

# Dutch/Flemish in the North of France

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Some of the oldest sources of the Dutch language originate from the north of France, where also a lot of place names and family names give evidence of the historical presence of Dutch in that region, although it was mostly called there Flemish. It was replaced there by old French in its Picard form from the 11th century onwards. The gradual transition of language and the corresponding moving up of the language border lasted for about a thousand years. That border did not coincide with political borders, e.g. between the counties of Artesia and Flanders. After the annexation of great parts of Flanders by Louis XIV in the 16th century a slow Frenchification of what is now the arrondissement of Dunkirk began. But Dutch continued to play its role as a cultural language until the French Revolution. The legislation about language use in education and administration hastened the Frenchification of the upper class in the 19th century, especially in the towns. But it was not earlier than the period between the two world wars and mainly after the Second World War that the oral Flemish dialect was increasingly given up. As a result, its disappearance is imminent.

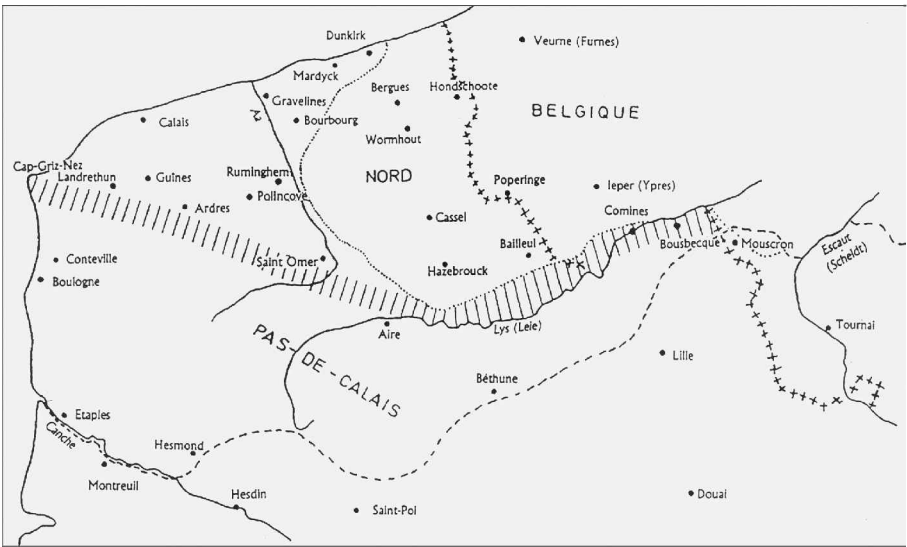
## Introduction

One of the oldest preserved sentences in Western Old Dutch, a love poem written down in Rochester in Kent in the late 11th century (the text says *Hebban olla vogala nestas hagunnan, hinasi hic anda thu* (Have all birds begun their nests except you and me)) is attributed to an author originating from what is now northern France (Gysseling, 1980: 126–130). And indeed, the northern part of the present-day French region Nord – Pas-de-Calais used to be part of the Dutch language territory or – as far as the ‘arrondissement’ Dunkirk in the ‘département du Nord’ is concerned – is still part of it today. One of the most visible and explicit signs of this belonging are the many Dutch place and family names in this northern French region.

## The Historical Retreat of Dutch from Pas-de-Calais

Those Dutch names in the Nord – Pas-de-Calais region are the last remnants of a larger Old Dutch and Middle Dutch speaking area in the Middle Ages, situated to the north of the linguistic border between Romance and Germanic languages, that had its course much further to the west and the south than today along a line that in the ninth century was going from the mouth of the Canche to just north of the city of Lille, where it coincided with the present language frontier in Belgium (Map 1). The reconstruction of the course of the original language border by M. Gysseling is founded on the respective Romance or Germanic phonetic evolution of the place-names, dating back to the seventh and eighth centuries in that bilingual region (Gysseling, 1976).

The origin of that primary language boundary seems to have been a consequence of a Late-Roman defence system along the route from Boulogne to Cologne, that had been held predominantly by hired German forces (see



**Map 1** The historical evolution of the language boundary in the north of France according to Gysseling (1980); Ryckboer, 1990).

