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Language policy and language practice in official administrations in 19th century Flanders

1. Introduction

This article deals with language choice in the transcriptions of town council meetings from more than 20 different Flemish towns during the 19th century. It is based on the results of a recent large-scale data collection by students of ours in Flemish archives, carried out in the context of the ongoing research programme of the Centre for Linguistics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel on the sociolinguistic situation in 19th century Flanders.[1] Just like in our presentation at the 2003 symposium (cf. Vandenbussche 2003), these innovative results force us to reconsider a number of generally accepted views in yet another domain of the historiography of language policy and language use in Flanders.[2]

2. Historical background[3]

2.1 The Dutch language territory is made up of the Netherlands and Flanders, the so-called Northern and Southern Low Countries.[4] Both areas had a very different political history from 1585 onwards. In that year the Netherlands became (and remained ± ever after) an independent state. Flanders was ruled by Spanish (1585-1714), Austrian (1714-1794) and French (1794-1815) occupiers and, eventually, reunited with the Northern Low Countries from 1815 to 1830. In 1830 Flanders became a part of the new and independent state of Belgium.

The distinct political evolution in the North and the South of the Dutch language territory had far-reaching consequences for the status and the elaboration of Dutch in both areas. In the Netherlands the standardisation of Dutch gradually took shape from the 'Golden' 17th century onwards; by 1800 it had both the standing and the structural elaboration required to function as a prestige language in all domains of everyday life. In Flanders, however, the foreign rulers after 1585 preferred French as their language of government and prestige. Although no explicit status planning measures were imposed by the Spanish and Austrian occupiers (i.e. until 1794), their *de facto* choice for French had the consequence that a supra-regional prestige variety of Dutch never developed in the South until the 19th century. Up until that date, the Dutch language in Flanders (spoken by the large majority of the population) remained a collection of regional varieties and local dialects to a large extent. The numerically small but powerful upper social classes and gentry, meanwhile, were (or became ever more) Frenchified (Willemyns 2003).

2.2 The French annexation of Flanders (1794-1814) marked the beginning of a period of explicit language planning, aimed at a radical and complete Frenchification of the Southern Low Countries. From 1804 onwards it was determined by law that all public and private official documents were to be made up in French only. Although this official policy most certainly caused and reinforced further prestige loss for the Dutch language, the attempt at total Frenchification did not succeed. Apart from the social elite, the majority of the Flemish population simply did not master the French language. As such, many small town chanceries and administrations continued to function in Dutch to a certain extent (Deneckere 1975) whereas in other cases the language laws were never put into practice at all (de Groof 2004). It is to be noted, moreover, that many primary schools continued to teach in Dutch because both pupils and teachers had no French.

2.3 After the conquest by the Dutch King Willem I in 1814, the Southern Low Countries were reunited with the Northern Dutch provinces and incorporated in the 'United Kingdom of the Netherlands'. Much like the previous French rulers, the Dutch occupiers tried to put the nationalist 'one state, one language' principle into practice in the South. This time, however, Dutch was to become the lingua franca in the entire United Kingdom of the Netherlands. In 1819, a law was announced that made Dutch the only official administrative language of the state. After a four-year transition period the law took effect from 1823 onwards. In 1830, however, Willem I had to succumb to the growing Southern opposition against his rule and he turned back a number of his linguistic decisions, admitting once again more rights for the French language in the South. This change came too late to save his political power, however; the Belgian revolution from 1830 sealed his fate.

2.4 In the new state of Belgium, French was *de facto* the prestige language of administration, court, school and army from the very onset. Although the only specification given about language matters in the new constitution (article 23) stated that "the use of languages is free", this liberal principle was used and abused to secure the dominant position of French. A decree from November 1830 made French the only official language of Belgium

[1] Wim Vandenbussche led the seminar during which the data was collected. The data was analysed by Eline Vanhecke for her Ph.D. project on chancery language in 19th century Flanders. The theoretical background on language planning and policy at the time is based on the substantial discussion of these issues in Jetje de Groof's (2004) Ph.D. thesis. Roland Willemyns is in charge of the overall supervision of the project.

[2] For a recent extensive overview of our research results since 1995, cf. Vandenbussche, De Groof, Vanhecke & Willemyns 2004.

[3] For an introduction to the history of the Dutch language, cf. De Vries, Willemyns & Burger 2004 (in Dutch) or Willemyns 2003b (in English, mainly focused on standardisation issues).

