9 Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Competing Language Norms in the Southern Low Countries (1815–1830)

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Introduction

The years 1804 and 1805 are sociolinguistic landmarks in the history of Dutch. In 1804, the first official spelling of Dutch was published, for which the government had approached Matthijs Siegenbeek (1774–1854), a professor of Dutch from Leiden. A year later, the first official grammar of Dutch was published by the Rotterdam minister Pieter Weiland (1754–1842). Governmental interference with language and teaching had been a central topic in (semi-)public debates in learned societies and periodicals from the 1750s onwards, resulting in officially regulated language standardisation and a series of laws aimed at educational reforms in the early 1800s (see Rutten [2012] for a recent overview). Both the spelling and the grammar were meant for the educational and administrative domains. The final decades of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century marked the transition from language planning as a private activity targeted towards an adult audience with a particular interest in language, to language policy as a public matter of national concern (Rutten, 2009).

In this transition, prescription is a keyword. Grammars and orthographies of Dutch had been published since the 16th century, but after 1804, prescriptive language guides and schoolbooks based on the official regulations flooded the linguistic book market. Siegenbeek and Weiland themselves actively participated in this development. In 1805, Siegenbeek published an extract of his 1804 spelling *ten dienste der scholen* 'for the use of schools', which was reissued in 1822. In 1805, Weiland had

published not only his Dutch grammar, but also the *beginselen* 'principles' of the grammar as well as a short version *ten dienste der scholen*. All three books went through several editions in the first half of the 19th century. The school grammar, for example, saw its 11th edition in 1857.

At the time of this first official Dutch language policy, the northern and southern Low Countries were politically separated, as they had been since the late 16th century. The northern Low Countries, roughly speaking the present-day Netherlands, were a satellite state of France called the *Bataafse Republiek* 'Batavian Republic'. The southern Low Countries (present-day Belgium and Luxembourg) were part of the French Empire. The separation came to a temporary halt at the Congress of Vienna in 1814—1815 when it was decided that the Low Countries would be brought together into the *Verenigd Koninkrijk der Nederlanden* 'United Kingdom of the Netherlands' (UKN), in order to form a buffer state to the north of France. In 1830, the Belgian Revolution split up the UKN into the present-day situation of three separate countries, Belgium, Luxembourg and The Netherlands.

In the southern Low Countries, located north and south of the Romance-Germanic language border, both Dutch and French were widely used in formal and informal contexts, and in spoken and written communication. When in 1815, King William acceded to the throne as the first monarch of the UKN, roughly three quarters of its inhabitants were native speakers of some variety of Dutch, about half of them from the north and half from the south.[1] With nearly 1.5 million francophones in the Walloon—Belgian territories, French was the largest minority language in the UKN, followed by German, which was only spoken in a small native-speaker community in the south-east. Although we will not discuss the government's language policy in detail (see Blauwkuip, 1920; de Jonghe, 1967), its main aim was the spread of Dutch as the exclusive national language. As French had become the most important language among the higher social classes, especially in the Flemish—Belgian territories (Vandenbussche, 2001), Dutch was to be the dominant language in various formal domains. In 1819, the government decreed that, from 1823 onwards, written communication in the legal and administrative domains needed to take place in Dutch only. Both the judiciary and the public administration thus became effectively 'Dutchified' (Van Goethem, 1990; Vanhecke, 2007).

The Dutchification policy in the southern Netherlands led to a stream of publications on language. In the French-speaking regions, numerous grammars and orthographies appeared, introducing and explaining Dutch language norms; these were usually based on Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805) (Janssens & Steyaert, 2008). In the Dutch-speaking parts too, language norms were discussed and prescribed in a series of language guides, pamphlets, grammars, orthographies and schoolbooks (Vosters, 2011). These texts did not always strictly follow the northern prescriptions proposed by Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805), as the second half of

the 18th century had seen the rise of a separate southern Dutch linguistic identity, characterised by different spelling conventions from northern practice (Rutten, 2011, and see below).

