The sociolinguistics of spelling

A corpus-based case study of orthographical variation in nineteenth-century Dutch in Flanders

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The reunion of the Northern and Southern Low Countries under William I (1814–1830) marked the beginning of a renewed and intensified linguistic contact between the North and the South of the Dutch linguistic area. Two writing traditions usually regarded as different came into close contact, giving rise to intense spelling debates in Flanders. The Northern provinces had had an official orthography since 1804, whereas competing spelling systems existed the South. In the contemporary language debates, several orthographical features were repeatedly brought to the fore, and developed into strong markers of regional, social and religious identities.

The present paper attempts to reconstruct the sociolinguistic landscape of the Southern Netherlands in the early nineteenth century, by focusing on normative publications, metalinguistic debates, and private language planning initiatives between 1814 and 1830. Special attention will be paid to the role of orthography in processes of identity formation. Furthermore, aiming to shed more light on some of the sociolinguistic principles at work, we will compare the metalinguistic discourse to actual language use, as represented in a specially compiled diachronic corpus of court files, including police reports, witness interrogation reports, and high court indictments. An analysis of the results will uncover, among other things, clear indications of an ongoing process of levelling and a gradual convergence towards Northern linguistic norms.

1. Introduction

After more than 200 years of political separation, the Northern and Southern Low Countries were united in 1814 under the Dutch King William I. Linguistically, two

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writing traditions often regarded as different came into close contact, giving rise to intense language debates in the Flemish South. In these debates, several orthographical features were brought to the fore, and developed into strong markers of regional, social and religious identities.

In the present paper, we will investigate the sociolinguistic processes behind these spelling debates, and assess the orthographical variation in practice by carrying out a corpus-based diachronic micro-study. First, we will outline the historical and linguistic background of the period under investigation (Section 2). Building on this, we will outline the sociolinguistic landscape of the Southern Netherlands between 1815 and 1830, with special reference to governmental and private language planning initiatives, and highlighting the role of spelling in identity formation (Section 3). Next, we will address the issue of language norms for early nineteenth-century Dutch by investigating the influence of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands on orthographical prescriptions (Section 4). Finally, we will try to examine some of the sociolinguistic principles at work by looking at actual spelling practices in a manuscript corpus of the period (Section 5).

2.   Historical and linguistic background

At the end of the sixteenth century, the Southern and Northern Netherlands were politically separated due to the Northern revolt against the Spanish rule. Both linguists and historians agree on the importance of this for the history of the Dutch language. De Vooys emphasizes how the "cities of Holland took over the leading position from the declining South, also linguistically" (De Vooys 1952: 66; our translation), and Burke posits an "increasing cultural divergence between North and South in the seventeenth century," suggesting that it "extended to language as well" (Burke 2005: 20).

While the Northern Republic of the Seven United Provinces began its so-called Golden Age, the South remained under Spanish (and later, Austrian) control. In contrast to the growing standardization efforts in the North,[1] the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century have traditionally been seen as a period of strong cultural and linguistic decline in the South, reaching an absolute low point after the French invasion of the 1790s. The social and political prestige of the French language and the assumed isolation of Dutch in Flanders are often mentioned in this respect (Deneckere 1954). According to several accounts, Dutch in Flanders seemed to be nothing more than a collection of mutually incomprehensible dialects at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wils mentions "Flemish dialects and spellings" being used

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1.   See, for instance, Van der Wal (1995).

in written documents from the educational, judicial and administrative domains (Wils 1956: 530),[2] and Deneckere even claims that such administrative documents were not intelligible from one town to another (Deneckere 1954: 326). The contrast between North and South seems clear: "As opposed to relative uniformity in writing in the North, absolute chaos ruled the South" (Suffeleers 1979: 17).

Parallel writing traditions and emerging standardization in the South have been largely neglected in most histories of the Dutch language. While the large number of grammars and orthographies published in the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands cannot be contested, these contributions have often been disregarded because of the supposed lack of uniform normative prescriptions (Smeyers 1959). Furthermore, although the *status* of the language at the time is fairly well-studied, particularly concerning the opposition between Dutch and French (e.g. De Ridder 1999; Van Goethem 1990; Vanhecke & De Groof 2007), much less is known about the actual *form* of Dutch in the Southern Low Countries during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Recently, several strong corpus-based objections have been made to the image of linguistic degeneration in the Southern Netherlands, as outlined above (Van der Horst 2004; Rutten & Vosters forthcoming). Not only is the idea of spelling uniformity in the North problematic, but the perception of Southern linguistic decay also lacks empirical support. Neither Deneckere, nor Wils, nor any of the other (linguistic) historians dealing with the topic have performed any systematic corpus research on linguistic material of the period. We will argue that distinct but closely related writing traditions had developed in North and South, which came into renewed and intensified contact when the Northern and Southern Low Countries were united in the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (UKN). Before turning to the linguistic points of divergence, however, we will first elaborate on public and private language planning initiatives, developing the concept of spelling as a marker of social, political and religious identities.

