

Triglossia and pragmatic variety choice in nineteenth-century Bruges

A case study in historical sociolinguistics*

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This article deals with the roles and functions of dialect, Dutch and French for Flemish upper-class writers in the nineteenth century.

It argues against the common opinion that the linguistic situation at that time in Flanders can be characterized by rigid dichotomies such as formal French versus informal dialectal/regional Dutch, and/or upper-class French versus middle and lower class (dialectal) Dutch.

Analyses of original upper-class documents from various archives in the town of Bruges lead to the assertion that the actual choices between the available linguistic resources were to a considerable extent dependent on contextual and pragmatic considerations. Examples taken from town council records, high society correspondence and election propaganda will illustrate the close link between variety choice and the wish to include/exclude certain social groups in distinct communicative settings.

1. Introduction

This article deals with the distribution and the functions of language varieties in nineteenth-century Flanders. My main objective is to refine a number of long-established views on the role of these varieties for the Flemish upper social classes.

I will first present a brief overview of the historical developments that shaped the specific sociolinguistic situation in nineteenth-century Flanders. I will then present the generally accepted views on the social stratification of language varieties and language use in that society, views which have since long been incorporated and repeated in various standard reference works on the

history of Dutch. In the core of the text, I will argue in favour of a revision of these views, drawing on the results of a case study of pragmatic variety choices among upper-class writers in the Flemish town of Bruges. In the conclusion to the article, I will try to define the functions and connotations of each of these varieties in a number of distinct communicative contexts.

It is important to stress the fact that until recently our knowledge of the linguistic situation in nineteenth-century Flanders was mainly based on findings of social and political historians. All major scientific “Histories of Dutch” (most notably Van den Toorn et al. 1997) pay marginal attention to the subject and the first “History of Dutch in Flanders” has only just been published (Willemyns 2003). (Socio)linguistic research on the topic is scarce (with Suffeleers 1979 as a notable exception) and, moreover, hardly ever concerned with the analysis of original sources written by people from different social backgrounds. Our conception of the linguistic behaviour was thus shaped by our insight into extralinguistic facts from, among others, the domains of language legislation (Van Ginderachter 1998), language education (Depaep, Simon and Verbeeck 1994), language policy (Deneckere 1954, De Jonghe 1967, Witte and Van Velthoven 1999), socio-economic developments (Boeva 1994) and social, cultural and political history (NEVB 1998).

Many scholars have contributed to this contextual knowledge, and have illustrated over and over again that the “language question” — the opposition between the Dutch- and French-speaking part of Belgium — was one of the three main determining axes for the country’s evolution during the nineteenth and twentieth century (+/- capital and +/- religion being the other two (Witte, Craeybeckx and Meynen 2000)). The nature and evolution of the Dutch language itself, however, has remained uncovered ground to a very large extent.

As such, any information on the actual language use of the Flemish population based on original corpus research is new. In order to cover this unknown ground in a coherent way, a series of case studies was carried out at the Centre for Linguistics of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel from 1995 onwards (Willemyns and Vandebussche 1999). This undertaking comprises sociolinguistic analyses of documents written by members of the lower, middle and upper social classes (Vandebussche forthcoming), studies of media discourse and official chancery language, combined with a thorough description of the motivations, methods and linguistic effects of language planning measures throughout the whole nineteenth century in Flanders (De Groof 2002; Willemyns 1996 and 1997a).

These case studies, one of which is presented in this article, may only present a partial snapshot of a highly varied linguistic behaviour in the whole of

Flanders, but they are vital for confirming, adjusting or even refuting our views on the sociolinguistic history of Dutch in that area.

2. Historical background

It should be noted that the received views in the following section are not entirely compatible with recent research data as far as the Frenchification of the upper-class and the marginal status of Dutch are concerned. This will be elaborated in paragraph 8.

There is general agreement that the nineteenth century was a vital period for the development, standardization and even survival of the Dutch language in the present-day area of Flanders (Wils 2001). In order to understand this, one should know that the Dutch language territory was split up in 1585: the Northern provinces became the autonomous and independent state of the Netherlands, whereas the Southern provinces, including Flanders, remained successively under Spanish (1585–1714), Austrian (1714–1794) and French (1794–1815) rule. In the North, the Dutch language gradually acquired a high degree of standardization during the seventeenth and eighteenth century and became a language that could perform all official functions attributed to a prestige variety. In the South, however, the foreign rulers left as good as no rights for the everyday Dutch language of the people and favoured French as the language of prestige and administration.

