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# Chaos and standards: Orthography in the Southern Netherlands (1720–1830)

GIJSBERT RUTTEN and RIK VOSTERS

## *Abstract*

*This paper discusses metalinguistic discourse and orthographical practice in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the southern Netherlands ('Flanders'). Whereas a lot is known about Dutch language standardization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, what happened after that, especially in the southern territories, is still partly uncharted territory. This contribution will examine and challenge the myths of language decline and linguistic chaos that are often associated with eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Flanders. The authors show that there was a vivid and coherent normative tradition, especially on the level of orthography, and that even a case of apparent orthographical disorder, such as the so-called accent spelling, can be counted as an instance of language standardization in the eighteenth-century southern Netherlands.*

*Keywords: historical sociolinguistics, history of linguistics, Dutch orthography, standardization, southern Netherlands*

## **1. Introduction**

In this paper, we discuss metalinguistic discourse and orthographical practice in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the southern Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> This period still continues to be somewhat of a *terra incognita*. Whereas a lot is known about the earlier periods of Dutch language standardization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, what happened after that is still partly uncharted territory. In section 2, we will elaborate on the historical-sociolinguistic background and describe in more detail the contrast of, on the one hand, language standardization, and on the other hand, the myths of language decline and linguistic chaos that are often associated with the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the southern Netherlands. In section 3, we will focus on

the importance of spelling in the sociolinguistic context of the time, in metalinguistic discourse and also as an identity marker for language users. In section 4, the myth of language decline in the southern Netherlands will then be demythologized. We will show that, alternatively, there was a vivid and coherent normative tradition, especially on the level of orthography. To demonstrate this, we will then present the case of the so-called accent spelling in section 5, as it has often been associated with the idea of spelling chaos and decline at the time. We will show that no such negative image is justified, and we will instead argue for standardization as an essential characteristic of the eighteenth-century linguistic situation in the southern Netherlands.

## **2. Historical-sociolinguistic background: Standardization and linguistic decline**

The Dutch language area is made up of two parts. The southern part roughly consists of the Dutch-speaking areas in Belgium, while the northern part approximately encompasses the present-day Netherlands. This political division is historically motivated. Following the northern revolt against Spanish rule from 1568 onward, the two areas developed into politically and religiously more or less separate entities. While the Northern Republic of the Seven United Provinces began its so-called Golden Age, the South remained under Spanish (and later Austrian) control. Linguists and historians generally agree on the importance of this division for the history of the Dutch language. De Vooys (1952: 66) emphasizes how the ‘cities of Holland took over the leading position from the declining South, also linguistically’ (our translation), and Burke (2005: 20) posits an ‘increasing cultural divergence between North and South in the seventeenth century’, suggesting that it ‘extended to language as well’. In the early nineteenth century, for a brief period of time (1815–1830), the southern and the northern part of the Netherlands were united again in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands under the reign of King William I. As a result of this temporary unification, the northern and southern writing traditions, which had been separated for centuries, came into close contact again.

The linguistic difference between North and South has often been conceptualized in the opposition between standardization and linguistic decline. Whereas the foundation of the later standard variety is supposedly laid in the northern provinces, especially in Holland, in the seventeenth century (cf., e.g., van der Wal 1995), the language situation in the South in the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century has traditionally been characterized as deplorable: a long period of strong cultural and linguistic decline is assumed to have reached an absolute low after the

French invasion of the 1790s. Two aspects of this linguistic downfall are usually singled out. First, the importance of French restricted the use of Dutch in the official domain, which became especially problematic from the 1790s onwards. The French language carried social and political prestige, while the varieties of Dutch used were often assumed to have been isolated from the North, where a supra-regional variety of Dutch had already come into use (e.g., Deneckere 1954). Secondly, insofar as varieties of Dutch were used in the South at all, they seemed to be nothing more than a collection of mutually incomprehensible dialects at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wils (1956: 530; cf. Wils 2001) mentions 'Flemish dialects and spellings' being used in written documents from the educational, judicial, and administrative domains. Deneckere (1954: 326) even claims that such administrative documents were not intelligible from one town to another. A sharp contrast is drawn up between North and South: standardization as opposed to linguistic decline, or, as Suffeleers (1979: 17) put it: 'As opposed to relative uniformity in writing in the North, absolute chaos ruled the South'.

However, the Dutch language was widely in use in the South as well, but southern writing traditions and emerging standardization have been largely neglected in most histories of the Dutch language. In spite of a considerable number of grammars and orthographies which were published in the southern Netherlands in the eighteenth century, many of these works have been disregarded because of their supposed lack of uniform, normative prescriptions (Smeyers 1959; Rutten & Vosters i.p.). In addition, although the status of the language at the time is fairly well studied, particularly concerning the opposition between Dutch and French (e.g., de Ridder 1999; van Goethem 1990; Vanhecke & de Groof 2007), much less is known about the actual form of Dutch in the South during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The image of especially the eighteenth-century southern linguistic situation as one of decline and chaos has recently been contested as a result of new corpus-based research into the original sources (van der Horst 2004; Rutten & Vosters i.p.). It appears that the idea of linguistic decay lacks empirical support. The fact that neither Deneckere nor Wils nor any of the other (language) historians dealing with the topic have performed any systematic corpus research on language material of the period may have contributed to their empirically flawed assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

In the sociolinguistic make-up of the time, spelling appears to have been highly important. Next, the image of the South being in decline seems to be a myth that had already been created in that period. Thus, in the remainder of this paper our focus will be on spelling and on the mythical ideas associated with it. We will first elaborate on the social importance of spelling as this can be deduced from contemporary meta-linguistic discourse and from processes of identity formation.

