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Just Getting By? Francophone Belgian Journalists Dealing with Dutch-language Sources in Their Public Broadcasting Service

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how the Dutch language is used when francophone Belgian journalists prepare and produce their reports—during all stages of the process—up until the actual broadcast. We conducted 16 qualitative interviews with TV news journalists employed by the Belgian French-speaking public broadcaster. Taking as a starting point the highly variable level of Dutch in the newsroom, we highlight four practices used by journalists when they have to cover a news story in Flanders or interview a Dutch speaker: avoidance, mutual assistance, specific efforts to deal with linguistic difficulties and what we call a “tactical use” of Dutch with the sources. This study reveals practices that are by no means a demonstration of excellent language skills. Journalists’ frequent lack of knowledge is compensated by a certain pragmatism: they aim to illustrate how their daily routines tackle a concrete problem in a relatively informal, flexible, and collective manner. Finally, we explore to what extent these practices impact journalistic performance and how the use of the Dutch language in the newsroom reflects the language divide in Belgium’s journalistic landscape.

KEYWORDS

Belgium; daily routines; journalistic performance; language knowledge; multilingualism; television

Journalists working in any broadcasting medium are required to use language skills on a daily basis, especially when sharing information with an audience. Being fluent in the language in which they communicate is rare, although many professionals need to have at least a passive knowledge of one or more additional languages, depending on the topics they cover regularly. In multilingual countries, where contact with the other language communities is potentially high, the question arises how proficient they are in the other national languages. This applies to Belgium in particular, where some media aim to cover, at least partially, what is happening on both sides of the language border dividing Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia.

Based on a corpus of interviews with journalists working for the television news of *RTBF*, a public-service broadcasting organization making radio and television in French-speaking Belgium, this study will attempt to understand how these reporters deal with Dutch, the most widely spoken language in Belgium (60% of the population). Based in Brussels, the capital of Belgium and the only bilingual region of the country, in the same building as the

Flemish public-service broadcasting (VRT), RTBF is considered an authoritative media outlet, aiming to regularly cover topics from both sides of the Belgian language border. Our case study, therefore, focuses on a newsroom where one could expect, *a priori*, a higher level of language proficiency than in newsrooms based in Wallonia (one of the two unilingual regions of Belgium), which mainly cover regional topics. Our aim is to highlight TV journalists' practices when they have to cover a news story in Flanders or interview a Dutch speaker. On a more general level, this article zooms in on how the use of a foreign language fits into the journalistic code of practice of a TV and radio broadcasting company. It is apparent from the outset that there is no formal procedure: the mastery of Dutch by the French-speaking population in Belgium varies greatly (Ginsburgh and Weber 2007) and nothing indicates that all journalists are able to conduct an interview or cover a news story in the two main official languages (Dutch and French), and even less so in German, Belgium's third official language (spoken by approximately 80,000 people). We also investigate what goes on behind the scenes in Belgian media: to what extent have the journalists themselves caused a language divide (see below) in the Belgian media landscape because of their possible lack of interest in the news stories of the other language community and/or lack of motivation to speak its language.

We will first set out the main concepts related to our research question, and describe the methodology selected to investigate the use of Dutch in the newsroom. Next, we will present the results, which will focus on two aspects: firstly, a description of the four types of language-related practices that seem to be most representative in our opinion; and secondly, an analysis of the impact of these practices on a specific perception of journalistic performance. We will then explore to what extent these are illustrative of the profession of journalists and how language in the newsroom reflects the language divide in Belgium's journalistic landscape.

Literature Review

The Belgian Media Landscape

While the language used by journalists, especially when they are covering a certain type of topic, has been the subject of many studies (Fowler 1991; Richardson 2008), day-to-day language practices in newsrooms have received less attention, except for the field of translation research (Valdeón 2015; Davier 2017; Perrin, Ehrensberger-Dow, and Zampa 2017; Davier and van Doorslaer 2018). In multilingual countries such as Belgium, all newsrooms are exposed to foreign languages to varying degrees. The linguistic variable has a profound effect on the country's media landscape: since the 1980s, the media has been managed independently by each language community (Dutch, French-speaking and German) and the role of language in the practices used to select and process information is crucial there (van Doorslaer 2009; Jacobs and Tobback 2013). The lion's share of studies exploring media landscapes in Belgium recognize that there are two different markets: one in Flanders and another in Wallonia (d'Haenens, Antoine, and Saeys 2009; Evens and Raeymaeckers 2017). Press agency *Belga* is the only medium that systematically publishes all of its content in the two main national languages. Audiences tend to have an affinity with the media in their own language. For example, it is interesting to note that some French

