

# Forgotten Voices from Below. Historical Sociolinguistic Research in Flanders

Jill Puttaert / Iris Van de Voorde / Rik Vosters

## Abstract

Dieser Beitrag berichtet von einigen früheren und aktuellen Forschungsprojekten im Bereich der historischen Soziolinguistik in (West-)Flandern und der niederländischen Provinz Zeeland. Vor allem der Forschungsansatz der *Language History from Below*, der den Sprachgebrauch ‚einfacher Leute‘ in den Mittelpunkt stellt, kommt explizit zur Sprache. Die Sichtweise ‚von unten‘ kann die traditionelle Sprachgeschichte, die vor allem auf formellen und literarischen Quellen beruht – häufig aus der Hand von bekannten Autoren – erweitern. Seit den 1990er Jahren werden an der Vrije Universiteit Brussel Studien zu den unteren sozialen Schichten und deren Sprache in Flandern durchgeführt. Der Schwerpunkt liegt dabei auf dem 19. Jahrhundert. Sprachliche Entwicklungen sind zuerst in Brügge und später auch in anderen flämischen Städten untersucht worden. Das laufende Projekt *Forgotten Voices from Below*, das hier näher vorgestellt wird, hat seinen Ursprung in diesen früheren Untersuchungen. Es handelt sich um eine Untersuchung von Sprachvariation und Sprachwandel in Briefen, die von Soldaten und bedürftigen Bittstellern verfasst wurden. Wir schließen mit einer Diskussion über Armut und Armenpflege in Flandern, die als Hintergrundkontext für das laufende Projekt dient, und diskutieren das entscheidende, aber problematische Konzept der sozialen Schichten.

## 1. Introduction

The discipline of historical sociolinguistics has been gaining ground in recent years (cf. Auer et al. 2015), sparking up new research on the language and society interface in a range of historical contexts. One particular focus of historical sociolinguistic research is language history from below: an approach pioneered by Elspaß (2005), arguing that the focus of language history should be expanded to not only include the language used by highly educated social elites, but instead to also focus on the writings of ordinary people. Such investigations of the language used by the lower and often less literate ranks of society should be conducted in order to supplement the traditional approach of language history ‘from above’, based on the generally more formal and literary language used by the social elite. The first aim of this chapter is to present what is meant with such a focus on language history from below, situating the development within the emerging field of historical sociolinguistics, and highlighting the foundations as well as the implications of such a new way of viewing the historiography of a language. Secondly, we will then argue that it is crucial for such approaches from below to define clearly and operationalize what is meant with a focus on writings from the lower social classes, and, when focusing on the language use of scribes from lower strata of society, to take into account fully the context of poverty, in order to avoid “‘ideational’ anachro-

nism” (Bergs 2012: 84). To illustrate this position, this paper will then turn to such a discussion of social class, poverty and poor relief in nineteenth-century Flanders, where we will propose a dynamic view of social class, based on social class situations rather than static and possibly essentialist notions of social class belonging. After sketching an overall image of the economic situation of the lower classes in (Western) Flanders at the time, based on the work of social and economic historians, we will then move on to present an overview of various past projects and one ongoing project which are all situated in this context, focusing mostly on the early work on the subject by Vandebussche (1999, 2002, 2004) – the so-called ‘Bruges project’, which carried a distinct urban focus on the city of Bruges. The current project, carried out by the lead author as part of her PhD research, entitled *Forgotten Voices from Below*, builds on this pioneering research from around the turn of the century, but concentrates on the written language of soldiers and paupers, all at the bottom of the social ladder, including scribes from all over the province of West Flanders, as well as from the neighboring province of Zeeland – in fact, we will in passing consider how this broader geographical focus can be relevant to Dutch language history as a whole, especially from the point of view of standardization in the Northern versus Southern Netherlands. In the final section, then, we will briefly discuss some first tentative conclusions from this ongoing project, linked to a critical discussion of the usefulness of the concept of ‘social class’ to historical sociolinguists. We will consider the high amounts of interscribal variation found especially in the corpus of pauper letters, along with the concept of linguistic hybridity, also very much a central feature of many of these letters. Both of these findings will lead us to conclude that we need to be careful not to identify social classes as clear-cut and uniform groups for linguistic analysis in historical settings, keeping in mind that individual factors can far outdo the impact of group characteristics such as class and trying to take into account as far as possible the specific socio-historical circumstances in which scribes.

## 2. Language History from Below

In this section, we will give an overview of a fairly recent approach to language history, namely so-called “language history from below” (Elspeß 2005; 2007). We will discuss some crucial aspects and assumptions of this up-and-coming line of research in historical sociolinguistics and explain why we view it as an essential addition to language history proper.

In her inaugural address in 2006, Marijke van der Wal argued that, while we are well-informed about many aspects of the standardization process in a range of European languages, and in spite of decades of intensive research, certain aspects of language history still remain blind spots. First of all, traditional language histories concentrated on the (emerging) standard language for a very long time, and only very limited attention has been given to the history of any variety other than the (emerging) standard variety after the medieval period. Needless to say, the standard language does not actually represent the everyday language of all speakers, and specifically the language used by the lower social classes may be strongly underrepresented by such a predominant or exclusive focus on the standard variety (Elspeß 2007: 3–4). But also the way in which we view the standard, and how we study its emergence and spread provides us only with

a very limited picture, as the material on which such studies are usually based is very restricted: “The traditional view of the standardisation of Dutch is largely based on the language of printed texts that were mainly written by well-educated upper-class men” (Rutten/van der Wal 2014: 3). Only recently, this perspective started to shift towards the initial diversity that was typical of earlier phases of language history, addressing different types of sources in order to get a more complete picture of the language, not limited by standard language ideology among speakers of a language, but also among linguists describing the history of a language. Along with Elspaß (2005; 2007), van der Wal (2006) thus argues for a radical shift in the perspective to take, adopting an approach from below to supplement the traditional approaches from above in language history.