### 3. The importance of spelling

As noted above, there was a very large number of grammars and orthographies published in the southern Netherlands in the eighteenth century. In 1713, a short grammar appeared in which the author E. C. P. (= Gillis De Witte [1648–1721]) compared southern and northern features, thereby revealing that the linguistic unity of the North and the South had become problematic.<sup>3</sup> One year later, Andries Stéven (ca. 1676–1747) published the first edition of his schoolbook on ethics which contained a few chapters on spelling (Rutten 2009a). Especially from the 1750s onward, a steady stream of linguistic textbooks appeared, mainly written by schoolteachers and meant to be used in schools (Rutten 2009b, 2009c). The main issues dealt with were orthography, pronunciation, and vocabulary, the last mainly for the sake of purifying Dutch from French and Latin loan words. From des Roches' important *Nieuwe Nederduytsche spraek-konst* ('New Dutch grammar') (1761) onward, morphology and syntax became very significant ingredients of normative works. The linguistic domain which appears to be most prominent in metalinguistic discourse at the time, however, is orthography, to the extent that some commentators almost appear to equate spelling with language itself.<sup>4</sup>

In the period between 1815 and 1830 in the United Kingdom, spelling was still the central issue in most linguistic discussions. Whereas King William himself did not seem to mind what kind of Dutch was being used in the South, issues of variation and norms within Dutch were hotly debated in the private sphere. In various cities and towns, language amateurs gathered in newly-founded 'literary societies' where native and non-native speakers alike were stimulated to use the Dutch language creatively and proficiently.<sup>5</sup> Many of these societies were financially or otherwise supported by the government, and they were strongly in favor of adopting northern linguistic practices, even though there was no official need to do so. Many of these groups held lectures and essay competitions about language, in which authors frequently argued for the linguistic superiority of the North. The main focus of most essays was spelling.

The grammars and orthographies of the period in the United Kingdom showed the same tendency to focus on spelling issues. There was a large number of orthographical handbooks to begin with. Moreover, even publications that were presented as 'grammars' often almost exclusively dealt with spelling issues (e.g., ter Bruggen 1818). Linguistic differences between the North and the South were sometimes reduced to orthographical matters, and the difference between northern and southern spelling was felt to be so strong that northern school books were being 'rewritten' in southern orthography. Some schoolbooks presented north-

ern and southern spellings alongside one another, almost in a bilingual fashion.<sup>6</sup> Most interesting, perhaps, were little guidebooks discussing North–South differences in such a way that southerners could familiarize themselves with northern writing practices.<sup>7</sup> The most well-known of these how-to guides, meant to teach people about the northern spellings, was itself written according to southern spelling practices, so as not to make it too hard to access for its intended readership (Cannaert 1823; cf. Vosters & Rutten submitted).

Next, it appears that in the new and altered sociolinguistic context of the unified Netherlands, spelling had suddenly become a strong marker of someone's social, political, and sometimes also religious identity, so that small orthographical differences gained unexpected importance. Spelling was such a salient issue that political identities were often attached to spelling debates, linking political positions to orthographical preferences. Politically, the southern incorporation into the Netherlands as a whole in the period of the United Kingdom (1815–1830) became an important issue, resulting, at least theoretically, in the following two extreme positions: the so-called 'particularist' position claiming that the southern Netherlands should separate themselves from the northern Netherlands (as actually happened in 1830 with Belgian independence), and on the other side of the political spectrum the 'integrationists', who wanted the Netherlands to remain united. This political contrast was at least in part mirrored by the linguistic opposition of those who claimed that southern Dutch was a language in itself, or at least a variety fundamentally different from northern Dutch, and those who maintained that southern and northern Dutch were essentially the same (cf. Vosters 2009b). Thus, indexical meanings were often attached to spelling debates. As the southern incorporation into the Netherlands as a whole became an important issue in political debates, arguments pro and contra the new union also extended into the field of language. southern proponents of the unification (the integrationists) emphasized the union of the one Dutch language, thereby minimizing regional differences and quite readily sacrificing southern spelling variants in favor of northern alternatives.<sup>8</sup> The opponents of the regime (the particularists) repeatedly emphasized the singularity of southern Dutch varieties, and resisted the 'Hollandophile' tendencies of adversaries who too eagerly turned their gaze northwards. This opposition became more salient as the protest movement against the regime grew, and voices for a separate 'Flemish' language especially grew stronger after 1830, when the southern Netherlands separated themselves from the United Kingdom in the so-called Belgian revolution.<sup>9</sup> The social context of the United Kingdom thus extended beyond a simple North–South opposition, and a Flemish writer's

choice to opt for either a northern or a southern way of spelling must more often than not be seen as part of a process of identity formation.