As a result, Dutch could not develop towards a standard prestige language in Flanders and remained a collection of dialects, of which the functions were restricted to the informal and [–prestige]-areas. According to Vandeputte, Vincent and Hermans (1986:25) “the social gap between the higher and lower strata of the population was expressed in terms of an opposition between languages, a social language-barrier. Whereas ordinary people used their (Dutch) dialect, the upper classes spoke French, became French speaking, or pretended to be.” Kossmann-Putto and Kossmann (1996:35) confirm this received view: “The nobility and the upper middle classes came to regard French as the cultured language par excellence[...] The Dutch language acquired a mark of social inferiority.”

Around 1800, there was no widely accepted standard Dutch that could be used for supra-regional communication in Flanders. The seriousness of this situation is illustrated by contemporary testimonies from the beginning of the nineteenth century stating that many Flemings and Dutch did not recognize

each other's language variety as actual variants of the same language, and by the fact that several official instances clearly stated that the tongue spoken in Flanders was useless for any official function (De Vries, Burger and Willemyns 1993). Common opinion has it that meanwhile Frenchification continued to spread among the higher social classes: "The bourgeoisie... readily submitted to Frenchification [...] French became the language of all public life and also of the well-to-do middle classes [...who] now made a point of distinguishing themselves linguistically from the masses of small peasants and labourers" (Kossmann 1978:80–81). Witte, Craeybeckx and Meynen (2000:44) add: "Flanders' native language was pushed down the social ladder, where the lower middle class, farmers and workers mingled".

In 1815, Flanders was reunited with the Netherlands for 15 years, but all attempts to impose the Northern Dutch standard failed, mainly because the greater part of Flanders' cultural elite had been Frenchified during the preceding decennia.

This situation, in which a small upper-class layer of the Flemish population used French, and the mass of the population spoke a Dutch dialect continued after the Belgian independence in 1830. The Belgian constitution guaranteed freedom of language-choice in official matters, but the country was governed almost exclusively in French, both on the regional and national level.

At the end of the century in 1898, however, Dutch was officially recognized (next to French) as Belgium's national language. This phoenix-like restoration was largely due to the so-called "Flemish Movement" — a socio-political and linguistic emancipatory movement — part of which favoured, among other things, the standardization of the Dutch language in Flanders and managed to transfer an ever growing number of public functions from French to Dutch (NEVB 1998).

3. Theoretical language stratification

Three language varieties were at work in Flanders during the nineteenth century: dialect, intended standard Dutch and French (Vandebussche and Willemyns 1999).

The notion of "intended standard" — as used by Mihm 1998 ("*intendiertes Hochdeutsch*") — is used to refer to a variety which does not meet the formal requirements of a standard language (e.g. consequent spelling and grammatical soundness), but which is nevertheless intended by the writer to fulfil the functions attributed to a standard variety (e.g. supra-regional communication, prestige variety). The term refers, accordingly, to the functional value of a

variety in the eyes of the writer and cannot be defined in fixed formal terms. As a matter of fact, the formal character of this ‘intended standard language’ will be different for each writer since it is the highest variety mastered on his personal continuum between dialect and standard language.

The distribution of these varieties in Bruges along the lines of social class and formality has been summarized as shown in Table 1.

This grid is a tentative description of a plausible language distribution at the time, partially based on linguistic analyses of original sources (lower- and middle-class written language), partially on *communis opinio* and, accordingly, subject to change when ongoing research will yield new facts about the actual language use. Despite the absence of oral sources and although the systematic analysis of upper-class texts is still going on, two facts are clear so far:

- Lower class members who were able to write did so in an intended standard Dutch (Vandenbussche 1999) and not in a dialectal variety.
- The “standard” middle class competence consisted of an intended standard Dutch for all written functions (*ibid.*). Those who knew French reverted to that language in formal circumstances, thus adopting a diglossic writing pattern described by Hagen (1999:20) as “Frans als carrièretaal... de volkstaal in de dagelijkse omgang.” [French as career language, the people’s language [i.e. Dutch; W. V.] in everyday communication, our translation].