It is against the background of the reunion of the northern and southern parts of the Low Countries under William I, his Dutchification policy, the concomitant encounter of southern and northern Dutch writing traditions and the young but firm northern tradition of official prescription that we wish to discuss one of the linguistic publications that came out in the southern Netherlands during this period.[2] In 1823, an anonymous publication appeared, called *Iets over de Hollandsche tael, noch voor, noch tegen, latende elk dienaengaende vry en verlet als naer goedvinden, in eenige familiaire brieven* 'Something about the Hollandic language, neither in favor, nor against it, leaving each person free in his own judgment on the matter, in the form of several private letters'. The author was later shown to be the lawyer Joseph Bernard Cannaert from Ghent (1768–1848).[3] The booklet, containing about 45 numbered pages, offers the reader an overview of the written language norms of the north, as codified by Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805). These 'Hollandic' norms are contrasted with what the author assumes to be the typical language use of the southern Netherlands, and thus offers a most interesting window into early 19th-century southern Dutch.

We will first give a broad overview of the sociolinguistic landscape in The Netherlands at the time, focusing on language planning, language ideology and language norms. We will then use the observations in Cannaert (1823) as a touchstone of language use in early 19th-century Flanders, comparing his observations to the results from a corpus analysis based on a collection of manuscripts from the period. These findings will lead to a wider discussion concerning early 19th-century southern Dutch as represented in language norms, prescriptive ideologies and actual language use of the period.

Language Planning

It is unclear what variety of Dutch the government wanted to propagate in the context of its Dutchification policy between 1815 and 1830. A remark in the margin of a constitutional bill from 1815 demonstrates that the King himself employed a broad definition of the concept, when he wrote: *Nationale taal* Nederduitsch *zijnde Hollandsch, Vlaamsch, Brabantsch* 'National language *Dutch* being Hollandic, Flemish, Brabantine' (Colenbrander, 1909: 502). Whereas Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805) had been the official norms in the north for almost two decades, there were no official language norms for the south. This is evident from the following comment of the then Minister of Education A.R. Falck to his colleague C.F. van Maanen from the Justice Department in 1822:

> *Overigens zoude ik van oordeel zijn dat vooralsnog geene verordeningen van gouvernementswege moeten plaats hebben ter verandering of wijziging, op hoog gezag, van het Vlaamsche taalgebruik, waaromtrent men aan den tijd en aan eene voortgezette taalbeoefening door de Vlamingen moet overlaten, eene bepaalde meening te doen veld winnen en te vestigen*
>
> For that matter, my judgment would be that, for the time being, no ordinances from the government would be in place to change or modify, on the highest authority, the Flemish use of the language. On this subject, time and continued practice of the language by the Flemings themselves need to determine which opinion will gain ground and establish itself. (Colenbrander, 1915, VIII-2: 584–585)

Around the same time, the public prosecutor from Bruges, H.J. Schuermans, noted that *De wijze, volgens welke de landstaal gebezigd of geschreven wordt, is aan het gouvernement meer onverschillig* 'the way in which the national language is used or written, is of less concern to the government' (Colenbrander, 1915, VIII-2: 578).

Despite such comments showing that there was no official requirement for Dutch-speaking southerners to adopt the Northern language norms, Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805) were well-known in the Flemish provinces. Even if they did not enjoy any official status there, their influence is clear from the many pamphlets, public lectures, newspaper articles and other publications which appeared on the topic. The language ideologies which were shaped and reinforced in these publications will be dealt with in the next section.

Language Ideology

Language was a frequent topic in the UKN. Soon after the withdrawal of the French troops in 1814, a large debate ensued on the desirability of Dutch as the new official language. The former Brussels attorney and court clerk Pierre Barafin (1774–1841) summarises the objections of many francophone southerners in his *Sur la Langue Nationale* (1815). In this pamphlet, he argued that Flemish and Hollandic are two different, mutually unintelligible languages, leaving French as the only real national language uniting all educated people (De Smedt, 2010). Other publications defending French against the perceived threat of Dutch as a new lingua franca followed, such as Plasschaert (1817) and Defrenne (1829). Dutch-speaking southerners mostly welcomed the Dutchification policy. Many Flemish grammarians and commentators hailed the new status of Dutch as a national language, following the earlier exhilarations of J.F. Willems (1793–1846): *Triumph! – onz' nederduytsche tael / Is van het fransche juk onthéven, / En zal, hoe zeer den nyd ook smael', / Haer' ouden luyster doen herleéven!* 'Triumph! – Our Dutch language can finally cast off the French yoke, and will relive its old glory, even in the face of derisive envy!'.[4]

