

## 'Lower class language' in 19<sup>th</sup> century Flanders

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### *Abstract*

*This article discusses the written Dutch of lower class writers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bruges (Flanders, Belgium). None of the scribes conformed to any of the prestige norms for Dutch spelling at the time. They all used an idiosyncratic orthography instead, full of variability but not chaotic. On the level of style and syntax, these texts are characterised by 'stylistic breakdown'. The combination of these orthographical and stylistic features was not typical for lower class writing as such. In Bruges, middle and upper class writers displayed similar writing patterns, but they abandoned this 'style' for the standard, earlier than the lower class writers did.*

### 1.

It is generally agreed that the 19th century was a vital period for the development, standardization and even survival of the Dutch language in the present-day area of Flanders (Willemyns 2003). Due to the territorial separation from the Northern Dutch provinces (which coincide with the current territory of the Netherlands) at the end of the 16th century, and under the influence of the French-favouring policies of the successive Spanish (1585–1714), Austrian (1714–1794) and French (1794–1815) rulers, Dutch could not develop towards a standard prestige language in Flanders. The nature of Flemish Dutch around 1830 (the year in which Flanders became part of Belgium) is usually described as a collection of dialects, the functions of which were restricted to the informal and prestige areas. Contrary to the situation in the Netherlands, there was no widely accepted standard Dutch that could be used for supra-regional communication – French was generally used instead for those purposes. Common opinion has it that Flanders' native language was pushed down the social ladder, where the lower middle class, farmers and workers mingled' (Witte *et al.* 2000: 44).

Less than 100 years later (in 1898), however, Dutch was officially recognized (alongside French) as Belgium's national language due to the successful and continued efforts of the 'Flemish Movement' (NEVB 1998) and undergoing all necessary stages of language planning for elaborating and establishing a fully-fledged national language of government.

In spite of the impressive scholarship on the extra-linguistic situation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Flanders, the intra-linguistic development of the language at the time has consistently been neglected in most standard reference works on the historical development of Dutch, so far (Rutten i. p.). As such, almost every relevant aspect of the context in which the standardization process of Dutch in 19<sup>th</sup> century Flanders took place has been studied in remarkable detail, but there is hardly any linguistic data on the precise nature and evolution of the language at the time. Similar to other language communities discussed in the present edition (cf., e. g., Elspaß on German), the scholarly literature traditionally refers to the style of literary icons when a sample of the written language is required (in the case of 19<sup>th</sup> century Flanders, the likes of Guido Gezelle and Henri Conscience).

In order to 'disclose' this uncovered episode of our linguistic history in a systematic way from a (socio)linguistic point of view, a project entitled 'Standardization mechanisms in 19<sup>th</sup> century Flanders' was started in 1995 at the Centre for Linguistics of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) (co-financed by the Flemish 'Research Foundation'). It concerned a historical sociolinguistic analysis of original archive texts pertaining to various social layers of 19<sup>th</sup> century society in the Flemish town of Bruges. For comparative purposes the language use in the media, law and official administration of the time was also included in the research programme. The present article concentrates on the analyses of working class texts and takes up a number of observations that were previously published in, among others, Vandenbussche (1999a and b, 2002, 2006); the most recent overview of the results for the other domains and text types is given in Willemyns and Vandenbussche (2006).

## 2.

Our basic research question – 'how did labourers write in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bruges?' – raised a number of methodological issues. First, who were these labourers or, in other terms, how should one define 'lower class' in the socio-economic context of the time? The categorization of writers in various social classes proved to be a highly sensitive issue, especially when one takes into account that the social and economic structure in Flanders (but also in the rest of Europe) during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was

constantly changing (Witte *et al.* 2000). The rise of the middle class, the slow transition from a trade-based to an industrialized economy and the subsequent changes in the relative financial status of certain professions make it a perilous undertaking to define a clear social structure for 19<sup>th</sup> century Bruges. While the secondary literature on the history of the town only provides partial onsets for a model of the social structure at the time (Michiels 1978; Van Eenoo 1959), it does stress the fact that Bruges 'missed' the industrial revolution – contrary to other Flemish cities like Ghent and Antwerp – and, accordingly, remained characterised by a 'medieval' artisan economy until the 1890s. For the lower strata of society this implied the firm presence of a craft (or trade) based group at the bottom end of the social ladder. There was a clear-cut division within this group between 'apprentices' (or *knechten* 'servants' as they were called in Bruges) and 'masters'; the first group eventually merged with the emerging proletariat towards the end of the century whereas part of the latter group rose to the ranks of the newly-formed middle class. From an international comparative point of view, one can rightfully question how a trade servant compares to a factory labourer in terms of class membership.

