

BETWEEN LANGUAGE POLICY AND LINGUISTIC REALITY: INTRALINGUAL SUBTITLING ON FLEMISH TELEVISION

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a relatively new and much discussed phenomenon on Flemish television: The practice of intralingual subtitling of Dutch, i.e. Dutch subtitling of native speakers of (varieties of) Dutch. Our study investigates the linguistic determinants of intralingual subtitling and subsequently confronts actual subtitling practice with viewer needs. The analyses reveal a striking inconsistency between intralingual subtitling practice in fiction versus non-fiction programs. This appears to be symptomatic of a tension between the official language policy in Flanders and present day linguistic reality. As such, subtitling practice subtly reflects the existence of shifting linguistic norms in Flanders.

Keywords: Intralingual subtitling; Language variation and change; Norm shift; Language policy; (Sub)standardization.

1. Introduction

In the northern, Flemish provinces of Belgium, Dutch is the official language. The Dutch-speaking community in Belgium outnumbers the French-speaking community in the southern part of Belgium: The first one is represented by ca. 6 million, the latter by ca. 4 million native speakers. Northern Belgium (Flanders) constitutes one contiguous Dutch-speaking area with the Netherlands (16 million inhabitants) which is situated north of Belgium and where Dutch is the official language as well. Although Flanders and the Netherlands share the same language, there are quite a few distinctive elements in both grammar and lexis which explain why terms such as ‘Belgian Dutch’ and ‘Netherlandic Dutch’ function as key notions in much of the literature on the Dutch language situation. Yet, labelling Dutch as a pluricentric language with two interacting centres (cf. Clyne 1992) was considered to be problematic until recently, because its power base has long been situated in the Netherlands: The national variety of the Netherlands functions as the official model for Standard Dutch in Belgium (Willemyns and Bister 1989; Geerts 1992).

Map 1: Map of the Netherlands and Belgium¹



In recent decades, a lot of research has been inspired by the question whether Belgian Dutch is converging with northern, Netherlandic Dutch or whether diverging tendencies are prevalent (cf. *infra*). From halfway the 20th century onwards it was believed that Flanders would need just a few decades to catch up with the Netherlands: Flanders would finally transcend its historical retardation in the standardisation process by adopting the Netherlandic Dutch standard language in all its registers (Goossens 1975).

For the formal registers, this prediction proved to be true: Belgian Dutch has converged towards Netherlandic Dutch (Goossens 2000; Grondelaers Van Aken, Spielman & Geeraerts 2001). Informal Belgian Dutch, however, rather unexpectedly appears to be making an about-turn. While in the sixties and seventies of the previous century many efforts were made by public services, by the media, by teachers and by laymen to bring the Dutch standard language within reach of every Fleming, we now see a kind of change from below: Flemings increasingly use so-called *tussentaal*, which could be translated as ‘intermediate language’. *Tussentaal* is hard to define since it

¹ Source: <http://www.taalthuis.com/course/backgrounds/nebel.html>

comprises different variants that are all positioned somewhere on the continuum going from dialect to standard language. Moreover, every region has its own 'intermediate language' or 'regiolect' (as opposed to the small scale local dialect). Still in Flanders one regiolect is definitely dominant: It is that of the central provinces of Flemish-Brabant and Antwerp, which make up the Brabant dialect area. In other words, that area is clearly trendsetting (Geeraerts et al. 2000; Goossens 2000; Vandekerckhove 2005) and the city dialect of Antwerp, which is the biggest city in Flanders², plays a prominent role in this regiolectization process (Taeldeman 2005). That is why Dutch linguists have wondered whether present-day colloquial speech in Flanders is marked by a process of autonomous standardization, ignoring the common discourse on the convergence of Belgian and Netherlandic Dutch that has for decades been promoted both in education and in the media (De Caluwe 2002: 58). The question whether this will ultimately lead to a Flemish alternative for the Netherlandic Dutch norm has been the topic of much debate.

Intermediate language has become a public medium which competes with the standard language in domains in which the latter previously was the unmarked medium. Symptomatic is for instance its current omnipresence in TV programs meant to entertain (such as variety shows and soaps) rather than inform (such as documentaries). To this fact it owes its – somewhat ironic and hardly flattering – nickname “soap-Flemish” (Geeraerts et al. 2000). Flemish sociolinguists and dialectologists have expressed their disapproval of the “omni-situational use” of intermediate language (Taeldeman 1992: 13) and have interpreted the ever-increasing use of 'soap-Flemish' or intermediate language as "corrupting linguistic norms" (ibidem), and as a symptom of "Flemish (linguistic) self-absorption" (Goossens 2000: 7).

The research presented here intends to offer a new perspective on linguistic relations in Flanders. It analyses a media phenomenon that is relatively new in Flanders and that seems to be symptomatic of the changing linguistic climate, viz., the practice of intralingual subtitling of Dutch on Flemish television. This practice consists of Dutch subtitling of speakers of Dutch who speak either in a fairly standard manner or who use a regional variety of Dutch. This subtitling is meant for the regular Flemish viewing public which has Dutch or a regional variety of Dutch as its first language. As far as we are aware, our study is the first to report on the phenomenon of intralingual subtitling not meant for the deaf and hard of hearing. Even though intralingual subtitling is relatively rare, informal observation in several European countries shows that it does exist beyond Flanders. Moreover, even in the Dutch language area, Flanders does not stand alone: In the Netherlands Flemish Dutch-speaking soap productions are subtitled as well. A well-known example is the Flemish police series *Flikken* which has been broadcast on Dutch television for some years now and which always gets complete subtitling.