It was not only political positions in the North–South debate that were indexed by spelling choices. There was also the social relevance of adopting the northern spelling norms. As mentioned above, there were private initiatives such as literary societies where northern spellings often found receptive ground. It also seems that complying with the northern norms facilitated upward social mobility. One particular example would be the case of Jan Frans Willems, the later ‘father of the Flemish movement’. His commitment to the Dutchification of the South was rewarded with considerable professional advancement, while at the same time, his spelling choices developed from typically southern (as in Willems 1818) to more northern (from his 1824 essay onwards).

Apart from political and social identities, religious identities came into play as well in the context of language use and orthography. When Pieter Behaegel, the later notorious particularist linguist, looked back on the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, he claimed that the supposed mutual incomprehensibility of northern and southern politicians was due to the irrepressible northern penchant for change: the Hollanders had strayed from the true language of their forefathers, just as they had digressed from the path of true Christianity in the past (Behaegel 1837: 34–35). In this line of thought, language change is associated with a shift in religion, and both are condemned. Another example comes from the grammar of a Roman Catholic priest, F. L. N. Henckel, who fiercely struggled against northern <de> instead of southern <den> as the masculine form of the definite article in the nominative case. In the South, <de> was reserved for feminine nouns, and thus, he argued, the northern practice of leaving out the <n> and writing *de paus* ‘the pope’ rather than *den paus* was a heresy, ‘attributing an unnatural gender to the Holy Father and causing disciples to stray’ (Henckel 1815: 135).<sup>10</sup>

Summing up, in metalinguistic discourse as well as in society as a whole, spelling was a highly important issue to which not only linguistic but also political, social, and religious meanings were attached. In the next section, we will discuss the issue of southern linguistic decline, thereby focusing on spelling.

#### 4. The myth of linguistic decline in the South

As mentioned above (section 2), the image of the period under discussion has been negative for a very long time. The South has often been depicted as an area in decay, suffering from linguistic chaos and orthographical lawlessness, whereas the North had achieved a strong uniform-

ity in written language. In this section, we will first describe the image of the South in decay in more detail, and then proceed to discard this idea as a myth.

A telling example of the myth of southern linguistic and cultural decay is expressed by Elias (1963: 106; our translation), when he said the following about the southern Netherlands in the middle of the eighteenth century: 'The intellectual life in the entire southern Netherlands ... around 1750 offers us a view of the most barren landscape one can imagine. There was simply nothing. There was the most complete silence in the deepest intellectual poverty.'<sup>11</sup> The historical image of the decline of the eighteenth century is linguistically paralleled by the so-called 'myth of eighteenth-century language decay' (van der Horst 2004). The basic idea is that southern Dutch, as opposed to northern Dutch, did not show standardization in this period, but rather *dialectization*, a regression towards locally defined varieties. It is claimed that '[b]y the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the North, the colorful diversity in writing slowly yielded to a uniform written language, based on the good usage of the classic authors [...]. The language in the South had undergone a different development from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, [and] tended to regress to its purely local character' (Wils 1958: 527–528; our translation).

This myth of eighteenth-century language decay can be traced back to contemporary comments on the state of the language. Especially during the early years of the United Kingdom, integrationist commentators had good cause to uphold the image of eighteenth-century Flanders as an intellectual wasteland. Consider Jan Frans Willems' comments on the eighteenth-century linguistic situation (1819: 302):

Flemish spelling has not been fixed to the level of a general Flemish standard by anyone up to the present. ... [E]ach schoolteacher in the southern provinces ... considers himself qualified to teach the children whatever language rules his whim might have dictated him. Anarchy is a serious evil, both in spelling and in politics.<sup>12</sup>

The myth of eighteenth-century language decay can at least partly be explained by referring to its rhetorical function in nineteenth-century linguistic debates: 'By emphasizing that the South had no tradition of its own, no basis, no language culture, nothing, they [i.e., the integrationists, GR & RV] strengthened their argument in favor of a closer connection to northern Dutch' (van der Horst 2004: 73; our translation).

There are several sides to this myth of southern linguistic decline. First, there is the idea expressed, for example, in Willems' quotation, that the South knew as many linguistic norms as there were grammarians and schoolteachers, or indeed as there were scribes, whereas the North



boasted a vivid and strong normative tradition. This is the so-called many norms myth.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, there is the idea of linguistic decline in practice: actual language use and especially spelling was chaotic, revealing local vowel systems rather than a supra-regional variety. This we call the orthographical chaos myth. A third element is the myth that northern language use was more or less uniform.