For the purpose of our analyses, however, it was safe to state that trade servants were amongst of the 'lowest' social groups at the time, whereas their masters enjoyed a higher moral prestige. Despite the attested close collaboration on social issues between servants and masters in certain trades, the writers of our corpus material belonged to those trades that made a firm distinction between both *strata*, clearly indicating that the lower group could never join the ranks of the higher and would never be allowed into their social circles.

A further methodological issue followed from the decision to build a corpus on the basis of original and unedited archive material. The feasibility of text-internal research on 19<sup>th</sup> century sources depends to a very large extent on text-external criteria like the readability, paper quality and even the degree of pulverization of these documents. A large share of potentially interesting sources turned out to be preserved in an either fragmentary or deplorable state, and had become illegible due to rot, water damage or inadequate conservation. Almost any researcher working with historical documents will be familiar with these corpus issues, but the problem is even more poignant in the case of lower class documents. Considering that that texts written by 'the man in the street' were for decades not considered to be of any scientific interest, there are (in Flanders, at least) far fewer documents available in the archives (compared to upper class texts).

## 3.

Our research corpus consists of original minutes of trade meetings, written by 24 different lower class writers, pertaining to the apprentice rank of the tailor, wool weaver, carpenter, shoemaker and brush maker trades. These handwritten meeting reports cover the whole period between 1800 and 1900. It actually concerns documents of various so-called *onderstandsmaatschappijen* ('social assistance companies') for trade apprentices. These organizations can be considered as early precursors of the present-day social security funds: they guaranteed their members and family minimal financial support in the case of illness, invalidity, pension and death (Michiels 1978).

Similar relief structures existed for the master rank in various trades. In order to compare lower and middle class writing skills, an additional 'middle class' corpus was compiled, containing texts by 10 writers from the *onderstandsmaatschappij* in the baker masters' trade. A second comparative corpus consisted of a database of upper class meeting reports, stemming from the archives of the Saint Sebastian archers' guild, one of the most prestigious high society circles in Bruges up until the present day (Godar 1947).

## 4.

In order to assess the scribes' skills on the level of orthography and style, one must first determine and describe the ruling norms at the time for these aspects of writing. Ideally, this implies a clear understanding of a writer's school career, of the writing manuals he used and of the norms he was taught. Like many other contributors to this edition, however, I had little or no information on the lives of the corpus writers. Apart from their work occupations and names, they remain anonymous scribes – all we can say for certain is that they were paupers at the very bottom of the social ladder. We simply do not know whether they enjoyed any organised schooling, nor if they may have been familiar with the ruling orthography norms for Dutch. It is therefore fundamentally problematic to compare the language in our corpus to the latter norms, and to describe it in terms of 'errors' and 'correctness': the standards we use to assess the scribes' language mastery are most probably 'unfair', in the sense that it is very well possible that the writers were completely ignorant of these norms. This comparison can nevertheless be useful, however, to illustrate the everyday spelling practices of the larger share of the population that existed next to (and, metaphorically, 'below') the dominant upper class doctrine of invariable spelling rules.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no generally accepted standard for the spelling of Dutch in Flanders: next to the fact that the official or-

thography norms spelling were changed three times between 1823 and 1863, there existed a number of unofficial but widely used alternative spelling models. As such, one can distinguish between at least 5 different spelling systems that carried some prestige in Bruges at the time: the official Siegenbeek-, Commission- and de Vries-te Winkel norms (imposed in Flanders in, respectively, 1823, 1844, 1864) and the alternative models of Des Roches (1761) and Behaegel (1817).

Comparing these models and the variants they proposed, it becomes clear that the core of Flemish spelling trouble was limited to 15 spelling issues (cf. Vandenbussche 2002 for a detailed overview).

