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Everyday language in the media: the case of Belgian Dutch soap series

Abstract

The paper investigates how everyday, substandard Belgian Dutch shows up in two Belgian soap series. Both programmes do not treat everyday Belgian Dutch in exactly the same way, but the differences that appear between both can be correlated with subtle differences in the type of soap that both series represent (specifically, with differences in the degree of realism that they exhibit).

1. Language and the media

Linguistic behaviour in the media is not uniform. Restricting the discussion to television, one may expect there to be a distinction between the formality of the register used in news programs, documentaries, discussion programs, shows, or fictional programs. The case of soap series, then, is particularly interesting from the point of view of everyday language. Soaps are supposed to be a realistic genre, reflecting everyday life to ensure easy identification by the spectators. So do they reflect everyday language as well ?

The present paper investigates how everyday Belgian Dutch shows up in two Belgian soap series: *Thuis* ("Home"), which is broadcast by the public television VRT, and *Familie* ("Family"), which is part of the programme of the major commercial station VTM. (Further details about the two series are given in paragraph 4.) The discussion will reveal that both programmes

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do not treat everyday Belgian Dutch in exactly the same way – but the differences that appear between both can be correlated with subtle differences in the soap subgenre that both series represent.

2. Everyday language in Belgian Dutch

As a terminological note, it may be useful to explain why the terms *Belgian Dutch* (the variety of Dutch used in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) and *Netherlandic Dutch* (the variety of Dutch used in The Netherlands) are to be preferred, rather than *Flemish* in contrast with *Dutch*. The uniformity between both varieties is roughly similar to that between, say, the varieties of German spoken in Germany and Austria, or that between British English and American English. Just as there is no doubt that both British and American English are varieties of English, there is no reason whatsoever to treat Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch as separate languages. They are good examples of what has become known in contemporary linguistics as *national varieties* of a given language. Conversely, the term *Flemish* is traditionally used in linguistics to refer to the level of dialects; in its strictest sense, it refers to the local dialects of the western provinces of the Dutch-speaking area of Belgium. As a term for the variety of the Dutch standard language used in Belgium, it would be doubly misleading: it would suggest that this is an entirely different language than the Dutch used in The Netherlands, and it would suggest that it is more of a dialect rather than a standard language.

The specific position of Belgian Dutch with regard to Netherlandic Dutch, then, may be described from an historical and from a contemporary point of view. Historically speaking, Dutch became a standard language in Belgium much later than in The Netherlands. Whereas The Netherlands gained its independence as a republic in the early 17th century, the southern part of the Low Countries remained under foreign rule until the foundation of the Belgium kingdom in 1830. And whereas in The Netherlands, the development of a standard language as part of the newly acquired national identity took place in the 17th century already, in the southern Dutch-speaking provinces, by contrast, the Spanish, and later the Austrian and French rule did not really favour the development of Dutch as a language of high government and higher education: Dutch basically remained a collection of dialects, which was used only minimally for supraregional functions. The foundation of Belgium did not actually change the situation: as the new state was politically dominated by the French-speaking bourgeoisie, the position of French as the language of culture and public office became even more firmly established.

In the course of the 19th century, however, a reaction occurred: the so-called “Flemish Movement” (initially a purely intellectual movement, later on a broad social movement) began to fight the discrimination suffered by the speakers of Dutch. One part of this struggle involved the official recognition of Dutch as an official language; the present-day federal organisation of the Belgian state is the outcome of this political movement. The other part of the struggle involved the Dutch-speaking community in Belgium itself: the standardisation of Dutch in Belgium – the shift from dialects to a supraregional standard – is the necessary counterpart of the struggle for recognition. One cannot claim any rights for one’s own language as a standard language if one does not use it as such. But what would this standard language have to be ? Round 1900, a consensus was reached that standardised Dutch in Belgium should be identical to the Dutch standard language that existed in The Netherlands: the standardisation of Dutch in Belgium then took the form of an *adoption* of the existing standard. In actual practice, this process of standardisation took off during the interbellum, but it seems to have reached massive proportions only after the Second World War – a development to which the mass media have most certainly contributed.

