

Catherine Bouko\*, Olivier Standaert and Astrid Vandendaele

# Being a journalist in a multilingual country: Representations of Dutch among Belgian French-speaking journalists

<https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2018-0036>

**Abstract:** In this paper, we examine how the francophone TV audience is introduced to the Flemish community and its language through daily news broadcasts. More specifically, our research looks at how the Dutch language is used when francophone journalists prepare and produce their reports – during all stages of the process –, up until the actual broadcast. We therefore conducted 15 qualitative interviews with TV news journalists employed by the Belgian French-speaking public broadcaster. The interviews were organized around eight topics, e.g. the place of Dutch in the newsroom and the languages chosen during interactions with Dutch-speaking interviewees. From a discursive point of view, we focused on the selected lexical terms and rhetorical tropes (the various uses of the *litotes*, in particular) to unpack the journalists’ practices, in relation to their representations of Dutch. Our study provides notable insights into their representation of the differences between French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians as a generational issue, their tendency to assess their proficiency in Dutch measured against bilingualism, as well as their wish to beat the cliché of “the unilingual French-speaker”. These observations are coupled with criteria which explain why French might be preferred in the end: the TV audience’s comfort, general intelligibility and subtitling constraints.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, journalism, representations, language, discourse analysis

## 1 Introduction

Belgium, in the heart of Europe, is a state notoriously divided by politics, wealth, and three languages. The country boasts just over 11 million inhabitants,

---

**\*Corresponding author: Catherine Bouko**, Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication, Ghent University, Gent, Belgium, E-mail: [catherine.bouko@ugent.be](mailto:catherine.bouko@ugent.be)  
**Olivier Standaert**, Ecole de Communication, Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, E-mail: [olivier.standaert@uclouvain.be](mailto:olivier.standaert@uclouvain.be)  
**Astrid Vandendaele**, Department of Linguistics, Ghent University, Gent, Belgium, E-mail: [astrid.vandendaele@ugent.be](mailto:astrid.vandendaele@ugent.be)

and is composed of three communities, each speaking a different language: French, Dutch and, to a lesser extent, German. Unfortunately, this multilingual configuration does not make every Belgian a polyglot, and the situation might be deteriorating. Indeed, over a period of several years, there has been a steady drop in Francophone pupils choosing Dutch as their first foreign language (from 49% in 2010 to 46.9% in 2014), in favour of English (from 31% to 35.2%) (d'Otreppe 2017). A similar phenomenon is observed in the Flemish community (i.e. Dutch speakers), where “the young Flemish generation hardly ever speaks French. The second language of Flanders is English” (Vanneste in Naczyk 2017, our translation). At a time when each of the two communities speaks their counterpart's language to an ever-decreasing degree, we ask to what extent today's media play a part in transmitting and sharing the language and culture of the other community. Our research focuses on televised news broadcasts, specifically. In this paper, we seek to examine how the Dutch language is used when Francophone journalists prepare and produce their reports – during all stages of the process – until the actual broadcast.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Two distinct media landscapes

Around ten years ago, Sinardet (2007) argued that Belgium was composed of two distinct public spheres, made visible through the very rare presence of Francophone politicians in Dutch-speaking television studios during national elections. Only 3% of broadcast TV news bulletins on both sides of the language border related to the other community, while 80% of the TV bulletins involved ministers belonging to their own respective communities (Sinardet 2007); Marc Lits (2009: 64) supports the idea that Dutch-speaking Flanders is foreign territory to French-speaking Wallonia and vice versa, which leads to oversimplifications and stereotypes, as indeed, are frequently observed in the coverage of remote international news. The RTBF and the VRT, the French- and Dutch-speaking public broadcasters, respectively, sometimes collaborate and share images from reports or interviews that they can broadcast in their respective TV news bulletins. For example, they produced a common TV programme in 2017 for the anniversary tribute to the victims of the Brussels attacks of March 2016. However, such common productions remain exceptional, not least for editorial and practical reasons, and most other collaborations remain invisible to the general public.

For Sinardet (2009; in Jacobs and Tobback 2012: 3), language does not play a role in the rare presence of Francophones in Flemish political TV broadcasts, as it is possible to record, dub or subtitle their talks. The language barrier is to be found on the politicians' side, who might see their participation in Flemish TV broadcasts as particularly face-threatening, and not from the journalists' side. In a more general way than in the context of elections, Perrin et al. (2017) insist on the practical impact of the journalists' linguistic skills. Indeed, events that gain high media attention directly depend on the journalists' skills in the language in which the events are reported. Translation practices play a role at every stage of journalistic work, which makes translation an important type of "micro-gatekeeping" (Perrin et al. 2017: 478), something that affects the nature of journalistic productions. For Jacobs and Tobback (2012), the language does not determine whether a report is included in the TV news or not, but it does play a central role during the editing process, notably when the journalistic team chooses which extracts to broadcast from the different dialogues available, which, ultimately, influences the general structure of the report and the degree of detail of the information. In their case study, Dutch constitutes an obstacle for some interventions; similar interventions in French would have been preferred, given that Dutch did not provide any added value. We put forward the hypothesis that this preference is determined by representations about the place of the Dutch language in Francophone newsrooms. This is exactly the type of social representation that we want to examine.

