Dialect loss and dialect vitality in Flanders

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Abstract

Dialect loss is a relatively new but by now quite general phenomenon in Flanders (i.e., Dutch-speaking Belgium). Although the processes of dialect change and dialect loss have proceeded with great regional differences in speed and intensity in the past decades, there is a general tendency toward replacing primary dialect features of a relatively local scope by secondary dialect features that have a wider distribution and/or bear stronger resemblance to the standard Dutch equivalents. Some urban dialects, especially the dialect of the city of Antwerp, play a prominent role in this process. The implication is that the old local dialects have not made way for a generalized use of (Belgian) Standard Dutch. Present-day Flanders is evolving toward a new diglossia: Standard Dutch was and still is reserved for formal domains, but for the younger generations in many regions the dominant variety for informal colloquial speech is no longer the local dialect but a ''regiolectal'' variety. Every region has its own regiolect but the so-called tussentaal *(literally 'language in between') of the Brabant–Antwerp dialect region is clearly dominating the linguistic scene in present-day Flanders.*

1. Introduction

Northern Belgium, or Flanders,[1] has more or less the same standard language as the Netherlands, but the linguistic conditions in the two parts of the Dutch language area are highly different. Although, from a dialect-geographical point of view, there is/was no break in the linguistic landscape, from a sociolinguistic perspective one cannot but perceive the border between the Netherlands and Flanders as a linguistic border. When traveling through northern Belgium, one is confronted, even in public life, with a wide variety of accents and even dialects. Most modern Western European ears must be surprised at hearing this. But is Flanders

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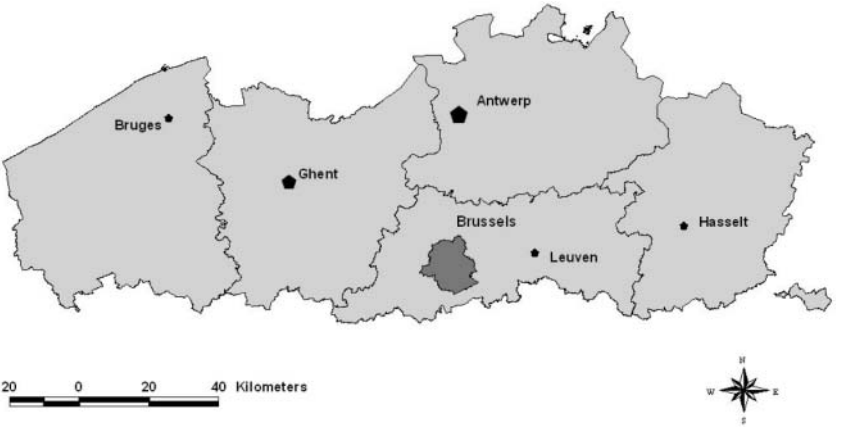

Figure 1. *Flanders (Dutch-speaking Belgium — northern Belgium) with its five provinces*

really the treasure trove of dialects which at first sight it might seem to be? In this article I will argue that the dialect situation in Flanders cannot be assessed in general terms anymore: up until a few decades ago the local dialect was still the dominant code for colloquial speech all over Dutch-speaking Belgium, but nowadays the provinces of northern Belgium are affected by processes of dialect change and dialect loss in different ways and at different speeds. They all have a common linguistic history, however, which is an explanatory factor, even for today's linguistic conditions.

2. Previous history

In Flanders, Dutch is the official language for all public domains, such as education, administration, and politics. The Germanic (Dutch) dialects of northern Belgium are related to that standard language. In other words, nowadays northern Belgium has linguistic conditions that are comparable to those of most western European countries. But this situation is a relatively new one. From the seventeenth century onward, French had been the language of the economic, political, and cultural elite in the area we are focusing on. The Dutch government of Willem I (1814–1830) marked a turning point for the use of Dutch in Flanders both in education and in administration, as recent research has shown (Vanhecke 2005), but after Belgian independence (1830) the dominance of French was re-established: the constitution of the new country contained the principle of "freedom

of language choice,'' but in practice French functioned as the only official language, both in French-speaking southern Belgium *and* in Flemish-speaking northern Belgium. Until the first decades of the twentieth century, French was still the dominant code for education, science, and culture. A kind of supraregional Flemish, developed and used in the first place by the middle classes, could hardly compete with French. In colloquial speech most people used their native language, the local dialect. So the conditions for a normal standardization process were absent: there was no elite to set the example as that (political-economical . . .) elite tended to use a ''foreign'' language, i.e., French (cf. Goossens 1975).

Due to the ''actions'' of the ''Flemish Movement,'' things gradually changed. A number of language laws, the first of which were voted in at the end of the nineteenth century (i.e., from 1873 onward), guaranteed the recognition of Dutch as an official language in Flanders. The language laws of the 1930s were a landmark in Flanders' linguistic history: from now onward Dutch was the *only* official language in Flanders. Symptomatic in this context is the ''Dutchification'' of the University of Ghent in 1930. Now Flanders could generate its own ''language elite.'' Yet the standardization process did not proceed as quickly and unidirectionally as one could expect. First of all, in the 1930s Flanders had no cultural elite mastering the standard language. Its teachers had been educated mainly in French (Goossens 1975). Although this problem could be overcome in one or two generations, there was and is a second factor complicating the standardization process: the official norm is the Dutch standard language, i.e., the standard language used in the Netherlands. Language attitudes in Flanders have always been ambiguous with respect to that northern standard language. In the 1970s, Geerts, Nootens, and Van den Broeck (1978) characterized Flemish language attitudes as ''schizoglossic'': Flemish informants positively evaluated the Dutch standard language variety used by Dutch people from the Netherlands, but at the same time stated they did not want to speak like that. Even today, the standardization process is marked both by movements toward the Dutch standard language and movements toward a kind of Flemish version of that standard.[2] Yet, we can state that nowadays Flanders does have a standard language, which is more or less identical to the standard language used in the Netherlands, and which is ''available'' for most of its population.