[4] The Dutch-speaking island Surinam is not relevant in the context of this article.

and, consequently, both Dutch and German were degraded to second-rate languages. The rehabilitation of Dutch only came as late as 1898 with the passing of the 'Equality Law', a decree that made both Dutch and French the official languages of Belgium. It took 70 years of social, political, cultural and economical struggle to attain this goal; these actions (and those that followed until well into the 20th century) are commonly referred to as the 'Flemish Movement'.[5] It is impossible to do justice to the full scope of this Flemish Movement in this article but it is fair to say that its basic aim was 'lifting up' the Flemish population and its language from its second-rank position. Education played a major, perhaps the most crucial role in this challenge: the majority of the Flemish people was uneducated and poor, the level of education in (Dutch) pauper schools was abominable and all higher and professional education was exclusively organised in French (Ruys 1981: 46).

3. Analysis of the data

3.1 This article discusses the way in which the successive (and often conflicting) language policies mentioned above were put into practice in the town and village chanceries of 19th century Flanders. Preliminary studies carried out (or supervised) by members of our research group in the town archives of Willebroek (Vanhecke 1998) and Grembergen (Van Meersche 2003) indicated that there may have been a discrepancy between the harshness of the official language regulations and the lenient application thereof in practice. Both case studies revealed, for example, that a lot of official documents continued to be written in Dutch during the French period, despite the radical Frenchification policy (cf. also de Groof 2004). The subsequent Dutchification under Willem I, on the other hand, was already achieved in both villages before the official 1823 deadline (Willemyns & de Groof 2004). The language freedom after 1830 caused a radical switch to French in both Grembergen and Willebroek, be it that Dutch gradually continued to reappear after 1838 and, eventually, took over entirely from French during the 1860s, more than 30 years before the Equality Law. Further research revealed a sharp contrast between language preference in larger or smaller towns: the administration of the bigger provincial capitals of Antwerp and Bruges clearly interpreted the constitutional language freedom in favour of French, smaller villages like Grembergen and Willebroek opted for Dutch.[6]

3.2 In order to confirm and refine the general validity of our preliminary case studies, we organised a further series of spot checks in more than 20 different chancery archives across Flanders. The towns and villages included in this data collection are: Aalst, Lebbeke, Liedekerke, Oudenaarde and Zele (in the province of East-Flanders); Brussel (comprising Diegem, Etterbeek, Evere, Haacht, Jette, Ganshoren, Ruisbroek, Vorst), Grimbergen, Halle, Machelen, Meise, Overijse, Tervuren, Tildonk and Wezembeek-Oppem (in the province of Brabant); Bornem, Diest, Geel, Keerbergen, Mechelen, Mol and Turnhout (in the province of Antwerp); Borgloon, Hasselt and Tongeren (in the province of Limburg).[7]

In every town we checked for each year between 1794 and 1900 which language was used in the written reports of the town council (or, if unavailable, in the reports of the college of aldermen or the registrar's office). This information was brought together in an Excel spreadsheet and in a series of coloured maps. Unfortunately, due to space and printing restrictions, we are not able to include these maps in the present article. The reader will find this information, however, in Willemyns, Vanhecke & Vandenbussche 2005. A selection of the spreadsheet is included as an annex to this article and gives the reader a clear overview of the balance between Dutch and French in Flemish administrations at nine crucial moments during the 'long 19th century'.

3.3 The third column on the spreadsheet shows the situation in the year 1804, 10 years after the French had conquered the Southern Low Countries. This is also the year in which the use of French was made obligatory by law for all official documents. One can see that the Dutch language had completely lost its function of chancery language in all towns as far as the reports of the town council are concerned, apart from one exception (Grembergen). While other documents may occasionally still have been written in Dutch, these data prompt us to reconsider the commonly accepted opinion that many Flemings (including administrative employees) were unable to write or understand French.

3.4 The attestations from 1814 (column 4, the end of the French rule) in our archive sources confirm this total dominance of French.

3.5 Five years after the reunification with the Northern Low Countries (1819, column 5), the dominant position of French remains impressive. This is the year in which the intended total Dutchification of the Flemish administrations was announced. While Dutch was occasionally used as a secondary language in two villages (Turnhout, Lebbeke) and the Brussels town council issued bilingual documents, there is no town which exclusively used the Dutch language for its town council reports.

