

Translation into Flemish(?): a Heuristic Approach

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Volume 39, Number 1, mars 1994

La traduction et l'interprétation dans la Belgique multilingue

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/004587ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/004587ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Walravens, J. (1994). Translation into Flemish(?): a Heuristic Approach. *Meta*, 39(1), 122–131. <https://doi.org/10.7202/004587ar>

Article abstract

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TRANSLATION INTO FLEMISH(?): A HEURISTIC APPROACH

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Résumé

L'auteur montre la spécificité du traducteur flamand qui se situe dans le contexte traductionnel des Pays-Bas. Le mot «flamand» signifie «qui appartient à la communauté du nord de la Belgique parlant néerlandais». Le néerlandais est la langue officielle des Pays-Bas qui sont évidemment la Hollande et les Flandres. Les différences linguistiques et culturelles entre la Hollande et les Flandres ont été présentées dans de très nombreux articles et ouvrages variés, mais jamais les problèmes spécifiques qui se posent aux traducteurs n'ont été mis de l'avant. Il s'agit ici d'examiner ces questions par le biais d'un modèle heuristique de traduction qui montre comment son utilisation éclaire de façon particulière la situation du traducteur dans les Flandres et aide dans la pratique traductionnelle. On précise les stratégies de formation pour les traducteurs belges.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the specific position of the Flemish translator within the larger context of translation in the Low Countries. By *Flemish* is meant “belonging to the Dutch-speaking community in the north of Belgium, *i.e.* having been born, raised and educated there”. The *translations* referred to are from foreign languages into Dutch and the *Low Countries* is, of course, the Netherlands and Flanders as a linguistic unit: in both regions, Dutch is the *official* language. One of the questions I want to ask is to what extent using the same *official* language actually entails using *one and the same kind of Dutch*. A corollary of this question is: do the Low Countries comprise *one* or *two cultures*? It goes without saying that these questions are of the utmost importance to the translator. If it should appear that the Flemish translator does not operate within the *same* linguistic and/or cultural framework as his Dutch counterpart, the consequences for his work and working conditions could be far-reaching. Any translator training programme (for non-native speakers and native speakers of Dutch alike) should, of course, take such considerations into account.

The linguistic and cultural differences between the Netherlands and Flanders have been discussed in numerous articles and a wide variety of book-length publications (see below), while the specific problems they entail for the translator are seldom brought to the fore. I propose to examine this matter via a *heuristic* translation model. A few sketches of this model have been published in Vandamme (1987: 84-85), Nekeman (1988: 222-224), Walravens (1988: 133-141) and Hermans (1991: 225-235). It is necessary, however, to start with a brief survey of its theoretical background and main components for four reasons: (i) the (relative) novelty of the model, (ii) recent changes in the model, (iii) the reader's comfort and (iv) the fact that, although this article will focus on only *one* of the model's components, it should not be studied out of context: each part must always be related to the model as a whole.

After a brief presentation of the heuristic model, I will show how it can be applied to shed light on the specific situation of translators in Flanders and how it can assist them in their actual translation practice.

Finally, I will illustrate how the application of the model points up certain aspects of language policy in the Low Countries and suggests the need for specific translator training strategies in Belgium (especially in Francophone Schools for Translators).

A HEURISTIC TRANSLATION MODEL

The Heuristic Translation Model is composed of two major parts: the model *proper* (Fig.2) and the translation *module* (Fig.1). Fig.2 shows how the actual translation process (represented by the module) is put in a historical (H), political (P), economic (E) and cultural (C) context. All these components make up the world (W) in which the translation process takes place. This world consists of a source system and a target system. The source language author (SLa), the source language reader (Srea) and the source language text (SLt) belong to the former; the commissioner (Com) of the translation, the translator (Tr), the target language text (TLt) and the target language reader (Trea) belong to the latter. Complex relationships exist among the different *boxes* of the model, that could perhaps best be described in terms of Even-Zohar's *polysystem* theory, cited, for instance, in Hermans (1985). Thus, the translation process is not studied in isolation but as part of a complicated network of interdependent relationships.¹