## 2.2 Social representations of languages and journalistic practices

Journalists' representations of their professional practices are still relatively understudied because news production is traditionally approached as a product of routines, which leave little room for the journalist's agency (Reardon 2017: 2). When they include the journalist as an agent in the process of newsmaking, most studies ignore the talk of the journalist or treat it as a transfer of transparent information, rather than as a discursive practice in its own right. Drawing on Catenaccio et al. (2011), Reardon calls for an ethnographic approach that more takes the discursive construction of the journalists' talk into account. For Hanitzsch and Vos, "the dynamic nature of journalists' identity can be understood as a discursive repertoire that enables the selective activation of contingent forms of journalistic roles" (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017: 7). As Gravengaard (2012) outlines, these repertoires are not always coherent; their articulation can make identity

conflicts appear, which are positioned in conflicting discourses. Therefore, by analysing the journalists' multi-layered (and sometimes conflicting) repertoires, we seek to unpack their representations, which they use to construct their – sometimes conflicting – values and practices.

### 2.2.1 Reference and usage representations

Social representations are constructed in communication processes between individuals; a social group is notably constructed around its members' representations of the real. Accordingly, a social representation of a language is more a feature of the social relation than an intrinsic characteristic of the language itself. Moreover, representations comprise a practical orientation. This orientation positions and influences social behaviours and social representations, which in turn, involve a (re)construction of the real by individuals (Jodelet 1994: 36). Consequently, we assume that journalists' representations of Dutch have been built into social exchanges. Those representations constitute practical knowledge, which *a priori* plays a role in their professional practices.

For Py, representations are

primitive stereotyped formulas and are then subject to a process of reformulation through attenuation, modalisation, reduction or through a shift of its scope. In our view, this trajectory responds to a personal experience which invalidates the initial formula either completely or to some extent (Py 2000: 8, our translation).

Taking this view, Py distinguishes between “reference representations” and “usage representations” (our translation). The former are beliefs or points of view that belong to a social group's members' collective culture; these members know these representations without systematically embracing them. Unlike the collective emergence and upholding of reference representations, usage representations are constructed from a more individual point of view, based on the individuals' personal life experiences. Reference representations are defined *in abstracto*, progressively detached from concrete and personal experiences over time, whereas usage representations are directly anchored in empirical experience, and are thus different for each individual. Therefore, we aim to identify the reference representations with which the Francophone journalists are familiar, whether they embrace them or not, and the usage representations which have been constructed as they gain professional experience.

### 2.2.2 The representations of the Dutch language among Francophone Belgians

In order to gain insight into the journalists' representations, it may be useful to compare them with the Francophone Belgians' representations in general. To the best of our knowledge, Wynants' research (Wynants 2001) is the only existing analysis of the Francophones' representations of their linguistic skills in Dutch. She particularly points out the representation of a "language delay" among the Francophones, in comparison with the Dutch-speaking Belgians. Wynants (Wynants 2001: 11–15) identified six types of explanation expressed by the respondents:

- Linguistic and sociolinguistic explanations: fear of making mistakes among Francophones, higher prestige of French compared to Dutch, confrontation with Dutch dialects, etc.;
- Explanations through cultural and media environments: multilingual media landscape in Flanders, where foreign languages are not dubbed but subtitled, and a monolingual Francophone environment;
- Education-related explanations: foreign-language teaching is perceived as more demanding in Flanders, lack of support from the Francophone parents in their children's learning;
- Explanation related to the representation of French as a dominant language;
- Explanations related to stereotypes about the linguistic communities: the courageous and pragmatic Flemish vs. passive Walloons;
- Political explanations: the role of the Francophone politicians, who do not set an example, the communitarian conflicts (separatist aspirations among a fraction of the Flemish people).

This observation of a language delay among the Francophones is nuanced by the impression of a positive evolution which takes the form of a tendency towards a better balance. This change is perceived as generation-related. Young Francophones aged between 10 and 25 have reportedly made linguistic progress, while Francophones over 40 are said to stagnate.

### 2.2.3 The representations of the use of languages in journalism

Cotter coins the expression "craft ethos" (Cotter 2010: 32), which encapsulates the founding values and representations that journalists associate with news-making. Two language-related references to craft ethos have been subject to previous research. The first representation concerns the importance of

proximity, which is perceived as a central value for newsmaking and is enhanced by dubbed translations. This representation influences practices; Perrin et al. (2017: 465) argue that when journalists translate, they tend to favour a “domestication strategy” rather than a “foreignization strategy”. The first strategy favours proximity between the information and the recipients in order to make it as accessible as possible. The second strategy is used to transmit the other languages and cultures in a more authentic way by keeping the original language and subtitling it (Venuti 1995). With the latter strategy, a bigger effort is required from the recipients in order to grasp the message.

The second representation considers translation as an easy and invisible task. In her ethnographic analysis in AFP and ATS press agencies, Davier (2014) points out that younger journalists do not always dare to ask for help for translations as it is perceived as a task which does not need explicit languages skills. This observation is consistent with van Doorslaer’s opinion, for whom “translating is everywhere, there are no formal translator functions” (Van Doorslaer 2010: 181). Therefore, we have analysed to what extent the journalists who we interviewed position themselves in relation to these two representations and mobilize others.