Depicting language history from above can be seen as the traditional approach to linguistic historiography: a mostly philological or strictly historical linguistic approach to a standard language or an emerging standard language, based mainly or almost exclusively on the language produced by notable citizens: literary authors, government officials, politicians or other important historical actors, professional scribes or clerks, and so on. Elspaß (2007) suggests that, by focusing on these standard forms of language use, a whole range of data is being ignored. In order to refine and complete the traditional language historiography, language historians began to study the written language use of ordinary people instead of texts produced by members of the elites, shifting the perspective from the bird’s-eye to the worm’s-eye view (Elspaß 2007: 4). This is in a nutshell what Elspaß calls a ‘language history from below’ (Elspaß 2007: 3–4): among other things, language history from below is “a plea for a long overdue emancipation of more than 95 % of the population in language historiography” (Elspaß 2007: 5), parallel to the shift towards similar types of sources and approaches in history proper (cf. Van Ginderachter 2004, 2006 for Flanders). Such a shift can thus involve looking at sources written by less-experienced writers not belonging to the social elite but can also mean drawing on less formal text types reflecting the ‘language of immediacy’ (Koch/Oesterreicher 1985; 1994), as will be discussed in more detail below. In any case, it is clear that such views from below have become indispensable when describing language history, in addition to the more traditional perspectives from above. To arrive at a rich and full account of language history, a one-sided view will not suffice, and it is a challenge for language historians to take both views into account.

Much of the work on language history from below originates from the German tradition of research into ‘Arbeitersprache’ (cf. Vandenbussche 2006 for an overview). Research started mostly in the German Democratic Republic by looking into the “niedere Umgangssprache” of the lower classes (e. g. Bielefeld/Lundt 1977), but especially gained a lot of influence with the work of Klaus Mattheier (e. g. 1986, 1989), who set out to study the characteristics of ‘Arbeitersprache’ as a “eigenständige Varietät” to be understood as a specific “Sprachstil”, the written side of which was heavily influenced by the spoken dialects (cf. also the later work by Grosse 1990, Schikorsky 1990, Klenk 1997 and Mihm 1998). Vandenbussche’s (1999) research, which will be discussed below, pioneered this type of research in the Low Countries, both as the first systematic study into social language stratification of Dutch on the basis of original sources such as the writings of manual laborers and craft apprentices, as well as by explicitly situating it within the comparative framework of the historical sociolinguistic enterprise.

One important theme in the study of language history from below is the constant tension between printed, handwritten and spoken language. The shift from studying language history based on printed materials to an approach mostly informed by less formal handwritten documents is central, and parallels the shift towards material written by non-elite users of the language: most traditional language histories are predominantly or even exclusively based on printed language use, such as literary texts and other highly stylized texts originating from the higher echelons, whereas most studies situated in the from below tradition tend to focus on less formal handwritten texts, such as ego-documents, preferably used as a means of ‘symmetrical’ communication. However, rather than assuming a sharp but overly simplistic distinction between ‘spoken language’ and ‘written language’ (cf. Elspaß 2012: 157), this focus builds on the work of Koch and Oesterreicher (1985; 1994), who provided a model to locate text types on a continuum of orality and literacy, regardless of the physical medium of transmission (spoken or written). The two poles on the continuum can be referred to as ‘Sprache der Nähe’ (language of immediacy) and ‘Sprache der Distanz’ (language of distance). Where ‘Sprache der Nähe’ is basically associated with orality, informality and unplannedness (cf. the concept of vernacular in modern sociolinguistic research), ‘Sprache der Distanz’ is rather literate, formal and planned (Elspaß 2012: 157; Koch/Oesterreicher 1985: 29–30). Journals, private letters and other types of ego-documents often used in language history from below clearly incorporate features from both styles and can thus be located in between the two poles (Koch/Oesterreicher 1985: 17–19; Simons 2013: 25–26). The idea of approaches from below is not to study ego-documents or other less formal handwritten texts as a direct window into the spoken vernacular of the past – although they can help us to reconstruct oral practices, albeit in a less direct and maybe more problematic way –, but they do provide a valuable addition to the often too one-sided accounts of traditional histories of the language.

Research adopting a perspective from below has taken off for different European languages. For German, we have already mentioned the seminal work of Elspaß, who used private letters to study the language of German emigrants in his 2005 monograph *Sprachgeschichte von unten*. This publication gave rise to more studies focusing on emigrant letters for other languages, such as Finnish (Nordlund 2013) and Lithuanian (Tamošiūnaitė 2013). For English, we can mention Fairman’s early (2000, 2005, 2008) work on pauper letters, which laid the groundwork for the corpus of *Letters of Artisans and the Labouring Poor* (Auer/Fairman 2013; Auer et al. 2014). Since these earlier publications, a range of studies has appeared with different angles and on different languages, collected in dedicated volumes such as Dossena/Del Lungo (2012), van der Wal/Rutten (2013) and Auer/Schreier/Watts (eds. 2015). For Dutch, especially the Leiden-based *Letters as Loot* project on Northern Dutch in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sailing letters from various social classes needs to be mentioned (Nobels 2013, Simons 2013, Rutten/van der Wal 2014), in addition to the Bruges project, which will be discussed below.

### 3. Social Class and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Flanders

#### 3.1. Social Class

As we have already mentioned above, language history from below is primarily concerned with the (written) language use of ordinary people from the past, focusing especially on so-called lower social class(es) – as will the project introduced in Section 5 below. Very few studies in this field, however, clearly define these concepts of ‘ordinary people’ and ‘lower social class’. What exactly do we mean by these terms, and who was part of this specific social stratum – if, at least, we can establish this to any degree? Since the notion of social class lies at the very heart of language history from below, and since it is a central concept in our ongoing research, it is crucial to define it accurately. To substantiate the claims of our own corpora (introduced below) originating from people from the lower social classes, a substantial part of the lead author’s PhD project will thus be devoted to defining a crucial concept such as social class in the context of poverty in nineteenth-century Flanders and to applying insights from sociology and history proper to the material we are working with.

In the nineteenth century, when the industrial revolution led to radical economic changes and consequently social changes, the concept of social stratification in general and (social) class in particular is extremely difficult to define, since both were very fluid constructions, undergoing change. Therefore, we will first take a look at the concept of social class both in an abstract and in a concrete sense (i. e. the context of industrialization), before moving on to the description of the historical context of the nineteenth century, mainly concentrating on poverty.