3. The sociolinguistic landscape

The London protocol of June 1814 envisioned a close and complete reunion of the Dutch and Belgian territories.[3] Although linguistic issues are not mentioned in the Eight Articles of the protocol, numerous language planning efforts were undertaken,

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2. Our translation. Wils reiterates these and similar claims in 2001.

3. The first article reads: "Cette réunion devra être intime et complète de façon que les deux pays ne forment qu'un seule et même état [...]" (Colenbrander 1909: 27).

both by the new government of William I, and by private citizens and organizations. There was a double linguistic opposition in the new kingdom: not only did the use of French as opposed to Dutch play a considerable role in all of the Southern provinces, but also the opposition between Northern and Southern varieties of Dutch needed to be taken into account. Governmental efforts tended to have a strong status planning component: focusing on the ultimate aim of linguistic unity in the new kingdom, William I took measures to promote the use of Dutch at the expense of French. Private initiatives often also involved corpus planning efforts: not only the opposition between Dutch and French was brought into focus, but also issues of linguistic (dis) unity within the language.

3.1   Official language policy

As early as 1814, William I issued a first language decree for the South, allowing the use of Dutch in certain legal deeds, and announcing more stipulations regarding language further down the road (Blauwkuip 1920: 24–36; De Jonghe 1967: 40–44). No less than five years later, after extensively consulting with his advisors, the full aims of his language policy became clear: in 1819, a royal decree called for the complete Dutchification of public life in the Flemish provinces.[4] The government allowed for a preparatory period of three years, but from 1823 onwards, only Dutch would be allowed for all official matters, mainly targeting administration and the judiciary.[5] To facilitate the transition, ample attention was given to education, where Dutch gradually gained importance on all levels, and was to become the sole language of instruction in Flemish secondary schools by 1828 (Janssens & Steyaert 2008; cf. also De Vroede 2002). In addition, the government established three chairs of Dutch language and literature in the South, and appointed Northern academics to promote and lend prestige to the language.[6] The Dutchification of Flanders was seen as a first step towards a close and complete union in the new kingdom, and formed part of a larger policy of cultural integration.

 Although Dutch had been the language of the majority of the population in most of Flanders for centuries, a fair amount of protest arose, as many people in local and national administrations had grown accustomed to French as the official language

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4.   Initially, it only applied to the provinces of Limburg, East Flanders, West Flanders and Antwerp, but it was later also extended to a large part of the province of South Brabant, including Brussels; for the sake of convenience, we will refer to this entire area as the Southern or Flemish regions.

5.   See the draft decisions in De Jonghe (1967: 269–280).

6.   See Janssens and Steyaert (2008: 180–195) about Liège, and Weijermars (2009) about Ghent. The third chair was in Louvain.

under the previous rulers. Many francophones emphasized the international prestige of the French language and culture (Barafin 1815), but also a significant number of Flemings felt that their native language variety should not be promoted to the level of official language. Consider this statement of De Coninck van Outryve, the later minister of internal affairs:

> Flemish [Dutch – RV,GR&WV] is only known in those provinces to such an extent that it can be used at home, for the day-to-day worries of life. [...] I hold the belief that the Dutch language should first and foremost be taught in these provinces, because that language is not known there; at least not in such a way, that it could be used by enlightened men for important discussions
> (De Coninck van Outryve 1817, in Colenbrander 1915, VIII, 2:422)[7]

This is, quite clearly, where the opposition between Northern and Southern varieties of Dutch comes into play, and opponents of the Dutchification policy often emphasized the difference between Northern 'Hollandic' and Southern 'Flemish' to "drive a wedge between the numerically stronger [Dutch speaking – RV,GR&WV] part of the population" (François 1992:133).

In spite of this initial opposition, the government carried the 1823 Dutchification through. And although several traditional accounts of the history of Dutch have assumed King William's language policy to be a complete failure,[8] more recent research into *de facto* language use has shown that the shift from French to Dutch actually occurred rather smoothly. Vanhecke (2007) investigated to what extent the policies were followed in 133 Flemish town chancelleries, and concluded:

> It is remarkable how prompt and trouble-free the planned Dutchification of public life in Flanders actually took place. [...] Except for Brussels, where a bilingual situation existed, the law was adopted and implemented everywhere.
> (Vanhecke 2007:368; our translation)

Van Goethem examined language choice in the judicial domain, and reached similar conclusions: after the transitional period between 1819 and 1823, nearly everyone switched to the new national language, with only rare exceptions. This shows that the basis of support for the Dutchification may not be underestimated. As research of

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7. Our translation. The original letter reads: "Men verstaat in die provinciën het Vlaamsch voor zooverre die taal in de huishoudelijke, in de gewone behoeften des levens te pas komt. [...] Ik ben van oordeel, dat men in de allereerste plaats in deze provinciën de Nederduitsche taal moet doen leeren, omdat men die taal daar niet kent, ten minste zóó niet kent, dat van dezelve door verlichte mannen in eenige belangrijke beraadslagingen gebruik kan worden gemaakt."