The present situation is still, to some extent, tainted with this specific historical background. The “retardation” of the standardisation process in Dutch-speaking Belgium (i.e. the fact that it began relatively late – much later at any rate than the linguistic standardization of The Netherlands) shows up in the fact that the linguistic distance between everyday language and the standard language variety is greater in Belgium than in The Netherlands. In Geeraerts, Grondelaers & Speelman (1999), this specific relationship is investigated on the basis of a lexicological study involving two lexical fields (that of clothing terms and that of football terms). Taking the relative distribution of synonyms as its basic variable, this study quantifies the uniformity of actual language use between different varieties of the language. (Such synonyms involve, for instance, *legging(s)* versus *caleçon* as the name for a tight-fitting, somewhat elastic pair of trousers for women, or *jeans* versus *spijkerbroek* as the name for a pair of jeans.) The highest register in the language is represented by nationwide magazines. For the clothing terms, a more informal, more everyday register is added in the form of shop window materials (that is, names given to items of clothing on price tags in shops). Both registers (the magazines and the shop window materials) are studied for Belgium as well as for The Netherlands. Basically, then, the lexical distance between the highest register and the lower, everyday register appears to be greater in Belgium than in The

Netherlands: there is a uniformity of about 68% between both registers in the materials from The Netherlands, whereas the same relationship is only 45% in Belgium. (The uniformity between the highest registers in both geographical areas is 82%.)

A very rough interpretation of these findings against the background of the historical development sketched a moment ago, would be to say that the standardisation process has not yet had its full impact on the everyday language: the latter seems to be somewhat closer to the original dialects (the lowest level in the continuum of registers) than in The Netherlands. In this respect, everyday Belgian Dutch is very much a substandard variety. So how does this variety show up in the media – specifically, in soap series ?

3. Scope and method of the investigation

In order to investigate the problem, four daily shows of each soap series were analyzed with regard to the presence of phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic markers of informal, substandard Belgian Dutch. Without going into details, here is an overview of some of the basic variables that were analyzed. (The examples in each case are indicative rather than exhaustive.)

Phonetic variables:

- dropping of word-initial h: *ik eb* instead of *ik heb* “I have”
- deletion of word-final or word-internal elements, specifically in short function words: *as* instead of *als* “if”, *altij* instead of *altijd* “always”, *da* instead of *dat* “that”, *iet* instead of *iets* “something”, *me* instead of *met* “with”, *wa* instead of *wat* “what”, *niet* instead of *niet* “not”, *ma* or *mo* instead of *maar* “but”

Morphological variables:

- definite article *den* instead of *de*, specifically with masculine nouns: *den hond* “the dog”
- indefinite article *ne* or *nen* instead of *een*, specifically with masculine nouns: *ne mens* “a person”; indefinite article *e* instead of *een* with neuter nouns: *e kind* “a child”
- inflectional ending *-en* instead of *-e* with masculine adjectives: *ne kleinen bakker* “a small baker”; inflectional ending *-e* instead of zero with neuter nouns after definite article: *het klein kind* “the small child”
- related inflectional phenomena with possessive pronouns and demonstrative pronouns: *diejen bakker* “that baker”, *mijnen bakker* “my baker”

- various changes in the system of personal pronouns (specifically in subject function): *ekik* instead of *ik* for the first person singular, *em* instead of *hij* for the third person singular, *welle*, *zelle* instead of *wij*, *zij* for the first and third person plural respectively; specifically, a unitary system for the second person personal pronoun instead of a system with familiar forms and polite forms: singular *gij*, plural *gij* or *gelle* instead of singular familiar *jij*, singular polite *u*, plural familiar *jullie*, plural polite *u*
- verbal inflections like *ik zien*, *ik staan*, *hij zie* instead of *ik zie*, *ik sta*, *hij ziet*
- diminutive formation with *-ske* or *-ke* instead of *-je* and its allomorphs: *een boekske* instead of *een boekje* “a small book”, *e brilleke* instead of *een briljetje* “a small pair of spectacles”

Lexical variables:

- onomasiological variation involving pairs like *schoon* instead of *mooi* “beautiful”, *klappen* instead of *praten* “to talk”, *seffens* instead of *dadelijk* “immediately, in a moment, rightaway”

Syntactic variables:

- double negation: *ik hoor nie goe nie meer* instead of *ik hoor niet goed meer* “I don’t hear well anymore”
- insertion of redundant conjunctions: *ik weet nie wanneer dat hij komt* instead of *ik weet niet wanneer hij komt* “I don’t know when he comes” (similarly in cases like “if”, “whether”, “how” “where” etc.)
- specific word order patterns in clusters of non-finite verb forms: *dit onrecht zou moeten aangeklaagd worden* instead of *dit onrecht zou moeten worden aangeklaagd* or *dit onrecht zou aangeklaagd moeten worden* “this injustice should be denounced”; *ik beweer dat dit onrecht moet aangeklaagd worden* instead of *ik beweer dat dit onrecht aangeklaagd moet worden* or *ik beweer dat dit onrecht moet worden aangeklaagd* “I claim that this injustice should be denounced”