The industrial revolution in nineteenth-century Europe was one of the fastest, biggest and most substantial changes in the history of Western civilization. The transition from an agrarian society based on farming and husbandry (sometimes combined with domestic industry) to a society that was centered around mechanical mass production, implied a social change as well: the old hierarchical structures (commonly referred to as ‘social estates’ with a “religious estate of priests, a military and political estate of knights or lords and the ‘common’ estates of the ordinary people” [Scott 1996: 6]) were gradually replaced by new notions of social division (‘classes’): “This [the use of the term ‘class’, J. P. / I. V. d. V. / R. V.] was not, however, a simple change in language. The new discourse of class emerged as an attempt to describe the very forces that had brought it into being” (Scott 1996: 9–10). In fact, “[c]lass’ was not a new term for old structures, but a term that identified the appearance of radically new forms of social division and collective action” (Scott 1996: 9–10, citing Bauman 1982: 38).

According to the historians Miles and Van de Putte (2010) – building on the theory of Max Weber – social class is “economically-mediated ‘social power’, or the ability to influence one’s life chances through the control of resources via one’s economic role” (Miles/Van de Putte 2010: 88). Thus, social classes are based on economic power, situated in the economic sphere where market and property are key agents, whereas ‘social estates’ are formed on the basis of cultural power (‘status’), situated in “the social sphere of *communal prestige*” (Scott 1996: 41, italics in original). These concepts can be linked to Bourdieu’s (1986) notions of ‘economic capital’ (“wealth and income”, Savage et al. 2013: 223) on the one hand and ‘cultural capital’ (“the ability to appreciate

and engage with cultural good, and credentials institutionalised through educational success”, Savage et al. 2013: 223)<sup>1</sup> on the other hand. We must stress, however, that both these differences between both concepts are far from clear-cut, since one’s economic situation (e. g. limited economic resources) often determines one’s cultural power as well (e. g. unequal access to schooling). Nevertheless, the notions of social class and estates/status can serve as analytical tools to try to disentangle social stratification in past societies:

Weber approached the conceptual discussion of class and status in an analytical way, seeking to construct ideal types that could be combined in various ways to describe particular concrete situations. For this reason, it must be recognised that class and status relations always coexist (Scott 1996: 35).

Considering these abstract notions of class and status, we must beware of “‘ideational’ anachronism” (Bergs 2012: 84) as we cannot simply assume that today’s structures of social division mirror those of the past. Moreover, every attempt to get insight into reality’s complexity in fact violates the truth to a certain extent, and “there is no measurable, testable thing called ‘social class’ apart from the one that we construct and define” (Bergs 2012: 84). For this reason, when we speak of social class, we suggest viewing it as a product of the concept ‘(economic) class situations’, as introduced by Weber (1920: 302) and also advocated by Scott (1996). Class situations comprise the specific circumstances of individuals’ lives, which determine their life chances. Social classes then are groups, the strata in society that are formed on the basis of these concrete class situations (Scott 1996: 29). Consequently, viewing social class as a product of economic class situations provides a far more fine-grained view on social stratification, which is certainly useful when looking at past societies, while not forgetting to consider the specific historical context of each society as a whole (Scott 1996: 224).

As the concept of social class ‘*pur sang*’ is often problematic, we will in fact be drawing on the idea of social class situations. Applying the notion of class situations to our corpora of soldiers’ letters and pauper letters, we often discern a vertical relationship between the sender and the addressee. As to the pauper letters, the sender clearly finds him- or herself in a very vulnerable and dependent position, being compelled to rely on the benevolence of the addressee, such a mayor, a governor, or a local priest. All these people – peasants, day laborers, but also shoemakers, tailors, etc. – share a situation of social and financial hardship and therefore can be grouped in the same (economic) class situation, even though they sometimes cannot be categorized in the same social class, or at least not when using traditional models which are quite often based on occupational titles (e. g. shoemakers or tailors would be part of the – lower – middle class). Thus, the notion of class situations is very dynamic, taking into account the specific circumstances people lived in, and therefore, this approach seems less at risk to rely on ‘ideational anachronism’. Although the social class situation is less obvious for the soldiers’ letters, they do display at least two types of vertical relationships as well. The

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu (1986) also distinguishes ‘social capital’: “contacts and connections which allow people to draw on their social networks” (Savage et al. 2013: 223).

young Flemish recruits writing home from the battlefields were often financially dependent on the addressee(s), mostly their mother and father. They frequently asked for money, as they often did not get paid on time. Similar to the needy people from the pauper letters, these soldiers depended on the goodwill of the letters' recipient. Apart from this vertical relationship between interlocutors in the letters, the soldiers found themselves in a clearly subordinate position in the military as well, since they were part of the lowest ranks of the hierarchy. This subordinate situation cannot, however, be labelled as a specific class situation (as Weber and Scott define it), as it is not rooted in the economic sphere (cf. Scott 1996: 39), but rather, this military ranking can be seen as consisting of 'command situations', which are "those causal components in individual life chances that result from the differentials of power that are inherent in structures of authority" (Scott 1996: 41) such as the state and "other authoritarian organisations" (Scott 1996: 41).

Before moving on to previous and current research in historical sociolinguistics, struggling with the issue of operationalizing social class, we will first, however, describe the context of poverty and poor relief in nineteenth-century Flanders. As all of the scribes especially in our corpus of pauper letters share a situation of social and financial hardship, it is crucial to understand how such situations arouse, and how socio-economic changes over the course of the century created a growing group of citizens living in poverty.

### 3.2. Poverty in the Nineteenth Century

As previously outlined, the industrial revolution involved major social and economic changes, expanding the gap between rich and poor. Only the upper layers of society – a small minority – benefited from the economic growth, but the vast majority – the hard-working peasants, humble artisans and poor day laborers – lived in poverty, or in constant fear of being plunged into poverty, since they were often not able to compete with the modern industrial production (Lamberts 2014: 319–320; Matthijs 2001: 54). However, it is crucial to underline that defining 'poverty' and 'the poor' is as elusive and problematic as trying to grasp the notion of social class. Poverty is a very fluid concept, especially in the nineteenth century:

Historians often write of the poor as a group because the boundaries between working class, indigent, and destitute were fluid. They could very easily slip from being self-sufficient to becoming desperately indigent. The precariousness and insecurity of their *economic and social situation* defines them as a group (Fuchs 2005: 14, our italics).