In all of these cases we are dealing with open subtitling: The subtitles are “an integral part of the audiovisual program since they cannot be removed and are always visible on the screen, like subtitles on a cinema film”(Diaz Cintas & Remael 2007: 249). Flemish television also offers a lot of closed intralingual subtitling on teletext, which is meant for the deaf and hard of hearing but is also used by non-deaf people, and

² In January 2008 the city of Antwerp had 477,306 inhabitants. In contrast, on the 1st of January 2009 Ghent had 239,541 inhabitants. And the website of the city of Bruges, for instance, gives 116,947 inhabitants for 2008. These figures can be found on the official websites of each of these cities.

probably increasingly so (Remael et al. 2008: 88). However, the research presented here only deals with open subtitling practices.

Our investigation is based on a large corpus of Dutch TV-programs broadcast on Flemish television. It does not deal with the specificities of intralingual subtitling compared to interlingual subtitling nor does it offer an analysis of the subtitles themselves (but see Remael et al. 2008). Instead, it focuses on the linguistic determinants of intralingual subtitling, although some extralinguistic determinants are necessarily dealt with as well (see section 2). Next, we examine the reception of intralingual subtitling: Section 3 deals with the results of a stimulus-based survey on viewer needs. In section 4 we compare the results of our intralingual subtitling practice analysis and the survey on viewer needs. The discussion opens up the perspective for more general questions on the role of the media in reflecting and/or shaping linguistic relations: What does intralingual subtitling reveal about the perception of linguistic variety and language change in progress; what does it say about the way program makers and other participants in the production process cope with changing linguistic practices? These are the final research questions of this case study.

2. Intralingual subtitling practice on Flemish television

During the first phase of this research project we conducted a number of interviews with net managers and subtitling companies. These led to the conclusion that there are hardly any consistent guidelines or company policies on when or where to subtitle. In fact, decisions about subtitling are often left to individual program producers (Remael et al. 2008: 84-88). Because the interviews did not allow for a systematic survey of actual subtitling practice, we put together a corpus of Dutch language television programs ourselves.

2.1. *The corpus*

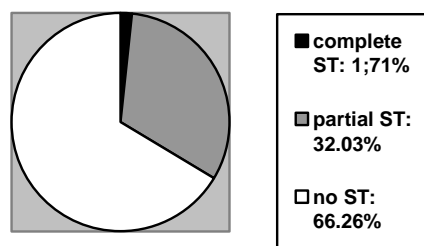
The corpus consists of Dutch language television programs broadcast by the public television station VRT and the commercial station VTM in the first three months of 2005. It is a balanced corpus in terms of broadcasting slots and genres. One seventh of all the Dutch-language programs broadcast on the two stations in the three months of data collection are represented. All told, the corpus consists of 793 programs or 380 hours of broadcasting time. Discounting the 384 children's programs (none of which are subtitled), that leaves us with a total of 409 programs covering four basic genres (cf. Creeber 2003), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Corpus of Dutch language TV programs excluding children's programming

	VRT	VTM	TOTAL
News	69	33	102 (24.9%)
Documentary	64	27	91 (22.2%)
Fiction	53	48	101 (24.7%)
Entertainment	51	64	115 (28.2%)
Total	237 (58%)	172 (42%)	409

In terms of subtitling the above 409 programs were subdivided into three categories: No subtitling, partial subtitling and complete subtitling. About one third of all programs are subtitled, but most of these programs get partial subtitling, which means that some speakers are subtitled and some are not (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Degree of intralingual subtitling (ST) in 409 Dutch programs on Flemish television



In a first step towards determining who is subtitled and who is not, so-called ‘speaker profiles’ were drawn up for all the programs with full subtitling and for a representative selection of programs with partial or no subtitling. This amounts to a total of 66 programs or 1204 speaker profiles. The speakers were coded according to the linguistic variety they used, age, sex, role and context³.

We distinguished five varieties of Dutch. One of these included 'Dutch as used in the Netherlands'. Since the research was carried out from a Flemish perspective no subdivisions were made within this variety. Flemish speakers of Dutch are generally not capable of distinguishing stylistic and regional varieties of northern Netherlandic Dutch. They tend to subsume all of them under one denominator, being ‘Hollands’ (Holland Dutch).

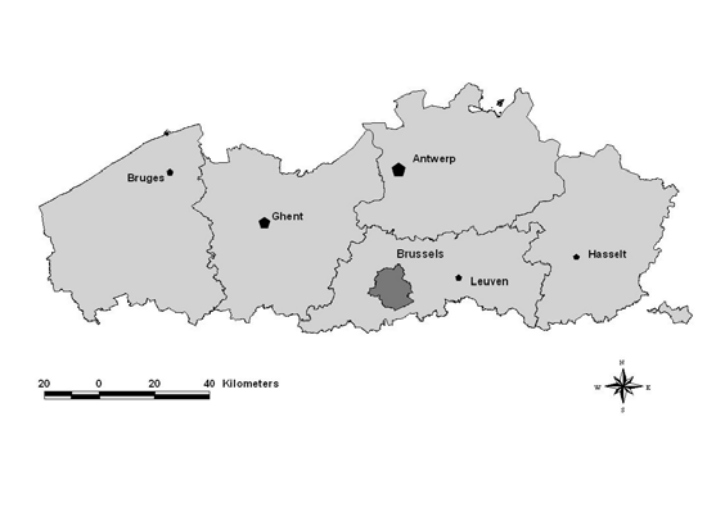
Aside from the category Northern Dutch (so any variant of Dutch as used in the Netherlands) we distinguished four varieties of Belgian Dutch: Belgian standard Dutch, western regiolect, Brabant regiolect and Limburg regiolect.

‘Regiolect’ is understood to comprise regionally coloured speech, i.e., so-called ‘intermediate varieties’ and occasionally also dialect, from the provinces of West-Flanders (capital: Bruges, see map 2 below) and East-Flanders (capital: Ghent) (= western regiolect), Flemish-Brabant (capital: Leuven) and Antwerp (capital: Antwerp) (= Brabant regiolect) and Limburg (capital: Hasselt), respectively. This classification represents the major dialect areas in Flanders and also corresponds to a layman’s perception of regional language variation in Flanders.