As stated before, the many norms myth can be traced back to Jan Frans Willems. He spent many years going through all the southern eighteenth-century books dealing with language and spelling, and his main conclusion can hardly be misunderstood: 'there are no Flemish orthographies or grammars of any lasting authority.'<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, Willems did not consider the numerous grammars and orthographies to constitute a fully fledged normative tradition. Willems' claims were still echoed many years later, e.g., by Sluys (1912: 53), who spoke about 'the greatest possible confusion' in normative publications, with every author adhering to a different spelling system. Concerning the work of des Roches, no doubt the most authoritative of the southern eighteenth-century grammarians, he even concluded that '[n]either his grammar nor his orthography were followed by anyone.' De Vos (1939: 50–52) followed suit, using phrases such as 'mind-numbing drudgery' to describe most of the eighteenth century normative works. Even more balanced accounts such as Smeyers' (1959: 112), who should certainly be praised for calling attention to the eighteenth-century codifiers and their grammars and orthographies, clearly stated that none of the pre-1815 grammarians ever strove for a uniform spelling, and that they all had different linguistic opinions depending on whichever dialect they spoke. After discussing a significant number of normative texts from the South, Smeyers concluded that most grammarians had done nothing to contribute to a way out of 'the maze of orthographical lawlessness', and that the only thing bringing them together was their obsession with purism and fighting off loan words (Smeyers 1959: 127–28). In sum, the idea is that the South lacked a proper grammatical tradition and that every grammarian constructed his own idiosyncratic spelling system.

It seems difficult to interpret these claims concerning a chaotic linguistic situation or language decline when at the same time there were certainly a large number of prints and reprints of grammars and spelling guides in the southern Netherlands. Nonetheless, a possibility would be to consider these works as lacking uniformity, with every grammarian sticking to his own system, never looking beyond his own local dialect. To investigate these claims, we looked very closely at all of the normative publications of especially the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the South, and our impression is that there definitely was a clear and coherent southern writing tradition. Normative publications were far

from being only focused on local or dialectal usage. In fact, nearly all of the authors of grammars and orthographies were very much aware of each other as well of the northern normative tradition, and many of them cite southern as well as northern grammarians and language authorities such as famous poets to back up their orthographical choices. Ironically, it is precisely from 1750 onwards – when Elias (1963) envisioned an intellectual wasteland – that several linguistic publications have come down to us. We will have a closer look at some of these works to illustrate our claims.

In the 1750s and 1760s, three Antwerp schoolteachers laid the foundation of the southern normative tradition of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These schoolteachers were Jan Domien Verpoorten (1706–1773), P. B. (?–?), and Jan Des Roches (ca. 1735–1787). In 1752, Verpoorten published the first edition of his *Woorden-schat, oft letter-konst* ('Vocabulary, or grammar'), which mostly dealt with loan words, but he also briefly discussed some spelling issues. Verpoorten's 'new manner of writing,' as he proudly called it, has to do, among other things, with getting rid of 'superfluous' consonants, consonant clusters representing only one sound such as:

[k] which is commonly spelled <ck> in auslaut and which should be spelled <k>

e.g., *ik* 'I' instead of *ick*;

[ɣ] which is commonly spelled <gh> in anlaut and which should be spelled <g>

e.g., *geven* 'give' instead of *gheven*.

These kinds of spelling proposals are not in any way related to the dialect of Antwerp. Instead, these were innovations already put forward in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century normative tradition in the North, as well as in the rare early eighteenth-century grammars from the South. Verpoorten was just linking up with and re-implementing common orthographical innovations. Similar orthographical proposals were put forward five years later by his fellow Antwerp schoolteacher P. B. in his *Fondamenten of te grond-regels der Neder-duytsche spel-konst* ('Foundations or basic rules of Dutch orthography') (1757). We cannot go into the details here, but it seems that P. B. and Verpoorten were competitors, linguistically as well as commercially on the schoolbook market. They took part in an implicit yet lively linguistic discussion that rapidly changed from fairly basic orthographical and lexical (purist) matters into a broader linguistic approach (Rutten 2009b).

This broader approach is further developed by the third Antwerp schoolteacher under discussion. In 1761, des Roches published the

*Nieuwe Nederduytsche spraek-konst* ('New Dutch grammar'). Contrary to his predecessors, des Roches did not limit himself to spelling and loanwords, but he wrote a full grammar of Dutch. Des Roches' grammar was the first southern grammar for decades and counts as one of the most important contributions to the codification of Dutch in the South throughout the eighteenth century (Rutten 2009c).

These three Antwerp schoolteachers in the 1750s and 1760s were aware of and reacted to each other's works. They proposed similar rules and presumably taught these rules in their classes. Furthermore, for our research concerning the period of the United Kingdom, it is important to remark that this southern normative tradition survived into the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well (Rutten i.p.). There were many reprints of Verpoorten and especially P. B. and des Roches, well into the nineteenth century. In the last decades of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the normative tradition was even intensified. Dozens of works were published in the whole of the southern Netherlands, which were always concerned with orthography and pronunciation, and often also with other grammatical features. The potential spread of these works was wide, as we know that most primary schools in the later eighteenth century owned a grammar, along with reading matters and a catechism, and offered orthography as a separate subject (Put 1990: 202, 208).