8. See Willemyns & De Groof (2004) and Vosters & Vandenbussche (2008:4–5) for an overview and a discussion.

the 'petition movements' has indeed shown, the language policy only became truly controversial when the general protest movements against the government gained momentum, causing the linguistic grievances to become part of a larger feeling of religious and political discontent (François 1992: 132–133).

3.2   The private sphere

As much effort as was put into the promotion of Dutch as the national language, the question as to which variety of Dutch should be used did not seem to warrant any planned government action. In general terms, King William did not seem to mind what kind of Dutch was being used in the South, as long as it was Dutch, and not French.[9] Issues of variation and norms within Dutch, however, were very hotly debated in the private sphere.

In various cities and towns, supporters of the new language policy gathered in newly-founded 'literary societies', where native and non-native speakers alike were stimulated to use the Dutch language creatively and proficiently.[10] In the case of Bruges, we know that a significant portion of the membership consisted of local town officials, often from the judiciary (De Clerck 1963: 277). Furthermore, many of these organizations were supported by the government, and they were strongly in favour of adopting Northern linguistic practices, even though there was no official need to do so. Many of these groups held lectures and essay competitions about language, in which authors frequently argued for the linguistic superiority of the North. A leading figure in these circles was Henri Schuermans, counsel for the prosecution in Bruges and later in Brussels. In 1822, he held a lecture about the Northern and Southern spelling practices of the Dutch language, in which he expressed the commonly-held view that the Northerners had always looked after their language, carefully grooming and improving it, whereas it was left to decay in the South, with "the greatest possible confusion and [linguistic] insecurity" as a result (Schuermans 1822, in Colenbrander 1915, VIII, 2: 577–580). Foreign influence was an oft-mentioned problem in Southern Dutch, but the main focus of essays like Schuermans' was spelling.

The same image holds true if we examine the market for linguistic publications. The status planning policy of the government did not only give rise to a large number of pamphlets and essays about the role of Dutch and French in society, but also prompted numerous publications dealing with the form of the language itself. Again, a great preoccupation with spelling can be observed – not only was there a great number of orthographical handbooks, but even some self-proclaimed 'grammars' dealt

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9.   See, for instance, Vosters (2009) for a discussion of this issue.

10.   See Blauwkuip (1920: 248–263) for an overview, De Clerck (1963) for a case study.

almost exclusively with spelling issues (Ter Bruggen s.a. [1818]). Moreover, Northern school books were being 'rewritten' in a Southern orthography, and some even presented Northern and Southern spellings alongside one another, almost in a bilingual fashion.[11] Most interesting, perhaps, were little guidebooks discussing North-South differences in such a way that Southerners could familiarize themselves with writing practices of the North.[12] The most well-known of these how-to guides, meant to teach people about the Northern spellings, was itself written according to Southern spelling practices, so as not to make it too hard to access for its intended readership (Cannaert 1823).

3.3 Spelling and identity

The foregoing might suggest that Northern and Southern varieties of Dutch, even when written, must not have been mutually comprehensible at the time, due to these spelling issues. However, as we will discuss in more detail later on, the orthographical differences between North and South were actually relatively small. De Simpel mentioned as the most important points: the Northern practice to dot the ⟨ij⟩, which remained undotted ⟨y⟩ in the South; the lengthening of long vowels in cases of analogy, and the Southern use of accent marks to distinguish two etymologically distinct E and O sounds (De Simpel s.a. [1827]). This is remarkable, because, for instance Cannaert reports about Southerners claiming to be unable to read texts from the North, rather turning to the French translation for a better understanding (Cannaert 1823: 4). Quite obviously, cases such as a dotted or undotted ⟨y⟩ or an occasional accent could not have prevented people from understanding texts from another part of the language area – that is, not for any purely linguistic reasons. Yet it seems that there was a strong societal demand for spelling guides such as Cannaert's. In the new and altered sociolinguistic context of the unified Netherlands, spelling had suddenly become a strong marker of someone's social, political and sometimes also religious identity, so that small orthographical differences gained unexpected importance.

In the political context of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, indexal meanings were often attached to spelling debates, linking political positions to orthographical choices. As the Southern incorporation into the Netherlands as a whole became an important issue in political debates, arguments pro and contra the new union also extended into the field of language. On the one hand, Southern proponents of the unification often emphasized the union of the one Dutch language as well, minimizing

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11.   Delin & Van de Gaer (1820) is a famous example of a spelling guidebook rewritten for the South. See also De Vos (1939:73). An example of the 'bilingual' style would be the anonymous work from Rousselaere (1818).