Finally, the categories "clarity of articulation" and "presence/absence of background noise" were also added to the classification because these two factors could potentially explain the presence or absence of subtitling.

³ For ‘age’ we used the five categories ‘elderly’, ‘old’, ‘middle-aged’, ‘young’ and ‘child’. Role: that is, role in the program at hand, e.g.: journalist, interviewer, clerk, patient, housewife etc. Context: e.g.: school, zoo, office, street, airport etc.

Map 2 : Flanders (= northern, Dutch-speaking Belgium) with its five provinces



2.2. Linguistic and extra-linguistic determinants of subtitling

For the linguistic determinants of subtitling we focus on correlations between the linguistic variety used by a speaker and the presence or absence of subtitling. In other words, the research question is: Which varieties of Dutch tend to get subtitling and which do not? The speaker profiles provide an answer to this question.

Our analyses show that subtitling support is strongly determined by the linguistic variety used by the speaker but at the same time our data reveal different patterns depending on the genre of the programs. Different subtitling practices appear to apply within fiction programs (soaps, series, films) compared to non-fiction programs (news, documentary programs, entertainment).

This warrants the distinction we make between fiction and non-fiction in the analyses that follow: Section 2.2.1 deals with the subtitling practice in fiction while section 2.2.2 focuses on non-fiction. In section 2.2.3 we compare the results for both major genres and briefly discuss the implications.

2.2.1. Linguistic variation and subtitling in fiction

Fiction programs hardly get any subtitling. Only 9 out of 101 fiction programs (8,91%) in our corpus are provided with subtitles: 3 partially and 6 entirely. All (the) 6 fiction programs with complete subtitling are programs with Dutch actors who speak a northern Dutch variety. Most of these programs are productions from the Netherlands. The entire corpus contains only 7 programs with complete subtitling. Therefore, it is quite striking that 6 of them are fiction programs in which Dutch from the north, i.e. from the Netherlands, is the dominant variety. Moreover, our corpus contains no other fiction programs in which most of the actors speak Netherlandic Dutch. Worth mentioning is also that the 6 fiction programs did not have one common producer (which might have explained a common subtitling practice). Thus, subtitling northern Dutch fiction

programs seems to be a general practice on Flemish television. More recent research data confirm this⁴.

In one of the three fiction programs with partial subtitling only one small conversation with a lot of background noise gets subtitling, the other two fiction programs with partial subtitling are episodes of one and the same program with a rather special status: It is a fiction program which offers an imitation of reality tv. Strikingly, subtitling practice within this program also seems to imitate reality tv since it corresponds to the subtitling practice in non-fiction (see below).

In the 92 fiction programs without subtitling, all of them Flemish productions, we find a nearly exclusive use of Belgian varieties of Dutch⁵. Previous studies of the linguistic varieties used in Flemish 'soaps' carried out by Geeraerts et al. (2000) showed that depending on the social status of the characters, either Belgian standard Dutch or Brabant 'intermediate' language is spoken in these series. Geeraerts et al. analysed 2 of the most famous Flemish soaps, namely *Thuis* 'Home' (VRT) and *Familie* 'Family' (VTM). We made speakers' profiles of all the characters in 5 other fictional programs (83 profiles in all). The linguistic variation represented by these profiles is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Linguistic variation in Flemish fiction programs without subtitling (based on speaker profiles)

LANGUAGE VARIETY	N	%
Brabant regiolect	53	63.8
Standard Belgian Dutch	18	21.7
Western regiolect	10	12
Netherlandic Dutch	2	2.4
TOTAL	83	100

Both the analyses of Geeraerts et al. (2000) and the data in Table 2 show that the Brabant variety, which is generally seen as the trendsetting regiolect in Flanders, is the most commonly used linguistic variety in Flemish fiction programs. The contribution of standard Belgian Dutch amounts to only one third of the contribution of the Brabant variety. The Northern Dutch speakers only make up 2.41% of the speakers in Flemish fiction programs. There are no speakers of the Limburg variety in our selection.

Our first conclusion regarding the subtitling of fiction is therefore that programs in which Netherlandic Dutch is spoken are subtitled, while those in which Flemish intermediate or regiolectal varieties dominate, and especially the Brabant regiolect, are not. Apparently, Flemish viewers of fiction are not supposed to understand Northern Dutch as it is spoken in the Netherlands, but they are supposed to understand the regional variety from the Brabant area, even though this variety may be spoken by no-one in their personal acquaintance.

⁴ In an unpublished BA-thesis supervised by the first author Benny De Decker (2008) analysed the intralingual subtitles in 5 episodes of a Dutch police series ('Van Speijk') which were broadcast on Flemish television in October and November 2007. All of these episodes got complete subtitling.

⁵ Only very occasionally do characters from the Netherlands appear, and their contributions to the program remain minimal (see also Table 2).

2.2.2. Linguistic variation and subtitling in non-fiction

When comparing the data for the fiction programs with those for the non-fiction programs we find a number of interesting differences. First, the frequency of subtitling is much higher in non-fiction, especially in news and documentary programs. Subtitling is present in 56.99 % of the news and documentary programs and in 16.52% of the entertainment programs (cf. 8.91% for fiction). Second, a wider variety of linguistic variants is used in non-fiction. Belgian Standard Dutch is the dominant variety now, both in the programs with and those without subtitling (see Tables 3 and 4). Subtitling of Belgian Standard Dutch is rare. Third, the Flemish regiolectal variants are also represented but contrary to what happens in non-fiction programs, they do get subtitling, though not systematically so.