If we zoom in on the *heart* of the model, we discover the translation *module*. Fig.1 is a graphic representation of the heuristic translation *process*. In order to proceed from the SLt to the TLt, the GOVERNING BOX (GOV) is first introduced. At this stage, the translation *goals* are set. The translator (and/or the commissioner of the translation) decide for which *audience* the translation is being done and examine how the translation is most likely to *function* in the target culture. These goals will govern the entire translation process.²

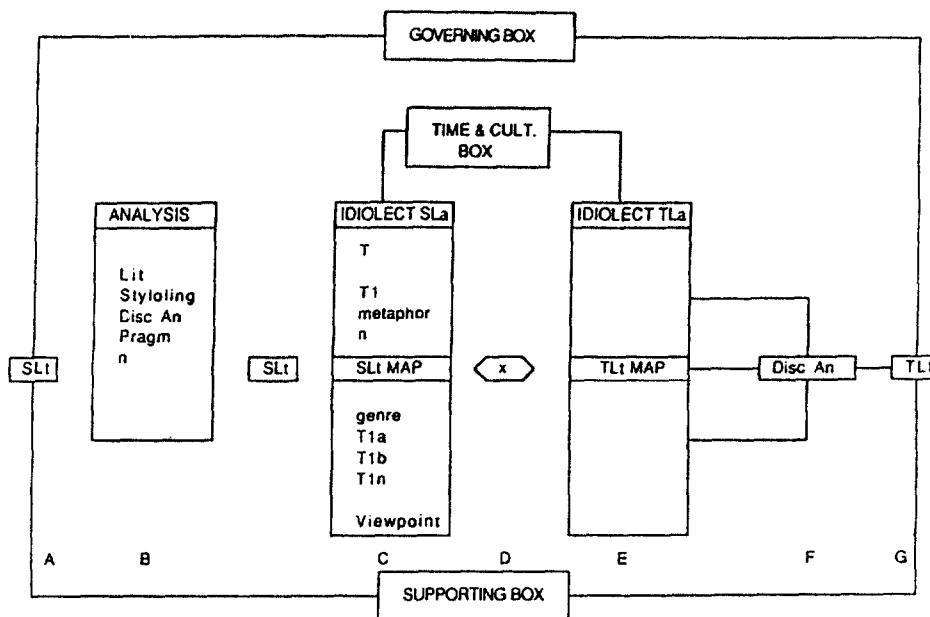


Fig. 1: Module for the translation of literary texts

The next paragraph illustrates the kind of information the Supporting Box might contain for a translation from English into Dutch.

TRANSLATION IN FLANDERS

One Language or Two?

According to Shetter (1988: 15-17)

the language known to us as Dutch is the official language of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and one of the official languages of Belgium. ... The official name of the language is *Nederlands*. It is the official standard language used by over 14,000,000 people in the Netherlands and over 6,000,000 in Belgium. The differences in pronunciation and word usage between the two countries are no greater than those between British and American English.

The fact that Dutch is *one* language spoken in *two*⁶ different countries is emphasized by Donaldson (1983: 5):

The most common and only official designation for Dutch in the language itself is *Nederlands*. ... During the last few years there has been a concerted effort in Belgium to replace the word *Vlaams* in all official titles and correspondence by the word *Nederlands*, reinforcing the idea that there is in fact no distinction between *Nederlands* and *Vlaams*...