12.   Cannaert (1823), but also De Simpel (s.a. [1827]).

regional differences and quite readily sacrificing Flemish spelling variants in favour of Northern alternatives.[13] On the other hand, opponents of the regime repeatedly emphasized the singularity of Southern Dutch varieties, and resisted the 'Hollando-phile' tendencies of their adversaries, who too eagerly turned their gaze northwards in matters of language. This opposition became more salient as the protest movement against the regime grew, and voices for a separate 'Flemish' language especially grew stronger after 1830, when the Southern Netherlands separated themselves from the UKN in the so-called Belgian revolution.[14] The social context of the UKN thus extended beyond a simple North-South opposition, and a Flemish writer's choice to opt for either a Northern or a Southern way of spelling must more often than not be seen as part of a process of identity formation.

Closely linked to this political identity work is the social relevance of adopting the Northern spelling norms. We already mentioned private initiatives such as literary societies, where Northern spellings often found receptive ground. Commentators such as Schuermans did not merely support the Northern linguistic norms, but also did not hesitate to inform the higher authorities in The Hague about their self-proclaimed ardent zeal for the mother tongue. The aforementioned lecture by Schuermans, in which he defended the superiority of the Northern orthography, was sent to the minister of justice, and a mere four months after that, the counsel for the prosecution of Bruges saw himself promoted to the prestigious post of deputy attorney-general in Brussels.[15] Another telling example is the case of Jan Frans Willems, the later 'father of the Flemish movement'. We can see how his commitment to the Dutchification of Flanders was rewarded with considerable professional advancement, while at the same time, his spelling choices developed from typically Southern (as in Willems 1818) to more Northern (from his 1824 essay onwards).

Finally, not only political issues could be indexed by spelling choices – religious identities also came into play. In 1837, when looking back on the period of the United

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13. This 'integrationist' underlining of one shared Dutch language remained particularly important during the rest of the nineteenth century, especially after the 1830 Belgian independence. In a time when the Dutch language had again lost many of its official functions to French, the movement towards a joint Dutch spelling must be seen as part of a larger campaign for cultural emancipation of the Dutch speakers in Belgium (De Groof et al. 2006).

14. Concerning the situation in the later part of the nineteenth century, Willemyns (1992) emphasizes that it would be incorrect to reduce the polemics to an extreme 'integrationist' and an extreme 'particularist' position. As has been argued in Vosters (2009), this is also true for the period of the ukn, when later 'particularists' such as Behaegel or De Foere still defended the unity of the Dutch language.

15. The speech was sent to Felix van Maanen on May 24, 1822 (Colenbrander 1915, VIII, 2:576), and Schuermans was promoted on September 25, 1822 (Van Hille 1981:245).

Kingdom of the Netherlands, the well-known particularist grammarian Pieter Behaegel claimed that the supposed mutual incomprehensibility of Northern and Southern politicians was due to the irrepressible Northern penchant for change: the Hollanders had strayed from the true language of their forefathers, just like they had digressed from the path of true Christianity in the past (Behaegel 1837: 34–35). Language change, in other words, is directly associated with a shift in religion, and both are condemned. Very much along the same lines, a local Flemish official reported to the minister of justice about a letter he had recently laid eyes on. In this letter, probably originating from a Walloon clergyman, language and religion are again inherently linked together:

> Nous combattons tous *pro aris et focis*. Opposez-vous toujours [...] à l'extension de la langue hollandaise. Le flamand tel que vos pères l'ont parlé et écrit n'y perdra rien, tandis que le hollandais, écrit même par des personnes savantes et irréprochables, porte toujours avec lui les germes de l'hérésie
>
> (Bergmann 1829, in Colenbrander 1915, IX, 2: 603)

A last example comes from the grammar of a Roman Catholic priest, F.L.N. Henckel, who fiercely struggled against Northern ⟨de⟩ instead of Southern ⟨den⟩ as the masculine form of the definite article in the nominative case. In the South, ⟨de⟩ was reserved for feminine nouns, and thus, he argued, the Northern practice to leave out the ⟨n⟩ and to write *de paus* 'the pope' rather than *den paus* was a heresy, "attributing an unnatural gender to the Holy Father and causing disciples to stray" (Henckel 1815: 135).[16] We will return to the issue of ⟨de⟩ and ⟨den⟩ in the following section.

4.   Spelling and the normative tradition

In order to find out more about language in the UKN, we will now turn to orthography in normative publications. Investigating the work of prescriptive linguists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we are, nonetheless, not looking for proof of normative influence originating from these orthographers on other language users. Rather, the question of Northern and Southern normative traditions is an interesting topic in its own right, because also in this field of the history of the language, the period of the UKN presents an interesting case. Similarly to the examples of spelling and identity formation discussed above, we will see how the linguistic orientation of grammar and orthography writers in the South could change, as authors struggled to adapt to the new sociolinguistic situation after 1815.

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16.   Again, our translation. The full Dutch original reads: "Niet *de* Paus, gelijk de Hollanders willen in den noemer van 't enkelvoud; want volgens onze grondregels [...] zou men den Paus een oneigen geslacht toeschrijven, en den leerling leeren doolen."