The analysis of the separate variables was carried out in accordance with the methodology developed in Geeraerts, Grondelaers & Speelman (1999): it is not the frequency of a specific marker as such that is relevant, but its frequency in comparison with the alternative forms. In lexicological studies, this would be called an onomasiological approach: it is not the relative frequency of *seffens* as such that is relevant, but its relative frequency in comparison with *dadelijk* or other synonyms. Extrapolating this “onomasiological” approach from the lexicon to the grammar, it is not the absolute frequency of the diminutive marker *-ske* or *-ke* that contributes to the substandard character of a text, but its relative frequency with regard

to the standard forms *-je*, *-kje*, *-tje* and *-pje*. Further, given the relative frequency of the individual markers of substandardization, an overall measure of the status of a text can be arrived at by averaging over the individual variables.

Because sociolinguistic factors may influence the choice of the language level, the results were noted for the individual characters in the soaps. In this way, it can be checked whether differences between characters correlate with their fictional social status.

4. Soaps as a fictional genre

Soaps are a specific genre of fictional television (see Kilborn 1992). In contrast with comedy series or sitcoms, in which each episode contains one complete narrative, soaps are characterized by multiple longer and intertwining plot lines that extend over several episodes. In this respect, they are similar to so-called serials, but in contrast with serials, serials have a weekly rather than a daily broadcasting schedule. From a less formalistic point of view, the first major characteristic of soaps is their *human interest approach*. Rather than the plot itself (which may be dominant in action series, thrillers and the like) it is the reactions of the characters with regard to the plot that carry the main focus of the dramatic attention: paramount in soaps is how the characters relate to each other and to the events. This emotional and relational focus entails a number of specific stylistic features of soaps. Specifically, the importance of dialogue and the frequent use of close-ups support the human interest approach of the soap opera.

As a second major characteristic, the success of soaps is based on their potential for identification: the spectator has to be able to relate to the characters, to empathize if not to sympathize with them. The fictional world will have to be close to the spectator's world to ensure identifiability: it will not have to be completely identical, but it should be sufficiently recognizable. This feeling of *familiarity* (which obviously supports the emotional involvement of the spectator) is also based on the relatively stable and the relatively limited set of characters. In the slowly developing narrative lines, the same characters reappear over and over again, which facilitates the spectator's identification with them. In addition, the settings of the dramatic events are similarly restricted to a few places with which the spectator may become familiar more and more familiar. Incidentally, the crucial role of the concepts of familiarity and identifiability appears clearly from the titles of the soaps under investigation.

The third major characteristic of soaps as a genre is their *realism*: the importance of identifiability entails that the fictional world is a realistic one, and that the dramatic events have an air of plausibility to them.

Specifically with regard to this realistic character, there appear to be differences between *Thuis* and *Familie*: the latter appears to have a more restricted sociological scope than the former, and the narrative lines in *Familie* are somewhat less realistic than those in *Thuis*. Let us illustrate.

Thuis follows the lives of the inhabitants of one specific village, whereas *Familie* focuses on a single (though extended) family. This Van den Bossches family belongs to the upper middle class: main character Guido Van den Bossche is an engineer who owns and runs a successful computer company, his daughter Veronique runs an Italian fashion firm, and his uncle Walter is a bishop. The plot is basically restricted to the vicissitudes of the Van den Bossche family. An important focus is Guido's struggle with his nemesis Didier De Kunst (the bad guy in all respects, whose main aim is ruining the Van den Bossches). In this sense, *Familie* offers a somewhat restricted picture of the sociological reality: the social environment of the characters is decidedly higher than that of the average spectator.

Thuis, by contrast, covers the sociological reality in a more encompassing way. The central characters (who are, incidentally, less painted in black and white than those of *Familie*) comprise a doctor and a manager next to a plumber, a publican, a cook, an antiques dealer, an artist, a hairdresser, a retired stallholder, and a few students.