Before long, however, in the eyes of many Flemish commentators the conflict between French and Dutch was overshadowed by the perceived differences between northern and southern varieties of Dutch. Already since the start of the UKN, many southerners had noticed a number of differences between the language used in the south and the north, most likely due to intensified contact with the northern variety, which had spread through the south as the variety used in government notices, legal documents and pro-government newspapers. From a modern linguistic perspective, however, assuming a clear north–south dichotomy is problematic because regional variation was abundant in both the north and the south, especially in the spoken language. Nonetheless, in the southern metalinguistic consciousness of the time, we observe a clear schematisation of the sociolinguistic landscape, juxtaposing 'Flemish' – or sometimes 'Brabantine' – and 'Hollandic'. When southern commentators mentioned 'Hollandic' or 'Northern Dutch', they seemed to refer to the official northern norms of Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805). Consequently – consciously or subconsciously – they denied the existence of northern variability, both in actual writing and in terms of prescribed language norms (Vosters *et al.*, 2010).

The central position of the northern norms in early 19th-century southern metalinguistic discourse cannot be underestimated, particularly with respect to orthography: most authors discussing the differences and similarities between northern and southern varieties focused exclusively on spelling. The north–south opposition reflects an orthographical divide between a supposedly typical Northern variant x versus a supposedly typical Southern counterpart x'. In this way, a fairly limited number of minor orthographical differences grew into symbolic markers of northern and southern language use in general, and became salient at a pragmatic level (Errington, 1985; Hickey, 2000). Writers started to use orthographical features to stress broader linguistic differences, thus aiming to legitimise cultural, political and even religious differences (cf. Jaffe, 2000: 502–503; see further Vosters, 2013; Vosters *et al.*, 2012).

Language Norms

The market for schoolbooks and spelling guides experienced an enormous growth during the years of the UKN: not only did guidebooks for non-native learners of Dutch appear all over the south (Janssens & Steyaert, 2008), but linguistic publications aimed at native speakers of Dutch flourished as well. Here too publications on orthography boomed: some, though called *Spraek-konst* 'grammar', dealt almost exclusively with spelling (e.g. Ter Bruggen, 1818). While in the second half of the 18th century there was still a clear southern standard in full development (cf. Rutten, 2011; Rutten & Vosters, 2010a), separate from – but in close contact with – the writing tradition of the north, the new sociolinguistic

context of the reunified Netherlands from 1815 onwards allowed for an increasing influence of the northern language norms in the south, largely representing the norms proposed by Siegenbeek (1804). We have dealt with this evolution elaborately elsewhere (Rutten & Vosters, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) and here we will summarise the main findings. Focusing mainly on prescriptions for orthographical features such as the spelling of the dipthongised /ei/ with <y> or <ij> (e.g. *wyn* or *wijn* 'wine') and vowel lengthening in closed syllables, either by adding <e> or by doubling the original vowel (e.g. *zwaard* or *zwaerd* 'sword'), we were able to demonstrate a surprisingly high degree of uniformity in southern prescriptive works predating 1815. Moreover, the southern norms diverge from Siegenbeek (1804) on every single feature under investigation. However, in publications from the period of the UKN, published between 1815 and 1830, we see that some southern features still stood their ground, but that new forms in line with the northern norms gained ground across all areas of the south.

It is in this context, with two separate northern and southern written language norms, that a work like Cannaert (1823) could arise. It was not, however, a unique publication in terms of its set-up and goals. Willems (1824) likewise presented a comparative overview of northern and southern language features, though more specifically to serve as a basis for his own system of orthographical norms. Similarly, De Simpel (1827) provided his readers with an elaborate overview of linguistic differences between northern and southern Dutch, although he made no secret of his strong preference for the Siegenbeek spelling norms (see also Vosters, 2011: 160–177).