television channels, such as the privately-owned *TF1*, have market shares approaching 15% in French-speaking Belgium (Audiovisual Council 2016). No Flemish channel has a similar sized audience in Wallonia, and the opposite is equally true. Although a few French-language daily newspapers have had something of an audience in Flanders for many years, today no medium is bought or read in significant numbers outside of its linguistic community. Obviously, this affects how often the other community's news is covered. Taking into account Belgium's institutional changes, the gradual market concentration, and audience preferences, Raeymaeckers and Heinderyckx came to the conclusion that "the journalism cultures are (...) different, with a much more significant trend towards commercialization and tabloidization in the Flemish media" (2018, 15). The difference between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking "journalist markets" extends to editorial policy, as shown in a comparative study on television news bulletins, which concludes that "the content of the television newscasts on the channels in northern Belgium is very similar, and the same is true in the south of the country, regardless of the topic studied" (Sinardet, De Swaert, and Dandoy 2004, 36—our translation). This "linguistic demarcation" (idem) has far-reaching consequences for the relationships that do (or do not) exist between the newsrooms and the Flemish and francophone audiences:

The two journalist communities seem to live in different worlds: there is an astonishing lack of journalistic interest in what happens in the other community, and only in moments of major crisis do journalists from both communities engage in any kind of dialogue. (Raeymaeckers and Heinderyckx 2018, 15)

Even when they have national coverage, the media in Belgium are aimed first and foremost at a specific linguistic community, which of course does not rule out similarities in the treatment of certain topics or agenda-setting. Nor does it mean that journalists of both linguistic communities don't share any common vision in terms of their practices, roles and code of ethics (Bonin et al. 2017).

Language Knowledge in a Journalism Context

To study the general use of a foreign language in a newsroom, we must first define what is meant by language knowledge and language use. In their study on the use of languages in minority language media, Zabaleta et al. (2008) define language ability in terms of three concepts: *language development*, *language knowledge* and *language use*. The first "refers to the degree in which a language is prepared in terms of lexicon and other journalistic, linguistic and stylistic elements to elaborate any kind of information" (Zabaleta et al. 2008, 195). Language knowledge refers to linguistic competence, "understood as 'knowledge of the linguistic system'" (idem). Although this knowledge appears to be self-evident for journalists working in their mother tongue, this is much less so for second or third languages. Finally, Zabaleta et al. mention language use, which encompasses a vast range of interactive and "in situ" uses of the language, for example in conversations with colleagues. Breaking down language ability in this way enables us to be more specific about the practices of journalists while doing their jobs, as they themselves confirm, rather than resorting to academic criteria (linguistics, syntax and grammar).

Our research question focuses on the approach to day-to-day journalistic practices. As stressed by Hui, Schatzki, and Shove (2017, 3), "'Practice' is a rich polysemic word that, in addition to denoting organized arrays of action, also highlights the necessary

embeddedness of human activity in social and material contexts and the relentlessly unfolding character of action and sequences of performances". The range of "practice approaches" has expanded and diversified over the last decades. In their presentation of practice theory in journalism studies, Witschge and Harbers (2018) stress that practice should be considered in two ways: as a set of activities, *and* a series of conversations about these activities. The two levels, *saying* and *doing*, combine to form a set of practices that are negotiated, shared and more or less standardized within a group of workers. The study of journalistic practices requires an inductive approach that is first and foremost anchored in everyday tasks and in the way the people doing them understand and talk about them. As such, Witschge and Harbers (2018, 111) describe a practice as "an ongoing process of bottom-up, collective negotiation of practitioners (both through the performance of an activity and the discourse on it) that is (...) determined (...) by specific contextual and material conditions, normative preferences, habitualized routines, and subjective experiences". Since journalistic practices can change, we encounter practices and visions within the field that are sometimes both different and overlapping. The myriad of variations these visions can bestow go against a normative conception of journalistic practices, which some attempt to pigeonhole as a coherent, controlled, and routinized whole (Deuze and Witschge 2017). This also refers to the definition of prudential practice in the sociology of professions, as defined by Champy (2011). A specific feature of these professions (which include architects, physicians, judges, lawyers, and journalists) is that they face unique and complex issues that can seldom be solved by the use of standardized procedures and knowledge. Champy defines prudential practice as

dealing with unique and complex situations [...]; having to speculate on the cases handled and deliberate on the aim of the activity, to be able to produce an effective result in uncertain circumstances; and, finally, the fact that knowledge and expertise cannot be formalized. (Champy 2011, 149 – our translation)

Based on both the practice theory approach and the theoretical hypothesis that journalistic practice is prudential, the everyday tasks carried out by journalists can be seen as the result of actions within a well-defined context, which are discussed and validated with colleagues to some extent, and negotiated according to parameters that themselves may be variable.