Among these main spelling cruces were the representations of long vowels [a:], [e:] and [o:] in open syllables ([a:] is closed syllables, too). Depending on the model, long [a:] could be written <a>, <aa> or <ae>, whereas for long [e:] and [o:] there was a choice between single and double graphemes: <e> and <o> versus <ee>/<éé> and <oo>/<óó>. For diphthongs [Ei] and [œy], the different norms prescribed either <ei>/<ui>, <ey>/<uy> or <eij>/<uij>. Problems with consonants were mainly limited to the representation of [z], [x], [t], [p] and [f]. Each of these consonants has a voiceless c. q. voiced counterpart (in respective order [s], [ʃ], [d], [b] and [v]). The different graphemes which normally represent those distinct voiced/voiceless phonemes were used for both the voiced and the voiceless element of the phoneme pair. An additional consonant problem was the spelling of [k]. Different spelling forms within one model could only be used in distinct and well defined circumstances and shared spelling variants across different models did not necessarily have the same distribution in each of these models.

None of the writers in our lower class corpus conformed to any of the spelling norms mentioned above. Their texts are characterized by continuous spelling variation instead and it appears that the corpus scribes were not interested in 'consistent' spelling at all. Contrary to common belief, however, this apparently free spelling variation did not lead to spelling chaos (Suffeleers 1979: 19). Each of the lower class authors had developed his own spelling system and used grapheme variants for the representation of the same phoneme within the same text (and even sentence) as an essential characteristic of these spelling systems. As such, one can find the same word or expression written in two different ways – 'gemeensaemheijd' (association) next to 'gemeenzaamheyd', for example – without any attempt to 'correct' this variability.

Writers did not pick their spelling variants at random, moreover. There were clear constraints on the allographs one could use. The corpus analyses actually made it possible to describe the maximal spelling variation within which a writer could operate: for the spelling of [k], for example, the scribes would use <k>, <c>, <ck> or <q>. Some writers

used only two or three of those variables, others all four, depending on the limits and restrictions of their personal spelling system. Given that it was also possible to predict where variants would most probably occur and that real ‘unpredictable chaos’ was only found with two out of 24 lower class writers, one can hardly call this overall spelling image ‘unordered’ or ‘chaotic’. As Jim Milroy (1992: 133–134) points out with respect to the spelling of Early Middle English authors: ‘(I)f the scribes really had used variants “at will”, we would actually be unable to read the texts ... There must always be *some* order in any spelling system that we can read, even if it is a variable system ... It is our task to attempt to specify the constraints on spelling under which they were working, always admitting that after we have done this, there may well be residues of apparent randomness that we cannot explain.’

This spelling pattern of limited systematic and consistent variation remained in use among the lower classes in Bruges throughout the 19th century. There is no evidence that writers changed their spelling habits when a new official norm was adopted nor that there was an overall partial move towards one of the official norms around 1900. Some writers from the second half of the century even displayed more variation than their colleagues 50 years earlier.

## 5.

Describing the stylistic and syntactic properties of the language found in our lower class corpus was highly problematic. The texts produced by our scribes are a long way from the literary examples to which 19<sup>th</sup> century grammars of Dutch tend to refer – the ‘standard’ variety that was promoted through normative style guides had overtly not percolated into the lower ranks of society. One representative example from 1824 may help to illustrate this observation and to understand the problems faced by present-day linguists wishing to assess the scribes’ stylistic and syntactical qualities:

*Ten huysse van Deken Jonkeere / ter presentie van alle De sorgers Deken ende greffier / dat alle De sorgers hun verbinden / aen alle Comparise / die den Deken zal noodig vinden te houden / die Aengaende het ambacht* [‘At the house of president Jonkeere / in the presence of all the members president and the clerk / that all the members commit themselves / in all meetings / which the president will consider necessary to hold / which concerning the trade’; the separation marks were not in the original text; W. V.]

One may assume that a number of words were omitted from this paragraph by the writer: after ‘the clerk’ one could add ‘it was decided’ and

it helps to imagine something like 'to be present' before 'in all meetings'. There are numerous comparable examples of these 'omissions' in the corpus and it is tempting to label this feature as 'poor language mastery'. However, these texts were written to be read aloud at the relief society's next meeting and to be consulted by future generations. Given that I could not find one single instance where these omissions were corrected in the text, one has to assume the possibility that these texts (including the omissions!) were both understandable and acceptable – one might say 'grammatical' – for the writer's community.

Instead of the clause 'die Aengaende het ambacht' ('which concerning the trade'), 'standard' grammar prescribed either 'die het ambacht aangaan' ('which concern the trade') or 'aangaande het ambacht' ('concerning the trade'). Although the amalgamate form found in the corpus would be 'wrong' or 'erroneous' according to 19th century grammar books, one cannot simply dismiss it, given the fact that it was effectively used in the present text and, again, that no attempt whatsoever was made to correct it either. What is needed to interpret these examples (and many others in the corpus) is a grammar of 'real life' language as opposed to the idealised description of literary prose traditionally found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century reference grammars.