As before, our focus will be on the Flemish South. In the North, the situation was quite different. The spelling of the Leiden professor Siegenbeek (1804)[17] had been the government-authorized standard for administration and education since the Batavian Republic, and remained official during the reign of William I. All of the government's correspondence, laws, decrees, and so on, were written using these conventions, yet no official efforts were made to impose this spelling upon the South (cf. supra). In Flanders, a writer theoretically was free in his or her choice to follow any spelling system – or none at all.

When discussing the situation of the UKN, it is important to consider the situation before 1815 as well. We have already outlined the image of linguistic decay that surrounds the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth century in Flanders – and specifically concerning spelling, the perception is that of normative chaos.[18] This idea is very prevalent in the metalinguistic discussions at the start of the UKN, although we have already touched upon the political investment of different parties. Several opinion makers had a clear interest in presenting Southern Dutch as a disorderly and unregulated collection of dialects, either in efforts to glorify the Northern Dutch of the new rulers, or to present French as the only civilized tongue of the South. Many grammar and orthography writers also supported this belief about the lack of a normative tradition in the South. Pieter Behaegel even held that there were "almost as many ways of spelling, as there were people who worked on improving the spelling" (Behaegel 1817:250).[19] Although this grammarian can hardly be accused of downplaying the Southern idiom in favour of Northern Dutch or French, it is clear, however, that ulterior motives of personal economic gain cannot be disregarded either: if all existing orthographies were flawed, it gave potential buyers all the more reason to obtain Behaegel's new book, which promised a clear way out of the normative darkness. In any case, this image of linguistic decay will be put to the test by evaluating it within the normative spelling tradition of the Southern Netherlands.

Our research involved tracing back several orthographical features (six of which are discussed below) in normative publications from the South. We looked at nearly all grammars, orthographies, schoolbooks, and any other type of linguistic publication containing spelling guidelines at the time – a selection will be presented below. We looked at works from all regions of the Southern Netherlands,[20] both from the decades

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17. Along with the grammar of Weiland (1805).

18. For a more detailed argumentation, see Rutten & Vosters (forthcoming).

19. Our translation. "Men ziet in onze landstreéken bynae zoo veel wyzen van spellen; als er verscheydene persoónen zyn, die zich op het verbeteren der spelling toegelegd hebben."

20. Split up, for the sake of clarity, in East (the province of Limburg), Center (Antwerp and Brabant), and West (the former County of Flanders). Also, a representative selection of

preceding the UKN (more specifically, from 1750 onwards; see Table 1), and from the period 1815–1830 (Table 3).

The following items were chosen, based on their relevance in the metalinguistic discussions of the UKN. We already mentioned some cases put forward by De Simpel (s.a. [1827]), but based on the numerous other works discussing orthographical issues at the time, we selected six oft-mentioned features:

1. The spelling of the diphthongized [ɛi], usually with a dotted or undotted ⟨y⟩, e.g. *wyn* or *wijn* "wine."
2. The second element of the older diphthongs [ɛi] and [œy], mostly spelled using ⟨y⟩ or ⟨i⟩, e.g. *kleyn* or *klein* "small," and *bruyn* or *bruin* "brown."
3. Vowel lengthening, either by adding another grapheme or by doubling the original vowel, e.g. *zwaerd* or *zwaard* "sword," *zuer* or *zuur* "sour."
4. The form of the definite and indefinite article in the nominative singular masculine form with or without a final ⟨(e)n⟩, e.g. *den man* or *de man* "the man," *eenen man* or *een man* "a man."
5. The use of accent marks to distinguish the lengthened *ē* and *ō* (out of Wgm. short vowels) from the monophthongized *ê* and *ô* (out of Wgm. diphthongs), e.g. lengthened *geéft* "gives" and *hoópt* "hopes." Note that in the Hollandic centre of the linguistic area – as in the present-day standard – both types of [e:] and [o:] had merged in pronunciation by the seventeenth century, while the difference still exists in most of the Southern dialects (Rutten 2009).
6. The ending of the second and third person singular present tense indicative forms of verbs with a dental root, usually spelled as ⟨d⟩ or ⟨dt⟩, e.g. *word* or *wordt* "becomes." Due to final devoicing in all relevant varieties of Dutch, the distinction between verb-final ⟨d⟩ and ⟨dt⟩ is exclusively orthographical in nature, grounded in morphology rather than phonology.

When we brought together what Flemish orthographers prescribed on these counts, a very clear image of typical eighteenth-century Southern usage emerged. This included the diphthongized [ɛi] spelled as an undotted ⟨y⟩, other diphthongs ending in *-y*, vowels lengthened with an added *-e*, nominative *-n* for masculine articles, a fairly consistent use of accents, and verb-final *-d* in cases where modern Dutch has *–dt*.[21] As can be deduced from the first section of Table 1, there is agreement among most authors

language guides in French will be included, as some of these books were widespread in the Dutch-speaking South as well (Janssens & Steyaert 2008: 244 ff).

21. These are the features in normal print in Table 1. The other variants are in boldface.

on nearly all of the investigated features, and no sign of 'normative chaos' as far as the situation in the South before 1815 is concerned.