Everyday story lines involving marital problems, diseases and accidents, unemployment and problems at work can be found in both series. But in addition, *Familie* contains a number of less realistic, more exotic, and perhaps even far-fetched dramatic lines. Guido Van den Bossche, for instance, is kidnapped by the mafia while being chained to a wheelchair after an accident. He is forced to cooperate on the development of a sophisticated weapon, but when he manages to escape, he is charged with industrial espionage. His son Peter joins a religious sect and eventually commits suicide. Together with his new love Claire (in meantime, Guido is divorced from his unfaithful wife Marie-Rose) he is attacked by a contract killer. Claire dies in the event, Guido again gets paralyzed, marries his nurse, and during the wedding party, the whole family is taken hostage by a band of terrorists who end with blowing up the entire hotel. But of course, the family escapes and the story can go on. This type of less familiar (to say

the least) developments is totally absent in *Thuis*.

In addition to the differences with regard to the characters and with regard to the narrative lines, there are comparable differences with regard to the settings of the two series. *Familie* is set in well-furnished, somewhat trendy houses, with an occasional sidestep to fashionable exotic locations. *Thuis* by contrast hardly ever goes abroad; the action even hardly ever leaves the village. And like its characters, the interiors that it features range from humble to well-to-do.

Summarizing: *Familie* is less realistic than *Thuis*. Because it restricts its central characters to the upper middle class, because the narrative contains some less plausible elements, and because it sometimes ventures into exotic locations, its realism is tinged with a degree of escapism. In an international context, the systematic realism of *Thuis* links up with a series like the British *Eastenders*, whereas the glamorous realism of *Familie* is distantly related to American soaps like *Dallas* or *The bold and the beautiful*. *Thuis* is basically just a mirror of reality; *Familie* is a gilded mirror – it shows how things could be if they were just slightly better than what the average spectator experiences from day to day.

5. Linguistic differences between the soaps series

The overall results of the investigation are charted in Table 1. For each of the four linguistic domains, the results are listed both in absolute figures and in percentages. For instance, “1001/1761” indicates that 1001 out of 1761 phonetic observations exhibited substandardization features in the series *Thuis*. And 1001 cases out 1761 equals a percentage of 57%.

	THUIS		FAMILIE	
pronunciation	1001 / 1761	57 %	588 / 1665	35 %
morphology	1104 / 1827	60 %	337 / 1340	25 %
lexicon	118 / 176	67 %	32 / 111	29 %
syntax	32 / 109	29 %	7 / 209	3 %
TOTAL	2255 / 3873	58 %	964 / 3325	29 %

Table 1

A certain amount of caution is necessary with regard to the interpretation of the results. In the first place, the absolute frequencies for the lexical and the syntactic variables are relatively low, specifically when each of the

variables is taken separately. Therefore, not much weight can be attached to the differences between the individual domains (and specifically, to the lower percentages that appear for the syntactic variables). In the second place, it should be kept in mind that the results involve variable whose substandard value is known in advance. That is to say, the overall percentage for *Thuis*, for instance, should not be read as saying that the language in *Thuis* is 58% substandard: there are many linguistic phenomena that have not been included in the investigation and that could possibly change the figure.

Given the necessary amount of caution, however, it is abundantly clear that *Thuis* uses a more substandard language than *Familie*. This is a surprising conclusion, because it is sometimes claimed (e.g. by Uytterhoeven 1995) that commercial television has introduced an informalization and substandardization of the language used in the media. Surprisingly, then, te soap series that is broadcast by the commercial station VTM appears to feature less substandard language than the soap series broadcast by the public television station VRT. How can this be explained ?

6. The sociolinguistics of soaps

The different status of both soaps as representatives of the genre can help us explain the linguistic differences that we have observed between them. If substandard language does indeed have the outspoken presence in Belgian Dutch that was described in paragraph 2, it is obvious that the more realistic series reflects this presence more clearly than the other one. The more escapist series of the two, by contrast, features a more polished form of linguistic behaviour. It aspires, one might say, to a form of bourgeois respectability that clashes with too much informal and substandard language. It eschews vulgarity, but at the same time, it maintains a certain degree of substandardization because doing otherwise might jeopardize the familiarity and the identifiability of the series.

This overall explanation needs to be taken one step further. In fact, the linguistic reality in Belgium is not homogeneous: there is a continuum from traditional local dialects over substandard varieties to the standard language, and the spectators are familiar with this continuum. Now, assuming that this continuum is correlated with sociological factors, would there also be differences of language behaviour among the fictional characters, according to their position in life ? Obviously, the question will be particularly relevant for *Thuis*, since it so to speak owes its own realism a faithful reflection of the differences in language behaviour between its

various characters. In the case of *Familie*, on the other hand, we may expect less variation among the characters, not just because they are sociologically more homogeneous to begin with, but also because the requirement of realism is somewhat less adamant than in the case of *Thuis*.