The *Nederlandse Taalunie* (founded in September 1980) illustrates the political, *i.e.* the *official*, wish to confirm the cultural and linguistic unity of Flanders and the Netherlands; its aim is indeed to further the cultural and linguistic integration of the North and the South. One may wonder, however, to what extent the *official* unity corresponds to the actual situation in the Low Countries today. Weisgerber (in Bartosik 1989: 240) says:

Roughly speaking, we could say that “Flemish” marks out all Belgian citizens who usually speak Dutch or Dutch dialect. ... Do we actually speak Dutch? ... Belgian philologists are quite positive on that point. But the Dutch ... sometimes maintain we murder the language. Some of them even obstinately refuse to acknowledge what they call a kind of lingo and they argue ... that differences of pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary between their Dutch and ours are too striking for the two varieties to be regarded as identical. ... The gap between American and British English, Low and High German, or Canadian and Belgian French is certainly as noticeable and regional variations are no obstacle to mutual understanding.

Weisgerber suggests that (i) there is a clear discrepancy between what linguists think and linguistic practice and that (ii) the linguistic differences that *do* exist between Flanders and the Netherlands are not necessarily an obstacle to communication. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to examine briefly what the main differences of *pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary* consist of. Characteristic of *Flemish* (according to Donaldson 1983 and Theissen 1992) is:

- a. **pronunciation:** the soft *g*, the (often) bilabial *w*, the common dropping of *h* and pure long vowels and diphthongs;
- b. **syntax:** the order of verbs at the end of a clause, *e.g.* *Hij weet dat het nu moet gedaan worden* — “he knows that it must now be done” — (instead of *gedaan moet worden* or *moet worden gedaan*); there is also an avoidance of *tangconstructies* with separable verbs, *e.g.* *Ik heb het hem proberen duidelijk te maken* — “I tried to make it clear to him” — (instead of *Ik heb het hem duidelijk proberen te maken*).
- c. **vocabulary:** the list of lexical differences is extremely long; here are just a few examples (with the Flemish word(s) preceding the Dutch one): *afschrijven* (*spieken*), *batterij* (*accu*), *beenhouwer* (*slager*), *de les is gedaan* (*de les is uit*), *gekend* (*bekend*), *moest het regenen* (*mocht het regenen*), *universitair* (*academicus*), etc.

Research by Tældeman (1992) and others shows that many of the *southern* variants are solidly anchored in the speech of many (most?) Flemings; quite frequently, the Flemish variant is perceived as *the norm*, i.e. a language is created that is situated *somewhere between* a speaker's dialect and Standard Dutch. Today, Flemings seem to have found a *common ground* — a delicate, but still changing, balance between dialect and Standard Dutch — which they have come to accept as *Standard Flemish*.⁷ The reasons for the emergence of this new southern (sub-?)standard are mainly historical and economic. In 1585, the political and economic separation of the North from the South led to separate linguistic developments for Dutch and Flemish, i.e. Dutch evolved *normally* whereas Flemish (dialect) was no match for the language of culture in the South (and Belgium since 1830): French. In their struggle for official recognition of *their* language, Flemings naturally turned to the Netherlands for support and for a linguistic *norm*. The latter was soon found, and for decades considerable efforts were made to put Flemish on a par with Dutch. Today, the *economic centre* of Belgium has shifted from the south (the Walloon provinces) to the north (Flanders). Very often — if not always — economic strength goes hand in hand with (greater) cultural and linguistic awareness. The subsequent self-consciousness (often called *complacency*) of the Flemings has generated an anti-Dutch reaction: emphasis on, and deliberate use of, the characteristic properties of *Vlaams* have become a means of cultural and political identification. Generally, three different reactions can be observed towards the present situation. The first consists in ardently advocating complete integration of the *two* linguistic communities. Geerts (1989) and Theissen (1992), for instance, suggest that all speakers of Dutch should adhere to the norm of the North. The second stance is a more moderate one: Tældeman (1992) accepts that *Flemish* is entitled to an, albeit limited, life of its own and that it may even be said to enrich the Dutch language to some extent. The third point of view is, again, a more radical one — cf. Deprez (1990): Flanders has already developed its own *Standard Dutch*, which might conveniently be called (*Standard*) *Flemish*; the main differences from *Standard Dutch* consist in pronunciation and vocabulary (the syntactic differences being of minor importance, see above).