However, the fact that there was a vivid normative tradition in itself does not imply that it was also coherent. Therefore, we tried to distill language norms from this vast body of normative works. We selected several recurrent features that time and again were discussed in the contemporary works, and we made an inventory of the prescribed use in the grammars. The choice of these features also depended on their importance in the nineteenth-century spelling debates when the government of the Belgian state demanded an official spelling regulation and asked well-known linguistic experts such as Jan Frans Willems to come up with a proposal. In the following debates, the two most important spelling options for every feature were often divided into a typically 'southern' and a typically 'northern' variant (Bormans 1841). The features we selected are the following:

- (1) dotted or undotted [ei], e.g. *wijn* or *wyn* 'wine';
- (2) the second element in the diphthongs [ei] and [æy], either <y> or <i>, e.g., *klein* or *kley*n 'small', and *bruin* or *bruyn*, 'brown';
- (3) vowel lengthening, either by adding an <e> or by doubling the original vowel, e.g., *zwaard* or *zwaerd* 'sword' (with [a:]), *zuur* or *zuer* 'sour' (with [y]);

- (4) the form of the definite and indefinite article in the nominative singular masculine form: spelled with or without a final <(e)n>, e.g., *de man* or *den man* 'the man', *een man* or *eenen man* 'a man';
- (5) the use of accent marks to distinguish the so-called soft-long *ē* and *ō* (< Wgm. short vowels), from the so-called sharp-long *ê* and *ô* (< Wgm. diphthongs), e.g., soft-long *geēft* 'gives' and *hoópt* 'hopes' from sharp-long *been* 'leg' and *droog* 'dry'. Note that in the Hollandic center of the language area, as in the present-day standard, both [e:]'s and [o:]'s had merged by the seventeenth century, while the difference still exists in most of the southern dialects;
- (6) the ending of the second and third person singular present tense indicative forms of esp. verbs with a dental root, either <dt> or <d>, e.g., *wordt* 'becomes' or *word* 'becomes';
- (7) the so-called superfluous consonants: <g> or <gh> in anlaut, <k> or <ck> in auslaut, e.g., *ik* or *ick* 'I', and *gheven* or *geven* 'give'.

In table 1, we present the prescribed use for the six features in a selection of late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century grammar books from the South. At the bottom, the 1804 officialized northern spelling norm is shown, which was codified by the Leiden professor Matthijs Siegenbeek (see table 1).

First of all, there clearly was a firm and coherent normative tradition in the South before the period of the United Kingdom, with almost complete general agreement on most features. Then, in the period of the United Kingdom (1815–1830), it is evident that southern and northern practice converge, with more and more northern features turning up in southern books, and southern practices thus giving way to the northern officialized norm of 1804. The northern 1804 orthographical prescriptions differ in all features from the common southern tradition. It should be noted that northern normative practice (let alone actual language use) was clearly not homogeneous (van der Wal 2007; Rutten 2008), but the southern perception appears to have been that normative uniformity ruled the North. Note also that the alternatives to the 'superfluous' letters, <g> and <k>, were generally accepted, and that every grammarian in North and South rejected <gh> and <ck>.

In sum, there appears to have been a vivid normative tradition in the South, as well as a very high degree of agreement on important orthographical issues. Admittedly, this is only one side of our research. Corpus studies into actual language use also suggest much more uniformity than the traditional view of the southern Netherlands as an intellectual wasteland, in severe decay, and suffering from total linguistics chaos (Vosters 2009a; Rutten & Vosters i.p.; Vosters, Rutten & Vanden-

Table 1: *Orthographical choices in the normative tradition in the South in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as well as in the officialized northern spelling of 1804.*

Southern normative tradition before the United Kingdom of the Netherlands									
Feature		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Region	Author	Year	y ij	-y -i	V+e V+V	-n -ø	Accent marks	-d -dt	gh- g- -ck -k
Center	Verpoorten	1752	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	P. B.	1757	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	Des Roches	1761	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	Ballieu	1792	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	Van Aerschot	1807	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-dt	g- -k
West	E. C. P.	1713	ij	-y	V+V	-n	yes	-dt	g- -k
	Stéven	1734	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	Van Belleghem & W.	1773	y	-y	V+e	-n	no	-d	g- -k
	Janssens	1775	y	-i	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	[Inleyding]	1785	y	-y	V+e	-n	no	-d	g- -k
	Van Boterdael	1785	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	Vaelande	1805	y	-y-	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
Southern normative tradition during the United Kingdom of the Netherlands									
Feature		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Region	Author	Year	y ij	-y -i	V+e V+V	-n -ø	Accent marks	-d -dt	gh- g- -ck -k
Center	[Grond-regels]	1817	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	Ter Bruggen	1822	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	Zilgens	1824	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	Willems	1824	y	-i	V+e	-ø	no	-dt	g- -k
West	De Neckere	1815	y	-y	V+e	-n	yes	-dt	g- -k
	Henckel	1815	ij	-i	V+e	-n	no	-d	g- -k
	[Cannaert]	1823	y/ij	-y	V+e/ V+V	-n/-ø	no	-dt	g- -k
	Moke	1823	ij	-i	V+V	-ø	yes	-dt	g- -k
	Behaegel	1824	y	-y	V+V	-n	yes	-d	g- -k
	De Simpel	1827	ij	-i	V+V	-ø	no	-dt	g- -k
	[Eerste beginselen]	1819	ij	-i	V+V	-ø	no	-dt	g- -k
In	Van der Pijl	1815	ij	-i	V+V	-ø	no	-dt	g- -k
French	Meijer	1820	ij	-i	V+V	-ø	no	-dt	g- -k
Northern officialized norm									
Feature		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Region	Author	Year	y ij	-y -i	V+e V+V	-n -ø	Accent marks	-d -dt	gh- g- -ck -k
North	Siegenbeek	1804	ij	-i	V+V	-ø	no	-dt	g- -k

bussche i.p.; Vosters & Rutten submitted). In the next section, we will turn to the question of how this myth of multiple norms and spelling chaos came about.