### 3 Method

We conducted 15 qualitative interviews (lasting 30 to 60 minutes) of journalists working for the newsroom of TV news at RTBF, the Belgian French-speaking public broadcaster. This cohort represents a little more than one third of the total number of journalists who work for this newsroom. We also met with the chief editor in order to gain insights into the Dutch-related institutional positions. The selected respondents interviewed at least one Dutch-speaking person in one of their reports broadcast in TV news between July and October 2017. We paid close attention to the variety of journalistic profiles, in terms of speciality (society, politics, culture, sport) and in terms of age, professional experience and type of professional working conditions (freelance, fixed-termed contract, permanent contract). In order to provide some additional context to our study and to correlate the Dutch-related representations with the journalists’ level in Dutch, it is worth mentioning that the level of Dutch among the journalists we encountered varies between four levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), i.e. from A2 to C1. We determined their levels on the basis of the markers of linguistic skills they used in their talk to qualify their own level or their colleagues’ levels (assessment of the level, explanation

of the tasks they are able to perform or not in Dutch and results of past language tests). Three journalists are basic user level (elementary level/A2); ten journalists are independent user level (intermediate B1 or upper intermediate B2) and two journalists are proficient users (advanced level/C1). These levels need to be seen as mere indicators for the qualitative analysis and not as results of our research in their own right.

Our interviews were semi-directed; the questions of our interview guide were organized around seven broad topics. The first two draw on Wynants' topics used to grasp the Francophones' representations in general, while the last five topics concern the journalism sector:

- School experiences and potential language learning difficulties;
- Comparison between the French- and Dutch-speakers' language skills and explanation for possible differences;
- Career projection when they were students, in particular the place of Dutch in the future professional practices they imagined for themselves;
- Media landscapes in Belgium (the distinction between Dutch-and French-speaking information);
- The place of Dutch in the newsroom;
- The chosen languages with Dutch-speaking interviewees;
- Their own and their colleagues' levels of Dutch.

To grasp social representations of members of a social group and not just mere opinions of individuals, it was important that the questions reflected the triadic construction that characterize social representations: representations of the subjects (e.g. the journalists), of the object (e.g. Dutch) and of the context/pragmatic project (e.g. TV journalism) form a system of mutual constitution. One angle of the triangle mediates between the other two:

This structure is essential if we want to understand how in the object, the project of the subjects is represented; or how in the subjects, the object appears in relation to a project; or how the project links the subjects and the objects (Bauer and Gaskell 1999: 168).

The respondents were asked to explain their approach to Dutch from both individual and collective points of view, and to outline to what extent they believe their opinions were shared by their peers, and thus parts of “common-sense constructs” (Hall 1999[1973]: 57) in the journalistic sector.

We favoured inductive reasoning, from specific premises to general conclusions: in most sections of the discussion, we asked them to start from concrete private and professional lived situations. It is only at the end of the interviews that we asked them explicit questions about their level of Dutch and their opinions regarding the professional use of this language. By starting with

concrete illustrative examples, we wished to outline representations from detailed experiences rather than mere general descriptions. We also sought to avoid them responding by feeling judged on their language level and practices. Some journalists first refused to be interviewed for fear of being judged by the researchers (and possibly by their hierarchy). Therefore, we aimed to create a compassionate climate of trust and confidence, far from any norm or linguistic ideal, which the respondents had to live up to, either explicitly or implicitly. “‘Live and let live’ disinterested observation” (Bauer and Gaskell 1999: 179) was crucial. Along the same lines, we insisted on the fact that the two researchers who conducted the interviews were Francophones themselves, and not highly proficient French-Dutch bilinguals, to reassure them and avoid any pressure. Anonymity was, of course, guaranteed.

We transcribed all the interviews. The analysis of the data was qualitative. Data systematization was achieved by constructing coding frames for each of the seven broad theme parts of the interviews. Firstly, we coded all the finely-grained sub-topics. We outlined around three topics per broad theme, resulting in around twenty sub-topics in total. Secondly, we particularly sought to identify the mechanisms of thematic anchoring. Thematic anchoring refers to the structural in-depth levels of social representations (Moscovici 2000) and comes close to the concept of ideology (Höijer 2011: 10). To analyze thematic anchoring, all the segments containing similar sub-topics were compared to point out the salience of specific opinions, attitudes and stereotypes.

During the analysis of thematic anchoring, we noticed frequent occurrences of euphemisms and litotes in the journalists’ answers. Therefore, in a third stage, we performed a discourse analysis to unpack these discursive practices related to their representations.

We present the results in the section below.

## 4 Results

The most salient social representations related to the seven broad themes are presented here. As the results have been anonymized, we use the masculine form in all the journalists’ quoted utterances.

### 4.1 Dutch school language learning perceived as a failure

“Pfff, c’était pas ... Je ne suis pas sorti de l’école bilingue, certainement pas. [Pff it didn’t happen ... I didn’t leave high school bilingual, certainly not”] (Journalist).

For the majority of the journalists, regardless of their levels, the Dutch classes at school and college or university failed to offer them a high level in Dutch. There was too much theory, not enough course hours and no linguistic immersion. This representation is consistent with the education-related explanation pointed out by Wynants 15 year ago (see 2.2.2); this seems to have remained stable over time. However, one journalist insisted that one owes it to oneself to go beyond the courses and another respondent underlined that it is up to you to maintain your language skills. Indeed, we frequently observed the paradox, often conscious among journalists, between the desire to learn and the lack of motivation to do so. In their current professional lives, this lack of commitment can be attributed to time constraints (long working days, and irregular time schedules) and by a pragmatic need to speak Dutch better, which is not demonstrated on a daily basis. Ideally, journalists would like to be more proficient in Dutch, but they manage to do their jobs with the level they currently have.