The last viewpoint is seldom proposed by linguists. Yet, anyone living in Flanders today *will* be confronted with *Standard Flemish*.⁸ Indeed, daily contacts with the media reveal that Flemish newspapers and the two Flemish television channels use a variety of Dutch that has all the aforementioned characteristics of *Vlaams* (without being one specific dialect or a mixture of clearly definable dialects); the same may be said of the language used in the administration and in schools. A child speaking Standard Dutch at home will be confronted with Standard Flemish at school, much in the same way as an English child moving to the U.S.A. will have to adapt itself to (and perhaps, at least to some extent, adopt) a variety of the same language with its own pronunciation and lexicon. In both cases (Dutch/Flemish and British/American English) communication between the linguistic communities involved is perfectly possible.

The position of *Vlaams* within the Dutch linguistic community has always been, and continues to be, a matter of much — often heated — debate. Despite continued efforts of linguists and politicians alike, complete integration of Flemings into one large Dutch linguistic unity has — to-date — not been completed; indeed, today's linguistic reality in Flanders seems to suggest that integration is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. In the next paragraph, we will attempt to offer (at least a partial) explanation for this situation.

One Culture or Two?

From a linguistic point of view, there is only one Dutch language; from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, the slow but steady emergence of a (semi?)-autonomous Flemish variant can be observed — cf. Parret (1992: 238). All natural languages are embedded in a specific

culture: it should therefore be examined whether the emergence of *Standaard Vlaams* is related to differences between Dutch and Flemish culture.⁹

Janssens and Vannisselroy (1990: 37) say that the Dutch are generally characterized by matter-of-factness, sobriety and thriftiness. The influence of Calvinism is clear. According to Van Hauwermeiren and Simonis (1990: 70-71) Flanders has been influenced by Romance culture, Flemings are conservative, prone to *improvisation* and less internationally oriented than the Dutch. Catholicism has left its mark. Droste (1992: 16-24) summarizes the cultural identity of the North and the South in four major categories: 1. *carpe diem* in Flanders versus a pervasive feeling of guilt in the Netherlands; 2. closeness versus openness; 3. pragmatism versus high principles; 4. *one* language, with clear distinctions between two variants.

In view of the various social dissimilarities between Flanders and the Netherlands and the many behavioural differences between Flemings and Dutchmen, Parret (1992: 238-239) and Droste (1992: 24) suggest that two cultures can be discerned. Yet a strong *common collective memory* creates an unalienable bond between the two communities, which allows the Low Countries to make itself known to the rest of the world as one linguistic and cultural entity (with *minor* shifts of emphasis within its supranational boundaries). This stance is advocated by those who fear that the role of English, French and German will become so pre-eminent in the European Community that languages such as Danish, Greek and Dutch will be suppressed. Therefore, in the case of Dutch, a united stand seems advisable. The aforementioned fear is probably justified, and one linguistic community of about 20 million people is likely to stand a better chance of surviving in tomorrow's Europe than one of 14 million *plus* 6 million.

One should ask oneself, however, to what extent this view (which is generally proposed by linguists and a limited number of politicians) corresponds to actual economic and political strategies in the Low Countries.

Many commercial products are, in fact, known throughout the world as coming from either *Holland* (e.g. cheese, flowers, radios) or *Flanders* (lace, high-tech products, polished diamonds), not as Dutch or Belgian. Thus, the business world contributes to the ambiguous status of *Vlaams*, *Hollands* and *Nederlands*. From a linguist's point of view this may seem deplorable; from a businessman's angle it is good business policy.

Since the early 1980s, the Belgian political landscape has been changing quite drastically: the road from a unitarian to a federal state has been long and winding. In the process, Flanders has moved from an economically inferior status to a superior position within the Belgian context. The accompanying self-consciousness has been translated into a desire to stress specifically Flemish *qualities* in all walks of life, including the language.