The regiolectal speakers make up ca. 10% of the speakers in the non-fiction programs without subtitling (Table 3). In the programs with partial subtitling⁶ the majority (59%) of the regiolectal speakers are subtitled but 41% get no subtitling (Table 4b). In other words, although non-standard speech does not automatically lead to subtitling, there is at least a strong tendency towards offering subtitling support for Belgian regional varieties of Dutch in non-fiction. In this respect, subtitling practice in non-fiction deviates strongly from subtitling practice in fiction programs, where regiolectal varieties get no subtitling at all. The difference in subtitling frequency for Belgian Dutch versus the regiolectal varieties in non-fiction is highly significant (Table 4b: $\chi^2 = 179.272$; $p < 0.01$)

Table 3. Linguistic variation in Flemish non-fiction programs without subtitling

LANGUAGE VARIETY	N	%
Standard Belgian Dutch	310	87.57
Brabant regiolect	24	6.77
Western regiolect	11	3.10
Limburg regiolect	2	0.56
Netherlandic Dutch	7	1.97
TOTAL	354	100

Table 4. Linguistic variety and subtitling in non-fiction programs with partial subtitling

(4a) The relative representation of several linguistic varieties

N=536 speaker profiles	NO ST		ST	
	N	%	N	%
Standard Belgian Dutch	227	64.12	7	3.84
Brabant regiolect	59	16.66	64	35.16
Western regiolect	45	12.71	95	52.20
Limburg regiolect	16	4.52	14	7.69

⁶ The corpus contains only one non-fiction program with complete subtitling. We leave this aside here.

Netherlandic Dutch	7	1.98	2	1.10
TOTAL	354 ⁷	100	182	100

(4b) relative subtitling frequency for Standard Belgian Dutch and Flemish regiolects

N=536 speaker profiles	NO ST		ST		TOTAL
	N	%	N	%	
Standard Belgian Dutch	227	97%	7	3%	234
Flemish regiolects	120	41%	173	59%	293

The principal regiolectal varieties are all represented. In the non-fiction programs without subtitling the Brabant regiolect speakers outnumber the other regiolectal speakers. In our selection of non-fiction programs with partial subtitling the western regiolect appears to be the dominant regional variety. Moreover, it gets significantly more subtitling than the variety from Brabant ($\chi^2 = 6.212; p < 0.05$). The Limburg regiolect is so weakly represented that we can hardly draw any conclusions.

The same weak representation holds for Netherlandic Dutch. In the selection of non-fiction programs without subtitling for which we made up speaker profiles we find only 7 speakers of northern Dutch (Table 3). The selection of programs with partial subtitling contains 9 speakers of northern Dutch. Only 2 of them are subtitled and in these 2 cases the subtitling is motivated by extra-linguistic factors⁸. Even though we have only very few speakers of Netherlandic Dutch in our non-fiction corpus, it would seem that - contrary to what happens in fiction - such speakers are not subtitled.

2.2.3. Conclusion

Our analysis of intralingual subtitling practice on Flemish television reveals a kind of two-track policy: The main finding for non-fiction programs is that the viewer gets subtitling support for intermediate or regiolectal language but not for Netherlandic Dutch. Within fiction we get the opposite pattern: There is no subtitling support for regiolectal speech with mostly Brabant colouring but there is systematic subtitling support for Netherlandic Dutch.

In other words, there is little consistency in intralingual open subtitling policies on Flemish television. These policies seem to be in a state of flux, as is linguistic practice in Flanders (cf. section 1). Since program-makers and producers of Flemish fiction programs certainly do not have in mind an exclusively Brabant viewer public, they must assume that the Brabant regiolect is generally understood in Flanders by now. At the same time, they seem to believe that Flemish viewers have become alienated from northern Dutch as it is spoken in the Netherlands and therefore need subtitling in

⁷ By accident this 'total' happens to be exactly the same as the total number of speakers in Table 3, but we are not dealing with the same group here (as can be deduced from the figures for each of the subgroups). The 354 speakers of Table 3 are part of non-fiction programs without subtitles; in Table 4 the number 354 refers to speakers in non-fiction programs with partial subtitling.

⁸ In one case (a newscast in which two other Northern Dutch speakers are not subtitled), the speakers's articulation is very unclear; in the other one, the speaker is actually singing a Dutch song.

programs in which this variant is used. But does all this correspond to linguistic reality in Flanders or does television to some extent shape that linguistic reality, i.e. does it strengthen or steer changing linguistic practice? In order to be able to provide some answers, we conducted a viewer survey.

3. Flemish viewers and subtitling: Needs and attitudes

3.1. Method

In 2006 we carried out a large-scale investigation into the needs and wishes of Flemish viewers with regard to intralingual subtitling on television. 454 adult viewers watched a number of carefully selected clips from the project corpus with and without subtitles. They were then asked to express their opinions on the extent to which they understood the fragments and on the desirability or undesirability of subtitling.

The survey was organised in four major Flemish cities, all of them provincial capitals, from west to east (see the map in section 1): Brugge ‘Bruges’ (representing western regiolect speakers from the province of West-Flanders), Gent ‘Ghent’ (representing western regiolect speakers from the province of East-Flanders), Antwerpen ‘Antwerp’ (for the Brabant regiolect) and Hasselt (for the Limburg regiolect). The respondents were either from the cities themselves or from the surrounding areas.

In all four regions the test groups consisted of a well-balanced and representative sample of men and women from three age groups. The youngest respondents were between 18 and 25 years old, the oldest group was between 60 and 70, and the middle group between 35 and 55. The educational level of the respondents varied from low to average and a small minority of people had a university education.