Methodology

It is difficult to assess the use of Dutch in the newsroom of a French-speaking media outlet using field methods such as observation. This is true, firstly, because the language is not systematically used and secondly, because it is not easy to predict when the occasion will arise to use it. For example, journalists covering federal politics and national sporting events have to talk to comparatively more Dutch speakers than their colleagues who report on culture, society or foreign affairs. Moreover, issues related to linguistic practices, especially translation processes, do not seem to be at the core of journalists' concerns: In her study of two press agencies based in Switzerland (the regional office of AFP and ATS), Davier (2017, 20) notes that it is a kind of "invisible" process: "As things currently stand, the agencies cannot reflect on the problems raised by translation, since they consider that this operation is no different from writing in a single language".

Consequently, we opted to approach the research question by means of semi-directive interviews. This research is part of a comprehensive approach that focuses on the use of Dutch in a working context where it may be used on a regular basis. The interviews were conducted according to Kaufmann's (2006) comprehensive interview methodology and were divided into four sections: (1) a description of the practices and tools used when a topic requires Dutch speakers to go on air, (2) the editorial management's instructions for dealing with Dutch and how they are put into practice, (3) the respondents' language abilities and level of education, and (4) their perceptions of the Dutch language, specifically its cultural dimension. All interviews were anonymous, lasted between 30 and 60 min, and were transcribed in full.

Taking into account that every interview centered on practices gives the researcher a "reconstruction" of various situations, and that journalists "construe the context in which the interaction with a researcher takes place" (Demazière 2012, 34. See also Broustau et al. 2012), we explicitly explained to the respondents that our aim was by no means to assess in absolute terms the level of journalists' language proficiency, or to compare it with other professionals. This was explained to journalists, in order to avoid possible self-justifying responses that might be evoked by interactions with scholars who touch on a potentially rather sensitive issue. Indeed, for French-speaking journalists employed by one of the reference media outlets, evaluating their knowledge of the most spoken language in Belgium might meet with a defensive attitude or reluctance. To make them feel more at ease, we also spelled out the fact that none of the researchers are themselves bilingual.

To put together a relevant sample of journalists from the television newsroom of *RTBF*, we conducted a systematic survey of the news items that involved Dutch speakers between July and October 2017, i.e., over a period of 123 days. We then invited everyone who had produced at least one news story involving Dutch for an interview. We were able to interview a total of 16 journalists, equating to slightly more than one-third of the *RTBF* news team. In addition to the interviews, we had a meeting with the TV news editor-in-chief to gain a better understanding of editorial policy on covering "Flemish subjects", and the language requirements for broadcasting and for recruiting journalists. The corpus provides a generally representative set of professional profiles in terms of length of service, gender, specialization, and command of the Dutch language (Table 1). All

Table 1. Summary table of the individuals interviewed.

Journalist code	Gender	Specialization	Years with RTBF
J1	M	Sport	5–10
J2	M	Politics	–5
J3	F	Local journalist	–5
J4	F	Politics	5–10
J5	M	Politics	5–10
J6	F	Politics	–5
J7	M	Society	–5
J8	M	Foreign affairs	5–10
J9	F	Foreign affairs	5–10
J10	M	Foreign affairs	+10
J11	M	Society	+10
J12	F	Society	–5
J13	M	Sport	5–10
J14	F	Science	+10
J15	F	Local journalist	5–10
J16	F	Society	–5

newsroom sections were represented (society, culture, politics, sport, foreign affairs). The interviews were not intended to test the journalists' language proficiency using methods commonly employed by teachers and trainers. The levels were established inductively, based on what the interviewees told us about their abilities and where they positioned themselves vis-à-vis perfect fluency, with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). On this basis, four journalists are basic user level (elementary level/A2), ten are independent user level (intermediate B1 or upper intermediate B2), and two 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.

The interviews were content-analyzed. Using an inductive approach and based on the information provided by the interviewees, this enabled us to gradually move away from their own words towards a more abstract categorization, which in turn allowed us to compare their individual professional experiences. During these discussions, the respective positions of the researcher and the interviewee created specific rhetorical stances and interactions, describing both the "experiences" of the interviewees (Demazière 2012, 30) and their practices. It should, however, be noted that for the four topics covered, we reached data saturation, defined as the moment "when new data don't add substantive new meaning to this which is already understood" (Savoie-Zajc 1996, 109). By successive cross-checking of the information collected, this data saturation enabled us to identify the most likely and most common situations, practices, and working contexts.