### 5. Case study: The orthographical representation of different *e*'s and *o*'s

As stated above (section 4), many commentators in the late eighteenth and especially in the early nineteenth century had political and rhetorical reasons to paint a rather negative picture of the eighteenth-century linguistic situation in the South. They even upheld this view when referring to the contemporary metalinguistic discourse which, we have shown in section 4, was far from as chaotic as it was said to be. What, then, could possibly have been the empirical base for negative judgments of the eighteenth-century linguistic past? A possible explanation can be found in the use of accent marks for the orthographical representation of different *e*'s and *o*'s: the so-called accent spelling that we also briefly discussed in the previous section, and on which grammarians and schoolteachers seemed to agree least (cf. table 1). In this section, we will first discuss accent spelling as a possible source of the myth of spelling chaos, and then argue that, instead of a sign of chaos or decline, accent spelling should in fact be interpreted as a case of ongoing linguistic standardization in practice.<sup>15</sup>

First, the linguistic background of accent spelling should be explained. In present-day standard Dutch, historically different phonemes have merged. Nowadays, as well as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most northern varieties phonologically have the same vowel in *veel* 'much' (< Wgm. short vowel) and in *deel* 'part' (< Wgm. diphthong), whereas in most southern dialects the historical-phonological difference is maintained, usually by a diphthongized realization of the vowel originating from a Wgm. diphthong. The same with *oo*: in most northern varieties *hoop* 'hope' (< Wgm. short vowel) and *hoop* 'heap' (< Wgm. diphthong) have more or less the same pronunciation whereas a phonological difference exists in most southern dialects. In the Hollandic center of the language area both *e*'s and *o*'s had merged by the seventeenth century. Due to the merger of these phonemes in northern Dutch, where a strong normative tradition existed, they were usually written with the same letters: in closed syllables <ee> and <oo> respectively, for both the vowels out of Wgm. short vowels as those out of Wgm. diphthongs. In the eighteenth century in the South, however, spelling systems emerged in which the historical-phonologically distinct vowels were also written with the same letters, but at the same time distinguished by accent marks. The accent marks were often used to distinguish the so-called soft-long *e* and *o* (< Wgm. short vowels) from the so-called sharp-long *e* and *o* (< Wgm. diphthongs). Thus, soft-long *veël* 'much', *geëft*

‘gives’, *hoóp* ‘hope’ and *loóft* ‘praises’ were orthographically distinguished from sharp-long *deel* ‘part’, *been* ‘leg’, *hoop* ‘heap’ and *droog* ‘dry’.

In the orthographical tradition, then, two parameters were involved in the spelling of a specific vowel. First, its etymological origin; secondly, its position in either an open or a closed syllable. In total, that leaves four different positions for *ee* and *oo*. In table 2, the spelling choices of eighteenth-century grammarians from the South are given:

Table 2: *Orthographical representation of the different e's and o's in open and in closed syllables in the southern normative tradition of the eighteenth century.*

Feature			soft-long <i>ē</i>		sharp-long <i>ê</i>		soft-long <i>ō</i>		sharp-long <i>ó</i>	
Region	Author	Year	open	closed	open	closed	open	closed	open	closed
Center	Verpoorten	1752	e	eê	ee	ee	o	ôô	oo	oo
	P. B.	1757	e	eé	ee	ee	o	oô	oo	oo
	Des Roches	1761	eé	eé	ee	ee	oó	oó	oo	oo
	Verpoorten	1767	e eé	eé	ee	ee	o oó	oó	oo	oo
West	E. C. P.	1713	e	ee	ee	ee	o ô	oo oi	oo oi	oo
	Stéven	1734	é	é êê	ee	ee	o	oo	oo	oo
	Van Bell. & W.	1773	e	ee	ee	ee	o	oo	oo	oo
	Janssens	1775	e	ee	eé	eé	—	—	—	—
	Van Boterdael	1785	eé	eé	ee	ee	oó	oó	oo	oo
	[Inleyding]	1785	e ee	ee	ee	ee	o	oo	oo	oo
	Ballieu	1792	eé é	eé	ee	ee	oó o	oó	oo	oo

In section 4, we only used the presence or absence of accent marks as a feature. Here, it becomes clear that many different proposals were linked to accent spellings. Acute accents as well as circumflexes were proposed, some in open, some in closed syllables, usually for one etymological type, but sometimes for the other. Some authors prescribed multiple spellings for one sound (where there are two lines),<sup>16</sup> one author changed his mind (Verpoorten), one author advocated one prescription while following another (Stéven), and there was one author who had a synchronic instead of a historical distribution for the *o*'s, but not for the *e*'s (Janssens). All in all, this could be interpreted as spelling chaos or orthographical lawlessness.