One of the implications of the retarded standardization process is that dialect and standard language only recently have become competing codes in Flanders. While in neighboring countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Germany, and in French-speaking southern Belgium, the standard language has long penetrated into informal domains, in Flanders

— generally speaking — until the 1970s regional dialect was by far the dominant code for nonpublic purposes. The use of standard language was reserved for "special occasions," such as delivering a speech, and certain spheres of public life, including, for example, contacts with public offices (Meeus 1974a, 1974b). In other words, some three decades ago, the language situation in Flanders could still be characterized as strictly diglossic (cf. Fishman 1972: 91–92), with widely used regional dialects and a very restricted use of the standard language. Dialect and standard language were still clearly functionally differentiated.

3. Dialect change and dialect loss

3.1. *The general picture*

In the past decades, the changing relations between dialect and the standard language have been approached from three angles (Mattheier 1997: 407). First of all, some surveys focus on the *functional* dimension, questioning the extent to which dialect and standard language are used by a particular community. Others deal with the issue from a *structural* perspective and examine structural changes within (a) particular dialect(s). Finally, some researchers investigate the correlation between language *attitudes* and the changing position of dialect and the standard language.

The term "dialect loss" may be interpreted in a broad or in a narrow sense. We opted for the latter, thereby reserving the term "dialect loss" for those cases in which the local dialect is being replaced by the standard language, either structurally or functionally. The ousting of old dialect features by new dialect features that deviate from the corresponding standard language features is not considered as an instance of dialect loss, but of dialect change.

For Flanders, studies of all three types are available. Functional and attitudinal research, sometimes combined, is generally based on surveys. Many surveys not only envisage the *use* of dialect and standard languages, but also the *command* of both codes. An advantage of these studies is that, from a geographical perspective, they often have a wider scope than most structural investigations. Mostly they do not focus on one town or one community, but on a wider region. A disadvantage, as far as the functional dimension is concerned, is the fact that we get *reported* language behavior (and mastery), and that this reported behavior (mastery) might deviate to some extent from the actual language behavior (mastery). Nevertheless, the results of these enquiries have proven to be fairly reliable in that they reflect existing tendencies. For northern Bel-

gium we also have a number of structural analyses at our disposal. Most of them are in-depth analyses for one small geographic entity (e.g., one single town). They analyze whether and how a particular dialect is affected internally by the standard language. In many cases, however, the results can be assumed to be representative of a wider region. Moreover they often transcend their strictly structural scope in that the results often reveal — indirectly — information on the position of dialect and standard language within the community under investigation.

Below we will present a survey of findings from many investigations dealing with the changing relations between dialect and standard language in Flanders. Although we can assume that many of the findings presented here have a representativeness that transcends the immediate scope of the study they are embedded in, inevitably to some extent this survey has to remain a fragmentary report.

The sociologist Baudewijn Meeus was the first to investigate the position of dialect and standard language in Dutch-speaking Belgium. One of his pioneering investigations (Meeus 1974a) was set up in 1971. Meeus wanted to collect data on the use of dialect and standard language in a number of domains, distinguishing private and public spheres of life. His informants came from all over the Dutch-speaking area in Belgium. His major conclusion was — at that time — that dialect was still by far the dominant code. People with lower educational levels, no matter whether they lived in rural or in urbanized areas, hardly ever used Standard Dutch. For this social group "diglossia is non-existent," he stated (Meeus 1974a: 9): even in formal and public situations regional dialects nearly always preserved their monopoly position. For people of higher educational levels he observed "a sharp cut between the formal and informal sphere" (1974a: 9): in situations that can be characterized as formal, Standard Dutch was used, in informal contexts regional dialects still predominated. The figures for language use within the private sphere of the nuclear family showed the turning point was drawing near: 87.5% of the parents that were interviewed spoke a dialect among themselves, whereas only 69% of those parents addressed their children in their dialect.

If at the beginning of the 1970s it may have been feasible to set up a survey for the whole of Flanders, shortly after, this was no longer possible. Several investigations made it clear that the position of regional dialects in Flanders can no longer be assessed in general terms. Flanders consists of five provinces, being, from west to east, West Flanders (capital city: Bruges), East Flanders (Ghent), Antwerp (Antwerp), Flemish Brabant (Leuven), Limburg (Hasselt) (cf. Figure 1). The major dialect geographical borders do not coincide exactly with those administrative borders: in Dutch-speaking Belgium we can distinguish between three major dialect

areas (Willemyns 1987: 310): the Flemish area, which covers more or less the provinces of West and East Flanders; the Brabantine area, covering, generally speaking, the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Antwerp; and the Limburg area, which contains the province of the same name. All of these areas extend over the national borders: the Flemish dialects are spoken in the province of Zeeland in the Netherlands and in so-called French Flanders as well. The Brabantine area also contains the province of Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands and the Limburg dialects also belong to the Dutch province with the same name. Nevertheless, the subdivision into provinces proves to be useful when dealing with the current socio-dialectological make-up of Flanders, as will be illustrated below. Two investigations, one of them conducted at the end of the 1970s and the other one at the beginning of the 1990s, present some interesting figures concerning "dialect knowledge" in Flanders. Willemyns (1979: 146) presents, on the basis of a survey of students from several universities in Dutch-speaking Belgium, the percentages of students claiming to have no command of a dialect. In Table 1, the figures have been reversed so that we get the scores for those students who *do* know a local dialect. In this way they can be juxtaposed to the data of Van Keymeulen (1993: 97). The survey conducted by Van Keymeulen (1993: 79), some 15 years later, among university students of the University of Gent, leads to comparable results, at least proportionally.[3] The high scores for the province of West Flanders are symptomatic of the vitality of this dialect region (cf. Section 4), but, generally speaking, the percentages seem to indicate a decline in the command of regional dialects and a growing discrepancy between several provinces.