As far as the written output of the upper classes is concerned, it could be assumed — on the basis of the aforementioned extralinguistic information — that their specific competence in nineteenth-century Flanders was mainly based on a diglossic and bilingual model, in which French served for all formal written purposes and the minor role of an intended standard Dutch was limited to

Table 1.

	UC	MC	LC
French	[+formal] [spoken] [+formal] [written] [−formal] [written]	[+formal] [spoken] [+formal] [written]	
Intended Standard Dutch	[+formal] [spoken] [−formal] [written]	[+formal] [spoken] [+formal] [written] [−formal] [written]	[+formal] [written] [−formal] [written]
Dialect			[+formal] [spoken] [−formal] [spoken] [−formal] [spoken]

Italic print indicates that not all members of the social group mastered the variety in question.

informal writing. (These received views are contradicted, however, by the outcome of recent archive research presented further in this article.)

No primary sources are available for comments on the spoken language in Bruges during the nineteenth century. Still, both the classic sociolinguistic typologies of the distribution of dialect and standard and Low and High prestige varieties (see Ammon 1987a and 1987b for an overview), and the specific “power” and “solidarity” connotations of these varieties in the province of West-Flanders (of which Bruges is the capital) (Vandekerckhove 2000; Willemyns 1997b) allow for a theoretical definition of the uses of dialect, intended standard Dutch and French. Lower class members probably used dialect for both formal and informal conversation. It is likely that the middle class spoke dialect in informal conversation and an intended standard Dutch in more prestigious contexts. As far as the upper-class is concerned, it can be assumed that French served for formal spoken purposes (as evidence below will illustrate) and dialect was used in informal communication. The role of intended standard Dutch was probably limited to formal conversation with people who did not speak French.

4. The project

In the context of an elaborated research program on the historical sociolinguistic situation in Flanders during the so-called “long nineteenth century”, the period between the French Revolution and the First World War (1789–1914), I am currently involved in a case study on the written output of the upper social classes in the town of Bruges. The corpus for this study consists of a large variety of original hand-written texts, spanning the whole nineteenth century, and pertaining to one of the most prestigious upper class archers’ guilds of the town, the Saint Sebastian guild. Next to the minutes of meetings (at an average rate of 10 meetings per year, approximately 1000 pieces) and documents related to shooting contests, we had access to informal personal correspondence between members, formal letters to befriended guilds, and official requests to the town’s council and administration. Cash books, obituaries, drafts of banquet speeches, songs and poems are just some of the many other document types which have been preserved in the guild’s archives (a full inventory was published in Godar in 1947). The authors of these documents can be identified in a relatively easy way. Due to their high social status, we can identify their functions and linguistic behaviour 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.

The research results so far seem to indicate that the roles of French, Dutch and dialect in Bruges may have been less clear-cut than we have 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.

5. Linguistic behaviour in guild documents

The guild documents show us that the famous Frenchification of the upper classes did not take place during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, but only after Belgian independence (1830) around 1850. It is hard to pin down the exact date of the transition from Dutch to French, for various reasons.

First, the switch did not occur at the same time in all documents. We find, for example, that all official meeting reports were written in Dutch until 1867. Letters to befriended guilds, on the other hand, were consistently written in Dutch only until 1840; correspondence to official public instances until 1830; communication between members until 1820.

Secondly, the language of certain document types only changed to French during the first decades of the twentieth century. The financial registers with incomes and expenses, for example, were kept in Dutch until 1925.

Thirdly and most importantly, the transition to French was hardly ever a radical one. Even when French clearly became the dominant language for certain text types, there always remained occasional formal instances in which Dutch was used (e.g. three Dutch meeting reports in 1876, 1884 and 1897). More often one finds that there was a gradual change in preponderance from Dutch to French, as was the case with printed invitations for special shooting contests. These were sent to befriended archers’ guilds in 1838, 1846, 1850 and 1866. In 1838 the invitation was written in Dutch, in 1846 and 1850 bilingual versions were used, whereas the 1866 letter was monolingual French. 70 per cent of the guilds answered in Dutch in 1838 and 1846. In 1850 this response pattern was reversed with 70 per cent French answers, a number that grew to 80 per cent in 1866 (real figures: 1838 13D/6F; 1846 12D/5F; 1850 6D/14F; 1866 6D/24F). It seems that for other highbrow archers’ guilds, too, the turn of the half-century was the crucial moment for the growing impact of French over Dutch.

