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Language perceptions and use among (TV) journalists in multilingual Belgium: how pragmatic realities affect the idealized benchmark of bilingualism

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Abstract

Building on previous research, we investigate how TV reporters at the French- and Dutch-speaking public television networks deal with each other's language when preparing and producing news reports. Through analysis of 31 semi-structured interviews with journalists from both networks, our study provides both insights into the news production process in a multilingual country, and the individual reporters' perception of the French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians' language. By delineating how the idealized benchmark of bilingualism is restrained by pragmatic realities (format, time and language proficiency), we demonstrate how 'coping strategies', including collective translation processes, play a role in news production.

Keywords

journalism, translation, multilingualism, television news production

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Introduction

While the language of journalists has been widely studied (see Bell, 1991; Fowler, 1991; Richardson, 2008; Crawford, 2012; Gravengaard, 2012), everyday language practices and linguistic routines in newsrooms have received less attention, except within the field of translation studies (Davier, 2017; Davier and Van Doorslaer, 2018; Perrin et al., 2017; Van Doorslaer, 2009; Valdeón, 2015). Jacobs and Tobback (2013) point out that 'in today's globalized and multilingual mediascape, the practicalities of inter-language translation have become increasingly relevant in the newsroom' (407). However, research has shown that issues related to linguistic practices, particularly translation processes, are not a journalist's greatest concern. After studying two Swiss news agencies, Davier (2014) concludes that translation is somewhat of an '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' (20). We consider these issues particularly important in the context of journalistic practice in Belgium, where the tensions between Dutch- and French-speaking communities are characterised by conflict, and political negotiations aimed at keeping the balance (Sterckx, 2010).

In previous research on journalistic routines in the RTBF newsroom, the leading Belgian francophone TV broadcaster, we focused on French-speaking journalists' representations and use of Dutch when covering a news story in Flanders, or when interviewing a (native) Dutch speaker (Bouko et al., 2018; Standaert et al., 2020) In this article, we compare these findings to those in the newsroom of the Flemish public broadcaster Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroep (VRT). An attempt is made at answering how Belgian TV reporters from either side of the language barrier regard the other linguistic community and its language through daily news broadcasts. Meanwhile, we try and map out how both Dutch- and French-speaking television reporters use each other's language in everyday practice. Our aim is to provide insight into the news production process in a multilingual setting, and the individual reporters' perception and use of Dutch and French.

We first delve into the Belgian context and the – at times – divisive media landscape. Then, we shed light on TV journalists' perception of (foreign) language use in their professional practices, paying special attention to the role of translation. Next, we focus on our methodology and data. Afterwards, our findings from both the French- and Dutch-speaking communities are discussed, focusing on how the TV reporters deal with a language that is not their own. We end this paper with a discussion of our findings, and some concluding remarks.

Background and theoretical framework

The belgian context

Belgium boasts a complicated state structure with a multitude of institutions and a growing bureaucracy (De Bens, 2007). At present, five governments are responsible for a population of around 11 million people, alongside a central government. The Belgian

Constitution recognizes three languages: Dutch in Flanders, French in Wallonia, French and Dutch in Brussels, and German in the Eastern municipalities bordering Germany.

Sociolinguistics has long regarded Belgium as a special, rather problematic, case of societal multilingualism (Blommaert, 2011). In fact, Belgium is renowned for its language conflicts (Vandendaele et al., 2014): the mid-19th century saw the beginning of the 'language dispute', whereby part of the population wanted protective legislation for the Dutch language, which was awarded a lower status than French. This has gradually evolved into a – mainly – political conflict between Wallonia and Flanders (Van Velthoven, 2011).

Media in Belgium are organised at the level of the language communities (Sinardet, 2013). According to De Bens and Raeymaeckers (2007), the Belgian media market is 'to a large extent, dominated by cultural (language) differences'. Editorial lines tend to have a regional scope, even if prestige/quality media claim to maintain a national coverage of events. Media groups mostly target one language community, and the audience is separated by the language criterion: traditional news sources in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium are most often consulted in Dutch (Rys et al, 2017). The same goes for French-language media in the French-speaking part. In addition, the French-speaking audience consumes media from France. Sinardet (2007) therefore argues that Belgium is composed of two distinct public spheres, made visible through the rare presence of francophone politicians in Dutch-speaking television studios during national elections. Lits (2009: 64) supports the idea that Dutch-speaking Flanders is foreign territory to French-speaking Wallonia and vice versa, which leads to simplifications and stereotypes. According to Vandendaele et al. (2014), Flemish and Walloon sources spin things differently: they bring 'other' news, or at least a 'different view' of the facts. Still, research shows that French- and Dutch-speaking journalists are quite similar, as there are no substantial differences in their role perceptions, influences and professional values and practices (Mertens and Standaert, 2017). Moreover, they share a vision on practices, roles and code of ethics (Bonin et al., 2017). Nevertheless, differences exist concerning angles, sources, news selection and regularity of the coverage of particular issues (e.g., royal affairs, future of Belgium).