Table 1. Spelling features in the Southern normative tradition

			1	2	3	4	5	6
Southern normative tradition								
	Feature:		1	2	3	4	5	6
Centre	Verpoorten	1752	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	P.B.	1757	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	Des Roches	1761	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	Ballieu	1792	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	Van Aerschot	1807	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	**-dt**
West	Van Belleghem	1773	y	-y	V+e	-n	**no**	-d
	Janssens	1775	y	**-i**	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	[Dendermonde]	1785	y	-y	V+e	-n	**no**	-d
	Vaelande	1805	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
Northern norm								
	Feature:		1	2	3	4	5	6
North	Siegenbeek	1804	**ij**	**-i**	**V+V**	**-ø**	**no**	**-dt**

At the bottom of the table, the work of Siegenbeek is mentioned, as the official orthography of the Northern provinces. Siegenbeek's variants diverge from the Southern tradition on each of the six counts: dotted ⟨ij⟩, diphthongs ⟨ei⟩ and ⟨ui⟩, long vowels ⟨aa⟩ and ⟨uu⟩, the article ⟨de⟩, the absence of accents on ⟨ee⟩ and ⟨oo⟩, and the possibility of verb-final ⟨dt⟩ spellings. Of course, the fact that the Siegenbeek guidelines were the officialised government-sanctioned norm does not mean that we can take them to be representative for the entire North of the linguistic area. Although little to no research has been carried out about early-nineteenth century spelling practices in the Northern Netherlands, it is safe to assume that many alternative ways of spelling were commonly used by all sorts of writers.[22] By representing the North only by the work of Siegenbeek, we do *not* mean to accept the image of uniform writing practices

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22.   Nonetheless, it may be added that Siegenbeek's most well-known critic, Willem Bilderdijk, did agree with him on all of the six points presented above. He only diverged in the use of ⟨y⟩ rather than ⟨ij⟩ for a very limited selection of lexical items (e.g. *my*, *by*, *party*); for most other words, he adhered to Siegenbeek's ⟨ij⟩. Outlined in Bilderdijk (1826), discussed in Mathijsen (1988).

in the North,[23] but we do mean to stress the symbolic value of his work, especially in the South. The idea among Southern commentators nearly always seemed to be that everyone in the North spelled according to Siegenbeek. Although this must clearly be seen in the light of the discourses of Southern decay versus Northern uniformity which we discussed earlier, the shibboleth function for the South is clear. When educated Flemish authors, for political, ideological, professional, or any other reasons wanted to abandon their own writing tradition, they turned to Siegenbeek. His guidelines are thus represented in Tables 1 and 3 as a point of reference.

Before moving on to norms of usage between 1815 and 1830, we can already conclude that, at the start of the nineteenth century, two distinct writing traditions had evolved in North and South, which nonetheless were very similar to one another. Linguistically speaking, the differences are minor, but it is within the context of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands that people rallied around these small spelling issues, which were then imbued with social meaning and became shibboleths of Northern and Southern use. Schematically, we can summarize the features as in Table 2.

Table 2. Typically Northern and Southern spelling features

Feature	Typically southern	Typically northern
1. dotting of [ɛi]	*y*	*ij*
2. diphthongs	*-y*	*-i*
3. vowel lengthening	V+*e*	V+V
4. article N Sg M	*-(e)n*	*-ø*
5. accent marks	yes	no
6. Ind Pres 2+3 Sg	*-d*	*-dt*

Keeping in mind the largely uniform image of the Southern normative tradition before 1815, we can at once deduct from Table 3 that the situation changed rapidly after the start of the UKN. More and more Northern elements started appearing in publications from all regions, and several authors entirely adopted the Siegenbeek variants for the six features under investigation. Both writing traditions collided, some mixed systems appeared (e.g. Willems 1824), and Northern spellings gained ground everywhere. This fits the expectations, given the changed sociolinguistic context of the new and unified kingdom: although there were no official requirements to do so, several orthographers probably felt an increasing social pressure to adopt the orthography of the North, or catered to a new market of Southerners wishing to familiarize themselves with the language variety of the new regime. Even within the work of some authors,

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23. As suggested, among others, by Wils (1956:527–528) and Suffeleers (1979:19).

changes can be observed – the most well-known example is Behaegel, who still used the Southern ⟨ae⟩ variant in the title of his work in 1817, but switched to the Northern ⟨aa⟩ some three years later.[24]