We have not been able yet to determine the motivations for the different language choices in the various text types, but most choices probably reflected the personal preference of the writer in question. What matters most here, though, is that Dutch was effectively used next to French for highly formal purposes by writers from the most prestigious social elite groups in the nineteenth century in Flanders, and that the continuous tradition of written Dutch was never entirely broken off among the upper social classes. In other words: there was no clear opposition to the use of the Dutch language in these circles, the language was considered as appropriate for writing formal documents, the Dutch language was elaborated enough for these functions, and the writers had a sufficient mastery of the Dutch language to use it to that extent.

6. Linguistic behaviour in the town council documents

Town council documents illustrate, however, that the established concept of the Dutch-opposed upper class cannot be replaced with that of a Dutch-favouring upper class. A substantial core of the guild members played a prominent role on the local political scene. Although not all members were politically active, the guild clearly belonged to the entourage of the upper social group which dominated and controlled the town council and its administrative policies (Godar 1947).

As far as written administrative language use is concerned, partial checks of the chancery's archives allow one to assume that the supreme administration in Bruges was dominated by French. Although this claim is being verified in ongoing research at the moment, a detailed report from 1876 on the distribution of French and Dutch in the administration's most frequently used documents shows the massive impact of French on everyday routine work (Municipal Archive Bruges, documents VIIA42-VIIA56 "Administration Générale").

- The list of monolingual French documents included all invitations to the meetings of the town council and its special commissions, the written and printed reports of these meetings (except for the rare Dutch interventions (see below) which were literally quoted), the minutes of the meetings of the college of aldermen, the communal school budget, the yearly report on town affairs, the register of incoming and outgoing mail, the register of all the processed files by the administration and all correspondence with public administrations.
- The only two Dutch documents were the posters announcing the date of subscriptions for free education and the election of a specific law council.

- Examinations for policemen and town hall servants, invitations to elections and the publicly announced “regulations” (no further specification) and police decisions were bilingual.

Petitions from various (Flemish) “mother tongue loving” (sic) organizations in favour of an equal treatment of Dutch and French in official matters frequently referred to the dominance of French in the administration of Bruges, not only in written form but also with reference to the spoken language (especially during town council meetings). The town council report of 27th April 1887 mentions petitions from 48 associations

dans lesquelles on demande avec beaucoup d’insistance que le conseil communal fasse régner le flamand dans les bureaux de l’hôtel-de-ville et l’emploi exclusivement dans l’administration. Ces sociétés prient aussi le conseil communal d’employer exclusivement la langue flamande dans les discussions du conseil. ‘In which it is asked with great insistence that the town council let Flemish rule in the offices of the town hall and use it exclusively in the administration. These societies also beg the town council to use exclusively the Flemish language in the council’s discussions’ (BC 27/4/1887, our translation).

We further know that the Dutchification of the town’s administration was a recurring theme in council meetings, and became a permanent issue of annoyance and conflict during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Vandenbussche 1995).

These discussions on the topic of the “Langue Flamande” figured prominently in the Bulletin Communal — the edited transcriptions of the town council meetings — in 1878, 1883, 1885, 1887, 1889 and 1897. They concerned demands to impose Dutch as the only official spoken language in Bruges that were consequently made and defended in an ever-recurring one-against-all pattern by one isolated council member, the Catholic Van Steenkiste. Over and over again he brought up the subject of the Frenchified character of the town administration and asked for a radical switch in favour of Dutch, both on the written (administration) and oral (council meetings) level. Although this man’s actions were supported by a large number of Dutch-minded organizations in the social and cultural field, his radical views on language policy virtually isolated him on the political front at that time in Bruges. It is fair to say that the defenders of the rights of the Dutch language were a tolerated minority both in the Catholic and the liberal party (Van Eenoo 1959; Lefevre 1976), and that Van Steenkiste was the only council member that consequently defended the rights of Dutch (Vandenbussche 1978).

Nearly all his fellow councillors were opposed to his radical proposals for Dutchification. The usual outcome of the discussions was a moderate and noncommittal concession from the French-favouring majority which did justice to nothing but a fraction of Vansteenkiste's intentions, but which nonetheless constituted a series of small steps towards a growing impact of Dutch on the administration's daily routine. (Irony has it that Vansteenkiste was the only member that consequently voted against those "half-hearted measures".)

