

Playing with language in a media-promoted standardisation context: public broadcasting and adolescent linguistic practices in Flanders

It is illustrated how the Flemish Belgian public broadcasting corporation intensifies an already marked project of linguistic standardisation, explicitly identifying substandard language use as sloppy. This standardising ambition can be said to backfire, however, when one observes the language games of a group of adolescents at school. For the latter, the traditional focus on Standard Dutch has made this variety available for play and masquerade. The broadcasting corporation's renewed standardisation attempts therefore only seem to harm its own mission, marking substandard varieties as available for relief, enjoyment, and less status freighted interaction.

Spelen met taal in een door media gestimuleerde standaardiseringscontext: publieke omroep en talige praktijken van adolescenten in Vlaanderen

Er wordt aangetoond hoe de Vlaamse publieke omroep een al uitgesproken project van linguïstische standaardisering intensifieert en expliciet substandaard taalgebruik als slordig identificeert. Deze standaardiseringsambities lijken echter een averechtse uitwerking te hebben, wanneer we kijken naar de taalspelen van een groep adolescenten op school. Voor hen heeft de traditionele focus op Standaardnederlands ervoor gezorgd dat deze variëteit beschikbaar is voor spel en maskerade. De hernieuwde standaardiseringspogingen van de publieke omroep lijken daarom enkel haar eigen missie schade te berokkenen en substandaardvariëteiten aan te bieden als beschikbaar voor ontspanning, plezier en minder statusbeladen interactie.

Even though contemporary media tend to be seen as a catalyst of diversity, offering a window on global variation and local realities, at the same time these media are themselves characterised by multiple regimes or “force fields” that exert important constraints on the potential diversity that can be witnessed (cf also Biltereyst in this volume). As Bourdieu (1996) indicates, the field of journalism is governed by routines, symbolic hierarchies and widespread opinions on newsworthiness, which lead journalists to pick out certain aspects of the immense range of potential topics as “news”, while often leaving others uncovered. In linguistic terms, media across the world appear to allow for an increasing availability of different languages and varieties in fiction, soaps, or other entertainment, while at the same time reserving the most “important” domains (for instance hard journalism) for a monovariational and mostly monolingual mission.

In Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) there has certainly been a change in the media landscape since the arrival of commercial networks in 1989. The latter have not only led to a fascination with “common people” and the increasing participation of such people in televisual entertainment, resulting in a growing visibility of linguistic diversity. They have also led to a significant change in viewing habits, since formerly, large groups of Flemish viewers used to switch to Dutch TV stations (in the Netherlands) for their entertainment. This evolution is increasingly feeding into a general anxiety relating to the eventual failure of the standardisation project in Flanders (cf Jaspers 2001, Jaspers & Brisard 2006), which also made use of radio and television in the 60s and 70s to propagate its views. However, a brief consideration of the language use on the major commercial station, VTM (*Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij*, Flemish Television Company), as well as the public broadcasting corporation, VRT (*Vlaamse Radio- en Televisie-omroep*, Flemish Radio and Television Broadcasting corporation), reveals that — at least in what are generally considered “important” programmes — standard language normativity is still very effective. Thus, the public broadcasting corporation is still generally regarded as an authority on standard language matters.

We would like to argue that possible anxieties about the standardisation project in Flanders should probably not be inspired by recent evolutions in the media landscape. Instead, there is more cause for concern

about the way in which the public broadcasting corporation (VRT) has positioned itself in this project. We want to show here that this self-positioning may have counter-productive effects. It looks as though the VRT's promotion of standardisation inadvertently leads to more, rather than less, of the nonstandard language use it considers problematic; and to a situation where non-standard language use is becoming increasingly meaningful or available as a means to come to terms with an intense standardisation regime.

The data we will refer to in this article demonstrate that the ambition of the public broadcasting company, not only to define the norm but also to ensure that it prescriptively and actively changes language use in Flanders, is one of the emic points of reference for Flemish adolescents in cases where they “play off” different codes against each other to bring across meaning. It is not in spite of, but precisely owing to, the normative stance of the public media that language variation is meaningful for these adolescents, and that their language games “work”.

Two restrictions of scope apply here: first of all, the term “media” is restricted in this context to the public and broadcasting media (radio and television), as opposed to non-public broadcasting initiatives and to the written media;¹ secondly, the particular case of the meaningful multilingual behaviour of adolescents that is discussed in this paper, is based on an in-depth ethnographic study among Belgian youngsters in a secondary school setting (Jaspers 2005). In the following paragraphs, we will first explain the linguistic watchdog role the Flemish public broadcasting corporation attributes to itself. Consequently, as a counterweight, the second part of this paper will present findings of the ethnographic-sociolinguistic study. The discussion in section three will bring the first two sections into relation with each other.

1. Multilingualism and public broadcasting in Belgium/Flanders

Although Belgium has three official languages (Dutch, French and German), and thus might initially seem to be quite multilingual, it officially consists of several monolingual areas, with the notable exception

1 Although the latter media testify to similar linguistic standardisation impulses.

of Brussels, which is officially bilingual (Dutch/French). Generally speaking, there is a Dutch-speaking area in the north, usually called “Flanders”; a French-speaking area in the south called “Wallonia”; and a mixed German-French-speaking area called the “East Cantons” on Walloon territory in the east of Belgium. These different areas and their respective languages are the products of a set of dynamics that was basically put in motion in the nineteenth century by what is now usually referred to as “the Flemish movement” (albeit that the East Cantons only became part of Belgium after World War I). This movement can be described as a socio-political process that focused on the acquisition of linguistic rights for speakers of Dutch in a French favouring regime. Deeply inspired by a Herderian perspective on language, culture and territory, this movement did not eventually lead to the transformation of Belgium into a fully bilingual state, but rather to the establishment of different monolingual zones within Belgium; to the declaration of Dutch as the official “language of the region” in Flanders; and to a further process of federalisation which delegated important policy areas to different regional governments (cf Deprez & Vos 1998, Hermans *et al* 1992). One of the federalised competencies pertained to the public broadcasting media which, as from 1971, no longer form part of any Belgian ministry, but resort fully under the authority of the respective communities.