3.6 The results from 1823 (column 6) present the reader with the complete opposite of the situation described above. In all villages only Dutch is used in the town council reports and French has disappeared almost completely, also in those villages with a fully Frenchified administration 4 years earlier. It appears that the 'one state, one language' legislation was respected and implemented as soon as it had been decreed. One further needs to consider the fact that the town clerks must have made the switch to Dutch before the actual obligation to use that language. Two exceptions appear in our data: the town council in Brussels continued to issue bilingual reports (the language legislation may only have been implemented at a later time in Brussels) whereas Zele was

[5] The state-of-the-art reference work on the Flemish Movement is the *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging* (NEVB 1998), containing detailed articles on virtually every aspect of this movement.

[6] An important (though puzzling) fact is that the transition from Dutch to French (or reverse) seems to have posed no problem at all to the scribes in our archive material (de Groof & Vanhecke 2004). Both their linguistic competence and the functional value (and 'acceptability') of Dutch as a language of administration must have been much bigger than has commonly been assumed, so far (Willemyns & Vanhecke 2003).

[7] Data from the province of West-Flanders (apart from Bruges) were still being collected at the time this article was written.

still French-dominant during the first months of 1823 and only switched to Dutch towards the end of that year. In sum: by the end of 1823 Dutch had become the exclusive administrative language in Flanders.
3.7 Column 7 describes the situation in September 1830, just after the 'retreat' of King Willem's strict language policy. Administrations in the Southern Low Countries were once again free to choose between Dutch and French for their official documents but, and this is remarkable, hardly any town or village seems to have felt the need to drop their use of Dutch and to revert to French. The Dutch king was still in power and Dutch continued to be the prime and dominant chancery language. Three exceptions to this rule were Oudenaarde (where the scribes immediately reverted to French), Lebbeke (French dominant, Dutch secondary language) and Zele (Dutch dominant but French did reappear).
3.8 Less than two months later (November 1830, column 8) the Dutch occupiers had been overthrown and the Belgian temporary government overtly expressed its preference for French as the language of prestige and administration. It is striking to see how fast certain towns were (especially the bigger provincial centres like Bruges, Antwerp, Tongeren) to conform to the language choice of the new regime and to reinstall French as their language of local government. Smaller villages would soon follow that example during the first decade of the Belgian independence, especially once the 'freedom of language choice' had been decreed in the new constitution.
3.9 The impact of the growing Frenchification during the 1830s is clearly visible in column 9. 1840 was the apogee of French as the language of administration in Flanders, although Dutch had not been banned entirely from the chanceries. In seven smaller towns it was still the dominant administrative language, next to French. Cases like Zele and Turnhout in which the administration had remained 'Dutch territory' were exceptional, however. French had clearly regained its dominant position in the official local administration.
3.10 The data from 1880 and 1900 (columns 10 and 11) illustrate the slow but growing success of the Flemish Movement's aim to 'lift up' the Dutch language to the level of a fully functional standard language. Its actions in favour of a Dutchification of Flemish chanceries were far from over on the brink of the 20th century, although the archive data do show that the dramatic situation in 1840 was gradually giving way to a Dutch-dominant picture. One cannot underestimate the importance of the language legislation from 1878 onwards in this process (cf. Willemyns 2003 for more details).