Table 5. *The respondents*

	BRUGES (<i>n</i> =120)		GHENT (<i>n</i> =120)		ANTWERP (<i>n</i> =108)		HASSELT (<i>n</i> =106)		<i>TOTAL</i>
	men	women	men	women	men	Women	men	women	
young	25	15	24	16	20	20	27	13	<i>160</i>
middle	12	29	17	22	10	25	8	18	<i>141</i>
senior	18	21	18	23	17	16	20	20	<i>153</i>
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>59</i>	<i>61</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>61</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>454</i>

All the respondents were asked to watch 7 clips from the corpus (see Table 6). There were two excerpts with speakers of the Brabant regiolect, one with subtitling and one without, two excerpts with speakers of the western regiolect, with and without subtitling, and two excerpts with speakers of the Belgian standard variant, again one with and one without subtitles. To conclude, the informants were presented with one clip from the popular Dutch police series *Baantjer* showing speakers of a rather

informal northern standard variety from The Netherlands. *Baantjer* is always subtitled on Flemish television, but we used an excerpt without subtitles from Dutch television. In none of the clips intelligibility was hampered by background noise, poor articulation or other extra-linguistic factors. The questions with each of the clips inquired into the intelligibility of the excerpt as well as the viewers' attitudes towards the subtitling.

Intelligibility was tested on the basis of a five point Likert scale going from "excellent intelligibility" to "not at all intelligible". Thus, we did not test actual comprehension but reported comprehension: The informants were asked to indicate which variants they believed they had or had not understood. Carrying out tests in order to check whether this 'reported' comprehension corresponded with what the informants had in fact understood was beyond the scope of the present study.

With regard to their appreciation of the subtitles, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they found the subtitles "necessary", "useful", "superfluous" or "disturbing" (they were allowed to tick several options). In the case of excerpts without subtitles, the respondents were asked whether they thought subtitling would have been desirable, with a choice between three options: "yes", "no", "I don't care".

Table 6. The selection of clips presented to the respondents⁹

1	Brabant regiolect with subtitling
2	Brabant regiolect without subtitling
3	Western regiolect with subtitling
4	Western regiolect without subtitling
5	Belgian standard Dutch without subtitling
6	Belgian standard Dutch with subtitling
7	Northern informal standard Dutch without subtitling

3.2. What the viewers understand

The first and most general conclusion is that subtitling, irrespective of the linguistic variant it transliterates, promotes comprehension. All subtitled excerpts were understood significantly better, in statistical terms, than those without subtitles. This is true for all regions and all subgroups.

Our overall intelligibility testing further indicates that the scores of the senior group are significantly lower than those of the two other age groups, and this holds for excerpts with and without subtitling¹⁰. The comprehension scores for the northern standard Dutch video clip form the one striking exception to this rule. Here, the older respondents' scores are not significantly lower than those of the others. The senior group score of 39.45% for "excellent intelligibility" is very similar to the 39.39% obtained by the middle group and higher than that of the young informants, where only

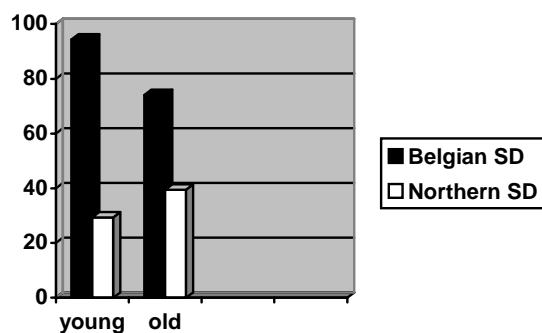
⁹ The clips were presented in random order, not in the order presented in this table.

¹⁰ All of the differences are significant: If we contrast the scores for excellent intelligibility for every group to the other scores (those for moderate intelligibility and not intelligible), chi-square tests render the following results: subtitled excerpts, old versus young: $\chi^2 = 15.2314$, $p < 0.01$; old versus middle: $\chi^2 = 14.5728$, $p < 0.01$ / excerpts without subtitling: old versus young: $\chi^2 = 18.6494$, $p < 0.01$; old versus middle: $\chi^2 = 29.3181$, $p < 0.01$.

29.37 % ticked off “excellent intelligibility” for the Northern Dutch standard variant (a difference which is not, however, statistically significant).

Notable is also the marked difference between reported comprehension of the Belgian Dutch variant versus the Northern Netherlandic Dutch variant without subtitling. Belgian standard Dutch is obviously much more accessible for Flemish speakers than the Northern variety. Only 35.76% of the informants claim to understand the northern Netherlandic variant without any problems, whereas 86.73 % claim a perfect understanding of the southern, Belgian variant, a most significant difference ($\chi^2 = 242.4095$; $p < 0.01$). Figure 2 shows the response of the oldest and youngest group to both excerpts. It does not only demonstrate the large difference with respect to the two linguistic variants, but also the inversion in the reactions of young and old.

Figure 2. Percentage of viewers from the younger and older generation who claimed perfect comprehension of Belgian and Northern standard Dutch



We are faced here with the curious finding that although the older generation has significantly lower intelligibility scores for 6 out of 7 excerpts (i.e., for the Belgian regiolects and the Belgian standard variant), the same group performs at least as well or even quite a bit better than the younger groups for the Netherlandic Dutch variant. What might explain the fact that the older generation understands informal northern Dutch more easily than the other groups?

One tentative explanation is that the older respondents are more familiar with the northern variant because of more extensive exposure to it, especially through television, a number of decades ago. The viewing habits of the Flemish public have changed: Contrary to what they did in 1960s and 1970s, Flemish viewers hardly watch broadcasts on Dutch television stations anymore¹¹. Attitudinal change may be another factor. Several Dutch sociolinguists have pointed to the growing linguistic self-awareness and confidence of young Flemings, a process which appears to be accompanied by distancing from Netherlandic Dutch (cf. De Caluwe, 2002). The increasing non-

¹¹ Goossens (2000) refers to changed viewing habits : In former days Flemings were more exposed to Netherlandic Dutch on their own Flemish television channels and in addition they watched tv-programs on Dutch channels much more frequently than they do nowadays. Several sources confirm this tendency. Data of the Center for Information about the Media (= CIM: Centrum voor Informatie over de media, see N. 1994). Moreover, Belgian surveys show that the 100 currently most popular Dutch language television programs are all broadcast on Flemish rather than Dutch television stations (see: <http://www.cim.be/tele/nl/index.html>).

identification with northern Dutch might imply that the younger generation perceives northern Dutch as a different language, more so than the older generations. This in turn may have an impact on younger respondents' evaluation of how much of the northern Dutch variant they actually understand.