- - - Language border in the eighth century;
- ||| language border zone in the 14th century
- +++ state border.

Lamarcq & Rogge, 1996). In addition, we must also take into account an intense Saxon colonisation in Pas-de-Calais from the fifth to the eighth century. A map of the area of their colonisation (Vanneufville, 1979:30) corresponds strikingly with the expansion in the Picard dialect of the Anglo-Saxon loanword *hoc*, *hoquet* 'dung hook' (Carton & Lebeque, 1989: map 100).

Perhaps the most striking feature of the historical and present language situation in the north of France is the steady movement of the linguistic border in favour of the Romance to the detriment of the Germanic language. That proves that the Romance varieties (namely Picard and later standard French) used to have more prestige than the Germanic ones and caused a millennial language shift. The final consequence is that the Flemish dialect, still spoken nowadays in the rural communities of the arrondissement of Dunkirk, is in danger of disappearing.

From the ninth century onwards one can observe a steady growth of Romance influence to the north of this original language boundary. The Romanisation seems to have reached the river Leie (Lys) as early as the 10th century. The city of Boulogne was bilingual up to the 12th century. One can presume that around 1300 the location of the linguistic border was situated approximately along a line that starts at the Cap-Griz-Nez, keeps to the south of Guines, Ardres and Saint-Omer, and reaches the Leie (Lys) east of Aire. Within this region it was the towns which seem to have introduced and adopted the French language (in its regional Picard form) first. From these centres of commerce and education it radiated towards the surrounding countryside. This process went on for several

centuries: Calais was bilingual until the 16th century, Saint-Omer, until the 18th century and from that century on the Frenchification begins also in the arrondissement of Dunkirk.

The historical presence of Dutch in the northern part of Pas-de-Calais is still recognisable not only in the place names but also in the surviving of a considerable amount of Dutch substrate words in the local Picard dialect. Several maps based on the ALPic I (see Carton & Lebegue, 1989), ALF (see Gilliéron & Edmont, 1902–1910) and Poulet (1987) can demonstrate this, e.g. *clav* for ‘clover’ (ALF 1326), *bèr, bèrk* for ‘shed’ (ALPic I 46) (see Ryckeboer, 1997).

## Historical Evolution of the Language Situation in the Département du Nord

The official written language that succeeded Latin during the 13th century in the part of the county of Flanders lying to the east of the Aa was mainly Dutch (Beyers, 1999). Although French was the language of the nobility in Flanders, and although this language had great prestige in the social upper class, it never endangered the vernacular tongue. Dutch (or Flemish as it was called) was not only the spoken language, it was also the language of local administration and literature in the largest part of the county to the north of the language border, the so-called ‘flamingant’ Flanders. This was also the case in that western part of the county that belongs to France since the second half of the 17th century. The Flemish-speaking ‘chastellanies’ of Bergues, Bourbourg, Cassel and Bailleul were then conquered by Louis XIV and have belonged to France since the treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

The use of Dutch in official domains was restricted almost immediately after the change of power. Education continued to be mainly in Dutch during the 18th century. On the one hand, the intellectuals and men of letters in the 17th and 18th century, e.g. Michiel de Swaen of Dunkirk, clearly insist on the unity of their language with the rest of the Netherlands, especially with Holland. On the other hand, they are bilinguals and they are very well informed about the cultural and literary events in France, so that their works have often had a linking function between the French and the Dutch cultural world. Moreover, in most cities French schools were established for the French-speaking members of the army and the administration. Their presence must have played an important role in the rise of a language shift, that later proved to be irreversible. Consequently we see that by the end of the 19th century Dunkirk, Gravelines and Bourbourg and their surrounding countryside had become predominantly French (or Picard) speaking.

Yet, the linguistic situation did not change fundamentally until the French Revolution in 1789, and Dutch continued to fulfil the main functions of a cultural language during the first century of French rule in this formerly monolingual Dutch region. There was an intense literary activity in the circles of the ‘Rederijkerskamers’ (theatre companies) and the French–Flemish chambers continued to participate in contests in the Austrian Netherlands and vice versa. A teacher from Cassel, Andries Steven, wrote a manual for language instruction in 1713, the *Nieuwen Nederlandtschen Voorschriftboek*, that stayed in use for more than a century in many schools on both sides of the state border.

