ (< Gmc. *ī) as an undotted *y* or a dotted *ij*;
2. the second element in diphthongs /ɛi/ (< Gmc. *ai) and /œy/, either as *-y*, *-ij* or *-i*;
3. the orthographic representation of long vowels /a:/ and /y:/ in closed syllables, either by adding an *-e* (*V+e*) or by doubling the original vowel (*V+V*);
4. the occurrence or absence of a final *-(e)n* in the masculine nominative singular of the definite and indefinite article (i.e., accusativism).

As we outlined in the previous sections, the last of the given variants (i.e., dotted *ij*, diphthongs in *-i*, *V+V* long vowels, and *ø*-articles) were considered to be distinctly Northern at the time – these are also the variants prescribed by Siegenbeek (1804).

The corpus consisted of a collection of original manuscripts from the administrative and judicial domain, originally compiled by Rotthier (2007), and transcribed and annotated as part of ongoing research at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Vosters and Vandebussche 2009). The sample used contained a total of 90,960 tokens,³¹ with texts from cities, towns, and villages from each of the five Flemish provinces. Text types include police reports, witness and suspect interrogations, and high court indictments, along with a smaller portion of letters and witness declarations. The corpus thus contains formal and less formal work of (semi)professional scribes, ranging from very local reports drawn up by village constables or rangers, to the routine work of trained clerks at a supraregional level. Text samples were taken for 1823, at the very start of the Dutchification policy, and for 1829, just before the end of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Table 1 shows the results of our corpus study. We can see that, in the cases of the diphthongs, the long vowels, and accusativism, the variants

31. Proper names, place names, uncertain transcriptions, and stretches of text in a foreign language were excluded from the present analyses. Also note that for the *-n/ø*-articles variable (“accusativism”), a smaller subset of the corpus was used, containing 61,912 tokens. See Rutten and Vosters (forthcoming).

Table 1. Distribution of orthographical variants in a corpus of early-nineteenth-century Southern manuscripts.

	Dotting of /ei/		Diphthongs		
	<i>y</i>	<i>ij</i>	<i>-y</i>	<i>-ij</i>	<i>-i</i>
Total	4882	2007	591	150	2310
1823	75%	25%	29%	7%	63%
1829	66%	34%	5%	2%	94%

	Long vowels		Accusativism	
	<i>V+e</i>	<i>V+V</i>	<i>-n</i>	<i>-ø</i>
Total	925	3618	29	139
1823	32%	68%	25%	75%
1829	5%	95%	10%	90%

perceived as Northern are dominant across the board, even as early as 1823, which in many localities was the first time in decades that these sorts of document were being produced in Dutch. Only for the first variable does the Southern form <y> have a clear majority. In addition, the change from 1823 to 1829 is remarkable – the already dominant diphthongs in <-i>, V+V long vowels, and ø-articles appear considerably more often and make up between 90 percent and 95 percent of all variants in 1829. The increase of <ij> versus <y> is less dramatic, which might be due to the minimal difference between both variants – in handwriting, both letters are formed in the same way, with only the dots making the difference. In any case, within a mere six years, there is a strong convergence toward forms that correspond to the official Northern norm of Siegenbeek (1804). In many cases, documents from both years were written by the same scribes, replacing forms perceived as typically Southern by forms perceived as typically Northern. This, of course, implies knowledge on the part of the scribes of different orthographical systems and their practical value, along with the ability to employ them in actual writing.

These observations lead us to conclude that, at least for the judicial and administrative domain, there are no signs of orthographical chaos for either of the investigated periods. Instead, we can see how one system of orthographical choices is steadily and fairly evenly replacing another.

7. The myth of Northern uniformity

7.1. Discourses of linguistic superiority

A fixed point of reference for the myth of Southern decay discussed above is the premise of linguistic uniformity in the Northern Netherlands. As a result of the government-sanctioned norm for spelling (Siegenbeek 1804), most Southern commentators assumed this one norm to be directly reflected in actual spelling practices as well. In 1822, for instance, the aforementioned Schuermans spoke about the “spelling and grammar of Siegenbeek and Weiland universally followed in the Northern provinces” (Colenbrander 1915: VIII-2, 578).³² This myth of Northern uniformity is usually framed in history as well. The seventeenth century is highlighted as the Dutch Golden Age, when a preliminary written standard was created in and around the prosperous province of Holland (cf. van der Wal 1995; van der Sijs 2004; van der Wal and van Bree 2008). The achieved uniformity from the eighteenth century onward is then contrasted with the linguistic downfall of Flanders. Cannaert (1823: 42–43), for instance, writes that “in the Northern provinces of our fatherland, our mother tongue has been cultivated since long, and with the greatest success . . . But in the Flemish provinces, the national language has never been pursued, where it is only recently being awoken from its deep slumber.”³³ This image has firmly established itself in the later historiography as well: “By the end of the 17th century in the North, the colorful diversity in writing slowly yielded to a uniform written language, based on the good usage of the classic authors” (Wils 1956: 527–528).³⁴ Only recently has this traditional standard language view of the Northern Dutch linguistic history started to be questioned (van der Wal 2006, 2007; Rutten 2008).