In any case, the intelligibility scores for Netherlandic Dutch are relatively low for all generations. No more than 29.37% (young) to 39.45% (old) of the informants state that they are perfectly capable of understanding northern Dutch, whereas the scores for non-comprehension range from 36.05% (old) to 43.13% (young). These scores certainly support the current intralingual subtitling policies for fiction: Netherlandic Dutch is always subtitled and this apparently meets viewer demand.

Given its prominence on Flemish television, another linguistic variant that deserves special attention is the Brabant regiolect. This regiolect is spoken in everyday informal conversations by Dutch speakers residing in the central provinces of northern Belgium (i.e. Brabant and Antwerp). They constitute the largest population base (with the city of Antwerp as its main town - see section 1 and map 2). In two of our excerpts, one with and one without subtitles, the speakers used the Brabant variant. As in the other clips with regiolectal speech, the variant used was not the local dialect, but a Flemish Dutch variant showing clear interference from some Brabant dialect features on the level of phonology and morphology.

For the excerpt without subtitles (which contained an interview with a caretaker from the Antwerp zoo) we obtained remarkable results: The respondents who resided in the regions of Antwerp, Hasselt and Bruges showed very similar scores for intelligibility, even though Hasselt and Bruges are well outside the area in which Brabant regiolect is commonly used. On average, 72.66% of the people in these three groups of respondents indicated that they understood the fragment perfectly well. However, the respondents from Ghent showed significantly lower scores than viewers from Antwerp and the other regions. Here the percentage for perfect comprehension is just 51.28%. At first sight, the scores from Ghent seem to meet expectations: It is only natural that people from East Flanders who were presented with an exogenous variant should have lower scores for intelligibility than people from Antwerp who were confronted with an endogenous variant. It remains to be explained, though, why viewers from Bruges in West Flanders and Hasselt in Limburg apparently understand an exogenous variant as well as viewers from Antwerp for whom this variant is endogenous. This rather surprising finding of similar response patterns for viewers from Antwerp, Bruges and Hasselt is mitigated in an interesting way if we compare the scores for comprehension of the Brabant regiolect with the scores for Belgian standard Dutch. Comprehension of (Belgian) standard Dutch by viewers from Bruges and Hasselt (as well as Ghent) is significantly higher than their comprehension of Brabant regiolect, while for viewers from Antwerp there is no difference between the scores for comprehension of standard Dutch and Brabant regiolect. Thus, whereas Antwerp viewers' levels of understanding of the Brabant variant and Belgian standard variant are comparable, Flemish viewers from the other regions understand the standard language significantly better than they do the Brabant regiolect (see figure 3).

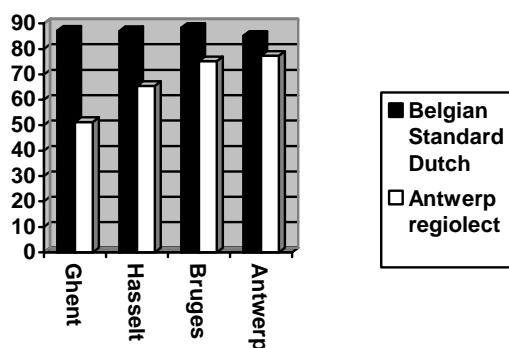
But then the scores for Ghent remain puzzling: Although the respondents from Ghent live closer to the Brabant dialect area than the West-Flemish respondents from Bruges and although their regiolect or dialect bears more similarities with the Brabant regiolect than that of their West-Flemish colleagues, they report a lower comprehension for the Brabant regiolect. The differences cannot be explained in terms of the age or the

educational level of the informants. Once again, we may wonder whether attitudinal factors interfere: Could it be that the respondents from Ghent, the 2nd city of Flanders in terms of size, somehow resent or have difficulty in accepting the dominance of the Brabant regiolect, which is typically associated with Antwerp, the largest city of Flanders, and that people in Ghent therefore are more inclined to question the intelligibility of the Brabant regiolect?

We have no direct empirical evidence for this hypothesis but Ghent does seem to share in some of the self confidence of the central Brabant region in recent days. Flemish celebrities from Ghent for instance generally display enough self confidence on television to use features which mark their Ghent roots¹².

Figure 3 is based on the percentages for “excellent intelligibility” for the Belgian standard Dutch excerpt and the Brabant excerpt, both without subtitles. It visualizes the differences in intelligibility for these variants for viewers in the four different regions. The only difference that is not statistically significant is that for the Antwerp group ($\chi^2 = 2.0582$; $p \leq 0.20$). The difference in comprehension for West Flanders (Bruges) is significantly smaller than the difference for East Flanders (Ghent) and Limburg (Hasselt), but it is significant all the same ($\chi^2 = 6.8657$, $p \leq 0.01$).

Figure 3. Percentage of viewers in the four regions who claimed perfect comprehension of Belgian standard Dutch and the Antwerp regiolect



The intelligibility scores for the Brabant regiolect, then, do not yield straightforward conclusions. The majority of our respondents ticked off “excellent intelligibility”, but for Ghent the percentage amounts to a mere 51%. For Hasselt, Bruges and Antwerp the percentages are 65.42%, 75.21% and 77.36% respectively. The majority of our Flemish respondents appear to be sufficiently familiar with the Brabant regiolect for there to be virtually no problems with comprehension. Still, there is a relatively large minority for whom this regional variant does pose problems: Depending on the region, one fourth to one third of the informants (and almost half of the group from East Flanders) signal moderate to serious problems of intelligibility. If one compares these results with the intelligibility scores for the Belgian standard Dutch variant, it is obvious that understanding the Brabant variant may be more problematic for part of the Flemish viewing public than many producers of fictional programs appear to think.