Moreover, "[w]hen writing about social classes, we have the tendency to conflate the analytical and descriptive categories of 'working class' and 'the poor' and use the terms almost interchangeably" (Fuchs 2005: 10). But not only (some) members of the so-called 'working class'<sup>2</sup> lived in poverty: also others, such as artisans or small shop-

<sup>2</sup> The term 'working class' is also highly controversial and "is not simply a neutral, alternative designation for a subordinate manual class" (Scott 1996: 226), as it originated in a specific

keepers could have found themselves in a situation of financial hardship or even indigence, due to bad economic times (crises), illness, the death of a spouse, etc. Therefore, Winter (2013) distinguishes two types of people receiving poor relief: what could be called the ‘permanent poor’ – a small group, who received assistance on a regular basis –, as well as the ‘casual poor’, who acquired support such as in-kind goods, money or medical help only from time to time.

The following letter from Marie Theresia Looze (Bruges, 1885), in which she wants to thank the charity institution for the help she received, not only illustrates the financial impact of illness, but also exemplifies the dynamic and fluid nature of poverty, as the women hopes to be self-sufficient again soon:

*De ondergeteekende Marie / Theresia Looze geboortig van / Thourout kom by deze uw / Edele Heeren van herten te / bedanken voor den onderstand / dat gy my seder eenige Jaaren / in myne ziekte heb verleent / en nu ik seder een maand / gedeeltelyk hersteld zyn om / wederom in myne noodzaalyk / -heden te bezorgen.*

‘The undersigned Marie Theresia Looze born in Thourout hereby comes to thank Your Honor cordially for the relief you have been giving me for several years during my illness, and for again providing in my necessities now that I have been partly recovered since a month ago.’

For Belgium,<sup>3</sup> if we operationalize living in poverty as being in receipt of poor relief from the ‘Bureel van Weldadigheid’ (in line with our definition of social class based on economic class situations), we may assume that in the period 1839–1846 the average number of people living in poverty increased by 2.2 % and even by 7 % in the area of Flanders (Mokyr 1976: 241, 243; based on Ducpétiaux 1850: 15–17, 19, 23). Most of the receivers of poor relief were day laborers, weavers and spinners (Matthijs 2001: 54). According to the census data from 1846, an average of 24 % of households on the East- and West-Flemish countryside depended on poor relief (Deschacht/Winter 2015: 43). The severe winter of 1844–1845 caused a bad harvest, especially of rapeseed and wheat, and Belgium – among other countries – was scourged by the potato blight in 1845. One year later, typhus hit Europe, and around 1848 and 1849 many people died from cholera (Vanhaute/Lambrecht 2011: 169). It goes without saying that especially the poor suffered from these crises: their malnourished bodies were vulnerable to disease and they often did not have the means to take care of their everyday hygiene or to pay a physician in case they got ill (Matthijs 2001: 53). In the course of the nineteenth century, the expenses of poor relief increased considerably, “driven by growing proletarianisation and boosted by periodic crises such as the dramatic events of the 1845/6 famine” (Winter 2008: 150). Like in the ‘ancien régime’, poor relief institutions in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries were organized locally. This was not only the case in

nineteenth-century British context of political discourse (see for instance Scott 1996, chapter 8 for this discussion).

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of brevity, we will only discuss the historical context of poverty and poor relief in the Southern Low Countries in detail here, as the largest part of the letter corpus discussed in Section 5 comes from this area, and an elaborate discussion would go beyond the scope of this article.

the Southern Low Countries but also in several other regions of Europe, such as England and Wales (Van Damme 1990: 485–489; Winter 2013).

There were, however, marked differences in poverty between regions, although both urban centers and rural communities were affected. For West Flanders, the cities of Bruges and Courtrai were hit especially hard (Deschacht/Winter 2015: 43): in 1847 no less than 40 % of the population in these two cities lived on poor relief (Vanhaute/Lambrecht 2015: 174). Along the coast, the amount of people in receipt of poor relief was lower than in the interior regions of Flanders, where some smaller municipalities – for instance around Torhout, Izegem for West Flanders and Aalst for East Flanders – had more than 30 % of their inhabitants officially registered as being poor. While the regional differences in terms of poverty cannot be reduced to a binary opposition between urban and rural, mainly the regions where proto-industry<sup>4</sup> (for instance weaving and flax spinning) had been of great importance were severely hit by the crises described above. For the area of present-day Belgium, this means that especially the rural parts of East and West Flanders were suffering from these bad economic times (Deschacht/Winter 2015: 46). However, the overall percentages of paupers receiving poor relief were high in both rural and urban areas: in 1846, for instance, 35.8 % of the West Flemish urban population and 35.0 % of the rural population lived in poverty (Mokyr 1976: 242). In addition, death rates – another factor which can be used to describe and interpret the impact of the economic crisis – exceeded birth rates by far in cities as well as in the countryside (Deschacht/Winter 2015: 38). The fact that cities – in contrast to villages, where the population decreased in the period 1847–1848 – did maintain their population size can (partly) be attributed to higher in-migration rates in towns than in villages, which contributed to urbanization (Deschacht/Winter 2015: 37): a number of poor people in the countryside – although usually not the poorest among them<sup>5</sup> – migrated to the cities in search of a better life. As will be outlined below, this migration from towns to cities implied a transfer of relief costs from rural to urban areas.

In nineteenth-century Belgium, people living in poverty could ask for support from local poor relief institutions such as the ‘Bureel van Weldadigheid’<sup>6</sup> or ‘Bureau de Bienfaisance’ (‘Charity Office’), which was in charge of ‘outdoor’ aid to poor households, as well as the ‘Burgerlijke Godshuizen’ (‘Commission of Hospices’), which were responsible for ‘indoor’ assistance and administered residential facilities, such as hospitals, orphanages, and almshouses (Winter 2013: 235).

<sup>4</sup> Proto-industry – a term introduced by Franklin Mendels in 1969 (published Mendels 1981) – refers to rural domestic industry (such as weaving and spinning). The development of this kind of industry, also called ‘proto-industrialization’, preceded the process of actual industrialization: several small peasants needed an additional income to make ends meet, so next to farming they also engaged in the (manual) domestic production of for instance linen, lace and wool.