Findings and Results

As stated above, our study sample contained very few journalists who claimed to have an advanced linguistic ability in Dutch (C). As the editor-in-chief himself confirmed, this appears to reflect the general trend among his staff: "We don't have many journalists who are able to take part in a televised debate with our Flemish counterparts—I would say four or five. The others get by, but are not at that level". At the other end of the spectrum, three journalists positioned themselves at elementary level. Schooling and the home environment play a vital role in the development of linguistic ability, as does the department where they work, which determines how often they are called upon to use the language: level A journalists are often found in teams that cover Wallonia news stories (where they have very little opportunity to speak Dutch), while the journalists who report on federal politics all have level B or C. Even though their employer offers training courses and discussion forums, the interviewees themselves admitted that they do not make much use of them. Moreover, management does not force them to do so. All in all, the majority of the respondents positioned themselves at an intermediate level, meaning that talking in Dutch would be neither a simple formality nor too difficult for the challenge to be insurmountable.

Everyday Practice

Analysis of the content reveals four types of practices, which we will summarize as follows: (1) avoidance, (2) extra effort in the preparation and/or processing of information, (3) informal mutual assistance, and (4) the "tactical" use of Dutch.

Avoidance

The challenge of filming in Flanders or interviewing someone in Dutch is most acute for the journalists with intermediate language ability because they will generally not make use of the first option mentioned by two level A respondents: trying to avoid the assignment and arranging for a colleague to do it. However, this option has its limitations, as there is not always another person available. Categorical avoidance of using Dutch is very rare when the instruction comes from management, but anticipating this type of issue to ensure the job is given to a colleague is more frequent among people with a lower linguistic ability: “I opt for avoidance because more often than not there is someone else better able to do this type of job”, one of the journalists (J11) confessed, emphasizing that, as he is a relatively long serving-employee, he was able to pass off this behavior as normal within the team. Another (J3) told us:

If I call my sources and they tell me they don't speak any French at all, I might ask my editor if we can send someone else. However, because it's a relatively small team, if this is not possible, I have to find a way of doing it ...

In professional terms, for profiles like these, the lack of ability appears to be sufficiently great for the person to discuss it openly with his colleagues. In our case study, two factors must be taken into consideration: first, relatively strong professional relationships appear to be in place (see 1.3). Second, from the list of topics that involved Dutch speakers (between July and October 2017), we can see that this scenario only presents itself in 8% of the reports broadcast during the TV news bulletins. Over the whole period analyzed, i.e., four months, we counted 115 topics that required the intervention of Dutch speakers and/or took place in Flanders. In the coverage of these topics, 166 Dutch speakers were shown on air, and only 74 of these, i.e., fewer than half, spoke in their mother tongue. The probability of having to use your language skills in the field is therefore relatively low, except in the case of major news stories. Avoiding Dutch stories is thus a feasible practice from the point of view of professional relationships, given that it only occurs occasionally.

Extra Effort

For a newsroom that produces two televised newscasts of around 35 min each day, the use of Dutch comes up against time constraints. Many topics are prepared in less than half a day. As most of them are 90-second segments, this is doable: editorial routines are efficient enough to achieve the desired result. However, in such a scenario, preparing a topic in Dutch poses an additional problem: French-speaking journalists have fewer contacts on the other side of the language border and the whole process will be in Dutch. One of the strategies revealed by most of the respondents was to make specific preparations as quickly as possible. In practical terms, this involved mainly vocabulary searches or checks using tools such as dictionaries (paper or online), Google Translate or Reverso, preparing a few questions in advance using sources written in Dutch, such as press releases, articles or the Flemish media's social media accounts. One of these journalists (J7) told us:

Once a subject has been chosen, we're sometimes asked to come up with a story within two or three hours. We don't have time to start wading through a dictionary so automatic translation helps us quite a bit. And we can gradually acquire expertise the more we use these tools and see the turns of phrase. We know what we need to look out for. This helped me a lot on the few occasions I've really had to work fast.

These preparation practices are in no way formalized or systematic, and depend primarily on the journalist's affinity with the topic. Each journalist adopts a different approach, depending on his profile and his network of contacts. It is also worth noting that the extra effort made potentially applies to all stages of the news report: searching for sources, preparing for meetings outside the studio, listening back to the rushes, selecting information, and subtitling interviews clips.