Language Norms in Cannaert (1823)

The existence of several works comparing northern and southern writing practices, aiming to introduce the Hollandic language norms to a southern audience, shows that there must have been a need for such publications at the time. Cannaert (1823: 7) explicitly claims to respond to this demand by publishing a *kortbondig, maer vooral, goedkoop boeksken* 'short, but above all cheap little booklet'. In a fictional dialogue with a sceptical reader, he refutes a number of arguments from Flemings against learning the Hollandic tongue (Cannaert, 1823: 4–7). Among other things, he deals with the argument that too much effort would be required to acquire a new variety of the language, particularly at an advanced age, and the high price of books from Holland. The debunking of such arguments, Cannaert (1823: 4) argues, is aimed at Flemish southerners who claim never to read any books from Holland, and who would prefer to read French translations rather than the Dutch originals of laws or edicts issued by the government. In all this, Cannaert's main argument seems to be the need for traditional second language acquisition: the entire publication, *over de Hollandsche tael* 'about the Hollandic language', is indeed written in a variety which the author characterises as southern, so as *het* hollandsch

niet te gebruyken, alvorens hetzelve eenigzins te kennen 'not to use the *Hollandic* variety already, before it is known' (Cannaert, 1823: 8).

After the introductory dialogue, Cannaert discusses nearly 50 features which he categorises as typically southern, along with their northern – or rather: Siegenbeekian – counterparts. We selected 15 features for further discussion here: five mainly orthographical issues, five related to pronunciation differences and five morphosyntactic ones. Table 9.1 summarises their representation in Cannaert (1823), along with representative examples of the alleged northern and southern variants.

Table 9.1 Schematic overview of 15 linguistic features discussed in Cannaert (1823)

I. Orthography	Southern	Example	Northern	Example
Diphthong /ei/	Ey	weyde 'meadow'	ei	weide
Long /a:/ in closed syllable	Ae	aldaer 'there'	aa	aldaar
Dentals in past pple (voiced stems)	-d/-t	bemint 'loved' geleefd 'lived'	-d	bemind geleefd
Initial /z/	s-	ses 'six'	z-	zes
/ks/ in non-loanwords	-x-	blixem 'lightning'	-ks-	bliksem
II. Phonology	Southern	Example	Northern	Example
WGc *ĕ + r + dental	-ei- -ee-	peird 'horse' peerd	-aa-	paard
Final schwa in fem. nouns	-e	rekeninge 'bill'	-ø	rekening
Palatalisation of OGc *ŭ	-o-	borger 'citizen'	-u-	burger
Past pple in WGc *ĕgi	-ey-	gezeyd 'said'	-eg-	gezegd
Unrounding of OGc. *eu	-ie-	vier 'fire'	-uu-	vuur
III. Morphosyntax	Southern	Example	Northern	Example
Double negation	Yes	Ik <u>en</u> weet het <u>niet</u>.	no	Ik ø weet het <u>niet</u>.
M. nom. sg. articles	-(e)n	den meester 'the master/teacher'	-ø	de meester
Diminutives	-(s)ke(n) -(d/t)jen	stukske 'small piece' fluytjen 'small flute'	-(t/p)je	stukje fluitje
Reflexive pronoun (3rd p. sg.)	Hem	Hy heeft <u>hem</u> bedrogen gevonden 'he found himself deceived"	zich	Hij heeft <u>zich</u> bedrogen gevonden
Conjunctions	-de -te	ende 'and' ofte 'or'	-ø -ø	en of

Is what Cannaert describes representative of southern language use, and how representative are the characteristics he lists at the time of the UKN? To test this, we searched for the features listed in Table 9.1 in a corpus of legal and administrative texts from the 1820s. This digitised collection of handwritten documents was recently compiled and transcribed, and contains texts originating from files of the so-called Courts of Assize, containing:

(1) police reports, drawn up by local police constables, rangers or other members of the municipal authorities;
(2) interrogation reports by scribes of district-level courthouses;
(3) indictments, issued by the professional scribes of one of the high courts;
(4) a number of letters, usually between different members of the prosecution;
(5) declarations by witnesses, bailiffs, former employers, etc.