<sup>5</sup> Corroborating Ó Gráda’s (2000) and Dribe’s (2000) view on migration, Deschacht/Winter (2015: 48) show that “accessible only to certain groups, it [migration, J. P. / I. V. d. V. / R. V.] did not offer a way out for those who suffered most heavily. Those hit the hardest by the crisis, do not appear to have had much choice. Those who died, did not leave.”

<sup>6</sup> As established by law, every municipality had to have its own ‘Bureel van Weldadigheid’ to look after its poor (Vanhaute 2011: 174).

The settlement legislation, which existed already in the ‘ancien régime’ but still was somewhat ambiguous, determined the community that was responsible for a person’s assistance in times of poverty. In general, this settlement (‘onderstandswoonst’) was the place of birth, but in some cases and under certain conditions (for instance if a person had stayed long enough at the new residence, or if a woman married a man from another municipality) one could obtain a new settlement (Van Damme 1990:483–489; Winter 2008: 138, 144). The first clear and general law concerning poor relief and settlement, however, came into being in 1797, under the French rule. If a person moved from his birthplace (original settlement) to another, he or she – being a ‘sojourner’ – could receive poor relief in the town of residence if he or she had lived there for one year without having received public assistance (Van Damme 1990: 495; Winter 2013: 229–231). Compared to the criteria in the following legislation throughout the nineteenth century, this criterion of one year of residence was rather lenient. The laws of 1818 and 1845 (both enacted in times of severe crises) were much stricter, raising the required length of residence for obtaining a new place of settlement to four and eight years respectively (Van Damme 1990: 496–498). Furthermore, sojourners could acquire temporal relief from the place of residence, but all costs were to be reimbursed by their lawful settlement. The latter, however, could send sojourners back if the aid given was considered to be inconvenient or too expensive (Van Damme 1990: 503; Winter 2008: 153).

Since a lot of migrants originally came from small towns on the countryside and – due to the agrarian crisis – moved to cities, the majority of the costs for poor relief was paid by rural communities. This transfer of money from rural to urban areas became a recurring topic in political debates (Winter 2008: 150–151; Winter 2013: 233). According to Van Damme (1990: 498, 504) villages in the Flemish countryside, especially in the areas of linen production, were suffering hard from this disproportional relief cost, forcing them to make severe debts. The first steps towards more equally divided relief expenses between urban and rural communities were made in the third quarter of the nineteenth century: the law of 1876 and the law of 1891 prescribed a centralization of sojourners’ relief costs: provincial funds, ‘fonds commun’, were founded to cover (a part of) the expenses of sojourners. Each community had to pay a contribution to this fund which was calculated on the basis of their number of inhabitants. Although the costs for the rural villages decreased considerably, the towns remained favored (Winter 2008: 151–152; Winter 2013: 233). Compared to other European countries, however, it remained rather hard for sojourners to acquire a new settlement, and migration was still generally discouraged (Winter 2008: 150).

Having sketched the economic and historical background against which the lead author’s ongoing work needs to be situated, we will now move on to a discussion of previous research from below carried out on nineteenth-century Southern Dutch, as the *Forgotten Voices* project is clearly to be situated in this line of research.

#### 4. The Bruges Project

Up until the late 1990s, the study of Dutch in Flanders, especially as far as the nineteenth century is concerned, mainly focused on issues of language planning and language choice (i. e. the tension between French as the H-variety and Dutch as the L-

variety), while larger-scale empirical studies of non-literary language use were scarce. Studies on grammarians and normative prescriptions do exist, but they alone do not give us a direct insight into actual language practices, let alone into the social stratification thereof. Descriptions of literary works of prominent nineteenth-century authors such as Hendrik Conscience or Guido Gezelle cannot be taken to be representative of the language of that time, since they only mirror (a part of) the written language of a small top layer of society (Vandenbussche 1999: 6). Little attention has thus been devoted to the real language use of people in the past, let alone of people from different social strata (cf. Vandenbussche 2002: 28; 2004: 28). As a result, the picture of the history of Dutch in the Southern Low Countries was, until recently, very much based on a view of language history ‘from above’, and historical (socio)linguists did not have a clear picture of what many registers and varieties of the language looked like, and what kind of (social) variation existed. In order to fill this gap in the language history of nineteenth-century Dutch in Flanders, our team at the Center of Linguistics of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel has undertaken a number of historical sociolinguistic studies, mostly centered around the nineteenth century, and all with a strong focus on handwritten material, composed by scribes from different social backgrounds. We will discuss the earliest of these studies within the larger framework of language history from below, so as to give a brief overview of the research tradition in which the study described in Section 5 is to be situated.

The PhD and postdoctoral work of Wim Vandenbussche (1999, 2002, 2004) – the so-called ‘Bruges project’, in which an analysis of the language in the West Flemish city of Bruges served as a case study – comprises a number of pioneering studies in historical sociolinguistics from below and from above, charting out and combining aspects of orthographic, stylistic and social variation. The corpus used for this work consists of three subcorpora comprising handwritten texts composed between 1800 and 1900 by scribes from three distinct layers of society. The corpus of lower and middle class writings consists of meeting reports from apprentices’ (lower class) and masters’ (middle class) assistance companies (‘*onderstandsmaatschappijen*’) of various trades (bakers, carpenters, tailors etc.), who provided a kind of social security fund which members from different occupational groups could rely upon if they were in need (Michiels 1978; Vandenbussche 2002: 28). The upper-class texts derive from the archive of the very prestigious Saint Sebastian archers’ guild (Vandenbussche 2004: 32), and comprise meeting reports, but also official requests, correspondence, and other similar text types.

The attribution of writers to a specific social class was based on “scribes’ relative esteem” (Vandenbussche 2002: 29), which in essence builds on status and prestige rather than on purely economically mediated power (cf. Scott 1996). This categorization into distinct classes seemed to be relevant in this context, since the “behavioural code for members” of the apprentices’ assistance company showed that the apprentices themselves regarded the masters as having a higher social status. The masters also kept a certain distance and tried to elevate themselves from the apprentices (Vandenbussche 2002: 29). Moreover, old structures of social stratification continued to exist in nineteenth-century Bruges as the town’s economic life had not yet been reorganized due to the industrial revolution (Vandenbussche et al. 2004: 62). Literacy rates in nineteenth-century Bruges were low. Between 1815 and 1830, 54 % of the town’s population were

illiterate. For the apprentices of several trades it is assumed that this number even amounted to 75 %, while the illiteracy rate of the masters amounted to 41 % (Callewaert 1963: 214; Vosters/Vandenbussche 2008: 9). Notwithstanding these low literacy rates, however, it is clear that both apprentices and masters regularly put pen to paper, as this was a requisite to practice their profession (Vosters/Vandenbussche 2008: 9): composing bills, tendering for work and writing meeting reports were all tasks that needed to be fulfilled.