Table 1. *University students with a good command of a local dialect*

	Willemyns (1979) (%)	Van Keymeulen (1993) (%)
West Flanders	98	88
Antwerp	91	62
East Flanders	86	50
Limburg	84	40
Flemish Brabant	72	48

3.2. *The Brabantine area*

The data of Van Keymeulen show that the process of dialect loss seriously gained momentum for at least three of the five provinces of Flan-

ders in the past few decades: East Flanders, Flemish Brabant, and Limburg. We now take a closer look at some research data for each of these three provinces, starting with the province constituting the political center of Flanders: Flemish Brabant.[4] If we can assume Flanders' language situation is marked by processes of dialect loss — and it will become clear we can — then the percentages of Willemyns and Van Keymeulen mentioned above certainly suggest that Brabant is ahead of (most of) the other provinces in that process.

Meeus (1974b) again offers us a starting point: in 1972 he set up an investigation in a number of Flemish Brabantine towns neighboring Brussels. The results are comparable to those of Meeus 1974a (see above). Meeus found that an overwhelming majority of his informants learned a regional dialect as their first language at home. For them, the standard language was a second language which was taught at school. Significant, given the sociolinguistic conditions at that time, is the categorization used by Meeus. He distinguishes monolingual dialect speakers, incipient bilingual informants, subordinate bilinguals, and finally coordinate bilinguals. Incipient bilinguals are informants that are native speakers of a regional dialect and who have only a passive knowledge of the standard language. Subordinate bilinguals have an imperfect active command and a perfect passive command of the standard language. Coordinate bilinguals master an active and good command of both a regional dialect and the standard language. The striking thing is that Meeus did not incorporate a category for "monolingual standard language speakers." Apparently at that time this type of speaker was still fairly exceptional, even in the administrative-political center of the country!

Since then things have drastically changed. Geerts, Hellemans, and Jaspaert (1985) observed an abrupt and swift change as far as the use of dialect and standard language is concerned. They interviewed an impressive number of informants, all of them living in Leuven, an important university city in Flemish Brabant. In a few generations, the situation has completely turned, they state. For the older generation Standard Dutch is a "marginal experience," whereas for the younger ones it is a natural means of expression. In two decades, the dialect of Leuven might nearly have disappeared, the authors conclude.

The findings for Leuven appear to be confirmed by research data for the local dialect of Tienen, a city near Leuven. Ceuppens (1996) did not manage to find informants from the youngest age group (20–30) with a higher social class background who still mastered the local dialect to any great extent. Apparently, the use of the local dialect has become a "privilege" of the older generations and of the lower social classes. Moreover, the dialect itself does not remain unaffected either: small-scale local

dialect features are sacrificed for Standard Dutch features but also for ''regiolectal'' Brabantine features. We use the term ''regiolectal'' for dialect features with a wide geographical distribution (cf. Hoppenbrouwers 1990). In contrast with many small-scale Brabantine dialect features, these regiolectal features appear to be very much alive (cf. Ooms and Van Keymeulen 2005: 113 and Section 5).

A Brabantine urban dialect which deserves special attention is that of the capital city, Brussels. The position of the dialect of Brussels is quite peculiar. Brussels is officially bilingual (French–Dutch), but both the Brussels dialect and the Dutch standard language have become minority languages in Brussels. From the nineteenth century onward, Brussels was subject to an intensive process of ''Frenchification.'' Yet, up until the end of the nineteenth century, most of the inhabitants of Brussels were native speakers of Dutch, i.e., in most cases the Flemish (Dutch) dialect of Brussels (Meeus 1974a: 20; De Metsenaere 1988). From then onward things drastically changed. Due to a number of sociopolitical factors, the originally Dutch-speaking population massively switched to French. Janssens (2001) gives an extensive survey of language use in present-day Brussels.

Table 2. *Language use in Brussels in family contexts (speaking with father and mother) (Janssens 2001: 34)*

Language group	Proportion (%) of inhabitants of the Brussels capital region
Dutch-speaking	9.3
Francophone	51.5
Traditional bilingual (French + Dutch)	10.3
New bilingual (French + other language)	9.1
Other language(s)	19.8

As can be deduced from these figures, French has become the dominant language, but Brussels is no longer a bilingual city segmented into francophone and Dutch-speaking communities. Since the mid-twentieth century, Brussels has become a migrants' city, with the influx of settlers from many different parts of the world making it a multilingual city. However, the impact of French cannot be underestimated: it is much higher still if we take into account language proficiency and language use in public life. French appears to be the lingua franca in Brussels (Janssens 2001: 137–156). Unfortunately Janssens's data do not allow us to distinguish between speakers of Standard Dutch and speakers of the Brussels dialect (or both) within the Dutch language group. De Vriendt

and Willemyns (1987) state that the people from Flanders who consciously did not want to adopt French as their primary language chose Standard Dutch, knowing that the Brussels dialect could not stand up against the prestige of standard French. Moreover, the pressure of French also affected the Brussels dialect itself: the current dialect is interspersed with many interferences from French, especially on the lexical level (cf. De Vriendt 2004: 91–94). Nowadays, many (of the few) speakers of the Brussels dialect use a mixed language that results from intensive code switching between their "old" Brabantine Brussels dialect and French. In this way, the Brussels dialect might be one of the most endangered urban dialects of the Dutch language area (Belemans 1999; De Vriendt 2004).