¹² E.g. the famous crooner Helmut Lotti, the photographer Lieve Blancquaert.

3.3. The appreciation of intralingual subtitling support

Flemish overt attitudes regarding the desirability of intralingual subtitling are anything but clear cut, and our data therefore cannot really provide TV producers and policy makers with straightforward answers. Still, the results are interesting enough in themselves.

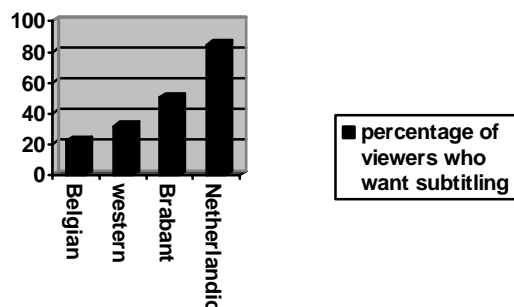
In response to the excerpts with subtitling, 59% of the respondents reacted positively: 10% indicated that the subtitles were “necessary” and 49% found them “helpful”. Conversely, 41% of the respondents reacted negatively to the subtitles: 31% thought they were “superfluous” and 10% even found them “disturbing”.

For the excerpts without subtitling, the respondents were asked to indicate whether subtitles might have been desirable. Here, too, the reaction was very divided: 47% of all respondents stated that subtitles would have been “desirable”, whereas 38% did not want any, and 15% did not care one way or the other. The regional differences in the responses are minimal and never statistically significant: The positive reactions ‘win’ everywhere, but the margin is extremely small. This lack of unanimity does not only appear across the board for all regional groups, it is present in all age groups as well.

The need for subtitling is clearly linked to the variety of Dutch that is presented to the respondents, but for most fragments the opinions are divided once again. There is but one remarkable exception to the latter finding. That one exception is the clip with Netherlandic Dutch without subtitling support. With regard to this fragment there is a striking unanimity in response: No less than 84.85% (381/449 reactions) of the respondents want subtitling for the informal Netherlandic Dutch variant. The demand for subtitling is significantly higher for Netherlandic Dutch than for the Belgian standard variant (100/446 reactions or 22.42%; $\chi^2 = 350.8302$, $p \leq 0.001$, see Figure 4).

At first sight the clip with Belgian standard Dutch also elicits unanimous responses, since most people (61%) do not want any subtitling. However, the scores for the people who were indifferent to subtitling reveal an essential difference in the evaluation of the viewers: Only 6% of the respondents claim to be “indifferent” when it comes to the presence or absence of subtitles for northern Dutch (the lowest “indifferent” score overall), whereas 16.37% are “indifferent” regarding the presence or absence of subtitling with the standard Belgian standard variant. In other words, only when it comes to northern Netherlandic Dutch do the Flemish ranks really close: A large majority want subtitling and hardly anyone remains indifferent to the issue.

Figure 4. The desirability of subtitling for four different varieties of Dutch (Belgian = Belgian Standard Dutch, western = western regiolect, Brabant = Brabant regiolect, Netherlandic = Standard Dutch from the Netherlands)



In the case of the regiolects the demand for subtitles is higher than for the Belgian standard variant, but considerably lower than for the Dutch variant from the Netherlands (see Figure 4). Another remarkable finding is that the demand for subtitles is higher for the Brabant regiolect than for the western regiolect. Half of the Flemish respondents (50.44%) want subtitles for the Brabant regiolect, whereas a mere 31.85 % signal that subtitles would be desirable for the western variant. Still, these conclusions should be corroborated by further research, since the present data are based on questionnaires with one excerpt without subtitles for each regiolect only. Without going into further detail, we also wish to point out that all regional groups report a lower need for subtitles for their own variant than for the exogenous one.

Finally, a comparison of the scores for “intelligibility” and “desirability of subtitles” shows that they are quite complementary. The varieties that appear to cause the most serious comprehension problems are also those that elicit the highest desirability scores. The groups that stand out because of higher percentages of comprehension problems (the older respondents, and respondents from Ghent) also ask for more subtitles. In other words, the responses are very consistent in this respect.

4. Discussion

Until recently there was a strong link in Flanders between media and language policies. In the 1960s and 1970s, newspaper columns and radio and television programs that were devoted to the topic instructed Flemings on how to speak ‘correct Dutch’, i.e., standard Dutch along northern (= Netherlandic) Dutch lines.

In Flanders, television has long been considered to set the standard for correct spoken Dutch. Even today the public television station VRT has a “language charter”¹³, which states that standard Dutch should be used on the public television channels. And yet, linguistic practice on television gradually started to change from the beginning of 1990s onwards, even on the public channels. In 1995 a famous Flemish TV host published an article in a periodical for students and teachers of Dutch with the title: “Television sets the (bad) example”¹⁴ (Uytterhoeven 1995). His essay was highly illustrative of the uncomfortable feeling, the amazement and sometimes even

¹³ The charter (in Dutch) can be found on:

http://vrttaal.net/taaldatabanken_master/taalbeleid/taalcharter.shtml

¹⁴ This is the English version of the original title of the article (in Dutch): “De tv geeft het (slechte) voorbeeld”

indignation with which some people - including linguists (cf. section 1) - looked at the growing presence of and 'tolerance' for non-standard speech on Flemish television. Our research into intralingual subtitling practice in Flanders reveals that the television stations themselves and more in particular program makers also struggle with this changing practice. This 'struggle' manifests itself in inconsistencies in subtitling practice and more in particular in a contradictory subtitling practice for fiction versus non-fiction programs. If we discard all nuances, the conclusion is that Flemish viewers of fiction are not supposed to understand northern standard Dutch as it is spoken in the Netherlands while they are supposed to understand regional speech from the central Brabant area in Flanders. Flemish non-fiction viewers, however, are not supposed to understand regiolect speech, whereas they are supposed to understand Netherlandic Dutch. Yet, fiction and non-fiction viewers are not in fact separate audiences: Viewers watch fiction as well as non-fiction.