Table 3. Spelling features during the United Kingdom of the Netherlands

			1	2	3	4	5	6
	Normative works of the south between 1815 and 1830							
	Feature:		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
Centre	[Mechelen]	1817	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	Ter Bruggen	1822	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	Zilgens	1824	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	Willems	1824	y	**-i**	V+e	**-ø**	**no**	**-dt**
West	De Neckere	1815	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	**-dt**
	Henckel	1815	**ij**	**-i**	V+e	-n	**no**	-d
	Gyselynck	1819	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d
	Cannaert	1823	y/**ij**	-y	Ve/**VV**	-n/-ø	**no**	**-dt**
	Moke	1823	ij	**-i**	**V+V**	**-ø**	yes	**-dt**
	Behaegel	s.a.	y	-y	**V+V**	-n	yes	-d
	De Simpel	1827	**ij**	**-i**	**V+V**	**-ø**	**no**	**-dt**
East	[Maeseyck]	1819	**ij**	**-i**	**V+V**	**-ø**	**no**	**-dt**
In	Van der Pijl	1815	**ij**	**-i**	**V+V**	**-ø**	**no**	**-dt**
French	Meijer	1820	**ij**	**-i**	**V+V**	**-ø**	**no**	**-dt**
	Northern norm							
	Feature:		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
North	Siegenbeek	1804	**ij**	**-i**	**V+V**	**-ø**	**no**	**-dt**

5. Spelling in practice

Now that we have a better understanding of the spelling situation in normative publications before and during the ukn, we will try to find out to what extent the new sociolinguistic context of the reunified Netherlands was reflected in actual language

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24. In Table 3, only the second volume of this work is shown; while it is undated, we know that it appeared in short installments from 1820 onwards (Hoernaert 1949).

use.[25] For this part of the study, we used a corpus of digitized handwritten documents from the judicial and administrative domain, containing:

– police reports (ca. 50%):
  the first recordings of crimes, usually made at the very local level by police officers, constables or other local leading figures;
– interrogation reports (ca. 50%):
  notes and reports of interrogations of witnesses and accused, drawn up by district-level clerks.

These documents were all written at a fairly local level, by a wide range of (semi-) professional scribes. The corpus contains a total of 61.014 tokens, with an equal share of documents coming from central towns and peripheral villages in each of the five Flemish provinces. Apart from this regional dimension, a diachronic dimension has also been built in, and documents have been selected from 1823, when the Dutch-ification policy first took effect, and 1829, at the end of the UKN. Note that for many departments, the documents from 1823 are among the first of their kind to be written in Dutch since before the French rule (1794–1814). They give an interesting insight into the Dutch language in Flanders at the start of the unification of the Netherlands, and allow for ample comparison with 1829, after those years of political union between North and South.

The exploration of the corpus material was done using computerized searches for the six spelling features presented in section four. We will present and discuss token counts, showing the main variants for each feature. Usually, these correspond to either the typically Northern or typically Southern forms that we encountered in the metalinguistic discussions and in the normative works. However, in the case of the diphthongs [ɛi] and [œy], a third important variant needed to be taken into account, i.e. ⟨ij⟩ rather than ⟨i⟩ or ⟨y⟩ as the second element of the diphthong. Obviously, more variation aside from the two or three main variants is possible, but by focusing on the distribution of typically Northern versus Southern forms, we hope to show the importance of Northern writing practices in the South, within the context of the reunified Netherlands. Accordingly, the results below should be seen as an indicator of the spread of typically Northern and typically Southern spelling features, and not as a complete account of all possible orthographical variation.

Table 4 shows the total number of tokens for all variants of our six features, as well as a distribution per cent for 1823 and 1829. All of the variants for which the connection with typically Northern and typically Southern items could be made – based on

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25. Cf. also Vanhecke (2007), who already mentioned the fairly rapid spread of the Siegenbeek standard in chancery documents.

the metalinguistic discourse and the normative framework – have been added to an overall total of Southern and Northern characteristics.

Table 4. Distribution of variants in corpus

	Total		Dotting of [ɛi]		Diphthongs		
	S	N	*y*	*ij*	*-y*	*-ij*	*-i*
Total	5.546	10.600	3.221	1.038	454	122	2.102
1823	42%	58%	78%	22%	25%	7%	68%
1829	24%	76%	73%	27%	4%	1%	95%

	Vowel lengthening		Article N Sg M		Accent marks		Ind Pres 2+3 Sg	
	V+e	V+V	*-(e)n*	*-ø*	with	without	*-d*	*-dt*
Total	1.570	3.683	131	149	151	3.616	19	12
1823	44%	56%	56%	44%	5%	95%	100%	0%
1829	8%	92%	38%	62%	3%	97%	25%	75%

Comparing the data for 1823 and 1829, we can see a clear tendency to abandon typically Southern forms in favour of their Northern counterparts. This change holds true for every one of the investigated features, and is most spectacular in the cases of the diphthong and long vowel spellings. Southern variants *-y* and *V+e* still accounted for a quarter up to half of the total number of tokens in 1823, whereas *-i* and *V+V* had already taken over more than 90% of the total some six years later. For the alternation between ⟨y⟩ and ⟨ij⟩, we can observe the remarkable stability of the Flemish undotted variant, which might be related to the minimal difference in writing. Furthermore, in spite of a higher share in 1823, the use of accents was never truly dominant, which may not be surprising, as accents were also one of the less stable features in the Southern normative tradition before the start of the ʋĸɴ. Another point of interest is the case of the *-ij* diphthong variant, which does not occur in any of the normative works in Tables 1 and 3.