On closer inspection, however, we do not think this is chaos, but a fine example of standardization instead. Assuming that it is improbable that the relative success of accent spelling, which was in use as a serious

orthographical option well into the nineteenth century, originated from the rather simple booklet by Verpoorten (1752), we asked ourselves where accent spelling came from. Our hypothesis was that it must have originated in actual language practice and that it was codified only later on by grammarians such as Verpoorten (1752). Since all of the early accent spelling proposals, from the 1750s and the 1760s, were from grammar books published in Antwerp (Verpoorten, P. B., and des Roches), we decided to study all the books published between 1720 and 1760 with an Antwerp publisher that are kept in the Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience in Antwerp, where they have the largest collection of old prints from the city of Antwerp. In total, we examined about 350 old prints, some 36 of which contained accent marks. As a result, we were able to trace the rise of the use of accent marks. We distinguish three stages which partly overlap each other:

- 1) *Deletions*: in this first stage, the accent mark is used as a sign that a sound is deleted. This is, of course, a practice well-known from medieval manuscripts and maintained in printing for centuries. The interesting thing is that it now and then also appeared in the context of the *e*'s and *o*'s. Consider: *dêes* 'this' and *vêel* 'much' where the circumflex compensates for the deleted schwa (< *dese* resp. *vele*). We also found, in one text, *ick hoôp* 'I hope' and *ick hope*, where again the schwa is deleted and compensated for by an accent mark.
- 2) In stage two, there is a lexically diffused spread of the use of accents to positions where no sound is deleted but where the vowel is similar to the vowels in stage one. So we find, for example, *scheên* 'appeared' and *verdweên* 'vanished', and *voôr* 'for' and *koôr* 'chose' in which there is no reason to assume any deletion, but where the vowels are similar to those in *dêes*, *vêel* and *hoôp*. So we have analogically based *lexical diffusion*.
- 3) In stage three, the use of accent marks is generalized to all the historically related and presumably similar sounding vowels. This is the stage of the *historical-phonologically conditioned accent spelling system*.

In table 3, the 36 books with accent marks can be seen on the left,<sup>17</sup> and the three stages are shown horizontally:

Table 3: *books with accent marks and the stage these represent (deletions, lexical diffusion or historical-phonologically conditioned).*

Author	Short title	Year	Deletions	Lexical diffusion	Historical-phonological
Storms	Vruchtbaeren boom	1708	x	x	
Vlaenderen	Nieuwe en oprechte	[1720]		x	
Bouvaert	Beschryvinge van den toren	1723			x



Table 3: (*continued*)

Author	Short title	Year	Deletions	Lexical diffusion	Historical-phonological
Roelands	Anathomia arithmetica	1724		x	
—	Twee-hondert en vyftigh-	1728	x	x	
Nakatenus	Hemelsch palm-hof	[1730]		x	
—	Het hemels palm-hof	[1732–1734]		x	
—	Beschryvinghe	[1732]		x	
—	De wonder bekeeringe	1735	x		
Wielens	Het leven van den glorieusen	1738		x	
Pontas	Geestelyke aenspraken	1738			x
—	Het leven der getrouwden	1741			
V. Wauwe	Het geestelyck maeghden-tuyltjen	1743	x	x	
—	Helden-sangh den lof der nature	1744	x	x	
—	De psalmen van David	1746		x	
—	Den spiegel des wreeden	[1748–?]	x	x	
Nakatenus	Het hemels-palm-hofken	[1748]		x	
—	Geboden ende uyt-geroepen	1750			x
[Op den Hooff]	Thimon den menschen-hater	1751	x		
—	Catalogue van den uytmuntende	1752			x
Van der Linden	Heerlyke ende gelukkige reyze	[1753–1805]			x
J. B. V. L. P.	De klyne christelyke academie	[1753–1805]			x
Poirters	Het duyfken	[1753]		x	
—	Vasten-avonds vrolykheden	1755			x
—	Maniere om godvruchtiglyk	[1755]			x
—	Korte maer heylsame	[1755]			x
—	Hant-boecksken van teere	[1755]			x
Claus	Christelyke onderwijzing	1756			x
F. C. M. R.	Christelyke onderwijzing	[1756]		x	
—	Beschryvinge van de bezonderste	[1756]			x
—	Den bloeyenden staet	1758			
Verpoorten	Het leven van den H. Donatus	1759			x
Joannes	Aenleydinge	1759		x	
—	Kort begryp	1759			x
—	Algemeyn jubilé	1759			x
Franciscus	Onderwys	[1760]			x

There is a clear general development from spelling practices related to deletions and lexically defined patterns, on the one hand, to eventually, fully fledged historical-phonological systems similar to those codified by Verpoorten (1752), P. B. (1757), and des Roches (1761), on the other hand. This development should be interpreted as standardization in practice: spelling practices are converging and becoming more and more systematic. Because there were such different spelling practices at the start, with all the different accent marks, etc., one has the impression of chaos, but on closer inspection, it turns out that in actual usage leveling of different practices is the case. Interestingly, we find spelling practices prescribed by grammarians first in actual usage and only years later in grammar books and spelling guides. Verpoorten's (1752) system was already in use in 1723 and in 1728, and in 1750 des Roches' (1761) system can already be found. In other words, the leveling of spelling practices, and the standardization of the system in actual usage preceded codification.