The continuous occurrence of so-called 'zusammengebrochener Stil' (Mattheier 1986) further complicates the syntactical analyses of these lower class sources. This concept (lit. 'stylistic breakdown') from German sociolinguistics refers to authors' inability to control the stylistic and grammatical properties of the text sort used – be it letters or official meeting minutes. The scribe basically manages to use the introductory and closing formulas but 'loses control' over his language in the body of the text which results (among other things) in syntactic anomalies, the omission of constituents and, in some cases, the loss of text structure. Once again, labeling this language use as 'broken down' may be unfortunate: these structures should not be considered as 'divergent' from a standard norm but as the very essence of a type of language use that should not be judged by the rules of 'standard' grammar.

## 6.

Across national and linguistic borders, all researchers involved in analyses of lower class texts from the long nineteenth century appear to find remarkably similar sets of linguistic features that are apparently 'typical' for their corpus material. The contributions in this edition can serve as representative examples of the state-of-the-art in this field of inquiry (one could add further references to Branca-Rosoff and Schneider's (1994) research on metropolitan French or Deumert's (2004) analyses of

letters in 19<sup>th</sup> century Afrikaans, to name but two). We see that the writers (or scribes, correspondents) are largely oblivious of the ‘educated’ or ‘schooled’ spelling conventions at the time (irrespective of whether the authority of these ‘norms’ came from an official decision or widespread use in the language community). Contrary to the aspired consistency of spelling rules, our writers make no effort to write identical words (or even morphemes and phonemes) in the same way within the same text or sentence. Variability is a core feature of their spelling behaviour, and in certain cases interference from the writer’s spoken dialect can account for some of the less evident spelling choices. As far as style is concerned, various contributors to this volume referred to the influence of letter writing manuals and other ‘institutionalised’ text examples (the Bible, official reports, etc.). The most striking common feature concerns the scribes’ unfortunate mastery of ‘standard’ syntactic constructions: the references to ‘anacoluthon constructions’, ‘Zusammengebrochener Stil’ and ‘stylistic rupture (or breakdown)’ in the present analyses all testify to the writers’ apparent difficulties with writing a coherent and logically structured text, as well as with adapting to the composition rules of various text types.

One may be tempted to conclude that the widely dispersed appearance of the very same cluster of writing problems among lower class scribes is too much of a coincidence to ignore. This is – in my understanding, at least – what caused a number of German scholars (Mattheier 1986, among many others) in the 1980s to postulate the existence of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Arbeitersprache* (‘workers’ language’). They found that German labourers from all over the Ruhr area (and beyond) all displayed the above-mentioned linguistic features in their letters and saw this combination of spelling and style problems as typical for 19th century lower class writing. These linguistic features were said to define a language variety of its own (*eine eigenständige Varietät*), the use of which was restricted to the lowest layers of society. This *Arbeitersprache* (‘workers’ language’) was not to be interpreted as one single variety, however, but rather as a *Sprachstil* (‘language style’), a spectrum (or continuum) of varieties (Mattheier 1986) – which stood in clear contrast with the *bürgerlicher Sprachstil* (‘bourgeois language style’).

I see two main reasons to question this concept of supra-regional (and even international) class-specific language features. The first is a sociological one: the literature on 19<sup>th</sup> century class structures shows that the social circumstances defining the lives of a German *Arbeiter*, an English *labourer*, a French *ouvrier* and a Flemish *knecht* may have differed enormously. These individuals may occupy similar positions in large macro-economic models of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe but that does not necessarily imply that their everyday lives were identical. The acquisition of writing

was very much determined by the latter micro-level, but aspects of everyday life 'from below' hardly ever appear in class definitions (contrary to income, housing situation, respect/esteem from peers, etc.). I am afraid that the 'Arbeiter'-concept is far too abstract and over-generalising to account for actual similarities in writing behaviour between individuals living in completely different words. Both Grosse (1990a) and Mihm (1998) elaborated this sceptical view, the first stressing how 'Arbeitersprache' was an 'inappropriate collective term' (*untauglicher Kollektivterminus*) because of the differences between the language use of individual workers, the latter adding that 'it can hardly be possible to sum up linguistic features which would be shared by all workers' and that 'it is impossible to speak of a 'Sprache des Bürgers', neither in a linguistic nor in a sociolinguistic sense' (Mihm 1998: 294; my translation).