In order to check this hypothesis, the various fictional characters in both series have been classified into sociological groups on the basis of their professional status, their lifestyle, the social environment in which they are situated. The results of the classification are given in Table 2, which is built up in the same manner as Table 1. The indications “lower”, “middle”, and “higher” refer to the relative social position of the characters. Typically, the lower group (workers, artisans, small employees) is absent from *Familie*. (It may be noted that the overall figures in Table 1 are somewhat different from those in Table 2, because a few secondary characters have not been included in Table 2.)

	THUIS		FAMILIE	
lower	1489 / 2115	70 %		
middle	285 / 413	69 %	391 / 1210	32 %
higher	363 / 1169	31 %	465 / 1719	27 %

Table 2

The relevant results are as follows. *First*, Thuis exhibits a correlation between the level of substandardization and the social position of the characters. Differences of linguistic behaviour are a way of expressing a character’s social identity (as may be expected in a realistic story). The difference between the lower and the middle group does not show up linguistically, but this observation may be nuanced when we look at the distribution of the results for the individual characters. The highest individual degrees of standardization (87% for local policeman Fernand and 80% for the retired housewife Florke) are in fact to be found in the group of characters with a lower social position.

Second, there does not appear to be any form of sociological stratification in the case of *Familie*. However, the individual results again lead to a refinement of this observation. The lowest individual scores are to be found in the higher sociological group, and not suprisingly, they involve the two characters with the highest social position: central character Guido Van den Bossche has a substandardization degree of 20%, and his brother

Walter, the bisshop, has a score of no more than 3% (which to say that he is a speaker of a more or less “pure” standard variety). Other features likewise reveal that there is a subtle form of sociolinguistic stratification even in *Familie*. Typically, *Thuis* (at least in the episodes analyzed here) hardly has any characters using the 2nd person pronoun *jij/je*: almost all characters use the substandard *gij*-variant (which is somewhat of a shibboleth for informal or substandard Belgian Dutch). *Familie* on the other hand has a fair number of *jij/je*-speakers: the degree of substandardization for this variable is 48%. If the set of characters in *Familie* is divided into two groups on the basis of this criterion, the average degree of substandardization (generalizing over all variables) is decidedly lower in the group of *jij*-speakers in comparison with the *gij*-group: 24% versus 38%. That is to say, hierarchically ordered differences of style or register are not absent from *Familie*, even if they are less outspoken than in *Thuis*.

It follows that a realistic reflection of the sociolinguistic stratification of language varieties is not absent in *Familie*, but it is less outspoken than in *Thuis*. This corresponds with the general picture that we got of the differences in the fictional realism of both series, and at the same time, it adds a nuance to our earlier explanation of the differences in the degree of substandardization shown by the two soaps. Perhaps we could say, simplifyingly, that *Familie* exhibits a shift (both from a linguistic and from a sociological point of view) towards the high end of the stratificational continuum, whereas *Thuis* moves rather in the other direction. (From a sociolinguistic point of view, the absence of speakers using the *jij*-form is an unrealistic feature of *Thuis*, just like the absence of a lower class is sociologically unrealistic in *Familie*).

7. The dialectics of representation

The foregoing pages have shown how everyday, substandard Belgian Dutch shows up in two Belgian soap series. It has become clear that both programmes do not treat everyday Belgian Dutch in exactly the same way: one of them features more and more varied substandard language, whereas language behaviour in the other is more uniform and closer to the standard language register. The differences that appear between both series can however be correlated with subtle differences in the soap subgenre that they represent: from a linguistic as well as a sociological point of view, *Familie* is realism with a tinge of idealization, whereas *Thuis* is realism with a tinge of naturalism.

The (variously mitigated) realism of the soaps invites a further question: the soap series reflect reality, but do they at the same influence reality ? There is a specific dialectic to representations that has to be taken into account here: a (more or less) faithful representation may reproduce reality in a double sense; it creates an icon, but at the same time, the item may become an example that perpetuates the situation represented. In the case at hand, could the representation of substandard language in the media strengthen the position of the substandard varieties in actual language behaviour ? More specifically, could the standardization process that is going on in Belgian Dutch be checked or slowed down by the fact that the substandard varieties enjoy extensive exposure in soap series ? This could be the case if the situation that is shown in the soaps is not merely interpreted as “This is the actual situation” but also as “This is the normal situation, this is as things should be”. On the basis of the materials presented in this paper, the question could not possibly be answered – which is a way of saying that linguists will be well advised to devote long-term attention to everyday language in the media.

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