From its very start, public broadcasting in Belgium has been a monolingual phenomenon — the first official broadcast (in 1931) was already transmitted on two different language-specific wavelengths. The monolingual profile and the regional orientation of the broadcasting corporation after the split in 1971 were also illustrated by a number of symbolic name changes, such as the change from BRT (*Belgische Radio- en Televisie-omroep*, Belgian Radio and Television broadcasting company) to BRTN (with the “N” standing for *Nederlandstalig* or Dutch-speaking) in 1991, and the change to VRT in 1997.² These name changes also expressed the underlying Flemish identity that the broadcasting corporation was now meant to support and establish. At the level of language, this nation- and culture-building mission manifests itself in the spearheading of standardisation in Flanders (1.1) and in anti-substandard language campaigns (1.2).

2 Its French counterpart, the RTB (*Radio-Télévision belge*), changed its name to RTBF (*Radio-télévision belge de la communauté française*) in 1977, and currently still bears this name.

1.1 Standardisation

There has always been a clear link between public broadcasting and language norms in Flanders. More particularly, the public broadcasting corporation has played a major role in the project of linguistic standardisation and in the organisation of linguistic surveillance. In Flemish society in general, linguistic standardisation has two major motivations.³ Firstly, and unsurprisingly, the use of a standard Dutch is legitimised by the modernist idea of a “neutral” *lingua franca*, a variety that is free from local indexicality and tradition, and which should therefore guarantee equal and unambiguous communication between citizens, as well as between these citizens and the state. It should also serve as a vehicle for mass education and the dispersal of scientific knowledge. One of the consequences of this modernist ambition is the ongoing construction of a boundary between what is considered standard, neutral or modern and what is viewed as dialectal, traditional or provincial. In terms of this view, dialectal and substandard language forms are actively identified as “impure”. It is these impure forms (along with the speakers who use them) that become the focus of a regime of linguistic surveillance that attempts to purify language use and trim it to suit “modern” purposes.⁴

In Flanders, the organisation of this surveillance regime intensified because of the nineteenth century choice for a standard Dutch instead of a standard “Flemish”. This choice was inspired by the romantic view that the variety of Dutch that was then used as the standard language in the Netherlands was the product of a more “authentic” tradition than the varieties that existed in northern Belgium at that time.⁵ Standard northern Dutch was seen as a variety that was free from the corruption of French, a language that had been “placed in safekeeping” in the (northern) Netherlands after the separation of the Low Countries in the 80 Years’ War (1568-1648). Opting for a standard Flemish was considered to be a ratification of a “bad” history of cultural decline and French occupation which according to the general perception the southern Netherlands had witnessed since that war. Instead, Standard Dutch purportedly restored and revitalised an authentic Dutch tradition in Flanders, and

3 Cf Beheydt 1993, Geeraerts 1990, Geerts 1974, Jaspaert 1986, Taeldeman 1992, Willemyns 2003.

4 Cf Bauman & Briggs 2003, Cameron 1995, Milroy & Milroy 1985, Silverstein 1998.

5 Cf Deprez 1994 & 1999, Willemyns 1996 & 2003.

in a way also re-established — albeit now mainly on a linguistic level — the lost political unity of the Low Countries. It is against this background that, even today, substandard speakers are not only perceived as producing impure language forms, but also as perpetuating culturally corrupted or inauthentic forms with which they obstruct Flemish national emancipation. In other words, producing inauthentic language re-produces a cultural and linguistic hybridity that contradicts one's "own" pure tradition — a tradition which, in terms of a romantic perspective, is crucial to the establishment of sociopolitical harmony (cf Bauman & Briggs 2003).

Opting for this "new", modern and authentic, variety implied teaching it to Flemish speakers. As a consequence of this, a veritable industry of linguistic surveillance and standard language teaching came into being, focusing on pronunciation, dialect words, foreign loans, calques, morphological and syntactical dialectisms, and so on. Examples of the role of the VRT in this project abound. In the 60s and 70s, the BRT, as it was then known, broadcast programmes such as *Hier spreekt men Nederlands* (*One speaks Dutch here* [rather than substandard varieties]) and *Voor wie haar soms geweld aandoet* (*For those who tend to violate her* [the standard language]). In these programmes, specific attention was devoted to speaking "correctly" or speaking Standard Dutch, as opposed to speaking Flemish dialects or using so-called uncared speech, "contaminated" by dialectal characteristics, French influences, hyper-corrections, and other "non-pure" elements. Today, programmes with titles such as these would be considered inappropriate. But it would be wrong to infer from this that the VRT has now grown overly lenient in respect of standardisation, or that it has abandoned its language surveillance mission altogether.

Evidence of this can be found in the VRT Language Charter (Hendrickx 1998), which goes into the "hows" and "whys" of language use on the VRT.⁶ Basically, the Language Charter reads as a continuous defence of Standard Dutch, at the expense of substandard language use. Moreover, even though it is mainly presented as an "internal" document on language policy within the VRT, it consistently aspires towards

6 The Charter was authored by the VRT "language advisor", with the assistance of a Language Advice steering committee, which features senior VRT journalists and one senior university linguist.

the exertion of a formative influence on the outside world, on language use among and by the Flemish people. The first paragraph of the Language Charter reads as follows:

Volgens de meeste Vlamingen is het Nederlands dat op de VRT wordt gesproken, de norm voor de standaardtaal in Vlaanderen. De omroep zet zich in om de zogenaamde Belgische variant van de Nederlandse standaardtaal te blijven hanteren en aan zijn kijkers en luisteraars te presenteren. Hoe die variant eruitziet, is vastgelegd in het Taalcharter. De VRT wil de norm voor de Belgische variant van de Nederlandse standaardtaal zijn en blijven.⁷

If the Dutch that is spoken on VRT is considered the norm, then “laying down the particular form of this norm in the Language Charter” is a clear instance of the VRT’s active construction and delineation of that Belgian variant of Standard Dutch. This is also obvious in the statement: “The VRT aspires to be, and to remain, the norm for the Belgian variant of the Dutch standard language”. The VRT here attributes formative qualities to itself, along with a linguistic authority that goes beyond its own boundaries. This authority is legitimised, among other things by the rhetorical twist in the following quote, in which the VRT holds that the corporation is only taking over the norm that is already being used by language-sensitive Flemings, and that at the same time, there are hardly any language-sensitive Flemings, hence the VRT has to construct a norm itself:

Als norm geldt de taal die door taalgevoelige Vlamingen wordt gehanteerd wanneer zij hun taal bewust verzorgen. [...] Kiezen voor een eigen norm houdt in dat de omroep vaak zelf zal moeten beslissen wat wel en wat niet tot de standaardtaal behoort. In Vlaanderen wordt de standaardtaal immers niet of nauwelijks gedragen door een “spraakmakende gemeente”. In onze buurlanden wordt die mede gevormd door politici, bedrijfsleiders en academici, maar in Vlaanderen kan hun taal bezwaarlijk een voorbeeld worden genoemd.⁸

- 7 Most Flemings consider the Dutch that is spoken on the VRT the norm for the standard language in Flanders. The broadcasting corporation commits itself to continue to apply the so-called Belgian variant of the Dutch standard language and to present it to its viewers and listeners. The particular form of this variant is laid down in the Language Charter. The VRT aspires to be, and to remain, the norm for the Belgian variant of the Dutch standard language.
- 8 The language spoken by language-sensitive Flemings who consciously use careful speech will be the norm. [...] Choosing an own [Belgian] norm implies that the broadcasting corporation will often have to decide for itself what forms part

Flanders is here construed as an almost underdeveloped country in linguistic terms, lagging behind many of its neighbouring countries. In this way, the VRT seems to have appointed itself as an institute responsible for, and coming to the rescue of, the quality of daily language use among Flemish Belgians, which is implicitly identified as not good enough. This is a very specific interpretation of its official mission to “offer quality programmes, both in terms of contents, form and language use” (VRT Statutes).

Criticism of the VRT language policy and its focus on standard Dutch is sometimes refuted by pointing out that the use of substandard language and dialect is acceptable, except in the case of presenters who are employed by the VRT and who (are seen to) represent the corporation (Hendrickx 2002). The policy is more lenient towards, for example stars, comedians or otherwise famous Flemings who either temporarily present or take part in entertainment programmes, and who often speak in a substandard or dialectal fashion, as a trademark of their profession. In fact, a fair amount of substandard language use is encountered in entertainment programmes and documentaries on regional culture, and especially in soaps — ironically enough, with the objective of making them more realistic and appealing. Clearly, however, the presence of substandard language use in these programmes is deplored, and is hoped to be only a temporary phenomenon, which takes place in spite of the VRT’s stance against substandard language. It is tolerated on the grounds of the eventual non-acceptability of substandard language; and the range of this tolerance obviously only covers unimportant domains (from a “hard journalism” point of view).

Another way in which the VRT refutes criticism is by claiming that the corporation is not really against linguistic diversity, but that language varieties simply are not functionally equivalent. Therefore, not all varieties can be used for communication in all types of contexts in the same way (Hendrickx 2002: 59). This claim is based on the rigid view that diglossia is a fixed, unalterable pattern of one-on-one rela-

of the standard language and what does not. After all, the standard language in Flanders is hardly supported by a ‘high-profile community’. In our neighbouring countries this community is made up of politicians, managers and academics, but in Flanders their language can scarcely be considered a good example.

tions between language varieties and contexts. Taking this situation at face value, or presenting diglossia as a determined and determining phenomenon, is tantamount to sweeping under the carpet speakers' abilities to constantly renegotiate form-function and code-context relations, as well as the unequal social interaction that led up to situations of diglossia and language stratification. Presenting "what people do in reality" (the functional unequivalence of varieties) as natural and fixed, and as something that other people can consequently be advised to live up to, is then not simply "taking this reality as a starting point". It rather boils down to actively reproducing functional unequivalences and patterns of diglossia. Whereas at the same time, this diglossic situation, along with the variability that is concomitant with it, contradicts the earlier statement that there are hardly any language-sensitive Flemings.

1.2 Anti-substandard language campaign

Quite recently (in 2001), the VRT stepped up its standardisation project by organising an anti-substandard language campaign (cf Jaspers 2002). Basically, the aim of this campaign was similar to the one pursued in the older programmes (by means of explicit advice), but it was now set up as a sensitising campaign, or as a sort of "wake-up call" for inattentive language users. This campaign, too, was presented as an internal affair aimed primarily at VRT journalists and presenters. Nevertheless, the campaign was visibly promoted via advertisements on the radio and in newspapers, and its external relevance was quite obvious in the campaign's baseline, which was: *VRT. Taalsignaal voor 6 miljoen Vlamingen* (VRT. Language signal for six million Flemings) in other words, the totality of the population. The campaign-text not only mentioned that substandard language is characterised by "oddities", but also that:

Tussentaal duikt vooral in spontane spraak op en meestal gebeurt het onbewust en ongewild.⁹

and that:

Tussentaal staat slordig. En dat terwijl verzorgd spreken niet veel moeite kost.¹⁰

9 *Tussentaal* [substandard language, lit "interlanguage"] pops up in spontaneous speech and this mostly happens unconsciously and unintentionally

10 *Tussentaal* is sloppy, yet careful speech does not cost a great deal of effort.

Asserting that substandard language use is spontaneous, unintentional, or unconscious is almost tantamount to saying that the speaker is not really alert on a cognitive level. Next to this, the campaign focused on some fifteen items that all Flemings should keep in mind, comprising advice to “take care of one’s pronunciation”, “use correct articles”, and “not to inflect pronouns”, and so on. In each case, illustrations are provided in the form of examples of such “incorrect” constructions. Remarkably, each of the items focused on are very extreme “mistakes” that are hardly ever made by the TV and radio presenters at whom the campaign was allegedly directed in the first place, which again renders the mere “internal status” of this campaign highly questionable. This campaign was also supportive of the Language Charter’s stance on *tussentaal*:

De omroep hanteert een aantrekkelijke spreektaalvariant van de standaardtaal. Hij wil bewust een tegenwicht bieden tegen de oprukkende tussentaal [...].¹¹

The Charter nevertheless also predicts that *tussentaal* will eventually disappear to make room for an informal kind of Standard Dutch:

Wij gaan ervan uit dat met de verdere verspreiding van het standaardtaalgebruik in Vlaanderen, de tussentaal in haar huidige vorm meer en meer zal verdwijnen. In haar plaats zal er een informele variant van de standaardtaal komen die op een natuurlijke en nauwe wijze aansluit bij de standaardtaal die in Vlaanderen in het formelere register al ondubbelzinnig geaccepteerd wordt. De VRT ziet het als zijn taak de Nederlandssprekende taalgemeenschap in Vlaanderen ook voor die informele variant van de standaardtaal tot voorbeeld te dienen.¹²

Evidently, these data show that the VRT is not only a monolingual broadcasting corporation; it also propagates an explicit monovariational mission and actively prescribes and exemplifies the specific form that

11 The broadcasting corporation uses an attractive speech variant of the standard language. It consciously aims to present an alternative for the increasing use of *tussentaal*.

12 We start out from the premise that with the further dissemination of standard language use in Flanders, *tussentaal* in its actual form is bound to disappear. In its place, an informal variant of the standard language will come into being, which will naturally and closely harmonise with the standard language that is already unambiguously accepted in Flanders in more formal registers. The VRT considers it its task to serve as an example for the Dutch-speaking community in Flanders for this informal variant of the standard language, too.

must be taken by Standard Dutch in Belgium, while emphasising the social-indexical character of substandard language use. In spite of the emancipatory ideals of the “Flemish movement”, this paradoxically implies that the (publicly subsidised) VRT contributes to the organisation of a regime of linguistic surveillance (cf 1.1), to which large groups of those whose language was made official are themselves now subjected. One hierarchy of languages has, in other words, been replaced by a different one (Blommaert 1999, Jaffe 1999): the frenchification the Flemish movement went up against, has now changed into a regime of “Standard-Dutchification”, in which speakers of Flemish varieties are confronted with the same type of difficulties this movement initially opposed. In this hierarchy, Standard Dutch is believed to be endowed with an intrinsic emancipatory potential. Yet, the VRT’s Language Charter and anti-substandard language campaign show that it does not look as though Flemings are willing to drop substandard language use altogether, or regard Standard Dutch as “their own”. On the contrary, as we will try to illustrate below, a strong emphasis on standard language use brings about sophisticated language practices that precisely feed on the hierarchisation of linguistic varieties. The emphatic policing of language the VRT aims at, rather seems to create the conditions, and indeed the need, for substandard and multivariational language use. In the following paragraphs, we will try to illustrate this with data from an ethnographic and sociolinguistic case study on adolescent youth in a secondary school. Evidently, this school context is not irrelevant. Schools are explicit sites of teaching, learning, and surveillance. As institutions, they are furthermore often held responsible for attending to standardisation.

2. Linguistic sabotage in an institutional standardisation context

2.1 Ethnographic observations

In contrast to the ideal of monolingualism and monovariationism, research carried out in a secondary school in Antwerp indicates that Belgian adolescents of Moroccan descent display a lively and abundant multilingualism and skilfully play with different Dutch varieties (cf Jaspers 2005a, 2005b, 2006). This actually happens in spite of widespread stereotypes relating to ethnic minority youth in Flanders, who are ge-

nerally seen as unwilling to learn or speak Dutch, or unable to speak it well. Thus, when they were playing with different Dutch varieties, these adolescents were also dealing with the way in which they were stereotypically looked upon, and were positioning themselves *vis-à-vis* existing (language) norms and practices in the daily situations in which they participated at school. In doing so, they exemplified the social and political negotiation around what is taught and what gets learned in an institutional context concerned with standardisation.

The data discussed here are the result of two and a half years of fieldwork in one secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium (between May 1999 and April 2002). Data collection involved participant observation, interviewing, individual (audio) recording, classroom (audio) recording, and feedback-interviews on extracts from the recordings.¹³ The research focused on the ways in which students of Moroccan descent (stereotypically regarded as young delinquents) played around with different varieties of Dutch and in this way often “sabotaged” the fluent rhythm of adult-adolescent relations. Data were analysed in an interactional sociolinguistic and linguistic ethnographic fashion (cf Gumperz 1982, Hymes 1996). The study chimes in with other recent analyses of adolescent linguistic behaviour in school as well as leisure contexts.¹⁴

The school in which these data were assembled (here called “City School”) offers nonuniversity technical and vocational curriculum tracks. The adolescents discussed here followed electro-mechanics as a main subject. All their (male and female) teaching staff members were of white Flemish background. Relations between students and teachers were mostly friendly and constructive. The City School is monolingual in principle (as all other official schools in Flemish Belgium), but in practice it has a highly multilingual population. This was also quite

13 The corpus consists of 35 hours of individual audio-recording and 35 hours of simultaneous classroom recording, and 45 hours of interviewing. The fieldwork concentrated on two classes in their last years of secondary education (thirty-five pupils in two different groups; in each group Moroccan students took up two thirds of the total amount of pupils; there were three students of Turkish descent, and 10 Flemish ones (of which one was female); ages varied from 16 to 21; backgrounds were working class, all minus two were Belgian-born).

14 For example Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou 2003, Heller 1999, Pujolar 2001, Rampton 1995 & 2006.

noticeable in the electro-mechanics classes, where different Turkish, Arabic, Berber and Dutch varieties were spoken on a daily basis. Many students of Turkish and Moroccan descent themselves remarked that they continually code-switched between their home language(s) and Dutch. Moreover, they frequently borrowed elements from other varieties, depending on their interest and ability, as well as on the attractiveness of a particular variety due to its association with certain friends or media.

When we look at their competence in Dutch, it is worth noting that students of Moroccan descent had a fairly good vernacular competence in Dutch, but systematically struggled with formal, or standard language expectations. Their writing skills were below average. Typically, in spoken as well as written language, they made errors of gender in articles (*de boek* instead of regular neuter *het boek* [the book]); adjectives were often inflected incorrectly (*een goede boek* instead of *een goed boek* [a good book]), and similar difficulties arose with demonstrative pronouns (*deze boek* instead of correct *dit boek* [this book]), among other things. Moroccan students also acknowledged that their own Dutch was less than perfect. But at the same time they repeatedly and consistently argued that they were competent speakers of Dutch, especially in relation to recent immigrants. And they delighted in identifying their white Flemish classmates' speech as dialectal and thus "bad" Dutch according to standard language ideology.