Finally, it should be mentioned that something is fundamentally wrong in the *fear for Europe* view, however realistic it may be. Indeed, linguistic and cultural diversity are the main characteristics — and perhaps the main assets — of the European Community. Should not Europe, therefore, be willing to invest in these resources? Every year, large amounts of money are spent subsidizing various industries and agriculture. Would the survival of European *minority languages* really cost all that much compared to the cost of destroying butter and vegetable surpluses? Perhaps linguists (and politicians) from the Low Countries should *first* consider the linguistic reality in Flanders today before defending integration between the North and the South, using Europe as an excuse. What matters is not what a few people think *should* be the case; perhaps, linguists and politicians should reckon with real-life situations. The situation in the Low Countries today seems to be that the linguistic and cultural link between Flanders and the Netherlands is recognized by a majority of Flemings and Dutchmen, but that (re-)integration is not seen as a priority by most of them.

THE HEURISTIC MODEL AT WORK

It will be clear that anyone translating a text into Dutch has to take into account a rather complex socio-cultural, political, economic and linguistic situation. If the target text is to *function* in the Netherlands, things are relatively simple: the norm is clear and one can easily picture the kind of product the target audience expects. If the *target* is Flanders, the translator has to answer certain questions and faces a number of choices. Basically, these boil down to one main question: should the norm of the North be followed, or is it wiser to translate into *Standard Flemish*? But since there is no clearly defined southern standard, the latter choice raises a number of further questions. Clearly, the translator into *Flemish* has quite a responsibility: since the southern standard is still in the process of being formed, people will look towards translations produced in Flanders to help establish that very norm. Therefore, Flemish translators *have* to take a stand in the aforementioned debate. A heuristic translation model can assist them in doing just that. The main purpose of the Governing Box is, in fact, to establish the translator's main goals and to describe how the translation is supposed to *function* within the target culture. In the course of the translation process, the translator can refer to a series of general outlines and a number of goals set in advance. At the same time he will be assisted by background information stored in the Supporting Box (*cf.* paragraph on translation in Flanders). Thus, the translation process is linked with the extra-textual context (or series of contexts): economic, political, linguistic and possibly other factors influencing the translation are *consciously* taken into account (*cf.* Fig. 2); as we have seen, these may be of vital importance in fully comprehending a translation context. Being aware of these elements (and going back to earlier options for each translation decision) will help the translator to make well-considered choices and produce a coherent translation. Finally, the translator may decide to adopt a specific stance (either in GOV or SUPP, or in both) concerning certain aspects of the source and/or target culture(s) in question. This personal opinion may then serve as a guiding principle throughout the translation, *e.g.* the decision to translate primarily for a Flemish readership — which will entail, possibly impose — a number of specific (lexical) choices.

Sometimes, decisions are made for the translator: if a foreign firm specifically wants to reach potential Flemish customers, the translator of that firm's advertising campaign will have to consider specific lexical choices. Similarly, advertising brochures targeting the Dutch market should avoid using typically Flemish expressions. Within the Model, this kind of information would, of course, be dictated by Com (*Commissioner*) and stored in GOV.

A translator may also be forced to make such decisions on a less stringent basis. If asked to translate into Dutch an English sentence beginning "In my sophomore Elements of Fiction course ..." ¹⁰, you would have to rely on a number of decisions made at the level of GOV and on information stored in SUPP. The translation of *sophomore* is a cultural problem. Neither Dutch nor Flemish universities have equivalents that cover this term. A sophomore is an undergraduate student in his or her second year. Since the term *tweede kandidatuur-student*, quite clear in a Belgian context, would mean little in the Netherlands, a more general term has to be found if the translator wants his translation to *function* in the North and the South (a decision made in GOV). *Tweedejaars* sums it all up and makes the SL item quite transparent for anyone unfamiliar with higher education in America. Indeed, the discrepancy between a typically American undergraduate programme and a Belgian *licentie* or a Dutch *doctoraal* can never be captured in its total complexity in one word; this kind of information will, however, be stored in SUPP.