Mutual Assistance

Linguistic ability and frequency of exposure to Dutch may be fairly variable, but one of the most significant insights from the interview analysis was the joint effort involved in the treatment of the language. All the respondents stated at one point or another that when they are unable to translate an interview clip, or when they encounter an accent that is too strong or an expression they do not know, or simply when they want to be sure their translation is sufficiently accurate, they ask colleagues to check their work before it goes on air. Without exception, Dutch as a journalistic practice involved discussion between journalists, film editors and cameramen. This was fairly informal and depended on the availability and linguistic ability of the people in the newsroom. *RTBF* has a translation department, but it is only consulted for full-length programs and the newsroom journalists do not use it, primarily because their work is often urgent. In some cases, this mutual assistance compensates for a genuine lack of ability, very often in subtitling, as illustrated by this journalist who is used to working in the Walloon region (J3):

I distinctly remember one occasion when I was in Charleroi and had to call the assistant producer, who was in Brussels. I held the telephone receiver close to the speaker so he could listen to the interview and translate the clip for me ...

Beyond the individual dimension, determined by the linguistic ability of each journalist, the use of Dutch is discussed and shared relatively spontaneously among colleagues. It would nevertheless be interesting to investigate the collective (and informal) dimension of other aspects of journalism practices. In fact, some journalists spontaneously mentioned that this did not apply only to Dutch but was "part and parcel of our working habits", to paraphrase one of the journalists interviewed. It is therefore a form of socialization that extends beyond solving translation issues. Socialization and knowledge-sharing must be rooted in a clearly demonstrated level of self-sufficiency that extends beyond ability (J7):

We always get by. Resourcefulness rules! I didn't have many Dutch classes at university so when I first entered the job market my proficiency level wasn't great, because I hadn't studied the language intensively since secondary school five years previously. But you still always manage to get by. (see 2. below)

Using Dutch "Tactically"

On some occasions, the research interviews may have triggered reflex answers from the journalists. When asked about the usefulness of speaking a second language fluently, Dutch in particular, there were two types of reaction: first, some interviewees expressed a desire to prove their credibility to their Dutch-speaking sources, whether they were holidaymakers on the coast, football supporters, senior government officials leaving parliament, or businessmen organizing a press conference. The issues of credibility and

image seem to be all the more poignant given that French speakers in Belgium have a reputation for being less able and less willing to use a foreign language than their Flemish counterparts (Wynants 2001). This stereotype primarily applies to some of the journalists with elementary or intermediary language ability and is not insignificant when it comes to their willingness to make an effort to initiate a discussion in Dutch when out in the field. The following is a slightly ironic illustration of this (J11):

I think that speaking to someone in their language with an okay accent demonstrates that you respect their language, and therefore their culture. And sometimes it's important for some of those Dutch speakers who feel they are being besieged by lazy, arrogant French speakers. I think it creates empathy, but it doesn't always work and doesn't always have the desired effect. It just goes some way towards dispelling the myth.

The working environment at *RTBF*, a reference player in the French-speaking media sector, also plays its part in endorsing some sort of obligation to speak Dutch correctly. The majority of the journalists also share the impression that most of their colleagues at *VRT*, the Flemish public broadcaster, can switch from one language to another effortlessly, which brings us back to the well-established stereotype that French speakers are not as good at languages as Dutch speakers are.

Secondly, some of the journalists admit that their efforts are also tactical: engaging in a conversation in the other person's language is a way to win that person over, make positive contact, and ease apprehensions, arising, for example, from the fact they do not know each other very well. After that, however, most of the interviewees admitted to trying to continue the interview in French as soon as possible for technical reasons (editing is easier and faster when all the clips are in the same language). So, using another language also has a tactical objective: making contact, putting a person at ease, even ingratiating yourself with them by taking "the first linguistic step", showing yourself and your employer in a good light, and facilitating the task of editing once back in the newsroom. One of the in-house rules is that the clips must be broadcast with subtitles, but this requires an additional effort and sometimes the help of a colleague. On this basis, obtaining an interview in French saves time and it would seem to be easier to achieve if the initial contact is made in Dutch.