The province of Antwerp also belongs to the Brabantine dialect area. The dialect situation of this province is quite difficult to assess. The scores for Antwerp in Willemyns (1979) and Van Keymeulen (1993) (see above) suggest that the process of dialect loss is less advanced in this province than in the provinces of East Flanders, Brabant, and Limburg. A number of studies on lexical dialect change, however, suggest an increasing and far-reaching interference or borrowing from Standard Dutch. In fact, there are some indications that the relatively "positive" scores in Willemyns (1979) and Van Keymeulen (1993) may be partially due to a kind of (linguistic) self-confidence which is often stereotypically ascribed to Antwerpians. Deprez, De Schutter, and De Remiens (1985) and De Schutter (1991, 1992) show that a distinction has to be made between the city of Antwerp and the rest of the province. Generally speaking, urban dialects appear to be more susceptible to interference from the standard language than rural dialects (De Schutter 1992). And yet, in some respects, the two most important cities of the provinces of Antwerp, i.e., the cities of Antwerp and Mechelen, seem to demand a different treatment. In fact, in terms of lexical interference from Standard Dutch, the conditions of the Antwerp and Mechelen dialects seem to be highly comparable: many Standard Dutch words have penetrated these dialects and replaced the old variety. But the current dialect situation is assessed in different ways by its respective speakers: the Antwerpians have no doubts about the vitality of their city dialect, even if they appear to have no command of a considerable part of the old dialect lexicon anymore (cf. De Schutter and Nuyts 2005: 137–141). The illustrious self-confidence of the Antwerpians seems to be confirmed here: the informants from Antwerp city feel confident about their dialect, even if it is highly interspersed with Standard Dutch elements (De Schutter 1992). The inhabitants of Mechelen, however, feel embarrassed and uncertain when confronted with their limited knowledge of the dialect lexicon (De Schutter 1991).

The prestige of the city dialect of Antwerp, both within and outside the city, certainly is an explanatory factor for the remarkable expansion of the Antwerp city dialect that started at the beginning of the twentieth century, affecting first of all the dialects of the neighboring villages (which have completely been supplanted by the city dialect). Today, the city dialect may have suffered substantial structural loss, especially at the lexical level, but its expansive force has not faded: Antwerp city dialect features still appear to diffuse across the province (De Schutter and Nuyts 2005: 24–26). The high prestige of the Antwerp city dialect, however, does not imply that "dialect use" is generally evaluated in a positive way by Antwerpians. Research dating from some twenty years ago showed that, generally speaking, Antwerp dialects from several parts of the province provoked mixed attitudes: they were attributed labels such as "pleasant" and "cosy" (especially the popular dialects of some Antwerp city areas!) but they were not associated at all with prestige and status. The latter only appeared to hold for Standard Dutch. Only Standard Dutch was considered to be "cultured," which moreover did not exclude it from being "pleasant" as well (Deprez 1984; Deprez et al. 1985). A recent inquiry set up in Antwerp in 2005 confirmed the general prestige of the standard language, especially in terms of status and competence (Vandekerckhove and Cuvelier 2007). For the solidarity dimension the ratings were less well profiled. But the most interesting finding was that age was definitely the major determinant for the perception of the codes: the younger generation displayed a more positive attitude toward dialect and a less positive attitude toward standard language than the older generation. The differences between young and old occurred within every dimension with striking consistency and they were nearly always significant or even highly significant. This may sound paradoxical in times of far-reaching dialect loss but it is certainly symptomatic of the changing linguistic climate in Flanders in recent times (see Section 5).

For the Brabantine area, especially for the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Antwerp, finally a two-sided statement can be made: on the one hand the Brabantine dialects are dying, but on the other the Brabantine regiolect is more vital than ever. The city dialect of Antwerp plays a major role in this tendency by exporting many of its dialect features to the hinterland. Antwerp, being the biggest Flemish city, constitutes an important commercial and industrial center and moreover the Antwerp–Mechelen–Brussels corridor along with the city of Leuven east of Brussels makes up a major economic axis in Flanders. This certainly explains why Brabantine regiolectal dialect features, especially morphosyntactic and phonological features (see Section 5), increasingly mark colloquial Belgian Dutch nowadays. The Brabantine dialect area, especially the Ant-

werp city dialect, has a greater impact on the nonstandard varieties of Belgian Dutch than any other dialect area in Flanders (cf. Taeldeman 2005a: 277 and see Section 5).

3.3. *East Flanders*

East Flanders may lag a little bit behind Brabant (Willemyns 1979; Van Keymeulen 1993), but it also appears to be subject to far-reaching processes of dialect loss. However, none of the dialect areas discussed here is so fragmented into sub-areas as the East Flemish one. Three main areas can be distinguished: the western two-thirds of the province constitute the heart of the East Flemish area, with the city of Ghent and a number of smaller cities like Eeklo, Deinze, Wetteren, Zottegem, Oudenaarde en Ronse; the dialects of the area called Waasland with the city of Sint-Niklaas (in the northeast of the province) take up an intermediate position between the Flemish dialects and the Brabantine dialects; and finally the dialects of the Denderstreek area (in the southeast of the province, including the cities of Dendermonde and Aalst) are heavily ''brabantized'' (cf. Taeldeman 2005b). We shall focus on the western area, and especially on the peculiar position of the city dialect of Ghent. Whereas the city dialect of Antwerp appears to have swallowed its hinterland, which results in leveling of dialect differences between the urban dialect and the surrounding areas, the city dialect of Ghent has remained an ''insular'' urban dialect. Taeldeman (2005a) discusses ''three types of urban insularity,'' all of which are applicable to the city dialect of Ghent. The city dialect of Ghent is marked by ''conservative insularity'' in some respects (2005a: 275–276) by not adopting phonological innovations that mark the rural hinterland of the city. However, the city dialect predominantly appears to have been involved in ''innovative island formation,'' both by generating innovations and by adopting innovations. Many exclusive East Flemish innovations, mainly phonological phenomena, originated in Ghent. Some of these innovations still have not found their way to the East Flemish countryside. Many others, however, were adopted by the rural hinterland but, quite surprisingly, ''have since then been rejected by the urban dialect'' (2005a: 273). Taeldeman (2005a: 274) offers two explanations: ''One possible explanation is that these East Flemish features, after they had been taken up in the adjacent rural areas, were felt to be too 'peasant-like' by the speakers of the urban dialect.'' The second explanation probably reinforces the first one: the Ghent dialect exchanges East Flemish features for prestigious Brabantine dialect features, which are ''parachuted'' to Ghent but do not affect the surrounding countryside.