The common negative representations among Francophone pupils remain prominent in some journalists' minds. Many journalists directly related to them, explaining straight away that they had never felt any resentment towards Dutch, contrary to most pupils in their classes. However, several journalists shared the common representation that Dutch "n'est pas la plus belle langue du monde [isn't the most beautiful language in the world.]" This extract, as well as the first one of this Section 4.1., illustrates the frequent usage of litotes by the journalists in their talks. The litotes is a rhetorical trope, which combines two necessary conditions: "a term is negated and the opposite of the negated term has to be salient." (Neuhaus 2016: 133), like in "that is not bad" for instance. On the one hand, beyond its formal characteristics, litotes are frequently defined as a form of understatement (Horn 1989: 303), which points out the distance between the utterance and the locutor, who says less to mean more (Jaubert 2008). On the other hand, Kerbrat-Orecchioni considers litotes as a form of euphemism (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1994: 67) and Neuhaus insists on the variety of its possible usages: "Litotic form has the potential of multitude meanings, i.e., denial, potential presumption denial, mitigation, and understatement." (Neuhaus 2016: 139) As will be discussed below, litotes fulfil different functions in the journalists' talks. The first two examples illustrate the usage of litotes in order to express an understatement. In both cases, the locutor takes a critical stance, which is typical of the usages of litotes (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1994: 67). Understatements are based on mitigation, through which the locutor remains vague to be milder, while his statement is shifted on a scale to mean more. The perception of this shift by the interlocutor is necessary to interpret these underinformed statements as understatements. Through litotic understatements, the journalist says less to mean more. It is important to note that contextual clues

are often needed to interpret extracts like the second one as understatements and not merely as litotic forms of mitigation.

Regardless of their levels, journalists perceive Dutch as a language that is “not difficult” or “not particularly difficult”. During the interviews, some of them pointed out the difficulties regarding syntactic forms (e.g. subject-verb inversion). We hold the hypothesis that such syntactic differences with French partly explain the Francophones’ “disenchantment” with Dutch. Indeed, a Francophone will immediately notice his possible syntactic mistakes, while tense mistakes in English go undetected, for instance.

## 4.2 Differences between French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians: Generational

Like the respondents in Wynants’ study, all the journalists in our study are of the opinion that Dutch-speakers have a better command of French than the other way around. Most of them have had this belief since childhood and their professional practices have confirmed this representation. Here, reference representations and usage representations converge. However, a generational change can be perceived. While generally, the Dutch-speakers master French, that does not necessarily apply to the younger generations (perceived by the respondents as aged around 20). In their professional practices, the journalists observed that, for example, the younger football players’ command of French is lower than that of (older) club managers. They also noticed that older Flemish politicians speak French perfectly, while this is not the case for their successors (even if these younger politicians still achieved a very satisfactory level in their opinion). Fifteen years ago, Wynants already pointed out this representation of a “tendency towards a better balance” (see Section 2.2.2), according to which the younger Flemish generations are less proficient in French than their elders. That being the case, their practice representations come to nuance to some extent their reference representations, even if this tendency towards a better balance is increasingly becoming a reference representation too.

To explain this difference in level, several journalists mention the role of dubbing habits in Wallonia, while Flemish television broadcasters, either public or private, have always subtitled their media content. At a time when it is easy to watch movies and series in the original language thanks to digital platforms, the impact of dubbing is probably perceived as even more important.

Interestingly, this representation of a tendency towards a better balance is not valid for the professional sector. Indeed, many journalists claim that Flemish journalists are significantly better at French than the other way round. This

representation often engenders both admiration and embarrassment among the Francophone contingent who just manage average levels. This representation also explains why most exchanges with their Flemish peers are done in French.

### 4.3 Qualifying as a bilingual

From many interviews, it seems the grass is greener on the other side. Frequently, journalists are able and willing to consider their colleagues “bilingual” but they are careful not to use this label for themselves. For most journalists with a basic or intermediate level of Dutch, using the label “bilingual” to qualify their colleagues’ level seems to be a way of widening the gap between themselves and their colleagues. In this vein, colleagues are easily qualified as bilingual.

In the majority of the interviews, the journalists place themselves on the bilingual scale. The definition of this concept is not self-evident, though: Elmiger (2000: 55) points out that bilingualism has been defined in various ways, from minimal pragmatism to an idealized approach. Usage-related criteria are compared to proficiency-related criteria: bilingualism can be considered as “the native-like control of two languages” (Bloomfield 1933: 56) while Grosjean sees Bloomfield’s stance as unrealistic and defines bilingualism from the locutor’s perspective. For Grosjean, “the bilingual is a communicating self who uses his two languages (separately or together) to communicate” (Grosjean 1993: 17, our translation). Our analysis reveals that the journalists favour the ideal sense of bilingualism when they measure themselves against this concept to assess their own command and that of their colleagues. The expression of “a perfect bilingual” is frequently used. Besides, all journalists consider their VRT peers’ level of French higher than theirs, which reinforces their frequent embarrassment, coupled with their admiration for the representation of their peers’ nearly perfect proficiency in French.

Some journalists’ statements, like the following one, mix both approaches to bilingualism:

Moi je parle correctement néerlandais. Je ne suis pas bilingue ... parfait mais je suis assez souvent ... en plus en étant basé à Bruxelles, envoyé en Flandre. J’ai l’étiquette à la rédaction de quelqu’un qui parle les deux langues. Je suis loin d’être parfait bilingue mais je suis autonome sur le terrain, quoi. Quand on m’envoie en Flandre je sais tenir une conversation, faire une interview. [As for me, I speak Dutch well. I am not bilingual ... not perfectly, but I’m often sent to Flanders, ... what’s more, being based in Brussels and sent to Flanders. In the newsroom, I’m known as someone who speaks both languages. I am far from being perfectly bilingual, but I work autonomously in the field. When I’m sent to Flanders, I can hold my own and conduct an interview.] (Journalist)

This form of linguistic skills can be considered as functional bilingualism, in line with Grosjean's approach.