The Effect on Journalistic Performance

Analysis of the interviews also reveals a number of comments relating to the impact of the aforementioned practices, which are determined by two factors: first, all the journalists interviewed, including those who are most at ease with Dutch, admitted at one point or another that their abilities reached a limit. This feeling seems to be reinforced by uncertainties that arise from the random nature of the news stories and the vast range of potential (new) topics: because the conditions under which the language is used are far from optimal, in terms of preparation and time available, and their inability to control the accent, the delivery or even the willingness of the spokespersons in advance, the journalists believe that sooner or later their practice hits certain language barriers. These barriers are not always viewed as problematic: in the same way as other constraints (related to logistics, safety or content) can hold them back in other circumstances and other areas, it seems that the *RTBF* journalists subconsciously expect their performance level to be lower when covering a Flemish topic, a fact that was also confirmed during our interview with the TV news editor-in-chief.

Second, we identified numerous comments about how a practice that is not fully bilingual affects an ideal vision of journalism, or at least a certain vision of journalistic performance that was shared by the members of the corpus. Interviews in Dutch are less comprehensive: “We only ask general questions, we have more difficulty anticipating what the source will say” (J4), “I don’t know how to respond to a statement in the way I would like to” (J6), “Because my mind is already occupied with holding the mike and checking the picture is centered, I only try to catch the gist” (J2), three different journalists confessed. The loss of spontaneity or nuance in the live broadcasts is explained by a possible lack of vocabulary and difficulty focusing on the core message, the language in which it is communicated, and technical constraints. The language issue can also potentially influence the choice of spokesperson, thereby interfering with the journalist’s gate-keeping function. This statement by a journalist with advanced language skills (J10) gives an example of why some prefer to choose a person who can speak French, even if there might have been other, more appropriate spokespersons available:

There’s a risk. I can’t think of any specific examples but yes, to be honest, you have to admit that there’s a risk. In any case, it’s a preference that can occur very naturally. Our report will involve a French speaker when in fact he or she is not the best person to give the most accurate information. So, yes, we probably do filter in this way.

These examples illustrate how closely interwoven all journalistic practices are, blurring the distinction between the technical aspects specific to television journalism, the general processing-related elements (being responsive, critical, prepared, ability to delve deep into a topic), and the purely linguistic parameters. Thus, choosing to interview a source who speaks French, despite the fact this choice may be detrimental to the quality and nuance of the message, does have its technical advantages because it permits “monolingual” editing and avoids the need for voice-over or subtitling. These overlaps illustrate the uncertainties involved in content collection and formatting, which require the journalists to make choices and compromises on the spot on a relatively informal basis, often left to their own discretion and judgment. It is therefore impossible to state categorically whether a source’s expertise will be judged more important than his or her linguistic ability. It will all depend on a number of constraints that they have to negotiate. Taking it further, regardless of a French-speaking journalist’s fluency in Dutch, using this language in a professional context does influence the type and format of the information gathered. At the very least, despite the idea of just getting by that comes across in many of the interviews, the combination of Dutch language skills and the constraints specific to television news bulletins appears to be detrimental to a particular perception of journalistic performance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Analysis of the interviews highlights a certain emphasis on the most interactive and informal forms of language, i.e., language use and language development (Zabaleta et al. 2008). Formal language abilities are not ignored; quite the contrary, gaps and limitations, particularly in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, and specific differences between French and Dutch, are acknowledged and often cited as obstacles for a proper understanding of the language. However, this does not seem to rule out the decisive role of language use in the field, where interaction and dialogue occur in very different ways, because

the decision to speak one language or the other, or a little of each, depends on a whole series of factors. Nor should knowledge deficiencies prevent preparation, or subsequent linguistic and stylistic formatting of the content broadcast on air using subtitling or voice-over. This is clearly a language development issue, and the fact the journalists must broadcast something that is as linguistically accurate as possible because they address an audience often prompts them to go to the extra mile or check with a colleague.