Regarding orthographic variation, Vandenbussche (2002; 2004) investigated the scale of variability and its relation to existing norms.<sup>7</sup> The results of Vandenbussche's study show that three distinct patterns can be distinguished, corresponding to the categorization into lower, middle and higher classes.

As to the writings of the apprentices (lower class), we see that hardly any scribe consistently adheres to a spelling system 'from above': spelling practices vary from scribe to scribe. However, going against the received opinion in Dutch language history at the time that the written practices of these and other scribes were highly chaotic and dialectal (cf. Rutten/Vosters 2011), the sometimes 'idiosyncratic' spelling practices of these apprentices were not chaotic: there was consistent orthographic variability that could not be related to linguistic context, but even in such cases, a relatively small number of spelling variants for the same phoneme was used, drawing on a (limited) range of writing conventions. In addition, it is important to note that these writings can in no way be characterized as a naive encoding of the spoken vernacular into written form. In the course of the nineteenth century, moreover, the spelling variability among these scribes shows a marked decrease, even though it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that adherence to the then officialized standard orthographical norms seemed to have become relevant to these writers (Vandenbussche 2004: 63): much of the texts they produced seemed to adhere to an 'intended standard variety' in the sense that they aimed to produce a variety with a large functional range (cf. the first part of Haugen's 1966: 931 standard language maxim: "maximal variation in function"), without the goal of reducing variation in writing (cf. the second part of Haugen's 1966: 931 standard language maxim "minimal variation in form").

Interestingly, however, when comparing the reports written by guild apprentices to the texts written by guild masters, as representatives of a middle class, Vandenbussche (2002) noted a very similar degree and type of spelling variation until about the middle of the nineteenth century: there seemed to be no adherence to top-down language norms, and a limited set of allographs was used interchangeably by various writers. However, from the 1850s onwards, this seems to have changed, and formal language norms, not only at the level of orthography, but also concerning grammar and style, started to impact the writings of these scribes. Additionally, it is also striking that neither the apprentices' nor the masters' earlier texts were ever corrected: words with miss-

<sup>7</sup> We should stress here however – and this has also been emphasized by the author in his later work – that it can be considered problematic to compare these spelling features in lower-class writing to a normative tradition or standard which these writers were not familiar with or probably did not even have access to, without first establishing the relevance of such formal language norms for these writers.

ing or redundant letters coexisted with their ‘correctly’ spelled counterparts in one and the same document (Vandenbussche 2002: 32). This observation, along with the fact that writing skills seemed not to be of great importance to obtain a higher function in the trade organizations (in fact, some of the highest positions were occupied by illiterate members who signed off on documents with a cross), points towards the very limited value given to writing in general and writing in an invariable code more specifically. As professions, however, that were traditionally more orally based and ‘handarbeit-orientiert’, started to shift towards being more writing based or ‘schriftarbeit-orientiert’ (Vandenbussche 2002: 39, cf. Mayer 1975), the importance of a uniform spelling as a symbolic marker of literacy also grew.

Upper class texts from the same period show less spelling variability, although it was not completely absent either. However, between 1750 and 1820, orthographic variation was frequently present in upper class texts as well, after which these writings became gradually more uniform (Vandenbussche 2002: 36; Vosters/Vandenbussche 2008: 10). Presumably, for this group, writing and an invariable spelling gained social importance at an earlier stage, in a similar fashion as it did in the middle-class texts about three decades later.

Beyond orthography, Vandenbussche also looked at stylistic variation, where similar patterns emerged. The focus was on the phenomenon ‘Stilzusammenbruch’, which had been put forward in the German tradition as a characteristic typical of ‘Arbeitersprache’ (Klenk 1997; Mattheier 1990): we see that writers often switched between a very formal, elevated style, often in the beginning or final – and thus more formulaic – parts of a report, and a much more informal and narrative style, omitting, replacing or repeating information (Vandenbussche et al. 2004: 63). In spite of this being put forward as a characteristic of ‘Arbeitersprache’, Vandenbussche argued that this shift cannot exclusively be attributed to lower class writings or to any kind of writing that is uniquely linked to a distinct social class: in fact, it is present in the apprentices’ writing, but the reports from the masters’ trades display the same stylistic feature, at least up until the 1850s, and ‘Stilzusammenbruch’ even occurs in upper class texts from the period 1750 to 1800. In the second half of the nineteenth century ‘Stilzusammenbruch’ disappeared in writings from middle class scribes (Vandenbussche 2004: 64), as it had done from the writings of upper-class scribes about half a century earlier. This pattern, comparable to the gradual and socially stratified decrease of free variation in spelling, hints at “a growing concern with stylistic and grammatical uniformity from the highest towards the lowest social classes” over time (Vandenbussche et al. 2004: 64). In addition, this observation leads Vandenbussche (1999: 198) to reject the idea of lower class-language as one distinct variety. Rather, he postulates that the written language features we come across that seem typical for one specific class can in fact be attributed to the level of literacy as a result of writing education. Nonetheless, the level of education is, of course, linked to social class and wealth, as poor people simply could not afford sending their children to qualitative schools with elaborate reading and writing education (Vandenbussche 2002: 36). In addition, however, the role of writing for one’s professional career and professional identity also seems to be a relevant factor (i. e. the distinction between ‘handarbeit-orientiert’ and ‘schriftarbeit-orientiert’).