After the Revolution the new political ideology in France condemned all minority languages, as remnants of an old feudal society, that had to be eradicated as soon as possible. Nevertheless the teacher Pieter Andries from Bergues stated in his answer to the inquiry of Grégoire about the 'patois de France' that his language was not a dialect but 'une langue raisonnée' by which he indicated that Dutch still had the function of a cultural language (De Certeau *et al.*, 1975: 231–243).

During the 19th century, especially in the second half of it, educational legislation banned Dutch/Flemish from all levels of education (Nuytens, 1976). As a result, Dutch gradually lost most of its functions as a cultural language. Its literary use became mostly confined to regional items for the still popular local theatre, to folklore (Edmond De Coussemaker, *Chants populaires des Flamands de France*, 1856) or just to comical tales (*Tisje Tasje's Almanak*; Moeyaert, 1978). The written language gained an increasingly regional character as it was cut off from the linguistic evolutions in Belgium and Holland, and also from the consecutive spelling reforms. In practice however the teaching of Dutch continued in many elementary schools (namely those that stayed under the influence of the clergy), and the Roman Catholic Church continued to preach and teach the catechism in Flemish in many parishes until the First World War. In this way the tradition of literacy-learning in Dutch was not completely abandoned, persisting mainly among the local clergy.

Yet, the increasing use of French implied the functional loss of the old mother tongue. The Frenchification did not immediately change the course of the language border; rather it worked from within, from the little towns, where the bourgeoisie was the first social class to give up their Flemish. As early as 1886, the parish-priest of Bierne (near Bergues), answering a dialect inquiry made by the Louvain professor P. Willems, stated that the indigenous Flemish dialect of the city of Dunkirk had almost disappeared (Ryckeboer, 1989).

This means that throughout the 19th century, a social language border existed in the département of Dunkirk, with an uneven distribution among the small towns and the villages. Although there has been almost no change in the geographical linguistic border between the French speaking and the Flemish dominated areas in the last 100 years, the ratio between the two languages within the bilingual area has changed steadily, generation after generation, to be almost completely reversed in the course of 120 years (see Vanneste, 1982). From about the interbellum in the 20th century onwards, everybody became bilingual and code-switching was practised frequently. The younger generation after the Second World War was almost exclusively educated in French and became ignorant of Flemish. The Flemish dialect became restricted almost to the middle-aged and elderly people and the passing on of the Flemish language to the next generation stopped in most families, even in the countryside, during the 1930s or 1940s (Pée, 1946, XVI–XVII). As a consequence those who still have an active knowledge of the Flemish dialect belong – with only a few exceptions – to the group of people who are 60 or older.

Neither the motivation of this social behaviour of giving up the ancestral language nor its chronological quantification have ever been the object of a sociological inquiry, but it is striking that the French-Flemish language community has hardly ever shown any social or political opposition to this Frenchification

process. Social reasons (higher education, commerce and industrialisation that all had their main attraction pools outside the Flemish-speaking area) urged the Flemish-speaking population to have a good knowledge of French. Moreover the Flemish always showed a great readiness to convergence in language use: from the moment that one member of a conversation group was unable to understand or speak Flemish, they all switched to French. And they still do so, for instance in the 'club' of elderly people, where the majority is often Flemish speaking. Since this group of Flemish-speaking people is ever diminishing and the possibilities of speaking Flemish in public have become rare, special meetings are held in some places at regular times where only Flemish is spoken (e.g. monthly in the village of Rubrouck and in the Musée Jeanne Devos in Wormhout).