A Heuristic Translation Model does not, of course, *generate* translations. One of its main purposes, however, is to put the translation process in a historical, cultural, political, economic and linguistic context. In doing so, it offers the translator a solid framework to

rely on when he is looking for solutions to translation problems. The solutions thus found are not necessarily the only possible *correct* translation of a given SL item; if the Model is applied, however, the resulting TLt will be a coherent translation.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of the linguistic situation in Flanders has, of course, certain implications in the field of language teaching and, more specifically, affects the teaching of translation into Dutch. In Belgium, four-year translator training programmes are offered at "Schools for Translators".

We have seen that linguists and politicians usually adopt one of three attitudes towards the position of Dutch in Flanders (integration, partial acceptance of Flemish and full acceptance of Flemish). No matter which stance is taken, things remain largely theoretical, while people do not seem to be greatly bothered about the views of theoreticians: they speak the kind of Dutch that comes naturally to them.

For professors of Dutch in schools for translators life is somewhat more complicated. Teaching *Standard Flemish* seems to be out of the question since the norm of this supposed(?) language has not (yet?) been established.

Teaching the norm of the North would seem to be the easiest way out and has a solid foundation: linguistically speaking there is only *one* Dutch language, so why bother about a minority which has no justified, *i.e. scientific*, claim anyway? With respect to this viewpoint, we should call the reader's attention to two major problems. First, any teacher of Dutch knows that *eradicating* Flemish characteristics from the Dutch of Flemings is quite demanding and takes a long time, often more than four years (which in itself is an argument against integration). Second: in those (rare) cases where the *purification process* has been completely successful, the dutchified translator working in Flanders *will* be confronted with requests to translate (especially commercial) texts into Flemish (or *Belgian Dutch* as it is then usually called). What a waste of those endless and painstaking hours of *taalzuivering*! Usually, linguistic concerns and commercial/economic interests are worlds apart. Furthermore, it has been illustrated that the use of specifically Flemish elements can play an important role in literary translation — *cf.* Schouten (1990) and Hermans (1991: 232).

The mitigated view, then, causes problems too: as it remains unclear which elements constitute *Standard Flemish* it is difficult to decide which features of Flemish are acceptable and should be taught.

In Belgian French-language schools for translators, things are even more complicated. Students learning a foreign language need — and generally like — rules. Rules are safe because they help to avoid confusion and mistakes: they are a beacon on the way to good grades. Having to learn *two kinds of Dutch* might therefore be an highly discouraging factor, especially when one of the varieties has hardly any rules to go by. Yet the commercial/economic setting (in which French-speaking students in Belgium taking Dutch as one of their required languages are most likely to work) shows that there is a demand for both variants.

For the translator in Flanders there is no solution that will bring universal happiness. It will be clear, however, that translators generally work within a very concrete economic reality and that their work is necessarily market-oriented. Therefore, translators have to respond to the demands of the market; otherwise they will put themselves out of business. Similarly, schools for translators have the responsibility of training future translators in such a way that their efficiency will be optimal. Hence it would seem logical that all translator training programmes in which *Dutch* is one of the languages studied should

pay at least *some* attention to *Flemish*. Within the present curriculum — which is fixed by law and is therefore unlikely to change in the near future — the courses best suited to catering for translators' needs are Phonetics (also important to interpreters), Grammar and Institutions. Time alone will tell to what degree Flemish should play a part in the curriculum. In the meantime, translators can find solace in a Heuristic Translation Model which assists them in appreciating the complexity of some, if not most, translations.