When it comes to broadcasting, Belgium has three separate, autonomous public service broadcasting corporations, that is, VRT for the Flemish community, RTBF for the French-speaking community (De Bens, 2007: 75) and BRF, the public service broadcasting organisation serving the German-speaking Community of Belgium. In this article, we focus on VRT and RTBF.

VRT and RTBF each occupy one half of the same building in Brussels, meaning the central corridor that divides both halves functions as a symbolic language border: for example, in the northern part (VRT), you only see signage in Dutch, in the southern part (RTBF) signs are French only. However, VRT and RTBF have been known to collaborate and share images from reports or interviews in their respective TV news bulletins. In 2021, VRT and RTBF joined forces on the production of 1985, a fictional series about the Brabant Killers, who were responsible for a series of violent attacks between 1982 and 1985. This is the first time these two public broadcasters collaborated on a drama based on

true events (VRT, 2020). However, for editorial and practical reasons, such productions remain exceptions to the rule; most other collaborations remain invisible to the public.

(Foreign) language in journalism

Journalism research has shown that the ongoing digital revolution has significantly changed the profession (Vandendaele et al., 2021); for one, technical skills have become an essential part of journalists' professional practices (Opgenhaffen et al., 2013). However, several studies (Steensen, 2009; Thurman and Lupton, 2008) note that general journalistic skills, that is, linguistic and writing skills, remain the core of journalism, whatever the media outlet. Yet, it is worth investigating to what extent journalists need foreign language skills.

Van Leuven et al. (2019) demonstrate that mastering one's native language is considered a journalist's most important skill. Opgenhaffen et al. (2013) add that Flemish journalists refer most to being fluent in foreign languages – particularly English and French – for gathering information. At a production level, however, writing skills are deemed more important, whereas being fluent in foreign languages is not considered a necessity. Opgenhaffen et al. also found, however, that journalistic training in Belgium does not pay sufficient attention to foreign language proficiency.

Cotter uses the term 'craft ethos' (Cotter, 2010: 32) to describe the founding values and representations journalists associate with newsmaking and argues that it is part of the ideological baseline for journalism. In the context of craft ethos and (foreign) languages, we should mention the importance of proximity, that is, 'the geographic distance between an event and a media organisation's newsroom and/or its audience' (Shoemaker et al., 2007: 231), which is perceived as a central value for newsmaking. This directly influences day-to-day journalistic practices, as journalists are faced with a need to translate, to bring a foreign news story closer to the target audience. In their study, Perrin and colleagues (2017) unveil the practical implications of journalists' linguistic skills when dealing with translation. They argue that, when translating, journalists favour a 'domestication' over a 'foreignization strategy' (Perrin et al., 2017: 465). The first strategy is fuelled by the idea of proximity between news and audience, to make it as accessible as possible. In that case, journalists often favour voiceover translations of utterances in a foreign language.[1] The second strategy is used to more authentically transmit foreign languages and cultures by including the original language and adding subtitles, requiring a bigger effort from the audience. Indeed, subtitles are sometimes used with a conscious desire to allow viewers with sufficient language skills to listen directly to the original (Conway, 2011: 78).

As translation plays a crucial role when covering a story in a foreign language, it is an important type of 'micro-gatekeeping' (Perrin et al., 2017: 478), affecting the nature of journalistic productions. Translation thus impacts comprehensibility, style and completeness of information, as well as topic selection. Valdeón dubs the role of translation in news production a 'first-level gatekeeping mechanism' (2020), involving several agents, who make decisions concerning what material can be published and in what form. Indeed, Valdeón shows that translations may result from ideological decisions, which do not generate the expected response on the part of the intended audience (2021). The Canadian

situation exemplifies how translation can play a key role in the gatekeeping process. In the 1980s and 1990s, the news departments of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's English- and French-language television networks (CBC and Radio-Canada) encountered strong resistance in their initiatives to broadcast their news with subtitles in the other linguistic community's language. Financial and logistical considerations explained this resistance, but cultural differences were also raised: some feared that translated news did not cover important topics in a way that was meaningful for the members of their language community (Conway, 2008).