### Reactions to the Official Language Policy and Language Loss

Now that the Charta of minority and regional languages in Europe has led to some discussion about the minority languages also in France, it has become clear that the Flemish minority is the minority that has had the least attention from the political or scientific side. It certainly is one of the smallest linguistic minorities in France, but the fact that the language group as a whole has behaved so calmly and never has claimed any linguistic rights in a noisy or violent way, accounts for the fact that their very existence is hardly known in France – not even in Lille, the capital of the *département* – by ordinary people, let alone by politicians. Even when Flemish-speaking persons get a high ranking position in the region, they usually don't even mention their linguistic background and identity.<sup>1</sup>

There was some protest from local authorities and village councils against the educational restrictions in the 19th century and even in the first decades of the 20th century, when it was still the custom to hold council meetings in Flemish. Some priests and clergymen openly neglected the prohibition to teach the catechism in Flemish and bravely supported a sanction, but a public protest was not formulated during the 20th century except for a repeated demand in 1910 and 1921 by the priest-deputy, mayor of Hazebrouck, Jules Lemire to teach the mother tongue. Yet, that was declined on the basis of 'antipatriotism'. It is characteristic that German in Alsace and Flemish or Dutch in French Flanders were excluded from the Deixonne law that regulated the teaching of minority languages in 1951.

Possible 'help' from abroad (Wood, 1980) has hardly ever been successful. In both world wars the German occupants tried to exploit the frustrations concerning the French language policy in favour of their own policy. The fact that the leader of the Flemish Movement in France, the priest Jean Marie Gantois, openly defended the collaboration with the Nazis, compromised all Flemish linguistic or cultural claims after the second World War. The attempts of the Belgian *Komitee voor Frans-Vlaanderen* (Committee for French-Flanders) to preserve the language by organising free courses of Modern Dutch, was able to arouse some interest for this language, but not to stop the language shift from dialect to French. It was not until the 1970s that the climate changed under the impulse of a movement that was more socialist and ecologist of motivation, and that the vernacular language got new interest: the launching of a manual: *Vlaemsch leeren* [Learning Flemish] and the struggle for the legalising of a

regional broadcasting association *Radio Uylenspiegel* finally changed the climate. In 1977 the *Reuzekoor* was founded in Dunkirk, an association that revitalised the traditional folk songs in both Flemish and French. In order to get the singers accustomed to the Flemish language a Flemish course was launched that in 1992 led to a textbook by Jean Louis Marteel: *Cours de Flamand* (Flemish Course; Marteel, 1992). The culminating point was the 'Université Populaire' of 1981, a meeting of all groups and associations concerned in Hazebrouck. They edited a manifest which stated, among other things, the following:

we urge that measures be taken, especially on a regional basis, to preserve (better than before) the undamaged environment and the cultural heritage of French-Flanders, viz.: landscapes, picturesque or historical places, works of art, technical or everyday objects, archives, etc. We also want more money to be invested in order to perform these tasks and in order to correct some mistakes of the past.

The French-Flemings also insist that their right to use their own language be recognised and implemented. They demand that the Flemish dialect, spoken or understood by some 150,000 people in the 'Westhoek', no longer be considered an allogeous language, but be acknowledged as one of the mother tongues of French citizens. Consequently, they want that particular language to be used in preschool and primary school education. It has to be taught to children in order to give them the opportunity to fully develop in their ancestral language and to acquire a mastery (during secondary education) of the Dutch standard language to which their Flemish dialect belongs and which is the mother tongue of 22 million of Europeans across our border.

In 1982 under the first Mitterand government the Minister of Education Savary launched a 'circulaire' that created possibilities for the teaching of the regional languages in France. The association *Tegaere Toegaen* ('Advance together') was able to get the teaching of the Flemish dialect launched in several elementary schools and the teaching of *Langue et Culture flamande* in several secondary schools (the collèges of Grande-Synthe, Steenvoorde, Hondshoote, Wormhout, Bourbourg and Cassel). But this early success didn't last for long and five years later this kind of instruction had almost disappeared. On the other hand the teaching of Dutch as a foreign language and 'the language of the neighbours' was gradually introduced and is now officially sustained by an agreement between the national school authorities and the 'Nederlandse Taalunie' (the intergovernmental Dutch-Belgian organisation that promotes the common interests in the Dutch language). This is the case, for example in the 'bilingual instruction' in the schools of the border towns Wervicq-Sud and Bailleul (Belle) (see Halink, 1991; Van Hemel & Halink, 1992).