Figure 9.1 The cover of Cannaert's booklet (Universiteitsbibliotheek Gent, BIB.G.008246/48)

All southern provinces are represented in the collection, with an equal amount of material per region from urban centres and various local towns or villages. The corpus contains 225 unique documents, written by 132 scribes and amounting to 101,454 words, excluding editorial and linguistic markup (see http://www.digitalebouwstoffen.be for more information on this *Corpus negentiende-eeuws juridisch taalgebruik 1814–1830*). The material also has a built-in diachronic dimension, with texts from 1823, when Cannaert's *Iets over de Hollandsche tael* was first published, and from 1829, at the end of the Dutchification policy of the UKN. For most localities, this means that the documents under investigation are among the first of their kind to be written in Dutch since the end of French rule (1794–1814). These manuscripts offer insight into the form of the language during the early years of the Dutch government. Moreover, they allow us to compare them with the situation at the end of the UKN (1829), and to see if any changes occurred after the years of political union between north and south.

The corpus was searched for both the supposedly typical southern and the prototypically northern forms of the 15 variables in Table 9.1.[5] Figures 9.2–9.4 show the results for each group of features. The different bars present the relative frequency of the supposedly southern variant, both in total and split up for the two years under investigation (1823 and 1829).

For the spelling variants shown in Figure 9.2, we can note the limited frequency of the forms which Cannaert (1823) labelled as prototypically southern. The Siegenbeekian spelling variants are clearly dominant in each of the cases. The supposedly southern <ey>, <ae>, <t>,[6] <s> and <x> spellings are, in other words, not prototypically southern at all.
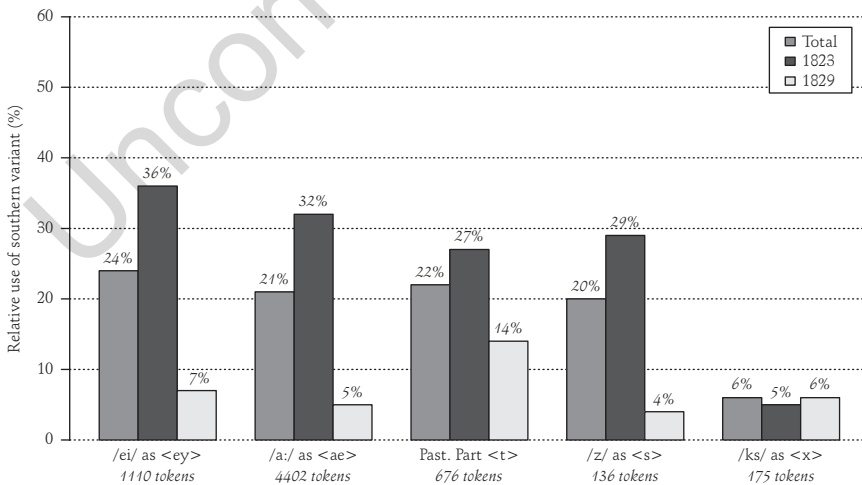