In an indirect way, subtitling practice within fiction can be seen as being highly informative about the (changing) linguistic relations in Flanders and the way they are perceived. The dominant varieties in Flemish fiction programs (soaps, series) are regionally coloured varieties, so-called regiolects or intermediate language varieties. Some of them are closer to the dialect pole, others more close to standard speech, but all of them are situated somewhere on the continuum between both¹⁵.

The choice for regiolectal rather than standard speech in fiction programs is no doubt strongly determined by genre-related requirements, since realistic series or soaps will try to reflect current linguistic practice (cf. Geeraerts et al. 2000). The VRT language charter acknowledges this and stipulates that dialect and regiolect can be used in fiction programs if they have a specific function, for instance, in order to express a *couleur locale*. This does not explain, however, why the regiolect of one region, namely the Brabant regiolect, is so dominant in Flemish soaps, nor why this variant is not subtitled. This points to certain presuppositions on the part of the program makers: Apparently they assume that the Brabant regiolect is a colloquial variety which is accessible to all Flemings (by now). Moreover, subtitling practice in fiction appears to be based on another presupposition: As Flemings increasingly focus on their own language centre, i.e. the central provinces of Brabant and Antwerp, instead of orienting themselves to the Netherlands, they are supposedly becoming alienated from the northern Dutch of the Netherlands, and therefore they get subtitling for this variety.

Both presuppositions are supported by the majority of the Flemish respondents that participated in our viewer survey: Most of them report a high comprehension of Brabant regiolect and a low comprehension of Netherlandic Dutch (cf. section 3.2). Although there is a relatively 'large' minority for whom the Brabant regiolect still poses intelligibility problems and although this may imply that Flemish TV channels are to some extent over optimistic in their estimate of how much is understood of the variant, it remains striking that the Brabant regiolect obtains much higher comprehension scores even outside the Brabant area than Netherlandic Dutch.

¹⁵ A question that deserves further consideration in this respect concerns the impact of the position taken up by regiolectal language use on the continuum between dialect and standard speech. Are 'intermediate' variants more likely to be subtitled when they are closer to the dialect end of the continuum and vice versa? This question must remain unanswered right now, because systematic research on that aspect still remains to be done.

In this respect, subtitling practice in fiction seems to acknowledge and even legitimize the changing linguistic relations in Flanders: Several Dutch sociolinguists¹⁶ have pointed to the growing linguistic self confidence of Flemings in recent years, some of them have also pointed to negative attitudes and feelings of alienation towards northern Dutch. In fiction programs on Flemish television, this process of non-identification with Netherlandic Dutch is expressed through systematic subtitling support for northern Dutch, whereas the growing linguistic confidence of Flemings is expressed through the absence of subtitling for Belgian regional varieties of Dutch.

Subtitling of native varieties is often perceived as a ‘corrective practice’¹⁷ and in some sense it actually is corrective, since regiolectal speech is not transcribed literally on Flemish television. It is generally converted into standard Dutch in the subtitles (see Remael et al. 2008). Therefore, the absence of subtitling for regiolectal speech may ‘emancipate’ the regiolects and increase their status, in this case especially the status of the Brabant regiolect. As such, the absence of subtitling for regional varieties in fiction may be seen as an acceptance of language change ‘from below’, and a recognition of shifting linguistic norms.

Subtitling practice within non-fiction is obviously much closer to official language policies: Standard varieties get no subtitling, no matter whether they have a Belgian Dutch or a Netherlandic Dutch slant, whereas non-standard regiolect varieties do get subtitling. This practice reflects two presuppositions: First of all, since the national variety of the Netherlands functions as the official model of Standard Dutch in Belgium (Willemyns & Bister 1989: 543), Flemish viewers can be assumed to understand Netherlandic Dutch. Secondly, the use of non-standard speech (be it regiolect or dialect) on television is unwanted or at least ‘marked’ (cf. the language charter of the VRT, see note 13) and therefore subtitling support in which regiolect (or dialect) is translated into Standard Dutch is appropriate and desirable. The latter, however, is not always reflected in subtitling practice within non-fiction: There is no systematic subtitling for regiolectal speech, and the generally dominant Brabant regiolect gets significantly less subtitling than the much less central western regiolect, which shows that even in non-fiction other presuppositions (unintentionally?) interfere with language policy agreements.

In conclusion, our study has indicated that the use of intralingual subtitling in television programming, a phenomenon unknown until recently, can be seen as an expression of changing linguistic relations. The presence and absence of subtitling for several varieties of Dutch clearly functions as a kind of statement on the actual or perceived position of these varieties. Moreover, the inconsistency in subtitling practice reveals a tension between overtly stated language policy goals and linguistic reality. Flemish television appears to play a major but ambiguous role in legitimizing the informal endogenous (sub)standardization process which seems to be taking place in Flanders, a process which implies divergence from Netherlandic Dutch. Thus our study shows how certain practices on television, in this case subtitling practices, can be highly informative of overt (official) and covert (non-official) linguistic norms and the tension between both.

¹⁶ See Jaspers (2001) for a survey.

¹⁷ People often feel offended when their speech is subtitled. The Flemish actor Wim Opbrouck made a very well-known parody on this theme in which he expresses the strong indignation of a West-Flemish person about the fact that he is subtitled whenever he appears on television. Ironically (but on purpose) his furious speech, in West-Flemish dialect, is subtitled.

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