Many journalists, even those who have obtained C1 levels, insist that they could be more proficient in Dutch. They make use of mitigation through euphemisms, such as “Je ne suis pas un exemple parfait, je me débrouille. [I'm not a perfect example, I get by]” or “J'ai un accent vaguement correct. [I have a vaguely correct accent].” Such understatements are produced in modesty contexts, in which the locutor is well aware of his proficiency but prefers avoiding self-praise (Levinson 2000: 145). We also noticed a tendency among journalists to define their linguistic skills through litotes, moreover, that they do not easily accept their language skills being complimented.

In some cases, there is a thin line between understatement and mitigation, as in the following extract:

Il y en a plusieurs qui sont dans le même cas que moi, qui n'ont pas un niveau de dingue quoi. [There are several journalists [in the newsroom], who are in the same boat like me, they're not at a fantastic level.]

Here, the use of the litotic form can be interpreted as a form of mitigation (negating a high level makes it possible to avoid using explicit terms to qualify one's poor level), but also as a form of understatement. Between mitigation and self-mockery through understatement, this litotic extract illustrates a face-enhancing act, reinforced by the mention of the group (the other journalists of the newsroom) to avoid face-threatening isolation. In other words, all journalists consider their level could be higher, and the reference to bilingualism sometimes allows to express this negative feeling in a milder way. Besides, they are often reassured about their linguistic skills when they notice that the “true bilinguals of the newsroom”, or even Dutch-speakers, do not understand the accents either. Such type of anecdote, which is a regular occurrence during interviews, is reassuring to the journalists but also justifies, sometimes explicitly, the Francophones' lack of interest in the Dutch language.

#### 4.4 Limited career projection as students

Three different types of journalists emerged from our analysis. Firstly, some journalists developed a natural relation to Dutch. They learnt the language outside of school when they were children and they were aware of the importance of mastering languages when they were students, as well as of the asset it would be on their CV. Secondly, several journalists, all working at the sports and politics sections, were aware of the necessity to learn Dutch. The Belgian political and

sports contexts (with more Flemish football teams) partly explain this. The third group, a slight majority, is characterized by the lack of multilingual projection. Many journalists did not imagine interviewing Dutch speakers. Several journalists explained that they focused more on basic journalistic skills when they were students.

Other journalists, some of whom chose to study Italian or English instead of Dutch at university, explain this choice by a lack of maturity or by a strategic choice to avoid Dutch, in order to pass their exams more easily, as they perceived the Dutch classes as the harder ones. Such choices were anchored at the time of the choice, as illustrated by a journalist admitting he chose Italian courses “because the teacher was nice”. Generally, the journalists mentioned that they did not project much into their future jobs, in terms of neither Dutch nor anything else.

#### 4.5 A divided media landscape: A cause for regret?

Moi j'ai quand même l'impression qu'on s'intéresse de moins en moins à la Flandre. [...] Maintenant on l'évoque même plus quoi, la Belgique, c'est la Belgique Francophone. Quand on dit 'trouve-moi les chiffres en Belgique' c'est la Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, point. [I have the distinct impression that we are less and less interested in Flanders [...] Now we don't even mention it, really, Belgium. What we think of more as Belgium, is French-speaking Belgium. When we say 'find me the figures for Belgium', it's for the Wallonia-Brussels regions, full stop.]

This extract illustrates a representation that we encountered very often. Most topics are selected by the editors and not by the journalists themselves. The two sports journalists who we interviewed insisted on their coverage of the national championships from both sides of the language border and claimed they consult Flemish media sources, given that much information in their field comes from Flanders. For the other domains, while editorial choice is perceived as a wish to limit Flemish topics to major news, it is probably partially favoured by the very rare consulting of Flemish media by the journalists, even by those who have high (C1 level) Dutch. With the exception of the sports and political journalists, most journalists indicated they consult Flemish media only when the topic requires it, which is not frequent. Browsing Flemish media mostly occurs downstream, once the topic that journalists have to cover is determined. Some journalists are fully aware that Flemish topics could emerge in newsroom meetings thanks to upstream media consultation.

Our analysis reveals a paradox: that the journalists regret not seeing Flanders covered in their newsroom more often, and their rather limited consultation of Flemish media is probably a contributing factor to the division of the media landscape that they regret. It is worth noting that the chief editor told us he thought that most of his journalists regularly consult Flemish media. However, we cannot rule out that his assertion was meant to favour positive representations of his newsroom from our side, and that he is actually well aware of this limited media consumption.