Figure 9.2 Relative use of the southern orthographical variants (1823 and 1829)
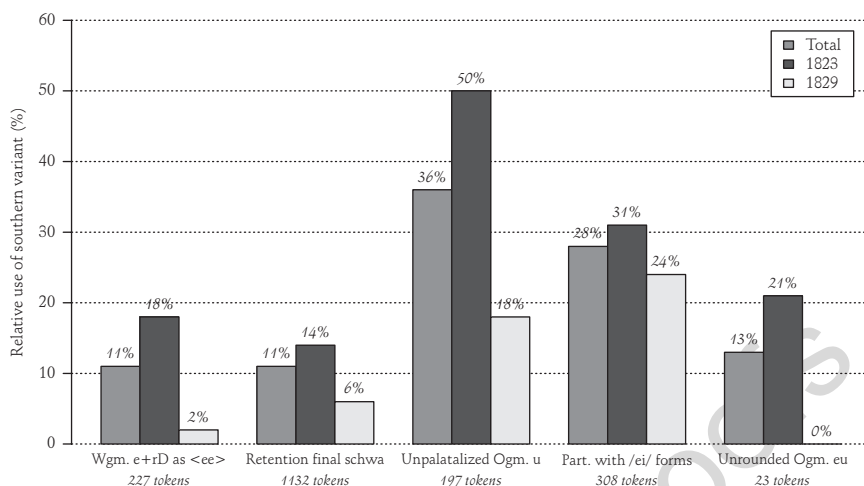
Figure 9.3 Relative use of the southern phonological variants (1823 and 1829)
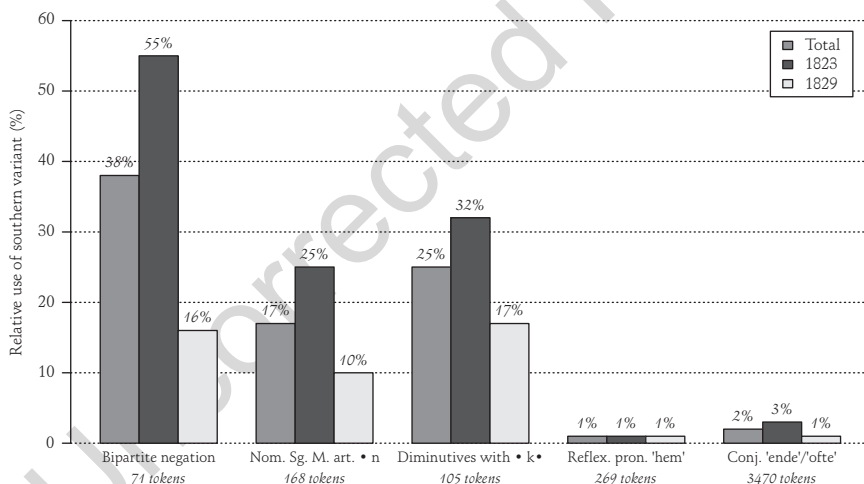

Figure 9.4 Relative use of the southern morphosyntactic variants (1823 and 1829)

A second observation concerns the striking differences between 1823 and 1829. There is a strong decline in the supposedly southern variants. Nonetheless, the southern variants are not extremely frequent in 1823 either: only about a third of all tokens is not yet in agreement with the Siegenbeek norms.

The features based on pronunciation differences in Figure 9.3 exhibit very similar trends. The so-called southern variants are not very frequent

in 1823 to start with, and their use has decreased even further over a mere six-year period.

The morphosyntactic variables in Figure 9.4 show the same pattern, although the variability between features is larger here than for the other sets. Double negation is the most frequent southern variant, with slightly over half of all instances occurring in 1823, but no more than 16% by 1829. The articles in -*n* and the *k*-diminutives, which both appear in most southern dialects, show a more representative pattern: a relatively low number of instances occur in 1823, having decreased even further by 1829. The last two features which Cannaert considered to be typically southern barely appear in that form in the corpus.

That some forms which Cannaert (1823) labelled as southern did not appear very frequently in the south may not be surprising if we take their spread in the present-day local dialects into account. Some phonological and morphosyntactic features today only occur in specific areas of the southern Dutch-speaking provinces (see Vosters & Rutten, 2011). Other features, such as the *n*-articles and *k*-diminutives, while not very frequent in our corpus occur throughout much of the south. Cannaert clearly claims to be describing the *written* language of the south, and even though some forms may have had a more limited spread than others in the local *spoken* dialects, most supposedly southern forms are fairly rare in our corpus of written documents.

Prescriptivism and the Myth of Southern Language Decay

Overall, we may conclude that many of Cannaert's prototypically southern features hardly appear to be characteristic of southern Dutch language use – at least as measured in a corpus of handwritten texts from the legal domain, with which Cannaert as a lawyer must have been familiar. Many of the features he mentions had already been replaced by their Siegenbeekian counterparts by 1823, and had continued to disappear by 1829. We assume that the intensified contact with northern varieties of Dutch at this time of political reunification must have had an impact on language use in the south, although the earlier documents also show that the situation at the outset of the Dutchification under William I cannot have been as distinctly southern or locally coloured as the prescriptivist and metalinguistic discourse at the time would lead us to believe. But if Cannaert did not draw his examples from the legal usage of the period, what did he base his observations of southern Dutch on? Is it possible that, consciously or subconsciously, he gave a distorted view of the sociolinguistic situation around 1823? This question may be impossible to answer, but we will nevertheless offer some suggestions.