It would lead us too far to give a detailed overview of these discussions, but it is nevertheless revealing to look into the main arguments against a radical Dutchification that were brought forth over and again by the French-favouring majority.

- Some members referred to the financial side of a Dutchification and the related translation costs:

C'est évidemment là une question de dépense, une question d'argent
'That is obviously a question of costs, a question of money' (BC 16/3/1885, our translation).

- Others stood up for the rights of the monolingual French citizens of the town, a group which constituted 1.72 per cent of the population in 1880, 2.59 per cent in 1890 according to the official census data:

Une partie de notre population ne comprend pas le flamand ou ne le comprend qu'imparfaitement, et cette partie là a des droits qu'il faut respecter
'A part of our population does not understand Flemish or only understands it imperfectly, and that part has its rights which one should respect' (BC 24/10/1885, our translation).

- It was frequently argued that the Dutch vocabulary was simply too poor to provide equivalents for French official terminology:

Nous avons cru devoir abandonner cet usage (du néerlandais) parceque nous avons bien plus l'habitude des expressions administratives justes, nettes, certaines, lorsque nous employons la langue française... il est essentiel que nos expressions aient une signification bien connue

'We thought we had to abandon that use (of Dutch) because we are far more used to proper, clear and unmistakable administrative expressions, when we use the French language... it is essential that our expressions have a well-known meaning' (BC 28/3/1885, our translation).

- Attempts to discredit Vansteenkiste's demands were made with references to extremism or hatred of the French language and its speakers:

M. Van Steenkiste ... va plus loin qu'aucun flamingant n'a été jusqu'ici.

'Mr. Van Steenkiste goes further than any "flamingant" (supporter of the Flemish cause, W.V.) has ever gone until now' (BC 24/10/1885, our translation)

[...] se montrer hostile au français et exercer une persécution déguisée contre ceux qui n'ont pas le privilège de connaître les deux langues.

'to be hostile to French and to carry out a hidden persecution against those who do not have the privilege of mastering the two languages' (BC 14/5/1887, our translation)

- One of Van Steenkiste's opponents argued that his pleas for Dutch were "des aspirations purement linguistiques" [purely linguistic aspirations] which would not increase the value of the council's decisions (BC 7/11/1885, our translation). Bruges had the highest poverty rates in Belgium at the time, however (44.4 per cent of the population in 1850, 34.5 per cent in 1860, 28.7 per cent in 1870, 29.7 per cent in 1880, Michiels 1978), and this group of paupers was beyond any doubt unable to understand French.

The bottom line of the discussion was never better phrased than in the following lines:

Que l'honorable membre veuille patienter un peu: il est encore jeune et pourra présenter ultérieurement des propositions nouvelles.

'Let the honourable member wait a little longer: he is still young and will be able to present new propositions at a later time' (BC 24/10/1885, our translation)

In sum: contrary to their apparent tolerance with respect to the use of Dutch in high-society social circles, the majority of the council members was very reluctant when it came to adopting Dutch as the official language of the administration. When Dutch was eventually promoted to the town's spoken language in a gradual succession of measures during the last 15 years of the nineteenth century, all council members kept the right to speak French, and the majority continued to do so.

In other words: there was a clear opposition to the use of the Dutch language in these circles, the language was not considered as appropriate for formal official functions, the Dutch language was now said not to be elaborated enough for these functions, and the writers/speakers claimed an insufficient mastery of the Dutch language to use it to that extent.

7. Linguistic behaviour in election propaganda

The complexity of the upper class's linguistic behaviour was further enhanced by their variety choice for election propaganda. Until 1893, the right to vote was the privilege of those Belgian citizens who paid a substantial amount of direct taxes. This group comprised no more than a fraction of the population, one voter out of 95 inhabitants in 1830 (Kossmann 1978: 157), mainly members of the higher classes. Political parties frequently used the popular medium of the "election press" to present their programs to these voters. According to Van Eenoo (1961: 173), Bruges was a typical example of this practice since the amount of election newspapers published in that city during the second half of the nineteenth century was extremely high compared to other Belgian cities: at least 20 free election newspapers were distributed in a period of two to three weeks at every new election. In these publications, a demagogic tone was combined with all available means to influence the public: serious letters were printed next to direct attacks and accusations of political opponents, cartoons and explicit slanging matches.