#### 4.6 The unimportance of Dutch in the newsroom

We have already pointed out that sports and political journalists consider Dutch as truly indispensable, notably because most federal ministers are Dutch-speaking. In contrast, while the other journalists regret the limited visibility of Flanders in the news programs and would like to speak Dutch better, they put the importance of Dutch into perspective when they explain their representations of the newsroom's day-to-day realities: while Dutch is considered an important skill in theory, a good level does not appear to be absolutely necessary in practice. Four representations are related to this *craft ethos*. The first representation concerns the necessary skills in audiovisual journalism:

On est des ensembliers quand on est des journalistes audiovisuels. [...] En fait, aujourd'hui, je me rends compte que les compétences nécessaires dans un métier comme le nôtre sont de plus en plus liées à l'information. C'est crucial d'avoir un bon esprit de synthèse, de comprendre rapidement les points importants d'un sujet et d'être capable de le rendre visuellement attirant et de traduire visuellement une idée. Je ne pense pas que la langue soit prioritaire; elle est secondaire. [We're package builders when we're audiovisual journalists [...] Actually, today, I realise that the skills that are required in a profession like ours are more and more bound up with information. It's crucial to have a good sense of synthesis, to quickly understand the salient points of a topic and be able to make it visually attractive and to visually translate an idea. I don't think that language is the priority; it is secondary.] (Journalist)

The second explanation lies in the collective knowledge of Dutch, which is considered sufficient by some journalists: it is necessary in a newsroom that at least some journalists speak it well but not all of them. Actually, the chief editor is fine with this collective proficiency in Dutch:

Objectivement il y a toujours quelqu'un qui peut aider. [...] C'est quand même pas compliqué de trouver pour vingt secondes de sonore quelqu'un qui sait faire une traduction correcte. [Objectively there is always someone who can help. [...] It's really not hard to find someone who can translate correctly for twenty seconds of sound.]

The chief editor's assertion also highlights the specific audiovisual format: the topics covered for the news programme are very short, with straightforward information, for which proficiency in another language is not strictly necessary. According to the editor-in-chief, in his newsroom, nobody is able to conduct long interviews. For the news, journalists just gather facts. For the editor-in-chief,

Des vrais bilingues franchement il n'y en a pas beaucoup mais par contre des gens qui vont sur le terrain sans problème, qui sont je dirais des bilingues usuels, qui peuvent tenir une conversation dans un café ou qui peuvent poser 4/5 questions à des gens en rue ça il y en a quand même beaucoup. [True bilinguals, frankly, are thin on the ground, but people who go into the field without too many problems, who are, I would say, common bilinguals, who can have a conversation in a café or who can ask 4 or 5 questions to people in the street, there are plenty of those.]

Most journalists explained they have difficulties bouncing back during the interview, to rekindle the interaction like they do in French, which would be a real issue for longer or more polemical interviews.

The fourth explanation concerns the human approach, and not the technical one, to information. For longer reports, even in French, journalists focus more into the human aspect and empathy and do not theorize. This explains why journalists can get by with a less elaborate vocabulary to talk about a topic.:

“C'est plutôt ‘comment est-ce que je vais rencontrer cette personne pour la faire parler, qu'elle me parle d'elle et que je la comprenne, que je la sente’ et alors t'as plein de critères qui interviennent et la langue en est un mais c'est pas le seul. [It's rather a matter of ‘How am I going to approach this person to get her to talk, so that she talks about herself in a way that I understand her, that I can sense what she's going through’ and so you have many criteria that come up, and language is one of them, but it is not the only one.]”  
(Journalist)

Political journalists are more regularly faced with less consensual assertions. For the editor-in-chief, as well as for most journalists, working in politics requires a higher level of Dutch than in the other fields.

In conclusion, the journalists' craft ethos is often defined by the pragmatic necessity of a collective command of Dutch, in order to produce short formats in which the human aspect is paramount. However, the journalists sometimes feel some level of unease when they are confronted with their linguistic shortcomings in the field. Even though they know they can rely on their colleagues for translations when they are back in the newsroom, they still need to manage the interactions with Dutch-speakers by themselves. This latter aspect of their craft ethos is the subject of the following section.

## 4.7 Challenging the cliché of the monolingual dominant French-speaker

All the journalists we encountered very explicitly expressed some embarrassment concerning the Dutch-speakers' frustration about the poor command of Dutch among French-speakers, which is a common representation in Belgium. Therefore, on the one hand, three reasons for using Dutch as much as possible prevail in the interviews: respect, mutual trust and professional asset. On the other hand, further criteria are brought to the fore to explain why French might be preferred in the end: the TV audience's comfort, intelligibility and subtitling constraints.

### 4.7.1 Dutch as a (strategic) sign of respect

All journalists share the principle of using Dutch in their interactions with interviewees. The proportion of Dutch used depends on their proficiency. On the one hand, the journalists who feel the most uncomfortable with Dutch use it to establish contact, at the very least:

“Si je commence en néerlandais peut-être qu'ils se diront moins 'encore des Francophones qui savent pas parler néerlandais' et c'est aussi une question de respect. En fait je dirais que c'est plus ça que le côté stratégique, c'est que j'estime que je ne sais pas s'ils parlent français donc je trouve que la moindre des choses c'est quand même de parler dans leur langue avant de savoir s'ils parlent ou pas et s'ils parlent pas c'est clair que ça va me stresser mais voilà je me ferai comprendre, je me débrouillerai. [If I start in Dutch maybe they won't be tempted to think 'typical French-speakers who can't speak Dutch' and it's also a question of respect. [...] I think I don't know whether they speak French, so I work out that the least I can do is to try and speak in their language before I know whether they speak it or not and, if they don't, then it's clear that I'm heading for a stressful time, but I nevertheless will make myself understood, I will get by.]” (Journalist)

On the other hand, individual craft ethos determines the use of Dutch beyond the first contact. Some journalists explained they systematically ask their questions in Dutch and would feel embarrassed if they asked them in French. Others prefer using French if the interviewee is proficient enough; the reason to justify this choice is the TV audience' comfort. In general, their criterion to determine the language of the interview is the criterion of intelligibility: if the interviewee is (more or less) equally proficient in French and in Dutch, French is chosen.

