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Language, political power and social exclusion in 19th century Bruges.[1]

1. Introduction

This article deals with the distribution and the functions of language varieties in 19th century Flanders. Although our historical introduction will illustrate that the 19th century was a fascinating and vital period for the linguistic make-up of this area, (socio)linguistic research on the topic is scarce and until recently our knowledge of this case study was mainly based on findings of social and political historians. As such, any information on the actual language use of the Flemish population at the time based on original corpus research is new. Since 1995, the Centre for Linguistics of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel has been involved in sociolinguistic analyses of documents written by members of the lower, middle and upper social classes, 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 19th century in Flanders (Willemyns & Vandenbussche 1999, Vandenbussche forth.). 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

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 17th and 18th 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 with strong lower class connotations, of which the functions were restricted to the informal and [-prestige]-areas (De Vries e.a. 1993).
Around 1800, there was no widely accepted standard Dutch that could be used for supra-regional communication in Flanders. Common opinion has it that meanwhile the Frenchification continued to spread among the higher social classes (Kossmann 1978, Witte, Craeybeckx & Meynen 2000).
In 1815, Flanders was reunited with the Netherlands for 15 years, but all attempts to impose the Northern Dutch standard failed. The resulting 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 (De Groof forth.).
At the end of the century in 1898, however, Dutch was officially recognized (next to French) as Belgium's national language. This restoration was largely due to the so-called 'Flemish Movement' -a socio-political and linguistic emancipatory movement- part of which favoured 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 19th century: dialect, intended standard Dutch –as used by Mihm 1998 ("intendiertes Hochdeutsch")- and French (Vandenbussche & Willemyns 1999). Until now, the distribution of these varieties in Bruges along the lines of social class and formality has been summarized as shown in the table below.

	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] [-formal] [spoken]

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

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,

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accordingly, subject to change when ongoing research will yield new facts about the actual language use. Two striking 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 dialectical variety.
-The 'standard' middle class competence consisted of an intended standard Dutch for all written functions (id). 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 19th 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 informal writing. (These received views are contradicted, however, by the outcome of recent archive research presented further in this article.)
Although no primary sources are available for comments on the spoken language in Bruges during the 19th century, one can give a plausible theoretical distribution 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 19th century' (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 19th century, and pertaining to one of the most prestigious upper class archers' guilds of the town, the Saint Sebastian guild (Godar 1947). Next to meeting minutes (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. The identity of the authors of these documents and their functions and linguistic behaviour in various parallel social and political networks can be traced in a relatively easy way. 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, especially concerning the cliché dichotomy between 'formal French' and 'informal dialect' with little or no room for standard Dutch.

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 17th and 18th century, but only after of the Belgian independence (1830) around 1850. It is hard to point 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 consequently 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 20th 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 at which Dutch was used (e.g. 3 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 archer's 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% of the guilds answered in Dutch in 1838 and 1846. In 1850 this response pattern was reversed with 70% French answers, a number that grew to 80% in 1866 (real figures: 1838 13D/6F; 1846 12D/5F; 1850 6D/14F; 1866 6D/24F). It seems that for other highbrow archer's 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 19th century in Flanders, and that the continuous tradition of written Dutch was never entirely broken off among the upper social classes.

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. 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 (Vanhecke 2002), 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 in the everyday routine work (Municipal Archive Bruges, documents VIIA42-VIIA56 'Administration Générale').
-The list of monolingual French documents included all invitations for 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 meeting minutes 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 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 costless education and the election of a specific law council.
-Examinations for policemen and town hall servants, invitations for 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 the town council's meetings). We further know that the Dutchification of the town's administration was a recurring theme in the council's meetings, and became a permanent issue of annoyance and conflict during the last quarter of the 19th century (Vandenbussche 1995).
These discussions on the topic of the "Langue Flamande" figured prominently in the Bulletin Communal (B.C.) - 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 spokes language in Bruges. It is fair to say that the political 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 there was only one council member that consequently defended the rights of Dutch (for a detailed discussion, see Vandenbussche 1995). 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. Nearly all his fellow counselors 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 the Dutchifying intentions, but which nonetheless constituted a series of small steps towards a growing impact of Dutch in the administration's daily routine.
It would lead us too far to give a detailed overview of these discussions (see Vandenbussche 2003 for literal quotes), 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
-Others stood up for the rights of the monolingual French citizens of the town, a group which constituted 1,72% of the population in 1880, 2,59% in 1890 according to the official census data.
-It was frequently argued that the Dutch vocabulary was simply too poor to provide equivalents for French official terminology.
-Demands for Dutchification were associated with extremism or hatred of the French language and its speakers.
-It was argued that that the pleas for Dutch were purely linguistic aspirations which would not increase the value of the council's decisions (BC 7/11/1885). Bruges had the highest poverty rates in Belgium at the time, however (44,4% of the population in 1850, 34,5% in 1860, 28,7% in 1870, 29,7% 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: "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 spokes language in a gradual succession of measures during the last 15 years of the 19th century, all council members kept the right to speak French, and the majority continued to do so.

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 compromised 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 19th century was extremely high compared to other Belgian cities: at least 20 free election newspapers were distributed in a period of 2-3 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 (vote-entitled) citizens 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 for 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) (for examples and discussion, see Vandenbussche 2000).
The large-scale edition of this kind of dialect propaganda was a common practice occurring over and again at every new election in the last quarter of the 19th 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 for informal and unprestigious spoken communication and which they never used in written form in any other circumstances.

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 for 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 ‘dicriminating’ 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 when a council member 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, saying that he should “address the Council, not the people” (BC 1879: 923, our translation).
In order to appreciate the full 'danger' of this passive political participation for the leading 'caste', one should consider the town's serious social and economical problems at the time: 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 the upper class dominance.

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 to distinguish oneself 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 for 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 one’s prestige and status among ‘equals’.
An intriguing matter awaiting further research concerns the quality of this written Dutch: 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 (see Vandenbussche 2003 for examples). 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.

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 variety 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 (Willemyns 1997b). It was thus the ideal instrument to address the electorate, to establish an apparent bond of closeness and solidarity, to create a sympathetic 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 the 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 archer's guild activities. In print, dialect probably left the impression of directness, of straightforward opinions from men who wore their heart on their sleeve.
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.

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 19th 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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