In the above depictions of language use in the North, clear processes of erasure can be detected, “in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena)

32. “[D]e in de noordelijke provinciën algemeen gevolgde spelling en spraakkunst van Siegenbeek en Weiland.”

33. “[I]n de noordelyke gewesten van ons vaderland, alwaer de moedertael, sints lange, met het beste gevolg, is beoefend geworden; . . . maer in beyde Vlaenderen, alwaer de landtael nooyt is aengetrokken geworden, alwaer dezelve maer eerst uyt haren diepen slaep . . . getrokken wordt, . . .”

34. “Bij het einde van de 17e eeuw was in het noorden de kleurrijke verscheidenheid in de geschriften langzaam geweken voor het overwicht van een eenvormige schrijftaal, die gegrond was op het achtbaar gebruik van klassieke schrijvers.” These and similar claims are reiterated in Wils (2001).

invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away” (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38). In this case, language and particularly spelling variation in the North, both in normative works and in actual writing practices, is simply ignored in order to magnify the contrast with the South. In this way, the standard language ideology dominant in the South reveals itself as an ideology of Northern linguistic superiority, most visibly among Southern integrationists.

7.2. Northern spelling in practice

To test the uniformity of spelling in actual Northern language use, we used a corpus of 100 personal letters (ca. 53,000 tokens) from the 1780s. While no digital manuscript corpora exist for the Northern provinces during the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, this collection does date back to the late eighteenth century, and allows us to test the degree to which spelling practices had actually converged and standardized by that time, decades after the supposed uniformity in writing would have been established according to the language myth under discussion. Our sources are part of the “Letters as Loot” corpus,³⁵ and are to a large extent written by scribes from the lower and middle classes. The letters originate from the (north)west of the language area (Zeeland, Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland):

Table 2 shows the distribution of the same four orthographical features that we investigated for the South (section 6.2). The variation concerning undotted <y> and dotted <ij> is remarkable, as the dotted <ij> was considered to be a typically Northern feature in the Southern perception. Nonetheless, *both* variants occurred to similar degrees in North and South. The same holds true for accusativism: supposedly typical Southern forms as *den* and *eenen* also account for about a third of all Northern tokens. Long vowel spellings with an added <e> are much less common, in spite of their occurrence in several important eighteenth century normative works (cf. section 3). Possibly most remarkable are the results for the orthographical representation of the diphthongs /ɛi/ and /œy/ – <ei> and <ui> spellings, which are a distinctive feature of the later Siegenbeek (1804) system, account for a mere 15 percent of all cases.

35. This corpus is being compiled as part of the *Letters as Loot* project at Leiden University, sponsored by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and carried out by Judith Nobels, Tanja Simons, and Gijsbert Rutten, under the supervision of Marijke van der Wal. See www.brievensalbuit.nl.

Table 2. Distribution of orthographical variants in a corpus of late-eighteenth-century Northern manuscripts.

	Dotting of /ei/		Diphthongs		
	<i>y</i>	<i>ij</i>	<i>-y</i>	<i>-ij</i>	<i>-i</i>
Total	1694	2901	317	511	141
%	37%	63%	33%	53%	15%

	Long vowels		Accusativism	
	<i>V+e</i>	<i>V+V</i>	<i>-n</i>	<i>-ø</i>
Total	253	3152	34	67
%	7%	93%	34%	66%

These results, compared with the findings of the Flemish corpus study, clearly show that any schematization of the discussion, with one prototypical Northern form as opposed to one prototypical Southern form, is not based on the orthographical reality observed in our corpora. We found significant spelling variation in both parts of the language area, albeit at different time periods, for all of the features investigated. While larger-scale studies of more comparable corpora are called for, it seems that the Southern perception of Northern orthographical uniformity was for a large part based on the Siegenbeek (1804) norm, but that, around the end of the eighteenth century, this uniformity was neither as solid nor as widespread as metalinguistic comments might lead us to believe. Although it can certainly be assumed that comparable samples from the early-nineteenth-century North would show a somewhat more uniform orthographical picture, suitable linguistic corpora to verify this hypothesis are currently lacking. In any case, the myth of Northern uniformity posits a long tradition of homogenous linguistic practices dating back to the seventeenth-century Golden Age. This image can be rejected on the basis of our findings for the eighteenth century.

8. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on social aspects of orthographic choice in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century Flanders, trying to demonstrate how spelling variation was used to construct an image of linguistic disparity between the Northern and Southern part of the Dutch language area. We examined actual spelling practices in the Northern and Southern

Netherlands and observed significant amounts of variation in both areas for the same variables. Discursively, however, we distinguished the construction of two language myths in Southern metalinguistic publications, positing linguistic decay and chaos in the South, as opposed to assumed invariability and long-established uniformity in the Northern territories. This gave rise to a dichotomized and schematized representation of sociolinguistic space, in which orthographical features became shibboleth markers of Southern and Northern language use. In this context, spelling also developed into an important identity marker at large, and we examined how orthographical features were used to signal political loyalty or index religious opposition. The language myths discussed not only impacted actual language use, as we observed a remarkable increase in our Southern corpus of spelling features which were perceived to be typically Northern, but they also played an important role in the discursive construction of Northern linguistic superiority – a discourse which would continue to characterize the integrationist position in the Southern norm discussions during the rest of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

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