This kind of language teaching, however, is mainly inspired by economic motivation and is not intended to cope with possible regionalist claims. This situation has led to a smouldering conflict between the supporters of the local Flemish and those who support the teaching of Standard Dutch. The first ones have tried to prove that the Flemish dialect had already grown into a language apart from Dutch from the 16th century on (Sansen, 1988), which is false, whereas

the teaching of Dutch as a modern language has hardly succeeded in making the link with the local linguistic heritage.

### Characteristics of the Flemish dialect in France

The Flemish dialect spoken in French Flanders structurally belongs to the West Flemish dialect group. Most dialect maps do not show a break along the state border. On the contrary, most isoglosses cross the state border and only a few follow its course (see Ryckeboer, 1977, Maps 1 and 2). Apparently the actual state border, dating back to 1713, does not correspond to any old dividing line in human communication, otherwise it would have caused an important bundle of isoglosses. Only the political separation of the last 300 years has caused this border to become a secondary dialect boundary.

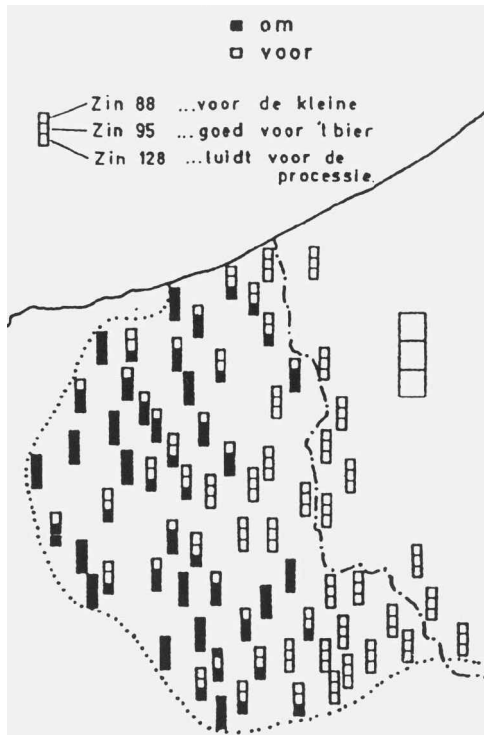
However, although the French Flemish dialect does not differ essentially from the other West Flemish dialects, it has at least two idiosyncratic features: (1) as a result of its peripheral position in the Dutch-speaking area and also because of its national and cultural separation it contains some typically western or coastal elements often called inguaeonisms and it has conserved many archaic elements which have disappeared elsewhere. This goldmine of archaism results from the fact that it has not participated in evolutions that have taken place in the Belgian Flemish dialects under the influence of Brabantic varieties or of the Dutch Standard language; (2) through this long separation from other Dutch dialects and the Dutch standard language, it has also developed local innovations. The most characteristic ones are due to its long contact with the neighbouring Picard dialect or Standard French.

Many of the so-called inguaeonisms or some particular Middle Dutch phonological, morphological or lexical features that survive in French Flanders are only to be found in the utmost western part of that area. Examples of inguaeonism are e.g. the delabialisation of short *u* to [ɛ] in *brigge* for Dutch *brug* (bridge) or the pronunciation [wei] for Dutch *weg* (compare English *away*). Some Middle Dutch phonological, morphological or lexical elements that survive in French Flanders are: the omission of final *-n* in verbs, nouns and adverbs ending in *-en*, the preterite ending *-ede* in weak verbs, and the persistence of mediaeval Dutch words such as *moude* for 'dusty earth' (see WVD part I, fascicule 1, p. 87). The survival of archaic elements can occur in any dialect, but nowadays they are often confined to French Flanders only, e.g. *zole* for 'plough' (see WVD part 1, fascicule, *Ploegen*, p. 1).

### Alienation from Other Dutch Dialects and Common Dutch by Communicative Isolation

Older linguistic innovations coming from the east were still able to cross the state border, but often only to a limited extent, so that the archaism only occurs in the utmost western part of French Flanders. A good example is the map of the substitution of the preposition 'om' (see Map 2).