Ultimately, the interviews detail the three categories put forward by Zabaleta et al. at different levels of practice, with a preference for language rooted in an exchange situation, regardless of any errors or approximations. What seems remarkable here are the ways the journalists find to sooner or later compensate for a lack of language knowledge. In connection with the practice theory mentioned above (Witschge and Harbers 2018), the cornerstone of performance is the ability to put a language into practice and adapt - improvise even -; rather than a high level of linguistic knowledge. The journalists frequently extol the virtues of being able to push the boundaries. This is probably a calculated move on their part to demonstrate how good they are at their job, by placing emphasis on the aspects of it they do best: getting by with their language skills and managing to deliver the best possible news report on a topic is more important than formal academic training and qualifications. Perhaps the meaning of the practices that come to the fore in our findings should be interpreted in this light (see 2. in *Findings*). They aim to illustrate how journalistic practice tackles a concrete problem in a relatively informal, flexible, and collective manner. This *modus operandi* is mostly presented as a self-evident process, the efficiency of which is a matter of adaptability, even if, on some occasions, journalists acknowledge it has its own limitations and can be somewhat vulnerable to urgent deadlines, unexpected coverage, colleagues' unavailability or sources' unwillingness to convey information. This goes some way towards explaining how few resources are deployed in a situation with multiple constraints. As Witschge and Harbers clearly point out, our actions only make sense through our words: the fact that the interviewees talk less about language knowledge, or do not seem to value it as much, is not out of a lack of interest or because they do not think it is useful (on the contrary, all the interviewees stressed the tremendous opportunities varying degree of proficiency in languages in general opens up for journalists). It is perhaps simply because the resources they need to master a language are far removed from the type of solutions they usually apply to problems encountered in their everyday work. This is where talking about practice and the practice itself converge, demonstrating that there are no rigid, top-down customized solutions, but rather that the process is similar to that described by Witschge and Harbers, i.e., handled by the journalists themselves according to different, more or less routine arrangements and negotiations. In fact, there is an explicit exception to the only in-house rule about Dutch—a requirement for subtitles—which permits journalists to use simple voice-over if an interview takes place too close to it going on the air. The editor-in-chief told us that “checking the subtitles on air is not ‘his’ priority”. Preparation on a case-by-case basis and collective effort take precedence over formal learning such as training and courses (which are not very popular with the corpus members), because all in all they seem to be more effective, i.e., simply better suited to the constraints and expectations that the journalists impose upon themselves and that are placed on them by their colleagues. As a journalistic practice, the use of Dutch clearly takes second place to a socially-accepted vision based on routines and fixed rules, some of which—such as the use of subtitles—come from management.

However, every practice has its limitations. In a journalism context, those we have described are measured in terms of a lack of language knowledge. In other words, any journalistic practice that is not conducted in the mother tongue has the potential to hamper even the apparently minor aspects of an assignment that involve speaking a language: requesting an interview, creating a positive interaction, asking the burning questions, making sure a message has been properly understood and summarizing it.

The challenge of working in this way extends beyond journalism. It is part of a deeper process because of the very nature of certain types of professional activities: despite in-house routines, rules and documents, journalism does not involve, or merely involve, the mechanical application of knowledge or procedures. There is a degree of uncertainty, associated not only with the news, which cannot always be anticipated, but also with the internal operations of the newsrooms, where continuous staff turnover (at *RTBF*, repeated staff lay-offs) frequently changes the nature of assignments. Journalism is among the professions that operate what Champy (2011) refers to as a “prudential practice” (see above). Our research question, centered on journalistic practices, seems to confirm the conjectural nature of journalistic practice and, by extension, its cogitative dimension, which involves case-by-case negotiation. Dutch is hardly ever used as a result of fixed rules, or instructions from management, other than the need for efficiency; in other words, the ability to produce, with this additional constraint, broadly similar content to that which would have been produced without the constraint. The practices are very similar yet at the same time very different, and it can be assumed that they also apply to other journalism practices: very much dependent on internal constraints and individual profiles, and more often than not approached using a wide range of methods.

Finally, because this study was conducted within a very specific media landscape, talking about two distinct markets in the same country, it seems to be quite tempting to try to measure how the use of Dutch impacts the extent of the gap between the two communities. In the four-month period that served as a basis for our analysis of the television news segments, the topics that involved a Flemish spokesperson were very much in the minority (8% of the total). It seems to be taken for granted that the *RTBF* editorial policy is first and foremost aimed at a French-speaking audience, as explicitly stipulated in its management contract. Within the TV news editorial team itself, one of the largest at *RTBF*, it would also appear to be acceptable that not every journalist can work easily with a Flemish source.

We believe that methods of analysis that focus on individuals and their experiences lead to a more nuanced understanding of the impact of languages on the Belgian media landscape, which is usually described on the basis of market structures (legislative framework, market organization, editorial orientations and readerships). Asking journalists to talk about their command of the Dutch language inevitably leads them to talk about some differences in performance as well, which they attribute to cultural factors. Consumption, even occasional, of Flemish media as well as contact with *VRT* provide insight into “the other” (J10):

I love to have Flemish newspapers spread out on the newsroom table, because very often the Dutch-language newspapers don't have the same reaction as we do. Some information is explained in a totally different way in Flanders than it is in Wallonia. Reading Flemish newspapers is extremely interesting because they present another side of the story (...). The French-language press has other editorial priorities compared with the Dutch-language press.