It should, however, be stressed that in 1823 already, over half of all attested tokens corresponded to the typical variants of the Northern writing tradition. Although Northern ⟨ij⟩ and the use of ⟨dt⟩ in verbal endings hardly occurred, spellings such as ⟨ei⟩, ⟨ui⟩, ⟨aa⟩ and ⟨uu⟩ were common from the very start. Already at the start of the forced Dutchification in 1823, Southern scribes showed themselves flexible to adopt Northern spelling practices. As these documents were often among the first of their kind to be written in Dutch, this is slightly surprising, and raises further doubts about the isolation and linguistic degradation of the Southern varieties of Dutch (cf. Vanhecke 2007).

Table 5. Regional and temporal distribution

1823	Total southern	Total northern	1829	Total southern	Total northern
Antwerp	35%	65%	Antwerp	29%	71%
Brabant	61%	39%	Brabant	23%	77%
Limburg	19%	81%	Limburg	9%	91%
East Flanders	50%	50%	East Flanders	26%	74%
West Flanders	42%	58%	West Flanders	25%	75%

The above image is furthermore confirmed when we consider the regional differences in our data. Table 5 shows the total count of Southern and Northern forms per province, also for both years under investigation. We can still observe clear regional patterns in the early years: some provinces, such as Brabant and East Flanders, adhered more strongly to variants from the Southern tradition, whereas others, like Limburg and Antwerp, already had a higher penetration of Northern forms. The differences between provinces were fairly large in 1823: the share of Southern tokens was more than twice as high in Brabant as it was in Limburg. It is interesting to see, however, how these figures converged by 1829. There is a general increase of Northern forms in every single region, but the differences between the provinces levelled out to a great extent: Limburg remained in the lead, but the total share of Northern tokens in all other provinces ranged between 71–77%. By 1829, the earlier regional pattern had evened out in favour of more uniform Northern-based preferences.

Concerning our initial question about the extent to which the new sociolinguistic situation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was reflected in actual language use, we can conclude that our corpus study shows a general change in linguistic orientation as far as orthography of trained scribes is concerned. Shibboleths of Northern use already occurred in 1823 in all provinces, but rapidly gained more ground in the six years following the start of the Dutchification. This highlights the importance of the political union between North and South for an increasing convergence of writing practices in the early nineteenth century, but also seriously questions the image of utter linguistic chaos in the years before William I's new policy. Although there were no official directives forcing individual scribes to adhere to the Northern spelling norms, we could still observe an increasing use of distinctly Northern variants. The fact that the variant distribution differed per feature, and the observation that few scribes' usage corresponded entirely to the guidelines of Siegenbeek (cf. the tenacity of Southern ⟨y⟩), pleads against top-down normative influence of Siegenbeek's 1804 publication. Rather, these findings highlight the fluid role of spelling within the sociolinguistic field of the time, where orthographical variation bore social significance.

6. Conclusions

In sum, we showed how the changing socio-historical context of the renewed unity of the Low Countries had linguistic consequences as well, especially in the periphery of the linguistic area, the Flemish South. Spelling emerged as one of the most salient points of divergence between the Northern and the Southern provinces, and became the spearhead of the metalinguistic discussions in the South after 1815. The way a person wrote became a prime marker of his or her social identity, and adopting Northern spelling practices became an interesting means of upward social mobility for ambitious Southerners. The period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands brought together two distinct but closely connected writing traditions, and we could tell from prescriptive grammars and orthographies that the Southern tradition still lingered on after 1815, but gradually gave way to the increasingly dominant northern prescriptions. A similar pattern came to the fore when we explored the spelling choices of Southern scribes in a corpus of original manuscripts, where Northern spellings gained a lot of following, even at a fairly local level. We may, in passing, highlight the striking linguistic competence of the scribes involved, many of whom had started their career under French rule, and over the years, had been switching between French and Dutch, and between Southern and Northern spellings of Dutch as well.[26]

Our findings show the relative success of the language policy within the larger framework of cultural North-South integration envisioned by King William I, but are also relevant for the development of Dutch after the Belgian independence. Not in the least, as is often mentioned, because the Dutchification allowed for a new generation of young Southerners to be educated and cultivated in Dutch,[27] but also because it paved the way for the later breakthrough of the written linguistic norms of the North. Along the same lines as we observed in our inquiries, it is in the newly-founded Belgian state that the Northern orthography consolidated its position in the South, with the so-called *commissiespelling* of 1844 as a symbolic climax. Fierce debates about the appropriate language variety for the South in the Kingdom of Belgium revolved around orthographical issues as well, and in spite of radical changes in the social and political context, it is clear that many of the issues which lay at the basis of the linguistic discussions during the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands would remain highly relevant for decades to come.

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26. See also Vanhecke (2007: 367).

27. Core members of the later 'Flemish movement' (Willemyns & De Groof 2004: 190).

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