Although the state border obviously did not prevent all local contact across the border, the linguistic influence from Belgium has become very weak and restricted all the same. Some word maps of the *Woordenboek van de Vlaamse Dialecten* (WVD, Dictionary of the Flemish Dialects) enable us to reconstruct the relative chronology of these diminishing contacts and influences. Barbed wire,



**Map 2** Substitution of the older preposition *om* by *voor* in the western Flemish dialects, except in a part of French Flanders (Ryckboer, 1983: Map 3)

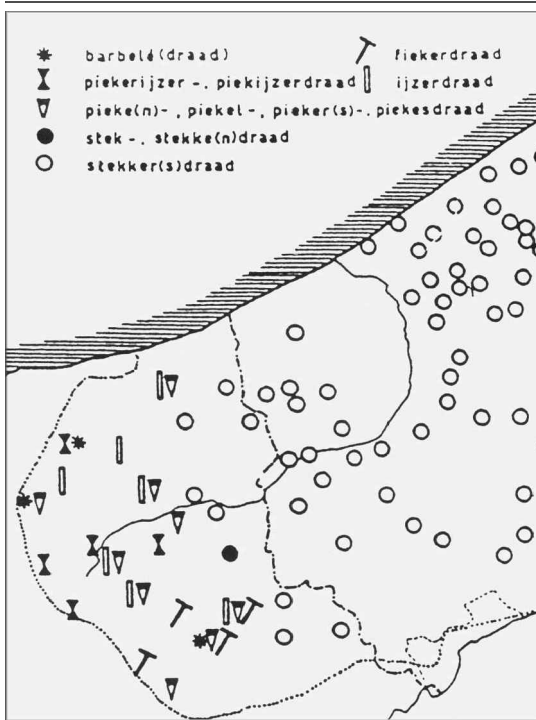
for instance, was introduced into the region about 1880. The typical West Flemish name for it is *stekkerdraad*. This new word was only able to penetrate into a narrow strip along the border. The inner part of French Flanders had already been cut off from West Flemish influence. However, at the time the local dialect in this inner part was still vital enough to create new words for the new thing, such as *pieker-* or *fiekerdraad*. The increasing influence of French is also clear from the loan translation *ijzerdraad* (from Fr. *fil de fer*) and the loan word *barbelé* (*draad*) (see Map 3).

Recent Belgian changes, even in traditional agricultural vocabulary have not often been able to cross the state boundary. A typical example is the name for the threshing floor in the barn. In Belgian Flanders a Brabantic word *dorsvloer* has been laid over an older Flemish *schurevloer* during the last century, but this evolution decidedly stops at the state border (see WVD I, 2 Behuizing: 419).

The communicative isolation led to the expansion of some local characteristics to the whole area of French Flanders, so that the state border became a secondary dialect border in some respect. A phonological example of indigenous evolution is the change from older *sk* to [š]. Even in 1880, L. De Bo, the author of the West Flemish Dialect Dictionary, noticed that the state border acted as the boundary for this phenomenon (see Taeldeman, 1996: 152).

An example of morphological evolution is the generalisation of the weak preterite ending *-ste* from the praeterito-praesentia to all weak verbs. This evolution





**Map 3** Denominations for 'barbed wire' in French Flanders (WVD I, fascicule 1, Akkerland en Weiland: 151)

stopped a few kilometres short of the state border, except in the neighbourhood of Steenvoorde, where it even crossed the border to Watou in Belgium.

### Linguistic Innovations in the Flemish Dialect from Language Contact with French

As a consequence of the retreat of the linguistic border during many centuries over the north of Pas-de-Calais and the arrondissement of Dunkirk generations and generations of bilinguals practised code-switching and consequently mixed up elements of the two languages. Vestiges of the influence of substrate Flemish on the Picard dialect in the north of Pas-de-Calais and by extension in the whole region are quoted in Callebaut and Ryckeboer (1997) and in Ryckeboer (1997).