In spite of their difficulties with Standard Dutch, a minimal variation analysis of a couple of phonological variables does show that these adolescents' routine Dutch is characterised by patterns of social stratification that also hold for other Flemings (cf Table 1: formal contexts correlate with standard realisations of phonological variables).

Table 1¹⁵

Faisal's realisation of t-deletion in *goed* (good) and *niet* (not) across 3 settings

<i>t-deletion:</i>	<i>standard t (goed, niet)</i>	<i>non-standard deletion (goe, nie)</i>
Book presentation	19/30 63%	11/30 37%
Pupil-teacher interaction/Interview	3/30 10%	27/30 90%
Playground	0/20 0%	20/20 100%

Faisal's realisation of [o:] *ook* (also) and *boven* (up) vs [u^ɪ] *oek* or [ʌ:] in *boven* across 3 settings

<i>{o:} vs {u} or {ʌ:}</i>	<i>{o:}</i>	<i>{u} or {ʌ:}</i>	<i>unclear</i>
Book presentation	19/23 83%	3/23 13%	1/23 4%
Pupil-teacher interaction/Interview	9/10 90%	1/10 10%	
Playground	2/6 33%	4/6 67%	

Faisal's standard and non-standard realisations of [a:] as in *vader* (father) across 3 settings

<i>{a} vs {}</i>	<i>{a:}</i>	<i>{}</i>	<i>unclear</i>
Book presentation	19/35 54%	13/35 37%	3/35 9%
Pupil teacher interaction/Interview	11/31 36%	15/31 48%	5/31 16%
Playground	1/22 5%	21/22 95%	

- 15 One token speaker (Faisal, a pseudonym) was selected in three different settings that vary in terms of formality: (1) a formal book presentation in class (formal, 5.30 mins); (2) an interview with the researcher and a short conversation with the teacher after class (semi-formal, 7 mins); (3) a playground interaction (informal, 10 mins). This led to significant differences in a *chi* square test ($p < 0.05$).

Accordingly, we can see here that standardisation attempts have had some success. Standard Dutch clearly is part of these adolescents' daily language. Nevertheless, the fact that these adolescents often failed to comply to Standard Dutch expectations was sometimes considered all the more reason why the City School should emphasise its Dutch-only policy. In this frame, explicit school language rules were formulated such as "When at school, speak Standard Dutch". Because of the high number of students with Moroccan backgrounds in them, the following language rules were developed for the electro-mechanics classes:

We gebruiken vanzelfsprekend standaardtaal (Algemeen Nederlands) tijdens de les.

In de les worden geen dialecten en zeker geen vreemde talen die slechts een klein groepje begrijpt gesproken. Iedereen moet iedereen altijd kunnen begrijpen.¹⁶

An evaluative linguistic focus was also attributed to the researcher:

While I'm noting down that two boys are speaking Dutch to each other, Samir, who is sitting next to me, asks: "Ah, they don't speak proper Dutch?" [fieldnotes]

Aziz, suddenly and provocatively at the end of math: "Are you going with us to Drama class? Yeah, that's what you find interesting, huh, to hear how well we can speak Dutch?" [fieldnotes]

In both examples we can see how, in the perception of these adolescents, being a language researcher immediately seems to imply a prescriptivist evaluation of their "proper" language use, or a registration of their poor competence. Clearly, these students are well aware of what is expected of them in linguistic terms, and of the kinds of evaluation they might expect to be subjected to. This was corroborated in interviews with these students, where they regarded Standard Dutch as a prestigious and necessary language, as "very useful" in future job contexts and institutional interactions, and as a variety associated with intellectual and moral superiority.

16 Obviously, we speak standard language (Standard Dutch) while in class. During class the use of dialects is not allowed, and certainly not the use of foreign languages which only a small group can understand. Everyone should always be able to understand one another.

However, in contrast to school rules and expectations, adolescents could regularly (about every 15 minutes) be observed playing with different varieties. Not only with other languages, but also with Dutch varieties as “Illegal Dutch” (or foreigner Dutch, the language attributed to recent immigrants and refugees, all viewed as “illegal” by these adolescents), and Antwerp dialect (associated by these adolescents with disgruntled working class whites) (Jaspers 2004). Furthermore, also Standard Dutch often was the object of ridicule. In spite of its “normal” presence in their daily language routines (as the statistics above show), and their explicit appreciation of this variety, therefore, City School adolescents did not see Standard Dutch as inconspicuous or neutral. Rather, Standard Dutch conjured up a serious world that is incompatible with their own ambition to enjoy themselves or at least feel at ease.

2.2 “Doing ridiculous” with linguistic varieties

Playing with linguistic varieties was, in fact, part of what adolescents referred to as “doing ridiculous” or “counteracting”. When they were doing ridiculous, students would start play-acting in class, or would feign enthusiasm or an eagerness to learn. They would simulate ignorance, and create other kinds of ambiguity and inauthenticity in order to lead their teachers (and also the researcher, cf 2.4) up the garden path, especially in situations they perceived as boring or serious.¹⁷ “Boring” or “serious” in this case refers to the many tedious moments life at school very often implies, which are effectively cheered up by “doing ridiculous”. In contrast, “being serious” meant being responsible, obedient and sincere — behaving in a way these adolescents qualified as nerdy and useless. Plainly put, “doing ridiculous” involved laughter, while “serious” situations brought “unlaughter” (cf Billig 2005).

In general, “doing ridiculous” could cause some humourous disturbance, but it did so without completely short-circuiting any of the lessons or research interviews in which they participated. For this reason, a term such as “sabotage” has seemed an apt word to describe this behaviour (cf Goffman 1974: 426). Using language varieties and the different

17 Cf “making out” (Foley 1990: 112), Goffman (1961: 157), “messing about” (Gilroy & Lawrence 1988: 136-7), “having a laugh” (Willis 1977, Woods 1976), “badinage” (Dubberley 1993).

social identities and locations to which these language varieties refer, naturally provides an abundant source of material for pretending, and for suggesting and projecting hypothetical identities. “Doing ridiculous” was, in other words, an effective way to brighten up what adolescents saw as “serious” situations in which they felt they had little influence on the course of events, and were instead being held accountable for ensuring that they behaved in a proper manner.