Apparently for quite some time there has been an interaction of converging tendencies initiated by the surrounding countryside (eager to assimilate city dialect features) and diverging tendencies initiated by the citizens of Ghent, unwilling as they were to speak the same dialect as the "peasants" of the neighboring villages (Taeldeman 2005b: 49–51). These processes of horizontal or interdialectal convergence and divergence suggest the East Flemish dialect area is a very dynamic area, but recent research for some suburban villages of Ghent reveals mixed interference both from the city dialect and from Standard Dutch, which in the end leads to the disappearance of the former rural dialects (e.g., Bultynck 1985 for the dialect of Mariakerke and Oosterlinck 1992 for Wondelgem). In other words, the East Flemish dialects nowadays are certainly marked by "vertical convergence" (Auer 1988; Auer and Hinskens 1996; Hinskens et al. 2005) toward the standard language as well.

The adoption of city dialect features by the hinterland undoubtedly points to some prestige of that dialect or of its speakers, but generally speaking the East Flemish dialects appear to be subject to considerably less positive appreciation than the dialects of Flemish Brabant, Limburg, West Flanders, and Antwerp (Van Daele 2000). In an inquiry set up by Van Daele, the dialects from these four provinces all got a "general appreciation" score between 3.02 and 3.10 on a five-point scale. East Flanders, however, appeared to lag behind with a score of 2.60. These are average ratings from respondents from all over Flanders. But, what is more, the East Flemish respondents appeared to be the only respondents that did not place their own dialect in first place on the "general appreciation scale." Taeldeman (2005b: 92) points to a correlation between this negative appreciation and the fragmentation of the East Flemish area. Due to the latter factor, East Flemish dialect speakers may be convinced of the fact that their dialect — literally — does not bring them very far: it has a limited communication radius (cf. Ammon 1973: 62: "Gebrauchsradius"). The fact that many East Flemish dialects are marked by rules of word-internal consonant deletion may offer another explanatory factor for their low prestige, as these rules may inhibit comprehension for "outsiders" and many studies revealed a link between language comprehension and appreciation (Taeldeman 2005b: 92).

3.4. *Limburg*

In some parts of the eastern province of Limburg, the dialect situation has changed far more drastically than in the others. An important factor appears to be the industrialization of some parts of the province, the first

phase of which was marked by the establishment of coal mines. Research conducted by Goossens (1987) and Belemans (1997) in the Limburg town of Genk points to the impact of these economic and subsequent demographic factors on dialect use in Limburg. Genk, situated at the center of Limburg, was subject to enormous population growth over the past 100 years. At the end of the nineteenth century, Genk was still a picturesque village with about 2,000 inhabitants. The establishment of three coal mines in the territory of Genk led to an increased demand for manual labor and subsequently to massive immigration both from other parts of the country and from foreign countries. The closure of the Zwartberg coal mine occurred just as a number of multinational firms, both assembly factories and ironworks, set up in the city. Nowadays, Genk has more than 62,000 inhabitants. Obviously — as can be deduced from Belemans (1997, 2002) — this had a serious impact on language use in this part of the province, especially on the use of the indigenous dialect. As can be expected, functional loss is accompanied by structural loss. As for the first dimension, a large-scale inquiry set up in 2001 in the city of Bilzen revealed that every new generation brought a serious reduction in the relative number of autochthonous citizens that still use the local dialect: from 80% of the citizens aged 55 or more, over 40% of the group aged 25 to 54, to only 11% of the youngest generation (aged less than 25) (Belemans and Keulen 2004: 77–78). This functional loss is mirrored by structural loss. While the lexical level may well be the most vulnerable part of any language (Van Coetsem 1988: 26), the data provided by research on lexical dialect loss in places right across the province of Limburg nevertheless remain striking (Belemans and Keulen 2004: 85): in the rural village of Kanne, for instance, the respondents aged more than 55 (in 2001) appeared to be able to produce the traditional dialect lexemes for more than 80% of the elicited items, the respondents aged under 25 scored only half as much (nearly 40%). Structural dialect loss, in this case at the lexical level, was recorded for all of the Limburg dialects that were subject to this kind of research, but there are considerable differences within one and the same province: structural loss has proceeded further in the bigger towns and cities than in rural villages, the borders of the province suffer more from dialect loss than the central dialects, the northern part of the province shows less dialect vitality than the southern part (Belemans and Keulen 2004: 86).

The province is also marked by an east–west division: For historical-political reasons, the western part of the province has been exposed to Brabantine influence since the thirteenth century. Before that time, the Limburg area was oriented toward the east and exposed to the expansion of language features from Cologne. The central and eastern Limburg

dialects preserved their affinity with the Rhineland dialect, but the Brabantine expansion in the western part of the province was never really reversed and may have been reinvigorated in the last few decades, due to the general "Brabantization" of Flemish informal Dutch (see Section 5). More research is needed to substantiate this final statement, but data from the "Spoken Dutch Corpus" (cf. Vandekerckhove 2005a) show that young Limburg informants tend to use Brabantine regiolectal features to a greater extent than older Limburg informants in their "supra-regional" colloquial speech.