First, we need to consider the limitations of the corpus used here. Although it only contains texts from the legal domain, Cannaert was active precisely in these circles. What is more, his appeals in the introduction are directly addressed to one of his imagined or unnamed colleagues, and his booklet even contains a passage on legal jargon. Second, Cannaert is clearly eager to promote his own book, and by portraying southern Dutch as old-fashioned, dialectal and generally different from northern Dutch, he increases the market value of his publication.

More importantly, however, we also need to consider what we previously called the 'myth of southern language decay' as a possible explanation for the observed discrepancy between Cannaert's metalinguistic observations and actual language use (Rutten & Vosters, 2011; Van der Horst, 2004). If we were to limit ourselves to the prescriptivist and metalinguistic discourse from the 18th- and 19th-century southern Netherlands, we would get the impression that the Dutch language, at the start of the Dutchification period during the UKN, was in a state of complete decay. Many commentators emphasise that anyone of any social significance used French as the language of prestige, leaving Dutch to wither away into a collection of local dialects without any overarching supraregional standard. Nonetheless, complaints about the state of the vernacular are a common phenomenon all across Early and Late Modern Europe: very similar lamentations about language decay can be heard in the north as well, just as in various other linguistic traditions, often precisely serving as a justification for an author's own endeavours in his or her mother tongue.[7] The myth of southern language decay, however, brings together some elements characterising the linguistic situation of the southern Netherlands. Language decay is usually related explicitly to the dominant position of French in the preceding decades, and dialectal and orthographical chaos in the southern provinces is described in sharp contrast to presumably complete linguistic uniformity in the north.[8]

There is thus on the one hand some discrepancy between the metalinguistic discourse in prescriptivist publications like Cannaert (1823) and actual language use in the southern Netherlands on the other. While the dominant discourse suggests a language variety in chaos, regressing towards local and dialectal forms, we do not see many dialectal characteristics in written Dutch from the south. Even for 1823, at the very start of the Dutchification policy which was to characterise the UKN, the Siegenbeekian variants were nearly always the dominant forms for most of the variables we investigated. Our corpus does not show any signs of transliterated dialect.

The political reunion during the UKN and William I's Dutchification policy again brought together southern and northern writing practices. In southern metalinguistic discourse, this resulted in a schematic opposition of typically southern and northern forms, wrongly suggesting

that language users were normatively caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Over time, the southern forms gradually gave way to the northern prescriptions. Comparing such ideologically motivated discourse to language use, we argued that the differences between northern and southern Dutch were much smaller than they are claimed to be in prescriptive works like Cannaert (1823). We explained this discrepancy with reference to the myth of southern language decay. Our analysis shows that combined research into language use, norm traditions and language ideologies can help explain and contextualise linguistic prescriptivism.

Notes

(1) See de Keverberg de Kessel (1834: 290–293), whose data are based on census data for the different provinces, and thus represent mere rough estimates (cf. de Jonghe, 1967: 24)
(2) This paper is a revised version of an earlier study published in Dutch (Vosters & Rutten, 2011). All translations are our own.
(3) According to Van Duyse (1849); cf. Lissens (2000: 140–141) and references therein.
(4) A poem, called 'Ode op de herstelling der nederduytsche Tael', appeared in the *Almanak van Nut en Vermaak* in 1815, and was soon praised and copied in *Le Spectateur Belge* (De Foere, 1815, II: 73–75).
(5) For some features, we had to limit our searches to the most frequent and/or etymologically least controversial lexical items, or the most frequent linguistic contexts in which the phenomena under discussion occurred. See Vosters and Rutten (2011) for full details on the search expressions used. For the analysis of the m. nom. sg. -n/ø- forms, a smaller subsection of the corpus was used (61,912 words) (see Rutten & Vosters, 2011).
(6) Cannaert does mention the variation between <t> and <dt> in the south, claiming <d> to be the exclusive form in the north. For the sake of clarity, however, we categorised <t> as the southern form, as this ending, according to Cannaert, would exclusively occur in the south.
(7) Cf. for instance, Rutten (2006: 122–129) for northern Dutch and Watts (2000) for English.
(8) This submyth of northern uniformity is debunked and dealt with more extensively in Vosters *et al.* (2010).

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