As Picard and later French were the languages with the greater prestige,<sup>2</sup> borrowing from these languages into Flemish was more important than vice versa. As early as 1886 a schoolmaster from Armboutsappel, filling out the Willems dialect inquiry, calls his language 'a terrible jargon, a mixture of Flemish and French' (Ryckeboer, 1989).

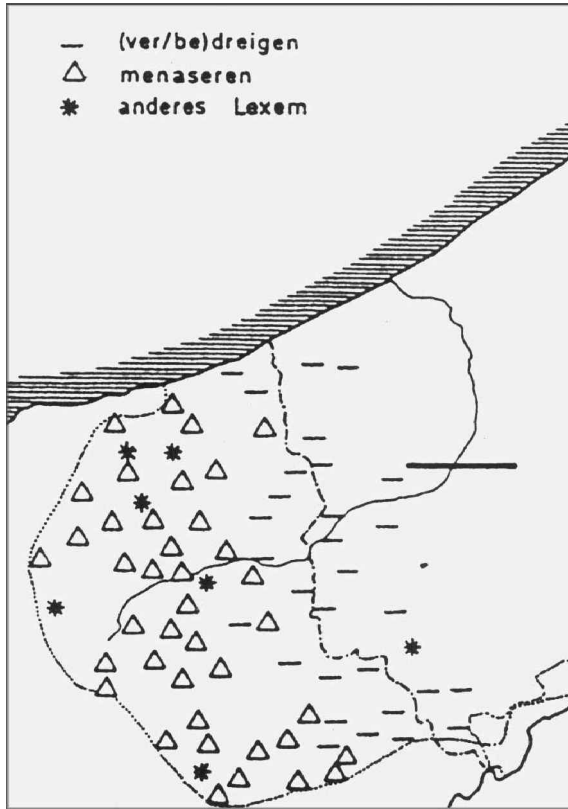
Vandenbergh (1998) investigated a corpus of French Flemish dialect conversations, that were registered during the 1960s. It comes as no surprise that she was able to demonstrate a much larger linguistic interference (both lexical and grammatical) of French in the Flemish dialect in France than in the neighbouring West Flemish on the Belgian side of the border. Only half of the lexical loans recorded in France were also known to be used in Belgium (303 out of 611, to be

exact). An example of the penetration of many French loanwords is the rendering of the concept 'to threaten'. The original Flemish (*be-/ ver-*)dreigen has been replaced by the loan-word *menasseren*, except in a small strip along the Belgian border (see Map 4). But the most revealing outcome was that in French Flanders far fewer loanwords are phonetically or morphologically adapted to the Flemish dialect: out of a total of 228 adapted loan words, 184 (80%) are also known in West Flanders; but out of a total of 383 non-adapted loan words, only 119 (30%) are also known in Belgium. Moreover the domains are significant: they belong to e.g. modern agricultural techniques (*écrèmeuse, veleuse, inséminateur*), modern medicine (*tumeur*), education (*composition*), modern jobs (*assistant social*), modern apparatuses and structures (*appareil de photo, coup de téléphone, feuille d'impôts, marché commun*), etc. Even the Flemish denominations for animals that have become rare (and that consequently are known only from books) have disappeared: the swan is called a *cygne* and no longer *zwaan* (see WVD III, 1, Vogels); the tortoise (Dutch/Flemish *schildpad*) is known only as *tortue* (see WVD III, 2 Land en Waterfauna). The adapted loan words, however, mostly refer to the world of a traditional, even old-fashioned way of life, and the concepts referred to date back to a period when French still had very much the same prestige on both sides of the state border (e.g. *bassing, baskule, dokter, sinteure*, etc.). For the concepts where on the French side, unadapted loanwords from the French standard are used, mostly standard Dutch words will be used on the Belgian side (*moissonneuse batteuse – pikdorser; conseil municipal – gemeenteraad*, whereas the archaic common dialect word for the latter was 'de wet').