3.5. *Summing up*

In Dutch-speaking Belgium, the process of dialect loss may be marked by differences in speed and intensity, with the overall picture suggesting that local dialect features tend to be replaced either by the corresponding features from the standard language or by dialect features with a wider geographical range, especially Brabantine features. The impact of some urban dialects clearly deserves special attention: that of the city of Antwerp, the expansion of which results in the leveling of the differences between the city dialect and the dialects of the surrounding areas, and that of the city of Ghent, which is marked by a remarkable insularity and which, at the same time, unlike its hinterland, does not remain unaffected from Brabantine–Antwerp influence either. In other words, the Brabantine and especially Antwerp features both seem to spread according to the *contagious diffusion model (or the wave model)*, i.e., gradually affecting the surrounding areas (the Antwerp hinterland), and in a *hierarchical* way, leaping from city to (smaller) city, not affecting parts of the rural areas in between them for some time (cf. Britain 2002: 623).

Up until now the most western province of Flanders has not been dealt with, because it demands a special treatment when considering dialect change and dialect loss. The western periphery is known to be marked by *extraordinary* dialect vitality. The following paragraph tries to present a balanced picture of an area that has not remained completely free from dialect loss but the uniqueness of which lies in the fact that the process can still be captured in its very early stages.

4. West Flanders: a unique case of dialect vitality?

The figures presented by Willemyns (1979) and Van Keymeulen (1993) (cf. Table 1) draw attention to the unique position of West Flanders.

Taking into account that the informants, all of them university students at the time, have a high level of education, the figures suggest regional dialects still have a solid base in West Flanders. This "impression" is confirmed by several investigations. The West Flemish language situation will be assessed both from a structural and from a functional perspective.

We start with the latter approach, presenting some data that illustrate the extent to which local dialects are still embedded in West Flemish society. The data in the tables below are extracted from a survey set up at the West Flemish campus of Leuven University (K.U. Leuven Campus Kortrijk) in 1996 (Vandekerckhove 2000). The informants are 108 second-year students from several disciplines born in 1976 or 1977.[5] The group consists of 50 men and 58 women, all randomly selected. Most of them (78.5%) have a higher social class background. They all grew up in West Flanders. The tables contain percentages, not absolute figures.

For 72% of the male students and 59% of the female students, the local dialect was still the dominant code in 1996. They confirmed the following

Table 3. *West Flemish university students: dialect use in different contexts*

I speak dialect with ...	Men	Women
Brothers/sisters	92	79
Friends	86	76
Fellow students	80	71
Parents	82	70
Young children	35	23
The doctor	32	28
Someone from another province	12	7
A teacher/a professor	2	0
Someone I do not know	0	0

Table 4. *Judgments about dialect use in different contexts*

"I think dialect is preferable to standard language" in the following situations	Men	Women
Friends communicating among themselves	91	80
School: pupils/students among themselves	83	70
Parents to children	61	47
School: teachers to pupils	3	0

statement: "I generally use more dialect than the standard language." This does not imply that the use of the standard language by these informants is negligible. The dialect and the standard language are connected to different domains (see Table 3). As can be expected, the local dialect is predominantly the code for informal domains: the language of the family and the wider circle of friends. In fact, in West Flanders, until recently (see Section 5), dialect had preserved its monopoly position as an informal medium of communication. A good indication of the position of the standard language is offered by the data concerning language use in school contexts: the standard language is *not* the lingua franca at school. Students fall back on their dialect for peer group communication. The standard language is only used and felt to be appropriate whenever there is a hierarchical relation between the interlocutors, in this case as a medium of communication between teacher and pupil. The point is that the dialect functions as the code for in-group contact, while the use of standard language is limited to out-group contact. There is one exception, however, which is not unimportant: dialect use with young children — which evidently does not necessarily imply out-group contact — is clearly felt to be much less appropriate than dialect use with the peer group. This is all the more so for the young women, who, conforming to the findings of many sociolinguistic studies (e.g., Trudgill 1983; and many others afterward), appear to be less dialect-oriented and more standard language-oriented than their male colleagues. Although the women certainly do not display a negative attitude toward dialect use in general, the scores for Table 3 can only be interpreted as a forerunner of change (cf. Section 5).

While in the rest of Flanders, generally speaking, the former diglossia between dialect and standard language has been disrupted in several ways, West Flanders is still marked by a fairly stable diglossia: the two codes are in complementary distribution across separate domains. Moreover, from a structural perspective they still form "opposing systems": for most students participating in the 1996 survey, "dialect" was not a problematic notion. Unlike in other areas of Dutch-speaking Belgium, in West Flanders "regiolectalization" tendencies seem not to have blurred the notion of dialect to such an extent that it no longer forms a well-defined entity in the minds of the speakers (Willemyns 1985: 211; Vandekerckhove 2000: 271).

Most of the West Flemish students participating in the 1996 survey (Vandekerckhove 2000) grew up in the southern half of the province of West Flanders. In 1983, Willemyns set up an inquiry in two towns in the north of the province, i.e., Diksmuide and Ostend (Willemyns 1985). Although his group of informants was far more heterogeneous, the

results of this investigation and the one at Kortrijk University are highly comparable.