Although these newspapers and leaflets were primarily aimed at the richer citizens with the right to vote of whom it is assumed that they favoured French, none of the preserved election newspapers and posters were written in French. Most articles were set in an intended Standard Dutch, but these documents stand out because of the high amount of literal dialect transcription, "a language which is inaccessible to those who are not a citizen of Bruges, but which presents an inexhaustible treasure of idioms and terms of abuse to the dialectologist" (Van Eenoo 1961: 173, our translation). Highly amusing examples include comments on a candidate who gave up his calling as a priest and criticism of the amount of foreign nurses in the municipal hospitals:

Hij heeft *de kappe over d'hage* gesmeten om hier te Brugge *me zen poese* te komen *weunen*

lit. 'he threw his hood over the hedge to come and live in Bruges with his cat' meaning 'he threw off the cowl to come and live in Bruges with his girlfriend' (Example taken from *Vartje Knap*, liberal election newspaper from 1882; dialectal elements in italics, our translation)

Die vrimde mamzils dan ze uut Zwitserland doen kommen, die nie anders en verstoon of frangs, die je dus nie verstoon os j'hunder eksplekeert waffer ziekte dajje heit, en die 's avons gon gon wangelen met entwoorsten 'en ipgeschept lief

‘Those foreign ladies who have been called here from Switzerland, who understand nothing but French, who accordingly do not understand you when you try to explain which illness you have got, and who go walking in the evening with a boyfriend they caught somewhere’ (Example taken from *An ‘t hoekske van de Mart*, Catholic election poster from 1912; dialectal elements in italics, our translation)

The large-scale edition of this kind of dialect propaganda was a common practice occurring over and over again at every new election in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Bruges. Some of these articles and posters may have been written to be read aloud to the large group of illiterate lower-class members, but this can only partially account for the paradox that the ruling upper-class politicians (traditionally associated with French) addressed the upper-class majority of their voting public (also traditionally associated with French) in a variety (dialect) which was typical of informal and unprestigious spoken communication and which they never used in written form in any other circumstances.

In other words: there was no opposition to the use of the written dialect in propaganda in these circles, dialect was even considered as the prime appropriate choice for writing these documents, and the copywriters had sufficient written mastery of this “oral” variety to use it to that extent.

8. Discussion

How does one account for the clear opposition to Dutch by upper-class writers in certain formal circumstances, for their frequent and active use of that language in other formal circumstances and for the adoption of a dialectal variant of that language in publications which were perhaps less formal but nonetheless vital to the establishment and confirmation of their respectable public image?

The answer to these questions may lie in the pragmatic value of the discussed language varieties in distinct communicative contexts.

8.1 French as a “discriminating” variety

In the setting of the town council, French was first and foremost the language which was unknown by the majority of the population. Its spoken and written use (respectively during the actual council discussions and in the official transcriptions) may have served as a barrier against political participation by the lower and middle classes.

Although it is true that “Joe Public” could not actively engage in executive town politics until 1893, there were a number of social pressure groups which closely followed the local government’s political actions and attended the council meetings. A Dutch debate culture and a complete Dutch translation of the meeting reports would have allowed them to understand the discussions and to react if necessary. The symbolical value of French as a tool for social and political exclusion in the Bruges town council became poignantly clear during a discussion in 1879 on the cost of pauper education in two official town schools. The following literal excerpt from the transcriptions of that session shows how a council member, M. Herreboudt, who occasionally intervened in Dutch with the clear intention to be understood by the lower classes, was reproached for using that language by one of his colleagues, M. Cauwe:

- M. Herreboudt. “Indien ik heden het woord neem in de vlaamsche taal, het is omdat het vraagpunt hoogst belangrijk is voor de werkende volksklas en, omdat het volk, vlaamsch verstaande, ik begeer verstaan te worden door mijne medeburgers, opdat men later niet zoude kunnen zeggen dat ik tegen de stede scholen ben.”
- M. Cauwe. “Spreek aan den raad, maar niet tot het volk, het is hier geene meeting.”
- ‘M. Herreboudt. If I begin to speak in the Flemish language today, it is because the question is of great importance to the working class, and because the people understand Flemish, I desire to be understood by my fellow citizens, to prevent anyone saying later that I am against the town schools.
- M. Cauwe. Address the Council, not the people, this is not a [political, W. V.] rally’ (BC 1879:923, our translation).