The very profound influence of spoken French on the Flemish dialect in France is also reflected in the use of many loan adverbs that are unknown in Belgian West Flemish, especially those ending in *-ment*, such as *extrêmement, complètement*, and other adverbs and interjections, often used as phrase markers in French, such as (*et*) *puis, bien entendu, d'abord, quoi?*, etc. Many conjunctions are also borrowed from the French language, such as: *puisque (dat), parce que, soit*. They are totally unknown in Belgian dialects (with the exception of *tandis que*, which used to be very common in Belgian West Flemish as well). In addition a number of prepositions that consist of a partial translation of a French prepositional group are used in French Flemish, but never in Belgian West Flemish, such as *à force van, grâce van*.

The Flemish dialect in France also shows syntactic characteristics that reflect both the age-old influence of French and the absence of influence from more eastern Dutch, especially Brabantic, dialects. It appears from many inquiries, especially from the corpus of recorded conversations which Vandenberghe investigated, that extra-position of some adverbial complements and even inherent complements is very common in French Flemish. This is impossible in Standard Dutch and less common in the neighbouring Belgian Flemish dialects as well (see Vanacker, 1973).

Another syntactic feature of the French Flemish dialect is the almost complete absence of inversion (for 97%) after topicalisation of a non-subject constituent. (I have also observed this phenomenon in a chronicle of 1813 written by a French Flemish Napoleon soldier from Winnezele – Ryckeboer & Simon, 2001.) Data collected before the second World War for the West Flemish Dialect Atlas (Pée, 1946) showed 76% absence of inversion in Belgian West Flemish (Vanacker,



**Map 4** French loanword *menasseren* instead of Flemish *(ver-, be)dreigen* 'threaten' (Ryckeboer, 1990: Map 10)

1967). Nowadays it is even less heard there, under the influence of the central Belgian regiolects and the Dutch standard language. We may conclude, therefore, that the state border has become a clear linguistic border not only as far as the lexicon but also as far as syntax is concerned.

### Flemish in France: A Case of Language Death

Summarising, it is obvious that the status of Dutch/Flemish in northern France has become very critical: it does not enjoy even the slightest form of official recognition and its use has become so marginal, even in the rural parts of the country (in the towns it has almost completely vanished), that one can expect its extinction within a few decades. An urgent task is to support it culturally and to valorise the still existing knowledge for linguistic and historical research.

Also, a general sociolinguistic inquiry is still lacking. During the 1970s and 1980s some local or partial inquiries were carried out that provided some data on the linguistic situation (Ryckeboer, 1976; Röhrig 1987; Ryckeboer & Maeckelberghe, 1987). The latter investigation carried through in the small border town of Hondschoote showed clearly that an almost total language shift had taken place over the last three or four generations. The grandparents of the pupils investigated spoke French to 36%, Flemish to 38% as well as both

languages to each other. In the next generation of parents, born between 1932 and 1952, French was used as the exclusive family language in 75% of the cases. The remaining quarter used Flemish alongside with French, yet almost never with the children. With a few rare exceptions the pupils themselves spoke nothing but French, although their passive knowledge of Flemish still seemed to be considerable. Half of the parents claimed to understand Flemish as did a quarter of the pupils. These data indicate that women gave up Flemish earlier than men – which is a common feature of feminine behaviour when less prestigious language varieties are at stake – but above all that extremely few youngsters are still familiar with Flemish. The answers on attitudinal questions reveal that 82% of the parents did not consider it worthwhile to pass on Flemish to the next generation, but that an equal amount of youngsters thought the opposite. Such attitudes are typical for a society confronted with imminent language death (Willemyns, 1997). Yet, 16 years later bilingualism continues to exist in the region and contacts with the Dutch speaking Belgian neighbours can still incite some interest in both the own linguistic heritage and the language and culture of the Belgian and Dutch neighbours.

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## Notes

1. This was the case e.g. when Noël Josephé, born in the border-village of Boeschepe, became the first ‘président du Conseil régional’ in 1981. Although his mastery of the Flemish dialect was excellent, he never mentioned or used it in public, except perhaps in local pre-election meetings.
2. In wealthy families in the former Flemish speaking part of what is now French Flanders it was the custom that the children went to Lille or Saint-Omer for some time to learn French. The mystic author Maria Petyt from Hazebrouck (1623–1677) writes in her autobiography that she was sent to Saint-Omer at the age of 11 to learn French.

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