## 6. Conclusion

Much in the spirit of Roland Willemyns' work on the history of Dutch, we have studied the sociolinguistic situation in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the southern Netherlands, a period which used to be characterized as one of language decline and linguistic chaos. Our focus was on spelling, as this was probably the most debated linguistic issue at the time, and we indicated how spelling often indexed social identities. In the orthographical tradition, however, we did not encounter prescriptive chaos, but a vivid and coherent normative tradition, which paralleled the northern normative tradition, to which it gradually gave way in the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815–1830). We then concentrated on an orthographical case which may have contributed to the myth of spelling chaos: the representation of etymologically different *e*'s and *o*'s with the help of accent marks. Again, the general and regular development of this so-called accent spelling does not allow for an interpretation in terms of chaos, but clearly shows the ongoing leveling and standardization of actual language practices.

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## Notes

1. 'southern Netherlands' and 'the South' roughly refer to the Dutch-speaking part of present-day Belgium, nowadays also called Flanders. 'northern Netherlands' and 'the North' refer to the present-day Netherlands.

2. In this paper, we will not report on corpus research either. However, in Vosters (2009a), Rutten & Vosters (i.p. a), Vosters, Rutten & Vandenbussche (i.p.), and Vosters & Rutten (submitted) we have discussed linguistic corpus results using a corpus of digitized manuscript text from the administrative and judicial domain.
3. On Gillis De Witte who used the pseudonym E. C. P. (Egidius Candidus Pastor) see Dibbets (2003).
4. For brief surveys of the most important publications see Smeyers (1959: 112–128), Willemyns (2003: 145–154) and Rutten (i.p.). The arguments in section 3 are explained in more detail in Vosters, Rutten & Vandenbussche (i.p.).
5. See Blauwkuip (1920: 248–263) for an overview, De Clerck (1963) for a case study.
6. Delin & van de Gaer (1820) is a famous example of a grammar rewritten for the South. See also de Vos (1939: 73). An example of the ‘bilingual’ style would be the anonymous work from Kortryk (1823).
7. For example, Cannaert (1823) and de Simpel (1827).
8. This ‘integrationist’ underlining of one shared Dutch language remained particularly important during the rest of the nineteenth century, especially after Belgian independence in 1830. At a time when the Dutch language had again lost many of its official functions to French, the movement towards a joint Dutch spelling must be seen as part of a larger campaign for cultural emancipation of the Dutch speakers in Belgium (De Groof *et al.* 2006).
9. Concerning the situation in the later nineteenth century, Willemyns (1992) emphasizes that it would be incorrect to reduce the polemics to an extreme ‘integrationist’ and an extreme ‘particularist’ position. As has been argued in Vosters (2009b), this is also true for the period of the United Kingdom, when later ‘particularists’ such as Behaegel or de Foere still defended the unity of the Dutch language.
10. The Dutch original reads: ‘Niet *de* Paus, gelijk de Hollanders willen in den noemer van ‘t enkelvoud; want volgens onze grondregels ... zou men den Paus een oneigen geslacht toeschrijven, en den leerling leeren doolen’.
11. In the original ‘Het geestelijk leven van de ganse Zuidelijke Nederlanden – het Land van Luik inbegrepen – biedt ons, omstreeks 1750, het uitzicht van het meest dorre landschap dat men zich kan voorstellen. Er was eenvoudig niets. Het was de meest volslagen rust in de diepste geestelijke armoede’.
12. Cf. the original Dutch: ‘[D]e Vlaemsche spelling [is], tot heden toe, nog door niemand op vaste gronden van algemeenen Vlaemschen aerd gebracht is. ... [E]lke schoolmeester, in de Zuidelyke Provinciën, ... acht zich bevoegd om den kinderen alzulke taelwetten voorteschryven, als hem door het hoofd zyn gewaaid. Anarchie is een erg kwaed, zoowel in de spelling, als in de regering’.
13. In Rutten & Vosters (i.p. a), we discuss the many norms myth in more detail, and there we also show the lack of spelling chaos in actual language use (cf. the myth of orthographical chaos in practice).
14. Willems (1824: 301): ‘Er bestaen ... geene vlaemsche Spel- en Spraekkunsten van doorgaende gezag’.
15. A detailed account of the argument in section 5 is given in Rutten & Vosters (i.p. b).
16. Usually, the choice depended on morphology: a single letter if there was no analogy with a similar form (e.g., *regen* ‘rain’), a double letter if there was an analogical form (e.g., *geëven* ‘give’ 3pl, analogous to *geëft* ‘gives’ 3sg). For a detailed description, see Rutten & Vosters (i.p. b).
17. Here, we give short titles, the estimated year of publication and the author’s name (if known). For full bibliographical references, we refer to the online catalogue of the Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience (<<http://stadsbibliotheek.antwerpen.be/>>).

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