In order to appreciate the full “danger” of this passive political participation to the leading “caste”, one should consider the town’s serious social and economical problems at the time (which may recall for some readers the equally deplorable situation in the Flemish town of Aalst during the same period, as described in Louis Paul Boon’s (1994) novel *Pieter Daens* and the Oscar-nominated film version). Bruges was Belgium’s poorest city with a mass of paupers (Michiels 1978). One was not sure yet about the outcome of the growing demand for social action in favour of these lower classes. Their linguistic competence was limited to dialect or, at its best, intended Standard Dutch. To them and their leaders, the acceptance of Dutch as the prime working language in the town council could have been one of the major keys to

enter (and influence) the local political scene and break upper-class dominance. In retrospect, we now know that at least three factors prevented this from happening in Bruges.

First, the two major political parties managed to control both the lower-class movement and the “Flemish movement” within the confines of a number of party-related organizations (Van Eenoo 1959; Michiels 1978). Partially due to a well-developed network of (both Catholic and liberal) paternalistic welfare and charity corporations, the rise of socialism remained a superfluous fringe phenomenon in Bruges until the beginning of the twentieth century. The strategy behind the inclusion of Flemish-minded organizations was mainly inspired by electoral profit:

As the Catholic and Liberal parties were in strong competition in a number of urbanized electoral districts, and virtually all seats were at stake in every case with a possible government majority, they had an electoral interest in an integrated margin in which the radical Flemish pressure groups would simply have to try to achieve their demands (Witte and Van Velthoven 1999: 74).

Secondly, the lower classes were more concerned with immediate material welfare than with language politics. The poverty rates that I quoted above speak for themselves. One could further refer to, among other things, the extremely deplorable housing conditions of the pauper masses, the poor industrial development in Bruges at the time and, accordingly, the absence of mass factory employment (contrary to Ghent, for example), and the overall low level of education of the lower classes. The impact of social distress at the time is perhaps best illustrated by the huge success of small-scale social security funds: virtually every handworker’s trade had its proper “*onderstandsmaatschappij*” (lit. ‘society of relief’) which provided minimal financial assistance in case of illness or disability, and which was vital to prevent its members from falling into poverty (Michiels 1978).

Finally, the leading forces of the broad middle-class platform in favour of equal language rights did not connect with the lower classes: “(They) approached the Flemish language issue from a petty bourgeois angle and few made a link with the dire economic conditions in Flanders. For them, there was no connection between the social issue and the Flemish movement” (Witte, Craeybeckx and Meynen 2000: 45).

8.2 Dutch and French in a secluded and exclusive upper-class context

Only the town elite could aspire to enter the intimacy of the archers' guild's activities. Financial obligations and a strict membership policy guaranteed its exclusive upper-class character (Godar 1947). Since members found themselves among an equally wealthy and respected public, there was no pressing need for them to distinguish themselves through language choice. This factual exclusion of the lower classes changed the character of French discourse — at least in the guild context — from a powerful means of discrimination to just one-of-many class attributes. Since Dutch did not represent any emancipatory threat, either, there was no objection to the frequent use of this language in documents which remained within the confines of the guild community. Rather than interpreting this as an “upgrading” of Dutch and a “downgrading” of French — in the sense that these languages respectively lost their [–prestige] and [+prestige] connotation in the specific guild context — it is more likely that this simply indicates that language choice was an issue of little importance to the guild members when it came to assessing their prestige and status among “equals”.

Although the quality of this written Dutch awaits further research, the language in these texts strikes us as well-structured with “proper, clear and unmistakable administrative expressions” with a “well-known meaning” — both in formulaic and more personal texts, as the following examples from a meeting report and an obituary will illustrate — despite the archaic and pompous tone (compared to contemporary lower- and middle-class texts, see Vandebussche forthcoming).

De zitting wordt geopent om 7 uren onder het voorzitterschap van d'heer hofmeester Jacqué. [...] De greffier geeft lezing van het procès verbaal der vorige zitting. [...] De greffier zegt dat er eene vergadering van den eed in het jaer 1854 beslist geweest is dat d'heeren officieren maar de jaarlyksche wedde zullen betaelen maar geen ingang geld [...] Er wordt lezing gegeven van de programma der feesten. De Commissie word belast met het uitvoeren dezer programma. De zitting word opgeheven ten 8 uren 's avonds.