## 5. Forgotten Voices from Below

Building on this early work by Vandenbussche, a new project in the domain of language history from below was started in 2014, entitled *Forgotten Voices from Below*, focusing on different types of formal and informal correspondence in nineteenth-century Flanders (part of present-day Belgium) and Zeeland (part of the present-day Netherlands).<sup>8</sup> The aim of the project is to gain insight into language variation and change in lower-class writings, with special emphasis on the tension between influences from local varieties and dialects on the one hand and supralocal writing practices on the other, but also to combine the findings from both the Northern and the Southern Low Countries into an integrated view on Dutch language history. While the work of Rutten/Vosters (2011) studied the normative traditions from above in both parts of the language area, previous studies in the field of language history from below mostly concentrated on the North or the South of the Low Countries, contributing to the language history from below from a Northern or a Southern point of view. As such, this project aims to provide a first step towards an integrated history of the Dutch language, taking a perspective from below, based on different sources from ‘ordinary people’ from parts of the Northern and the Southern Low Countries.

The traditional history of the language often postulates a sharp divide between the development of Dutch in the Northern versus the Southern provinces. In the North, standardization took off in the seventeenth century, and led to a unified spelling (Siegenbeek 1804) and grammar (Weiland 1805) in the early nineteenth century. Although we can rightfully question the effectiveness of such top-down norms in practice, especially beyond the domain of spelling (Krogull/Rutten/van der Wal 2017), a strong meta-linguistic discourse of linguistic uniformity in Northern writing developed and was maintained throughout the century (Vosters/Rutten/van der Wal 2010). In the Southern provinces, however, there is often said to be no tendency towards standardization, especially during the long eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but rather a regression towards local writing practices, with a strong influence from both French and the local dialects: “around 1800 Dutch was no more than a concatenation of dialects in the Southern provinces, inappropriate for supra-regional use” (Grondelaers/Van Hout 2011: 203). At other occasions, we have labelled this view ‘the myth of eighteenth-century language decay’ in the Southern Netherlands (Rutten/Vosters 2011; Vosters 2011). While the empirical evidence for such a strong North-South divide is indeed limited, the argument for this supposed ‘language decay’ in the South is based on a top-down view of standardization: as French was used instead of Dutch as the language of prestige and by the social elite, it was often argued that Dutch was left to wither away in the hands of the uneducated, in the lower social strata of society (e. g. Deneckere 1954: 262). This traditional view of Dutch language history assumes that supralocalization or standardization are impossible in the absence of prestige functions. We wanted to empirically test

<sup>8</sup> *Forgotten voices from below. A sociolinguistic analysis of lower class correspondence in the Low Countries between 1780 and 1815*. PhD project of Jill Puttaert (aspirant), funded by FWO-Vlaanderen (11ZK617N). Supervisors: Rik Vosters, Wim Vandenbussche. Research assistant 2017: Iris Van de Voorde.

– and where necessary correct – this view, exactly by comparing lower-order writing in the period under investigation, not only from the Flemish South, but also from Zeeland, belonging to the Northern provinces. While we may expect some marked North-South differences in higher, formal texts from the elites, which may be attributed to differences in standardization and standard language culture, we hypothesize that the regional differences in lower-order writing were fairly small. Although we do not expect to find a direct written reflection of the spoken vernacular, we do expect features from the spoken dialects to show up in the mix, both in Flanders and in Zeeland. Such a finding would indicate that the North-South divide that is central in describing the linguistic situation in the Dutch-speaking Low Countries up until the nineteenth century in traditional language historiography is in fact much less articulated or even absent when looking at the writings of the large majority of language users.

To investigate this, we compiled and built two types of letter corpora ‘from below’. The first corpus comprises a collection of 317 private letters (105,972 words) from West Flemish soldiers writing home from the battlefield in the Napoleonic era (late eighteenth and early nineteenth century). These letters were collected and transcribed by Jan van Bakel in 1977 and have been turned into a searchable electronic corpus for the purpose of this project. The letters are composed by about 282 different scribes from several towns and cities in West Flanders. Almost all of the recruits were young men, mostly from the lower ranks of society – many of them were sons of servants, day laborers, local craftsmen etc. We assume that a great number of these letters were probably not autographs but were written by literate fellow soldiers who would write down the words dictated by their illiterate peers. The second subcorpus is currently being finalized. We plan to complete it by the end of 2018 and make it accessible for anyone interested soon thereafter. The preliminary version comprises a collection of 252 pauper letters – ‘bedelbrieven’ in Dutch – written by 223 different authors, totaling approximately 55,000 words.<sup>9</sup> The letters originate from West Flanders and Zeeland, and by means of these letters, poor and needy men and women begged for financial support mostly from the local government or the local poor relief institution, as discussed earlier. Letters originate both from urban centers and from more rural areas, and while we intend to integrate this urban-rural distinction into our analyses, we already discussed how poverty hit hard across the board, and we thus deem it more likely that patterns of linguistic variation will vary across regions more than across this divide in terms of urbanity.

Although it is hard to establish this with any degree of certainty, we assume that about two thirds of the letters we selected for our corpus can be categorized as ‘autographs’, meaning that the person sending the letter was also the person who truly wrote it. In order to determine the autograph status of each letter in the best possible way – which remains a problematic task – we developed a classification protocol based on textual (e. g. same handwriting for letter and signature) and contextual elements (e. g. metalinguistic comments about the letter writing process). The letters were categorized

<sup>9</sup> A great part of the West Flemish pauper letters used for this corpus has been collected and digitized by Eline De Keulenaer and Maarten Van Ginderachter (Universiteit Antwerpen), to whom we are very grateful for sharing their material with us.

into ‘probably autograph’, ‘certainly autograph’, ‘probably non-autograph’ and ‘certainly non-autograph’.