Other reports confirm this perceived difference, not only in editorial angles but also in the sometimes very different way they handle topics that affect both communities, such as immigration, the environment, and security. Another journalist highlights nuances specific to TV and radio journalism practices (J14):

I watch *VRT* before I watch the *France Télévisions* news. The Flemish have a different approach. They're more rigorous, more serious, and much less playful. They concentrate heavily on the facts and their news bulletins are much shorter, which leaves little room for what I'd call lighter items.

This assertion also reveals that their representations are not always accurate, as on average, the 1 PM news broadcast lasts about 26 min, whereas the 7 PM broadcast lasts about 42 min generally. At the same time, mention is also made of the often easy and constructive relationships they have with their colleagues in the Flemish public-service broadcasting company, exchanging images or information, for example.

One could object that this kind of testimony was solely for the purpose of the interview, where it would have been trickier for the journalists to admit to the researcher that they were indifferent to, or had little interest in, the actual subject of the interview. There are also slight indications of a normative attitude to journalism, focused on projecting an ideal image of the job to people outside the profession (Hanitzsch et al., forthcoming) or fitting in with an image entrenched in French tradition, a tradition that has been fueled for many years by a love/hate relationship with Anglo-Saxon journalism practices (Chalaby 1996), which the Flemish have adopted. The fact remains that this study, even though it focuses on a specific editorial team, reveals not only practices that are by no means a demonstration of excellent language skills, but also a discursive approach that is fairly open to, and interested in, what is happening in Flanders.

This is a far cry from the deeply-entrenched clichés and stereotypes of mutual disinterest between the Walloons and the Flemish. Undoubtedly, the greatest hurdle to a more in-depth coverage of Flemish news is, as virtually all members of the corpus told us, the fact that a command of Dutch is ultimately not a vital component of their job, unlike for example meeting deadlines and technical constraints. Lower managerial expectations, the focus on autonomy, using additional effort to compensate to some extent for their existing level of proficiency, and the probability of being able to work in their mother tongue: all this creates a situation in which the journalists do not feel under any pressure to improve their Dutch.

Jacobs and Tobback claim that “the language in which source materials are available has an impact both on the selection of quotes, hence on some of the ‘details’ to be included in the item, and on the way the news item is finally shaped” (2013, 419). Many journalists we met expressed the view, especially in their difficulties to grasp subtleties when interacting with Dutch-speaking sources. More broadly, we might consider that the multilingual context in which these journalists work and the way they deal with it “can affect (...) the perception of one culture by another culture” (Chesterman and Arrojo 2000, 155). Indeed, the most frequent practices described by RTBF journalists can be considered as obstacles in the circulation of the other community's language. Dutch-speaking sources are often invited to talk in French, or their voices are drowned out by the French voice-over. Consequently, French-speaking TV-viewers are rarely exposed to the other community's language through the news on television, which fuels a vicious circle: the less you hear a foreign language, the less you feel comfortable when hearing it, and the less you wish to hear—and try to understand—that language.

Furthermore, the uneasiness surrounding the use of Dutch by some journalists can have an impact on the content covered in the news. Indeed, journalists are not always able to delve into a topic and to relay nuances or finely-grained rationales from Dutch-speaking sources. In such cases, the prudential practice allows them to produce news reports that match their professional constraints and their editorial line, but prevents them from fully playing their role as informers. Our case study is not an exception: in press agencies where journalists are required to translate news reports every day, many of them draw on modifications, omissions and additions which slightly modify their content. For Davier, these “simplifications” and “avoidance strategies” (Davier 2017, 135–136—our translation) which we also observed in our interviews, respond, among other things, to a “fear of being seen as a bad translator” (Davier 2017, 290—our translation) even if translating is considered a subordinate activity that goes beyond their basic professional skills. In our case study, the avoidance strategies to favor French and the simplifications in French voice-overs prevent journalists that are not proficient in Dutch from being perceived as bad translators. Their mission of delivering basic information in a limited time is fulfilled. However, this *modus operandi* surely does not contribute to a frequent penetration of the Dutch language, and, ultimately, of the Dutch-speaking culture, in French-speaking homes.

This comprehensive study leaves open avenues for further research. To supplement our results, our research efforts currently focus on the French-speaking journalists’ Flemish counterparts at the VRT newsroom, (strategically) located in an adjacent building in Brussels, not only for the purposes of comparison, and a more fine-grained contextual analysis of newsroom cultures, but in order to gain a deeper understanding of language attitudes on the other side of the language border, and how these, in turn, are substantiated through everyday journalistic practices.

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