In fact, boring and serious situations were not only associated with school. This label could also be extended to all routine participation frameworks in which these young people experienced little room for self-initiated action, and in which there was a strong likelihood of being held accountable by adults (teachers, researchers, adults outside of the school context). More precisely, “serious” situations occurred on occasions when there was a marked potential for evaluation, observation, critique, sanctioning, and/or stereotyping. For example when teachers re-proached them and complained, or when they found themselves being awkwardly observed (for example by a researcher), or confronted with unfamiliar white adults such as temporary teachers. Of course, similar situations could arise outside of school, for example while travelling with adult whites on the tram. In fact it was in this context that the word *tegenwerken* (sabotaging) was used. When Imran was asked why he and his friends sometimes spoke pseudo-learner Dutch on the tram, he said:

When we're on the tram, and when you see they're all racists, that's when you act like that, that's when you sabotage, you see, 'cos acting normal isn't much fun for us then, you see.

Imran is reporting here on a practice described by Rampton as “tertiary foreigner talk”: “a language practice where people with [a] migrant or minority background strategically masquerade in the racist imagery used in dominant discourses about them” (Rampton 2001b: 271). More particularly, Imran and his friends are trying to make people believe that they are bad speakers of Dutch, in order to provoke indignation at their supposedly deficient Dutch or to make white Flemings expose their unfriendly attitudes towards youngsters of Moroccan descent. All this, simply in order to switch back afterwards to their normal, fluent, Dutch, and to be able to laugh at the surprised faces of the people who were so naive as to believe that these adolescents’ Dutch was really so bad. In doing so, Imran and his friends are not merely being

silly; they are actually making a routine situation (being potentially confronted with racism and stereotyping) less obvious by linguistically “throwing dust” in the eyes of the people who are perceived as creating such situations; and in this way, they are challenging these people’s perception of reality. “Acting normal” in such situations “isn’t much fun,” since it means accepting a rather unpleasant situation without demur. Consequently, playing with linguistic varieties frequently occurred in situations where expectations about normative behaviour were markedly heightened, when situations were experienced as slightly different from normal life, and when attention needed to be paid to how they should be (linguistically) behaving and how this behaviour would reflect on their moral identities.

2.3 Speech stylisation

Sociolinguistically, this “playing with linguistic varieties” is a form of speech stylisation. Stylisation is a practice that can be defined as the “intensification or exaggeration of a particular way of speaking for symbolic and rhetorical effect” (Rampton 2001a: 85), and as “the knowing deployment of culturally familiar styles and identities that are marked as deviating from those predictably associated with the current speaking context [...] a form of strategic de-authentication” (Coupland 2001: 345). Stylisations, in other words, are extremely contrived and self-conscious speech products, or theatrical linguistic performances. It is this performative aspect and their deviation from routine behaviour that makes them useful entries for the analysis of normative and deviant language use. After all, performances usually put the focus on form; often reframe ordinary language and signal that what is said is to be understood in a special sense; and performances usually spotlight a performer whose actions and communicative skills are consequently (morally) evaluated by an audience (cf Bauman 1977). Therefore, the evaluation of these deviant products in the ensuing interaction tells us something about what norms are taken as routine, what is found acceptable or not, and what is seen as authentic and/or correct. Moreover, when speakers stylise they usually project a different, hypothetical self-identity, which allows inferences to be drawn about how they relate to the situation on hand, as well as about their relation to the variety being used. Since varieties are also linked to the social world, linguistic

performances can inform us about how social actors position themselves in that world and towards each other. In the next paragraph, we will focus on how students in this case study stylised Standard Dutch, and what information we can derive from this concerning their relation to this variety and to socio-linguistic norms in the world beyond it.

2.4 Styling Standard Dutch

Although there is a statistical indication of their routine acceptance and use of Standard Dutch, it appears in the data that in non-routine behaviour, Standard Dutch does not seem to be accepted as neutral. In the data there are 31 instances in which Standard Dutch is stylised, 3 of those were noted, 28 were taped — A number of criteria decided whether a certain utterance was stylised or routine.¹⁸ As we mentioned above, adolescents portrayed this variety in interviews as the language of authority, co-operation, and as an important asset in later life. In practice, however, and in spite of their awareness of the emancipatory potential of this variety, adolescents used Standard Dutch in a way that illustrated how inauthentic it was for them, and how, in their view, it expressed unequal power relations. Standard Dutch was notably associated with teachers' doings, who occupy a dominant position in the classroom. Frequently, too, stylisations of Standard Dutch conjured up images of (mostly quite intellectual) media communication, and of presenters, journalists, reporters and interviewers, whose professional competencies include the distribution of turns in conversation; the formulation of probing questions; and the evaluation of participants'

18 Whether or not a certain fragment counted as stylised performance was first and foremost informed by Jaspers' long familiarity with these adolescents' usual and unusual ways of speaking and by his own knowledge of Antwerp dialect and Standard Dutch as a relatively standard speaker who grew up and lives in Antwerp. Other important indicators included: an increased intensity of standard phonetic features, the use of standard (instead of dialectal) personal pronouns and standard verb conjugation, the use of standard diminutives, stereotypically formal or intellectualist lexis, and special acoustic design such as careful articulation, different voice quality, or sudden shifts in loudness and pitch level (see Rampton, 2003 for a similar approach). As Rampton (2003: 55) indicates, "[I]f the audience (or indeed the speaker) subsequently responded by laughing, repeating the utterance, by commenting on it, or by switching into a different kind of nonnormal dialect or voice, this could be another clue."

answers — all of which, of course, are structurally reminiscent of what teachers do in class (Macbeth 1991: 285, Sacks *et al* 1978: 45). The same holds for competent interviewees, who provide their answers in Standard Dutch and in line with the turn-taking system of organised conversation, which is structurally similar to what exemplary pupils would do. In the stylisations of these adolescents there was a clear and recurrent link between the media, its tightly organised and asymmetrical turn-taking formats, and the use of Standard Dutch.