An elaborate analysis of several orthographic, morphological and stylistic variables in our corpus is still ongoing, but several first and exploratory case studies on a number of features such as *h*-procope, schwa-apocope and adnominal inflection in a part of the pauper letters already show that the written language in these letters is characterized by a high degree of ‘linguistic hybridity’ (Puttaert 2016) – a term introduced by Martineau/Tailleur (2014: 224) investigating nineteenth-century private correspondence from people of different social classes, mostly from French Canada. Some vernacular features are frequently present in the letters, while others are completely absent. As a first example, we can consider the absence of schwa apocope, which is a distinctive regional feature typical for both the West Flemish and Zeeland dialects, especially in the verbal ending of the first person singular of the simple present indicative. Most of these dialects up to the present still retain the original schwa ending (e. g. *ik werke* ‘I work’), whereas other dialects in this area developed an *-n*, *-en* or even *-t* ending (e. g. *ik werken*, *ik werkn*, *ik werkt*) (Goeman et al. 2008: 50, 56) – in contrast to nearly all other regions of the Southern Netherlands, where the schwa ending started to disappear towards the end of the Middle Dutch period (e. g. *ik werk*) (Marynissen 2004: 610–611). In a preliminary subsection of the pauper writings originating from nineteenth-century Bruges, we found that almost half of all tokens (49 %) followed the apocopized variant, whereas the other half of all tokens (51 %) followed a spelling reflecting one of different possible vernacular forms present in the regional and local dialects (Puttaert 2016: 224). Yet at the same time, as a second example, other local dialect features, such as the absence of initial /h/, are almost completely absent from the same writings. Many southwestern dialects feature a procope of /h/, mostly in word-initial position before a vowel (e. g. *emel* for *hemel* ‘heaven’) (De Wulf et al. 2005: 433), but in the exploratory corpus study by Puttaert (2016: 227), this variant was almost completely absent: only 3 out of 303 initial /h/ phonemes were dropped in the spelling, and the also common phenomenon of hypercorrect *h*-insertion (De Wulf 2003: 227) shows up in a mere two words, both produced by the same scribe. The absence of some and presence of other dialect features indicates that writers certainly mixed elements from their daily vernaculars into the written code but did clearly not naively write down their native dialect, as the traditional image of ‘linguistic decay’ and dialectization (as opposed to standardization) would lead us to believe (cf. above). In fact, many of the letters also contain features very typical of highly stylized, written registers, such as present participles. Contrary to English, the use of present participles in Dutch is characteristic of very formal, written language, and would hardly be used at all in the spoken vernacular. Yet about half of the scribes in our corpus use such forms at least occasionally, and they often – but certainly not exclusively – seem to occur in epistolary formulae (e. g. *hopende dat mijn aenvrag zal gunstig aengenomen worden* ‘hoping that my request will be accepted favorably’). Such co-occurrence of vernacular and formal written features in letters by scribes ‘writing upwards’ (cf. Lyons 2015) indicates that the writers were well aware of the need to draw on language varieties and registers different from the spoken vernacular they used on a daily basis: they produced a hybrid and therefore fairly complex writing style, drawing on a wide linguistic repertoire combining (some) elements from their spoken local vernaculars, regional variants, as well as a mixture of supralocal, written standard

and (highly) formal elements, often all in one letter, to best suit their communicative needs.

Moreover, a first exploration of the data of both pauper and soldiers' letters for both such informal vernacular forms (the absence of 1st singular present indicative schwa apocope, as well as bipartite negation, which is also still prevalent in West Flemish dialects) and for more formal written forms (the use of present participles, as well as the older synthetic genitive constructions) shows that there is a high degree of intra- and interspeaker variation as well (Vosters/Puttaert/Vandenbussche 2016, Puttaert/Vosters 2017): many scribes use different variants alongside each other in the same letters, but the differences from one scribe to the next seem more significant than the differences between, for instance, our collection of pauper letters and the corpus of soldiers' letters. While this still needs to be explored further, these preliminary findings contradict the idea of a distinct lower-class or 'Arbeidersprache' variety, and go against the traditional image of language decay, especially among the lower social classes, in nineteenth-century Flanders. In fact, we would argue that these differences in writing rather reflect external linguistic differences in schooling, familiarity with the written code, writing experience, etc. While further research with an extended body of data and a larger set of features is currently being conducted in order to shed more light on these issues and at the same time develop the comparative North-South dimension of the project, we can already conclude that it seems hard to characterize all of these writers in both our corpora as belonging to a same group in terms of sociolinguistic variation: the individual scribe still appears to be the most powerful factor predicting the occurrence of the features under investigation.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we introduced some past and current research projects into the history of Dutch in the Southern Low Countries, with a particular emphasis on the nineteenth century, starting out from the framework of historical sociolinguistics and discussing several basic tenets of an approach to language history from below. We emphasized the need for researchers adopting a 'from below' approach to delve into the socio-historical context of poverty and social class stratification in the period under investigation and illustrated this by discussing recent work by social and economic historians on poverty and poor relief in Flanders as background context for the running project. This research shows the wide spread of poverty across West Flanders, while at the same time emphasizing the fluidity of such a concept: due to the far-reaching economic and societal changes throughout the century, a significant proportion of the population – peasants, day laborers, artisans – all ran the risk of suddenly losing their position of self-sufficiency and being plunged into dire material need. The notion of social class turned out to be equally elusive as the concept of poverty, which is why we advocated an approach following Weber (1920), who proposes to view social class as a dynamic construct resulting from economic class 'situations', rather than operationalizing it as invariable and essentialist labels, based, for instance, on profession.

Following the more general discussion of social class, poverty and poor relief, we then sketched how the current research grew out of the pioneering work by Vandenbus-

sche in the late 1990s and early 2000s, introducing the social stratification of language variation and change as a field of inquiry in Flemish language history. Already present in this tradition is the conviction that there is no singular variety particular to the lower social classes, but also the idea that we need to look at the importance of literacy and adherence to standard language norms for one's social and professional identity. Based on this earlier work, we then introduced an ongoing project on language history from below, focusing on nineteenth-century pauper and soldiers' letters from West Flanders and Zeeland. The preliminary results of this investigation indicate that these letters, which, especially in case of the pauper letters, are marked by a stark vertical relationship between the sender and the addressee, can be described as linguistically hybrid. While we see that many writers only had a limited familiarity with the written code in general, each individual does call upon a relatively wide set of linguistic resources, resulting in certainly not one monolithic lower-class language variety, but a writing style which seems to combine informal elements from spoken vernaculars with more stylized characteristics from the formal written code. As such scribes' motivation for writing was clearly to convince the recipient of the letter of the writer's trustworthiness and genuine need, we can observe that they made use of all of the linguistic resources at their disposal to achieve that end. Since such observations render it difficult to consider the writings of the lower classes as a single and unvarying variety, we argue that historical sociolinguists need to be careful not to overgeneralize class-based findings by underestimating individual differences, which may have arisen due to the various social, economic and educational circumstances which a particular writer had to face. As such, in order to avoid ideational anachronism, we always need to keep in mind that concepts such as social class only exist in the way we construct and define them (cf. Bergs 2012: 84), and that variation between individuals can far outweigh the impact of group characteristics such as class.

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