4. Conclusions

4.1 Contrary to what is commonly believed and taught, the language policy of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands did not fail. It was successfully implemented and accepted throughout Flanders from the very onset in 1823 (cf. also Willemyns & de Groof 2004).
4.2 Political loyalty appears to have been an important element in the official reactions of the town chanceries towards the successive language policies discussed above. Both under the Dutch rule and immediately after the Belgian independence, the chanceries fully conformed to the preferences of the national government.
4.3 Next to political correctness, the linguistic preferences of the scribes may also have played a role. Whereas scribes anticipated the Dutch language policy, they only slowly adopted to the French language laws. During the first years of the Belgian independence there was a massive shift from Dutch to French, despite the absence of a clear prescriptive language policy. We believe that the return to the formerly forbidden French language may be explained by the general revolutionary climate at the time. The use of Dutch may have been interpreted as a sign of ongoing loyalty to the former Dutch King. Once this connotation of 'political treason' had disappeared (this was especially so after the peace treaty between Belgium and Holland had been signed in 1839), Dutch gradually reappeared in the local administrations. In our contribution to the 2003 Symposium, we have shown that the ongoing use of French in certain bigger towns like Bruges –and the accompanying refusal to accept Dutch as the language of local government- was not related to political loyalty, but to the wish to exclude the lower social classes from the political scene (Vandenbussche 2003).
4.4 It remains astounding that the chancery scribes were able conform to new language legislation from one day to another. Our archive data prove that they must have had an elaborated linguistic competence in both French and Dutch that defeats all common assumptions about the deplorable language skills of the Flemings during the long 19th century. We are yet unable to explain or clarify this 'mystery', mainly because of our very limited knowledge of the educational system in 19th century Flanders, so far. Especially where language education is concerned, it is fair to speak of the 'black box' of historical pedagogy. On sure thing, however, is that the level of the education in Dutch must have been superior to what is commonly assumed.[8] We draw further support for the latter claim from the observation that chancery scribes were able to adapt almost immediately to new spelling systems for Dutch during the nineteenth century. Both de Groof 2003 and Willemyns & Vanhecke 2003 contain detailed illustrations of the 'ease' with which town officials could switch between up to 5 different orthographical systems. This is a fascinating challenge for scholars of historical pedagogy. We, for one, have tried to provide historical-sociolinguistic elements that may contribute to a better understanding of this research topic (Vandenbussche 1999, de Groof 2004).

[8] Willemyns 2005, for example, illustrates that scribes from the Northwestern area of French-Flanders wrote high quality Dutch during the first years of the 19th century.

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Province	Town	1804	1814	1819	1823	Sept. 1830	Nov. 1830	1840	1880	1900
Antwerpen	**Willebroek**	F	F	F	N	N	N	N/F	N	N
	Antwerpen	F	F	F	N	N	F*	F	N	N
	Bornem			F*	N	N	F*	N/F	NA?	NA?
	Mechelen	F*	F	F	N	N	F	F	F	N/F
	Turnhout	F	F	F/N	N	N	N	N	N	N
	Mol	F	F	(N) NB	(N) NB	(N) NB	(N) NB	F/N	N	(N) NB
	Geel	F	F	F*	N	N	N	N/F	N	N
Limburg	**Hasselt**	F	F	F	N	N*	N	F	F	N
	Tongeren				(N)	N	F*	F	F	F
	Borgloon				N	N	F*	F	F	N
	Leopoldsburg								F	
Oost-Vlaan.	**Oudenaarde**	F	F	F	N	F!	F	F	F	F/N
	Aalst	F	NA	F*	(N)	N	N/F	F	N/F	N/F
	Aalst	F	F	F	N	N	N	F	N*	N
	Grembergen	N/F	NA	NA	N	N*	N*	N/F	N	N
	Grembergen				N	N	N*	N/F	N	N
	Zele		F	F	F/N	N/F	N/F	N	N*	N
	Lebbeke		F	F/N	N*	F/N	F/N	F/N	N	N
West-Vlaan.	**Brugge**				N	N*	F*	F	F	N
Vl. Brabant	**Brussel**			N+ F	N+ F	NA	NA	F	F	F
	Meise	F*	F	F	NA	N	N	F	F	F
	Grimbergen	F	F	F	N	N	F	F	F	F
	Asse									N
	Vorst			F	N	N	F	F	F	F
	Ruisbroek					N	N	N/F	F*	N*
	Liedekerke					N	N	F*	F	N
	Tervuren		F	F	N	N	N	F	F	F
	Wezemb.-Oppem		F	F	N	(N)NA	(N)NA	(F)NA	F	N/F
	Overijse				N	N	N	F	F	N
	Evere					N*	N*	F/N	N/F	N
	Schaarbeek								F*	F
	Keerbergen	F	F	F	N	N	N	N/F!	N	N
	Diest	F	F	F	N	N	N	F	F	F
	Halle	F	F	F	N/F	N	F	F	F	
	St.-Mart. Bodegem					N	N	F*	F	F
	Etterbeek					N	N/F	F/N	F	
	Jette-Ganshoren		F	F	N	N	N	F	F/N	N/F
	Haacht			F	N	N	N	F/N	F	N
	Tildonk			F	N	N	N	F/N	N	N
	Diegem-Machelen					N	N	F	N/F	N
	Landen					F	F	F	F	F

F = French, N = Dutch

F/N = both French and Dutch, but French is dominant

N/F = both Dutch and French, but Dutch is dominant

N+F = bilingual documents

NA = not present in archive, NB= not available in archive

F* of N* = French or Dutch, except for 3 texts or less