Research interviews were therefore very tempting opportunities for stylisation. In spite of the researcher's many attempts to minimise his own role as an interviewer or turn taking authority, adolescents often experienced interviews as heightening the potential for embarrassment (*i e* being evaluated, observed, or being singled out for an answer). In the following example,¹⁹ we can see how in response to this, Standard Dutch was playfully used by adolescents to simulate extreme co-operation:

- 1 JJ: but eh why eh . why would he do that . or does that happen
- 2 often that you think there are racists about?
- 3 Faisal: | no no we just say
- 4 Imran: no no Nordin (sometimes) just says some of these words
- 5 Faisal | *no no it's actually about*
- 6 *it's actually about f- it's actually about femi-feminism*
- 7 Jamal: (laughs)
- 8 Faisal: (laughs)
- 9 Imran: no no no . that was . dunno ()
- 10 Faisal: no we had this kind of banal feeling and uh .. ()
[...] [30.0]
- 32 Jamal: no but uh .. sometimes
- 33 they just say things isn't it .. you shouldn't really try to
- 34 analyse that and all 'cause- he just says that-
- 35 JJ to provoke other people or to make them feel=
- 36 Jamal: well yeah something like that
- 37 JJ: =annoyed?

19 Participants and setting: Interview with Imran (19), Jamal (19) and Faisal (19). April 2001. They have just been listening to an extract from a recording that was made some months ago. JJ asks them why Nordin, one of their classmates, would be shouting "racists!" in the school corridor. A thirty-second digression between lines 10 and 32 has been left out here. Stylisations are in *italics*.

- 38 Faisal: *it's actually about the obs- observation* (laughs)
 39 Jamal: (laughs)
 40 Faisal: no no . just wi-
 41 Imran: | ()
 42 Faisal: | for example for example look huh .
 43 w- we are sometimes together all of us uh . we're saying
 44 something strange dunno 'blue' or something . that's .
 45 simply
 46 Imran: it doesn't have anything to do with our culture or stuff²⁰

Pragmatically speaking, what Faisal says in lines 5-6 could be a possible answer to the researcher's question in line 1. But this possibility is not taken into consideration by Imran and Jamal (lines 7-8). Imran makes this explicit in line 9, and tries to formulate something more suitable, which Faisal then also tries to do in line 10. A little

20 Dutch original:

- 1 JJ: maar eh waarom eh [.] waarom zou die dat doen [.] of gebeurt da veel
 2 da gulle vindt dat er racisten rondlopen?
 3 Faisal: | neenee wij slagen
 4 Imran: neenee Nordin zegt (soms) van die woorden
 5 Faisal: | *neenee 't gaat eigenlijk om . 't gaat eigenlijk om*
 6 *bet f- 't gaat eigenlijk om bet femi-feminisme*
 7 Jamal: (lacht)
 8 Faisal: (lacht)
 9 Imran: neeneenee [.] da was [.] 'k weetnie. ()
 10 Faisal: nee wij hadden zone banaal gevoel en eh [.] ()
 [...] [30.0]
 32 Jamal: nee maar eh [.] soms
 33 zeggen die van die dingies hé [.] ge moet da nie echt proberen te
 34 ontleden en zo want- die zegt da maar
 35 JJ: om ander mensen wat te provoceren of zo om om die wat ambetant te=
 36 Jamal: awel ja zoiet
 37 JJ: =doen voelen?
 38 Faisal: *'t gaat eigenlijk om de obs- observatie* (lacht)
 39 Jamal: (lacht)
 40 Faisal: neenee [.] gewoon me-
 41 Imran: | ()
 42 Faisal: | bijvoorbeeld bijvoorbeeld zie hé [.] w-wij zijn
 43 soms met samen allemaal hé [.] wij zeggen ineens iets raar 'kweenie
 44 'blauw' of zo [.] da's [.] gewoon
 45 Imran: da heeft niks me- ons cultuur te maken of zo

later, Jamal gives his explanation and tells the interviewer not to pay too much attention to other people's foolishness. The interview seems to be back on track again; but in line 38, Faisal produces another answer that is structurally identical to what he said earlier in lines 5-6: again, he uses an "intellectual" word that features the same stuttering repetition of its first part, and which, this time, is even less plausible in terms of content. Again Faisal's contribution is not taken seriously (lines 39-40); and it is Faisal himself who provides a more genuine answer in his routine Dutch in lines 42-45.

Faisal's two special contributions are not delivered in his routine way of speaking, but in a "Standard Dutch":²¹ he uses careful pronunciation, "expensive" words, and no dialectal vowels. Faisal is doing ridiculous here; and the fact that his two contributions are interactionally adequate, but deviate from what is expected in this interview in terms of content and indexicality, provides an argument for interpreting what he does as a case of upkeying — an unauthorised adding of layers of meaning (Goffman 1974: 366), which could potentially cause the researcher to hold a different conception of the situation from the one which is entertained by Faisal. The latter is trying to turn the interview into a parody, and he is becoming over-involved by giving answers which, considering JJ's status as a researcher from the university, are particularly impressive (1) because of their Standard Dutch quality; and (2) because of their intellectualist and therefore "interesting" content. In any case, the effect of this is "frame trouble" (cf Goffman 1974) — even while he is prepared to provide a remedy by denying what he said (lines 10 and 40), Faisal is creating a situation in which all of the information he gives is potentially ambiguous and insincere. The more Faisal does this (and this example was only one of several occasions on which he used Standard Dutch in this way), the less the researcher knows which frame applies, and/or the more he needs to be suspicious of everything Faisal says. Since Faisal interprets this interview as an occasion on which he is being requested to provide authentic information, he is effectively sabotaging it by constructing inauthenticity, and by actively resisting a request for authentic information on his (and Nordin's) ethnic experience.