As they want to create an atmosphere that is appropriate for the interview, most journalists are also conscious that they “please” the Dutch-speakers when

they use their language. For the journalists working in politics, Dutch proficiency is particularly considered a crucial asset to oil the wheels of professional relations, as it helps to get information, to efficiently rely on one's professional network, etc. It goes further than appropriate conditions for interviews.

#### 4.7.2 Technical constraints that explain the use of French

Some journalists point out the technical aspect. They prepare the interview in Dutch with the respondent, but ask the questions in French when they record the interview to avoid subtitling during the editing process, which are substantial timesaving and easy editing benefits. This craft ethos, which respects the interviewees' mother tongue, is reflected in the interactions with bilingual spokespersons, with whom the journalists systematically communicate in French, even if they are Dutch-speakers.

The RTBF's specifications demand subtitles of all utterances in Dutch in the news programme, except if the report is not ready one hour ahead of broadcast. Most of the journalists claim they are in favour of subtitling, because it enables TV viewers to hear languages other than French, but they see it as a technical constraint. Moreover, subtitling is not always achievable, because of lack of time as well as overwork. Besides, translating for subtitles requires an exact match between the two languages, while dubbing permits translations, which are not one hundred percent faithful. Translating subtitles highlights the comprehension issues that most journalists grapple with, notably when they interview respondents with strong regional accents.

## 5 Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, our research reveals how most respondents would like to speak Dutch better. However, more specifically, most consider that a collective command of Dutch is crucial, while individual proficiency is only one skill among other journalistic skills. Sometimes, this social representation seems to be an acceptable compromise between the idealized ethos of the journalist who can easily work in the other language of the country, and a more pragmatic ethos, for which day-to-day realities justify intermediate (or even basic) knowledge of Dutch. Like Gravengaard (2012) who pointed out the multi-layered conceptions of news work, we also outline paradoxes and balances that are sometimes hard to strike in Dutch-related craft ethos.

On the one hand, bilingualism almost systematically appears as a benchmark of linguistic skills. All respondents consider their Flemish peers' level of French (much) higher than their level in Dutch, which reinforces their frequent embarrassment. Beating the representation of the monolingual Francophone, who starts to speak French to his interlocutors immediately, turns out to be very important for the journalists, for reasons of respect or human warmth, but also to efficiently use one's professional network (especially in politics). In the same vein, they are nearly all in favour of subtitling, given the role they infer to TV dubbing in the Francophones' poor linguistic skills. Therefore, with subtitled instead of dubbed interviewees in news reports, the journalists in this study favour the "foreignization strategy" rather than the "domestication strategy" (Venuti 1995; Perrin et al. 2017).

On the other hand, this ideal approach to multilingualism is restrained by pragmatic realities: while most of them affirm they would like to improve their level, they do not have the possibility to free up the necessary time. Moreover, the institutional approach to Dutch does not really encourage them. An 'unspoken rule' in the newsroom in our study seems to be that those journalists who are more proficient in a language assist those who are not. This solidarity appears expected by the hierarchy, as it is accepted that not every journalist masters Dutch. Interestingly, that expectation of solidarity is in sharp contrast with the fear of asking for help, as identified by Davier in two press agencies (Davier 2014). The difference can probably be explained through the format of TV news, which does not require extensive translations. Like Davier, we notice that translation is considered an invisible practice, requiring no explicit skills. At the RTBF, these translations are often performed in a hurry and/or thanks to last-minute resourcefulness, according to the availability of the journalists present in the newsroom when colleagues need help. The balance is not always easy to find between the TV viewers' increased open-mindedness towards foreign languages and the extra work that subtitled translations imply, while the journalists already often have the impression that they have to work against the clock.

Furthermore, the management of language skills by the interviewed journalists shows similarities with that of other types of skills and work tools that they have to acquire and use on a regular basis. The practices mentioned here for languages concerning their learning as well as a collective and case-by-case management of the translation tasks is in line with the journalists' approach to the digital tools and skills, which are currently at the heart of the transformation of newsrooms and the journalists' work (Witschge et al. 2016). Indeed, journalists familiarize themselves with the use of new media for processing and disseminating information and with the various forms of digital narration in

variable and dynamic ways, i.e. non-uniform and non-rectilinear. Such forms of familiarization allow these skills to be made accessible in a way that requires flexibility and adaptation to production constraints, thus favouring on-the-job training over an exhaustive and 'orthodox' mastery of these skills. In this respect, the management of language skills is part of a broader professional dynamic, that of professions with prudential practice (to which journalism belongs, like architecture, management, medicine, etc.), where professionals are always encountering singular, complex and evolving situations and cannot therefore apply standardized knowledge (Vezinat 2010).

From a discursive point of view, we observe a frequent use of litotes, which, as Neuhaus (2016) demonstrated, is not limited to understatements but can also be used for mitigation, especially when the interlocutors' face is being threatened. This is often the case when the journalists talk about languages: for some of them, their low proficiency in Dutch contrasts with their ideal craft ethos of journalists working in a multilingual country and makes their professional identity more vulnerable.

Social representations are expressed in various modes (Bauer and Gaskell 1999: 177). Therefore, a multi-method analysis is particularly welcome. In this vein, our insights obtained through interviews pave the way for further research into the actual newsroom processes by means of participant observation. Moreover, a comparative study of the Dutch-speaking TV journalists' representations and practices involving French might also reveal to what extent the Francophones' representations about their peers appear accurate, and vice versa. This might be a first step towards collaboration, given that French-speaking journalists are in the market for professional linguistic immersion (rather than traditional languages courses) to improve their Dutch.