This does not imply, however, that the West Flemish dialect area is marked by stability. On the contrary, recent research reveals it is subject to several shifts. In Vandekerckhove (2005b), the dynamics of four West Flemish city dialects were analyzed (Kortrijk, Roeselare, Bruges, Poperinge), focusing on two variables: the personal pronouns of the plural and the suffixation of morphemes for the diminutive. Data from older sources, i.e., collected in the beginning and/or first half of the twentieth century, were compared to recently collected data, provided by informants born after 1970. The diachronic analyses reveal little in the way of an increasing interference from Standard Dutch. They do reveal, however, a number of leveling processes: dialect features with a small geographic distribution are replaced by dialect features with a wider distribution. In other words, the data manifest an "increase in scale,"[6] but the personal pronouns of the plural and the diminutives have hardly undergone any dialect loss in the strict sense of the word, i.e., generally speaking dialect features are *not* replaced by the corresponding standard language features. The impact of the standard language is not such that it leads to intensive direct borrowing from Standard Dutch, rather it appears to manifest itself rather indirectly in the substitution of dialect features that are strongly deviant from Standard Dutch by dialect features bearing a closer resemblance to Standard Dutch. This is also one of the major conclusions of Vandekerckhove (2000), which contains an analysis of phonological dialect change in one West Flemish town, Deerlijk, situated in the southeastern periphery of the province. Moreover, the Deerlijk data reveal a diffusion of West Flemish dialect features from the city of Kortrijk into the southeastern hinterland. So once again a city dialect appears to be playing a dominant role in present-day processes of interdialectal convergence. The dialect changes observed in the southeastern periphery and those in other parts of the province point to essentially internal West Flemish dynamics, not steered by Brabantine influence (at least until recently). So interdialectal, or horizontal convergence, clearly prevails over vertical convergence. Yet, some nuancing is necessary: in Vandekerckhove (2000) and (2005b) the phonological and morphological levels are focused upon. This partially explains the "positive" outcome. No doubt there is quite a lot of dialect loss at the lexical level, which appears to be much more susceptible to change.[7] Moreover, the leveling processes might mark the first step toward dialect loss. For the informants, most of them having a high level of education, dialect is still the unmarked code in informal contexts, but that code has to meet somewhat different requirements than before. In the first place, it should have a wider

"Gebrauchsradius" (Ammon 1973: 62) or, in other words, a wider range of communication. The youngest generation still uses dialect forms and they still do so intensively. They appear to have a thorough active command of these dialect forms, but dialect forms which might be marked in supraregional contacts because of their limited dispersion no longer belong to their ideolect. It has become clear that the dialect of the younger generations is not a copy of the dialect of their predecessors. It is gradually developing into a dialect with a wider geographical range. But even if these leveling tendencies display the first symptoms of an inevitable process of dialect loss, it also implies we can still capture dialect loss in its very infancy here, and that is, in a western European context, quite exceptional.

The reasons for this case of exceptional dialect vitality may be manifold. First of all, dialect preservation in this area is certainly partly related to the peripheral position of the province, which is bounded by France in the west and by the sea in the north. In the south, the border of the province of West Flanders coincides with the border between Belgium and France and partly also with the language border between northern Belgium and French-speaking southern Belgium. Moreover, the East Flemish dialects have functioned as a kind of barrier against the Brabantine influence exerted by the economic and political center of the country, and in an indirect way for some time the distance between West Flanders and the Brabant region also guaranteed "protection" against the pressure of the standard language, which penetrated the center much earlier than the peripheral regions. Until a few decades ago, West Flanders was hardly at all urbanized and this certainly is a second explanatory factor. Some West Flemish cities grew and flourished in the Middle Ages, but from post-mediaeval times onward until the mid-twentieth century the urbanization process in West Flanders nearly stopped. As a consequence, West Flanders remained an agrarian province for a very long time. Because of this the province barely witnessed any immigration: it could not really offer employment outside of the agrarian sector and there was no space for "new" farmers. Because of these factors, until recently the West Flemish dialects were "protected" against "external" influences and this guaranteed the preservation of the homogeneity of the area and the survival of very old dialect features: In the West Flemish dialects, the mediaeval sound system of the Flemish dialects has been preserved (cf. Taeldeman 1983) together with a number of even older Saxon features (Devos and Vandekerckhove 2005: 38–48). Due to the homogeneity of the area, West Flemish dialect speakers are not forced to adapt or drop their native dialect when communicating with dialect speakers from other parts of the province, which again contributes to the preservation of the West Flemish dialects.

5. Future perspectives? The *tussentaal* issue

Although we must be very careful in making predictions, we could, starting with West Flanders, state that the turning point has been reached. First of all, as described above, the West Flemish dialect area increasingly appears to be marked by leveling processes involving an elimination of dialect features that have a limited geographical distribution. Secondly, the percentages in Table 3 reveal a discrepancy between dialect use with (older) relatives and the peer group on the one hand, and dialect use with children on the other. In Table 4, especially the young women manifest a relatively low appreciation for dialect use between parents and children. Judging from the scores in Table 3 for dialect use "with parents," we must conclude that for most of these students their first language is a West Flemish dialect. Quite a lot of them, and especially the young women, might break with this tradition once they start raising their own children. We urgently need an update to establish the present-day tendencies in West Flanders, but unsystematic observations confirm that this is actually happening right now.[8] An abrupt change seems to be taking place, especially among people from the middle and higher social classes. Whereas for West Flemish people aged 30 or more, there is hardly any correlation between dialect use and social class background, for the youngest generation very soon dialect use might acquire a social stigma. In most parts of Dutch-speaking Belgium, this is already a fact (Willemyns 1997) and we can only expect a further decline in dialect use and dialect knowledge.

One of the intriguing questions for Dutch-speaking Belgium is "*what kind of Dutch*" will replace the local dialects, which, until a few decades ago, were the only medium of communication in informal domains (Taeldeman 1993). From the 1960s onward, many Dutch linguists were convinced Flanders would evolve toward a generalized use of the standard language (cf. Goossens 1975). Today, the standardization of the Dutch language in Flanders has virtually caught up with that of the Netherlands for all *formal* uses of Belgian Dutch (cf. Goossens 2000), a process which has been marked by a gradual convergence toward northern, Netherlandic Standard Dutch, but *informal* Flemish-Dutch rather unexpectedly appears to be making an about-turn: a growing number of people are adopting a spoken variant that increasingly functions as a kind of "general Flemish" (De Caluwe 2002). This variety is generally called *tussentaal* by Flemish linguists, which could be translated as 'intermediate language', the reason being that, from a structural perspective, it is situated in between the standard language and the dialects of northern Belgium. This implies that *tussentaal* is not homogeneous at all: all language

varieties that are situated on the continuum between the poles dialect and standard language can be labeled as *tussentaal*. So every region has in fact its own *tussentaal*. However, the central Brabantine area, which comprises the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Antwerp, clearly appears to be ''trendsetting'' (see also Section 3), which means that the Brabantine-colored *tussentaal* is definitely dominant. Some well-known morphosyntactic *tussentaal* features are:

- the use of the personal pronoun *ge* or its accented variant *gij* (2nd person singular) instead of Standard Dutch *je/jij*;
- the use of the diminutive suffix *-ke* (and variants) instead of the Standard Dutch suffix *-je* (e.g., *boekske* versus *boekje* 'small book');
- a deviant adnominal inflection (of adjectives, articles, etc.: e.g., in some contexts the old flectional suffix *-n* is preserved: *nen nieuwen auto* instead of Standard Dutch *een nieuwe auto* 'a new car');
- a deviant inflection of some verbs (e.g., *ik zien* instead of Standard Dutch *ik zie* 'I see'), etc.

Examples of phonological markers of Brabantine *tussentaal* are:

- word-final *t*-deletion in some small high-frequency words (*da* instead of *dat* 'that', *nie* instead of *niet* 'not' . . .);
- deletion of *h-* in the anlaut (*een uis* for *een huis* 'a house', *nen oed* for *een hoed* 'a hat' . . .);
- a monophthongal realization of some Dutch diphthongs (e.g., Dutch *huis* [hœys] is realized as [œ:s], with the monophthong [œ:] instead of the diphthong [œy];
- the Brabantine *tussentaal* equivalent to Dutch [ɛɪ] is [ɛ:]: e.g., [kɛ:kə] instead of [kɛɪkə] kijken 'to look' . . .) etc. (cf. Goossens 2000; Geeraerts et al. 2000a).

The use of these features clearly transcends ''local'' interaction between people from the Brabantine area (Vandekerckhove 2005a, 2007). Therefore, the question whether this will ultimately lead to a Flemish alternative for the Netherlandic Dutch norm has been the topic of much debate among Dutch linguists (cf. De Caluwe 2002), although *tussentaal* use generally marks informal communication. The latter however does not imply that it is restricted to private domains and conversational contexts with a limited communicative reach. *Tussentaal* has gained a solid position in public communication, e.g., in informal speech in the media (cf. Geeraerts et al. 2000b; Vandekerckhove et al. 2006). This may guarantee the survival of a lot of secondary dialect features,[9] especially Brabantine dialect features with a wide geographical distribution, but it certainly does not guarantee the survival of the local dialects as such. On the contrary,

tussentaal has become the new code for informal colloquial speech and as such it replaces the "small scale" local dialect. As a consequence, Flanders is gradually developing into a region with two "supraregional" languages: a variety of Dutch for official and formal occasions (i.e., Belgian Standard Dutch, which closely adheres to Netherlandic Dutch) and another more or less generalized variety of regiolectal (esp. Brabantine) Flemish-Dutch for informal occasions (*tussentaal* Flemish) (Goossens 2000). It is very doubtful whether there will be much place left for the traditional local dialects within this complex configuration, but a lot of research remains to be done on the possible cross-fertilization of the Flemish dialects and their regiolectal variants, the Brabantine-colored *tussentaal*, and Standard Dutch.

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Notes

1. The term "Flanders" can be used in a broad and in a narrow sense. In this article we opt for the first possibility, using the term "Flanders" for northern or Dutch-speaking Belgium in its entirety. In the dialectological literature, the notions "Flanders" and "Flemish" generally refer to the area where the West, East, French, and Zeeuws-Flemish dialects are spoken, i.e., the western part of northern Belgium, northern France, and the southwest of the Netherlands.
2. Cf. Van de Velde (1996), Geeraerts and Grondelaers (1999), Geeraerts, Grondelaers, and Speelman (2000a), Geeraerts (2001).
3. Some groups, especially the Limburg students, are under-represented. This might endanger the representativeness of several groups: West Flanders: 110 informants; East Flanders: 237 informants; Antwerp: 87 informants; Brabant: 58 informants; Limburg: 25 informants.
4. Nowadays Belgium has two provinces of Brabant: so-called Vlaams-Brabant (Flemish Brabant) and Waals-Brabant (Walloon Brabant = French speaking). The Belgian capital of Brussels, which belonged to the old province of Brabant, has its own political-administrative status.
5. Kortrijk is the West Flemish city where the university campus is situated. As mentioned before, the city of Leuven lies in the center of Flanders, in the province of Brabant. The students that participated in the inquiry belonged to one of the following four disciplines: Law, Medicine, Mathematics, and Economics.
6. Cf. Hinskens (1992: 311): "In short, dialect levelling turns out to be a two-dimensional process of giving up dialect variants in favour of areally more widespread forms. These latter forms may be of a supra-local or supra-regional dialectal, or even of a national standard nature. Put otherwise: dialectgeographically, levelling results in an increase in scale."
7. Cf. Van Coetsem (1988: 26): "There is nonetheless a consensus that phonology and grammar in general show greater stability than vocabulary, although in recent times it has become increasingly clear that the question is far more complex than that." Data

from Ryckeboer (1995) show, on the one hand, that in West Flanders there is less dialect loss at the lexical level than in the other provinces of Dutch-speaking Belgium, but, on the other hand, that, nevertheless, especially for the youngest generation, lexical dialect loss is considerable even in the western periphery.

8. At West Flemish primary schools nowadays one may hear young parents in their thirties talking to each other in their West Flemish dialect, while at the same time their children are interacting in Standard Dutch with some interference from West Flemish regiolectal features.
9. The distinction between primary and secondary dialect features was introduced by Schirmunski (1930), see also Hinskens (1986).

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