21 That is, in what comprises "Standard Dutch" in the view of Moroccan adolescents themselves.

Furthermore, each social encounter brings along expectations about proper or routine behaviour that participants can be called upon to live up to, requiring certain normative identities to be projected. The fact that Faisal and his friends use Standard Dutch to present themselves as different-from-the-usual and stylise this variety to project an ironical, hyper-normative identity, points to the fact that they are negotiating the terms of their participation and their involvement. Indeed, they are ridiculing their involvement in the interview, and thus the interview itself, and in doing so they are providing a kind of social commentary on the activity on hand (cf Rampton 2006: 218): this is not an explicit commentary, but a practical one that makes clear that they (or Faisal especially) are not taking things overly serious or do not wish to do that. The relation of Standard Dutch with the regime of linguistic surveillance described above could mean that, if we place this brief interaction in the wider or slower social structure in general, we can see here how a couple of adolescents are, albeit locally and very temporarily, negotiating their co-operation with the linguistic norms in the world beyond — or exemplified by — this interview. As we have already said, this is a world these adolescents often identified as far too serious, and this is a point we will take up in the following section.

The example we discussed above (and many others in the data) derives much of its illustrative power from its absurd humour: adolescents delight in exaggerating their co-operation and in the resulting embarrassment of the interviewer, similar to the pleasure they take in pretending to be bad speakers and discomfiting adults on the tram. In fact, the categories these youngsters themselves frequently used to structure their social world (doing ridiculous vs doing serious) indicate that they held dear to a humourous way of living. Doing serious instead pointed to a dull world controlled by adults and their reprimands, a world literally full of seriousness and, for them, unattractive people, things, and practices. Doing ridiculous, in contrast, provided them with alleviation from boredom. It could jumble up the fluent rhythm of lessons or research interviews, it confused authority figures or led them astray. Playing with languages was funny, in other words, and it livened up these adolescents' day at school.

Moreover, projecting an exaggerated, hyper-normative identity is obviously a good way of making fun of such identities (and the people that

are often seen to authentically impersonate them) and contesting their influence. Crucially,

... humour highlights power [...] by its ability temporarily to distort social relations and structures and point to their absurdity. Like a Magritte painting, by altering features of 'normality', such as scale and proportion, humour shocks us out of perceptive lethargy, forcing us to re-evaluate what is around us (Dubberley 1993: 91).

3. Discussion and conclusions

At this point, it is useful to relate City School students' language use to the role of the VRT in Flemish Belgium. In the beginning of this paper, we identified the VRT, a state-subsidised institution, as an enthusiast advocate of Standard Dutch in a society that already has a passion for standardisation. We also saw that in the eyes of City School students, there was a clear link between the use of Standard Dutch and tight turn-taking regimes in the media, which in their turn were reminiscent of similar boring, serious, and embarrassment increasing situations at school. Though it is difficult to claim that the VRT's language policy immediately causes the stylisations we find in the case study, it might not be unreasonable to suggest that by raising the pressure on Standard Dutch, the VRT is adding fresh fuel to the potential for embarrassment (not speaking good enough, being singled out for correction) in a society where adolescents at school already experience this potential as significant enough to discourage them from using this variety. Thus, one could say that in its standardising fervour, the VRT is enhancing a sociolinguistic "climate of unlaughter" in which linguistic products are strictly policed and patrolled, and where deviant, colourful, or frivolous forms have no room, unless in domains considered unimportant. In such a strict linguistic regime, playing with different varieties and substandard forms, or mocking standard ones, can provide comic relief — especially when the acquisition or use of these forms does not seem to bring about real benefits and when linguistic policies are experienced as primarily serving linguistic rather than social ends.²² At the same time, this comic relief does not preclude speakers meeting standard

22 Employment studies in Belgium constantly bear out that employers reject potential employees with non-Flemish backgrounds or names, in spite of their linguistic or other competencies.

language expectations to a certain extent. More importantly perhaps, while teaching what forms should be used in formal situations, the VRT (and other institutions) are precisely teaching what forms are fun, and are teaching that on non-serious or informal occasions, expectations can be different.²³

Although these adolescents' low enthusiasm for Standard Dutch may eventually be self-defeating on the broader linguistic market and on levels where standardisation surveillance is highest, their practices do point to the paradoxical situation in which the VRT (and the community of which it is a typical product) finds itself. The VRT is intensifying an already forced standardisation climate that seems to make speakers briefly windowdress if the occasion calls for it, but then look for other forms on less constraining moments. Rather than encouraging its use therefore, the VRT appears to be heightening the probability of control, the need for escape, and in doing so effectively drives a wedge between Flemish speakers and an uncomplicated use of Standard Dutch. In this way, one could say that the VRT's monovariational mission brings about the very linguistic diversity it originally set out to discourage, and recreates the conditions for its own mission.

In sum, in this paper, we have seen that:

- Adolescents in a local Flemish school partly meet Standard Dutch expectations in daily language routines;
- Adolescents associated Standard Dutch with strict and asymmetrical turn-taking regimes visible in the media, which are structurally similar to teacher-student relations that often invoked evaluation and pressurising;
- When adolescents experienced heightened evaluation and explicit pressurising, or anticipated embarrassment, this could lead to inauthentic participation and linguistic masquerade; and that

23 Cf Meeuwis (1998, 2001) for a converse case: in modern urban comic theatre in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in modern Lingala literature, the contrast between regional and intergenerational varieties is primarily capitalised on for creating humorous and poetic effects. The standard-substandard contrast is meaningless and unexploitable, as standardisation attempts in the early twentieth century failed for a number of practical reasons, which fall outside the scope of this paper.

- Standard Dutch could be the object of ridicule in a process where adolescents were drawing lines between the authentic and the laughable, and identifying linguistic forms as available for authentic/laughable performances.

Additionally, we have seen that the Flemish radio and television broadcasting corporation (VRT) is raising the stakes, and is emphatically identifying Standard Dutch with evaluation and control, and substandard language use as deplorable and sloppy. In our view, this seems to go against any creation of favourable conditions for an uptake of Standard Dutch that significantly exceeds its present success. On the contrary, the more the VRT and other Flemish institutions invest in mono-variationism, the more it looks as if Flemish adolescents will be identifying other languages and substandard varieties as available for relief and enjoyment, and for the construction of different identities than those allowed for or (perceived to be) given by Standard Dutch interaction.

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