Lastly, we are confident that the methodology presented here allows for insights outside the Belgian context, including – but not limited to – Switzerland, which boasts four national languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansch), as well as Canada, where English and French enjoy equal status as the country's official languages.

## References

- Bauer, Martin W., & George Gaskell. 1999. Towards a paradigm for research on social representations. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 29(2). 163–186.
- Bloomfield, Leonard. 1933. *Language*. New York: Holt.
- Catenaccio, Paola, Colleen Cotter, Mark De Smedt, Giuliana Garzone, Geert Jacobs, Felicitas Macgilchrist, Lutgard Lams, et al. 2011. Towards a linguistics of news production. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43(7). 1843–1852.

- Cotter, Colleen. 2010. *News talk: Investigating the language of journalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- d'Otreppe, Bosco. 2017. Les écoliers wallons snobent de plus en plus le néerlandais. *La Libre Belgique*.
- Davier, Lucile. 2014. The paradoxical invisibility of translation in the highly multilingual context of news agencies. *Global Media and Communication* 10(1). 53–72. doi: 10.1177/1742766513513196.
- Elmiger, Daniel. 2000. Définir le bilinguisme. Catalogue des critères retenus pour la définition discursive du bilinguisme. *Travaux neuchâtelois de linguistique (Tranel)* 32. 55–76.
- Gravengaard, Gitte. 2012. The metaphors journalists live by: Journalists' conceptualisation of newswork. *Journalism* 13(8). 1064–1082.
- Grosjean, François. 1993. Le bilinguisme et le biculturalisme. Essai de définition. *Travaux neuchâtelois de linguistique (Tranel)* 19. 13–41.
- Hall, Stuart. 1999[1973]. Encoding/Decoding. In Paul Marris & Sue Thornham (eds.), *Media studies. A reader*, 51–61. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hanitzsch, Thomas, & Tim P. Vos. 2017. Journalistic roles and the struggle over institutional identity: The discursive constitution of journalism. *Communication Theory* 27(2). 115–135.
- Höijer, Birgitta. 2011. Social representations theory: A new theory for media research. *Nordicom Review* 32(2). 3–16.
- Horn, Laurence R. 1989. *The natural history of negation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobs, Geert, & Els Tobback. 2012. Is language a news value in Belgium? A case study of the use of Dutch-language quotes in the French-language TV news. *Journalism Studies* 14(3). 407–422.
- Jaubert, Anna. 2008. Dire et plus ou moins dire. Analyse pragmatique de l'euphémisme et de la litote. *Langue française* 160. 105–116.
- Jodelet, Denise. 1994. *Les représentations sociales*. Paris: PUF.
- Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Catherine. 1994. Rhétorique et pragmatique : Les figures revisitées. *Langue française* 101. 57–71.
- Levinson, Stephen C. 2000. *Presumptive meanings: The theory of generalized conversational implicature*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Lits, Marc. 2009. Media in Belgium: Two separated public opinions. In Dave Sinardet & Mark Hooghe (eds.), *Public opinion in a multilingual society institutional design and federal loyalty*, 61–70. Brussels: Rethinking Belgium.
- Moscovici, Serge. 2000. *Social representations. Explorations in social psychology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Naczyk, Rafal. 2017. Faut-il encore être bilingue? *Moustique* 26–27, 14 October 2017.
- Neuhaus, Laura. 2016. On the relation of irony, understatement, and litotes. *Pragmatics & Cognition* 23(1). 117–149.
- Perrin, Daniel, Maureen Ehrensberger-Dow, & Marta Zampa. 2017. Translation in the newsroom: Losing voices in multilingual newsflows. *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies* 6(3). 463–483.
- Py, Bernard. 2000. Représentations sociales et discours. Questions épistémologiques et méthodologiques. *Travaux neuchâtelois de linguistique* 32. 5–20.
- Reardon, Sally. 2017. Natural selection: Empiricist discourse in the talk of broadcast journalists. *Discourse & Communication* 12(1). 80–98.

- Sinardet, Dave. 2007. Wederzijdse mediarepresentaties van de nationale “andere” : Vlamingen, Franstaligen en het Belgische federale samenlevingsmodel. Antwerpen: Universiteit Antwerpen.
- Sinardet, Dave. 2009. Direct democracy as a tool to shape a united public opinion in a multilingual society? some reflections based on the Belgian case. In Dave Sinardet & Mark Hooghe (eds.), *Media in Belgium: Two separated public opinions*, 47–60. Brussels: Rethinking Belgium.
- Van Doorslaer, Luc. 2010. The double extension of translation in the journalistic field. *Across Languages and Cultures* 11(2). 175–188.
- Venuti, Lawrence. 1995. *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Vezinat, Nadège. 2010. Une nouvelle étape dans la sociologie des professions en France. Bilan critique autour des ouvrages de Didier Demazière, Charles Gadéa et Florent Champy. *Sociologie* 3(1). 413–420.
- Witschge, Tamara, C. W. Anderson, David Domingo, & Alfre Hermida (Eds.). 2016. *The SAGE handbook of digital journalism*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Wynants, Bernadette. 2001. Les Francophones face à leur image. Les représentations des compétences plurilinguistiques des francophones. *Français & Société* 13. 3–41.