Notes

1. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this article to examine all these relationships in detail. For the group of scholars usually associated with *The Manipulation of Literature* (Hermans, 1985), the scientific study of this network has become the focal point of their research. Their approach is primarily TL-oriented and descriptive. The TLt is studied, for instance, in view of critical reception (or lack of it), socio-cultural and/or historical conditions of text production and the role of translated texts in the TL canon.
2. A translator who is commissioned to *translate* a Russian folk tale into Dutch for a child audience may suggest a *free* treatment of the SLt. The question whether this will yield a translation in the *proper* sense of the word is irrelevant since the translator has made explicit his intentions. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is quite conceivable that a translator who is asked to translate a series of Japanese poems for the benefit of Comparative Literature students with no reading knowledge of Japanese, will opt for a *faithful* translation. Indeed, the comparatists' research results will depend largely on the accuracy of the TLt.
3. It should be noted that SUPP does not contribute *directly* to the analysis of the SLt: it *signals*, for instance, specific *discrepancies* between different literary *codes* in SL and TL (e.g. the lack of a particular literary genre in the target culture that is — nevertheless — to be translated from the source culture). Possible solutions to such problems, however, are not suggested at this stage: the facts are merely recorded. It is indeed important for the translator to ascertain the kind of knowledge that can be expected in the TL audience about the (literary) conventions of the SL culture.
4. The kind of analysis applied to the SLt will, of course, depend on the translator's training. Thus, a *traditional* close reading analysis may be complemented by a discourse analytic, stylolinguistic and/or pragmatic approach.
5. It is not the purpose of this article to develop these aspects of the heuristic approach. It should also be noted that the applicability of the Model for different translators and language pairs is the subject of ongoing research.
6. To elaborate on the role of Dutch in the north-west of France (*French Flanders*), Surinam, the Dutch Antilles and Indonesia would be beyond the scope of this article. Similarly, the place of Afrikaans in the linguistic picture will not be discussed here.
7. The lexical contribution of Flemish to the Dutch language was commented upon by Goossens in 1971 (in Geerts 1974: 82-85) and Emmerman in 1970 (in Geerts 1974: 74-81); the typical *Belgian* pronunciation of Dutch was studied by Goossens in 1973 (in Geerts 1974: 139-150).
Today, the typically Flemish elements referred to seem to be becoming increasingly prominent in radio and television broadcasts, which may be said to reflect *the norm* and contribute to forming it (cf. McCrum 1989: 26-27). Flanders has two television companies: the privately owned *Vlaamse Televisiemaatschappij* (VTM) and the public broadcasting corporation *Belgische Radio en Televisieomroep, Nederlandstalige uitzendingen* (BRTN). Both of them produce their own talk shows, game shows, news broadcasts and serials. The difference with their Dutch counterparts (as far as the language is concerned) is as striking as the difference between British and American broadcasts. Also, the number of Dutch serials on Flemish television is strikingly limited — and vice versa. It should also be noted that advertising spots for the same products have a specific voice-over in the North and the South. This suggests that, from a commercial point of view at least, the two (linguistic) communities are regarded as *different*.
8. It would be beyond the scope of this article to list all the characteristics of *Standard Flemish*. Since it is not an official standard it does not have its own *grammar books* or its own dictionaries. In fact, one would find little unanimity amongst Flemings about the characteristic traits of *Standard Flemish*. Suffice it to say here that a typical pronunciation and vocabulary are its most prominent features (cf. British and American English). According to some scholars — cf. Tældeman (1992: 36-37) — the southern *norm* should in fact reflect a mere stage on the way to full integration. Careful observation of the Dutch spoken by Flemish youngsters, students, teachers, university professors, writers, lawyers, physicians, businessmen, broadcasters, shopkeepers and politicians suggests, however, that the process of integration has stagnated.
9. *Culture* can, of course, be defined in many ways. Within the context of this article, it should be seen as a *collective consciousness* including the arts, the sciences, religion and the sum total of habits and conceptions that characterize a specific society — cf. Droste (1992: 15).

10. The sentence is from John Barth's *Sabbatical* (New York, Putnam's Sons, 1982). The words are spoken by one of the main characters in the novel, a professor of American Literature, when she is discussing one of the courses she teaches.

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