‘The reunion is opened at 7 o'clock under the presidency of steward Jacqué [...] The clerk reads the report of the last meeting. The clerk says that it was decided in a meeting in 1854 that the Officers would only pay the annual fee but not the entrance fee [...] The program of the festivities is read. The commission is charged with the execution of this program. The session is closed at 8 o'clock in the evening’ (Livre des Procès-Verbaux, 30th May 1878, our translation)

Dit was het bewijs der vriendschap van alle de confraters, het waar bewijs van dankbaarheid aan de heer Joye voor alle de diensten die hij gedurende vijftig jaren aan onze gilde bewezen had, ook zal zijnen naam nooit vergeten zyn hij zal geschreven blijven in het geheugen van alle de leden en in ons jaarboek zal hij aangeduid worden, als ware gilde broeder, als ware verdediger der welbeminde gilde van st sebastiaan.

‘This was the proof of the friendship of all fellow-members, the true proof of gratefulness to Mr. Joye for all services he performed for our guild for 50 years, his name will never be forgotten, it will remain written in the memory of all members and in our annual report he will be highlighted as a true guild member, as a true defender of the dearly loved Sebastian’s guild’ (Livres des Proces-Verbaux 9th October 1897, our translation)

If research of similar sources confirms this quality, this may indicate that at least two of the frequently used arguments in favour of “official French” were false. Contrary to what they used to say, some upper-class members did know how to write understandable, coherent and well-structured Dutch texts, and this language was also refined and precise enough to meet all formal requirements for official documents.

It is ironical that the assumed later democratization of the guild was accompanied by a simultaneous increase in the use of French. As the “natural” esteem for upper-class associations disappeared under the influence of societal changes, and as the Sebastian Guild gradually changed into a gentlemen’s club (Godar 1947) after 1900, the token value of French as a prestige marker did become ever more “charged” in the end. This continued until the last quarter of the twentieth century: the equivalence of Dutch and French had been guaranteed by law in Belgium since 1898, Flanders had been monolingual Dutch territory by law since 1932, but the “guild of high standing” only switched back to Dutch as late as 1976.

8.3 Dialect as a “solidarity” variety

Although the dialect pieces (election newspapers and posters) were clearly intended to ridicule political adversaries, there may have been more to the use of this variant than comic effect or eye-catching slapstick humour. Dialect is a variety which has kept till the present day an extremely high “solidarity” character in the Flemish region where Bruges is located (Vandekerckhove 2000; Willemyns 1997b). It was thus the ideal instrument to address the electorate, to establish an apparent bond of closeness and solidarity, to create a pleasant personal image of sincerity and credibility and to refute the impression of the Frenchified ivory-tower politician.

Why did this work with the distinguished group of Frenchified voters? One should always remember that the local dialect most probably was the prime means of informal spoken communication for all social classes, including high society. To them, too, the high variety (whether that be French or Dutch) was only used in the most extreme formal circumstances, and for all other instances they reverted to dialect. There is little doubt, for example, that a lot of dialect may have been spoken during the archers' guild activities. In print, dialect probably left the impression of directness, of straightforward opinions from men who called a spade a spade.

The fact that this propaganda could also be understood by the silent majority of the population that was not allowed to vote may have been intended to create a general feeling of sympathy among this group. The tradition of highly popular local politicians still lives on today in Bruges, and may have figured as a major support for individual political power and influence in the tense social context.

9. Conclusion

The issues discussed in this paper prompt us 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 nineteenth century. Instead of the rigid dichotomy between formal French and informal dialect, upper-class writers may have used or avoided specific varieties in their written documents, depending on their wish to include or exclude certain interlocutors in distinct sociopolitical contexts.

- French served as a prestige marker and a tool for social exclusion in the domain of political decision-making, in the presence of lower- and middle-class members.
- In exclusive high-society circles, French lost its isolating function towards the lower classes. Since the use of Dutch in this setting did not present any danger of lower- and middle-class participation, Dutch was frequently used for internal documents.
- Dialect was used as a tool for sympathetic image-building in electoral campaigns towards the upper and lower classes alike, because of its strong connotation of “solidarity”.

In order to determine the relative impact of these conclusions, ongoing research will have to focus on the function and use of the discussed varieties for writers

from similar and different social backgrounds, both in Bruges and in other Flemish cities.

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