A far more fundamental issue concerns the social stratification of the linguistic features of *Arbeitersprache*. It is by definition assumed that these markers will only occur in texts from lower class writers and not, for example, in middle or upper class texts. Our research on meeting reports from 19<sup>th</sup> century Bruges proved that assumption to be wrong.

## 7.

Both Mattheier (1986) and Grosse (1990) hinted at the fact that the individual orthography of members of the industrial bourgeoisie and the gentry from 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany sometimes resembled both the spelling image found in working class letters, as well as the morphological and syntactic features mentioned above. Our research on meeting minutes from the middle and upper classes in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bruges confirmed this: all formal characteristics of so-called 'Arbeitersprache' (i. e. variable spelling and 'Zusammengebrochener Stil') occurred in the texts from both lower and middle class scribes up until 1850. Up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these features even appeared in the upper class corpus, too. Irrespective of the class they belonged to, the scribes consistently used the same set of spelling variants and diverged from 'standard' morphology, syntax and style in similar ways (cf. Vandenbussche 2002 for a more detailed comparative discussion with examples of the spelling variation). One could say, in other words, that members from all social classes wrote 'Arbeitersprache' in Bruges up until 1800, that the lower and middle classes continued to use this 'variety' until 1850, and that the 'typical' lower class features only became real social markers during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both standardized spelling and stylistic and grammatical correctness seem to have been of little importance to any writer before the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Bruges. From that point onwards, however, a sensibility for standard language norms

swiftly spread through society in three major phases, starting at the top of the social ladder around 1800 and gradually reaching the middle lower classes around 1850 and 1900.

### 8.

Class as such can no longer account for the combined occurrence of variable spelling and 'stylistic breakdown'. A set of alternative possible explanations should include considerations of literacy and the quality of schooling, as well as the importance of 'standardised' writing (i. e. conforming to the ruling elitist language norms) for the creation of a specific social identity.

Just like in Germany, literacy in Bruges only began to spread among the lower walks of society after 1800. Census statistics indicate that the highest classes were fully literate by 1800. The middle classes reached this stage of language mastery some 50 years later and massive writing acquisition only really started for the lower classes during the second half of the century (Callewaert 1963).

This phased diffusion of literacy co-occurs with the different impact of fact of written language on upper, middle and lower class work careers, a distinction referred to as 'Schriftsprache orientiert' ('orientation towards the written language') and 'Handarbeit orientiert' ('orientation towards craftsmanship') in the German literature. In Bruges, the bourgeoisie was characterized by an explicitly writing-oriented work culture from the 19th century onwards, whereas the tasks of labourers and trade apprentices remained craft-oriented (and orally based) up until the period between the two World Wars. The lack of information that has come to us on the educational system in the town at the time reflects this dichotomy: writing skills were hardly taught in pauper schools – Sunday schools for the poor typically taught 'letter-recognition' or 'grapheme-copying' with so-called ABC-booklets – but grammar and style were core elements of the curriculum of middle and upper class schools (Michiels 1978; de Clerck *et al.* 1984).

I believe that the language of my corpus scribes should be understood as a set of transitional varieties on the continuum between literacy, semi-literacy and illiteracy: each writer's written production reflects a different phase of the acquisition of literacy. As long as writing remained a skill of secondary importance and little sociological impact in our scribes' work life – our corpus documents come for the work-related sphere, contrary to the private letters referred to in the other contributions in this edition – it can be assumed that they will make no specific efforts to refine their literacy skills. This is bound to change when literacy is transformed from a subordinate skill to a powerful tool for social pro-

motion. For the upper classes this probably happened when writing according to the norm became a means to confirm and assess one's refined social standing. For the trade masters – and much later for their servants – the 'making of the middle class' and the possibilities this evolution suddenly offered for upward social mobility may have triggered the orientation towards norm-oriented writing. From those days onwards, writers could no longer 'allow themselves a much larger variability in orthography, grammar and syntax than today, without being submitted to the sanction of a negative evaluation of their background and social position' as Mattheier (1986: 225; my translation) puts it.

While there is no more reason that written varieties were determined by class in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bruges, the impact of class membership is not entirely dismissed in this view: the connection between relative wealth and the accessibility of quality writing education remains a paramount factor for the interpretation of the corpus material.

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