Perrin et al. (2017) found that news events inciting a lot of media attention directly depend on the journalists' skills in the language in which the events unfold; if journalists do not understand that language, they are less likely to include the event in a broadcast. Within the Belgian context, however, Jacobs and Tobback (2013) argued that language itself does not determine whether a report is included in the TV news bulletin or not, but rather that it happens in the country's other linguistic communities. In their study at the RTBF, they found that language does play a central role during the editing process, notably when the journalists choose which extracts to broadcast. Ultimately, this influences the general structure of the report and the degree of information detail.

Data and methodology

Amid the turmoil of organisational change and innovation in news production, journalists' representations of their professional practices remain somewhat overlooked, as the news production process is traditionally framed as a product of routines, leaving little room for journalists' agency (Reardon, 2017: 2). When journalists are included as agents in the newsmaking process, research tends to ignore what they verbalise, or treat it as a transfer of information, rather than as a discursive practice in its own right. For this reason, and following Catenaccio et al. (2011), Reardon calls for an ethnographic approach that pays heed to the discursive construction of the journalists' everyday talk, that is, the conversations they engage in with peers and sources (Witschge and Harbers, 2018). According to Hanitzsch and Vos, 'the dynamic nature of journalists' identity can be understood as a discursive repertoire that enables the selective activation of contingent forms of journalistic roles' (2017: 7). Yet, as Gravengaard (2012) points out, the reporters' repertoires are not always coherent; the way in which matters are articulated can make identity conflicts apparent, positioned in conflicting discourses.

We believe the discursive process underlying news production needs to be studied, as well as its connection to context. Merely looking at journalistic products and practices from an outside position would leave a lot unclear, as crucial contextual clues would be missed. We would also be ignoring 'the communicative process, the active work done by participants as well as the cultural context that underpins the action' (Catenaccio et al., 2011: 1846). We therefore delve into the journalists' multi-layered repertoires aiming to uncover the representations used to construct their professional practices and values.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 francophone RTBF journalists, as well as the editor-in-chief (Table 1) in summer/fall of 2017. In fall/winter of 2019, we conducted 15 qualitative interviews with TV news journalists employed by Dutch-

Table 1. Francophone TV reporters.

Journalist	Gender	Professional focus
J1	♂	Sports
J2	♂	Politics
J3	♀	Regional Affairs
J4	♀	Politics
J5	♂	Politics
J6	♀	Politics
J7	♂	Society
J8	♂	Foreign affairs
J9	♀	Foreign affairs
J10	♂	Foreign affairs
J11	♂	Society
J12	♀	Society
J13	♂	Sports
J14	♀	Science
J15	♀	Regional affairs
J16	♀	Society

speaking public broadcaster VRT, and the editor-in-chief (Table 2). All interviews were conducted in the journalists' native language, that is, Dutch or French. When selecting respondents, we made sure there were variations in age, professional experience, newsroom specialties and level of Dutch/French within the sample. We asked the journalists to self-assess their language proficiency level (based on previous language tests and the tasks they can perform in the foreign language). The level of Dutch among the French-speaking journalists varied between four levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), that is, from A2 to C1. The Dutch-speaking reporters' level of French, on the other hand, ranged from CEFR-levels B1 to C1. These levels need to be regarded mere contextual indicators for the qualitative analysis and not as results of our research.

We interviewed the reporters according to Kaufmann's (2006) comprehensive interview methodology, which combines traditional semi-structured interviewing with interviewing techniques of a more ethnographic nature, that is, organising the interviews in the naturalistic setting of the newsroom, and encouraging storytelling. Each so-called 'understanding interview' was divided into four sections: a description of the practices and/or tools used when a topic requires Dutch/French speakers on air; management's instructions for dealing with Dutch/French and how those are put into practice; the respondents' language abilities and level of education and their perceptions of Dutch/French.

Every interview lasted between 30 and 60 min and was transcribed in full[2]. We sought to avoid the reporters feeling judged because of language levels and practices. Some journalists first refused to be interviewed for fear of judgement by the researchers (and possibly their superiors). Therefore, we aimed to create a climate trust, far from any norm

Table 2. Dutch-speaking TV reporters

Journalist	Gender	Professional focus
J1	♂	Science
J2	♂	Science + Society
J3	♂	Society
J4	♀	Foreign affairs
J5	♂	Foreign affairs
J6	♂	Foreign affairs
J7	♀	Legal affairs
J8	♂	Politics
J9	♀	Education
J10	♂	Breaking News + Foreign Affairs
J11	♂	Politics
J12	♂	Foreign affairs
J13	♂	Foreign affairs
J14	♀	Politics
J15	♀	Politics + Economics

or linguistic ideal, which the respondents had to live up to, either explicitly or implicitly. '"Live and let live" disinterested observation' (Bauer and Gaskell 1999: 179) was crucial.

Once transcribed, the interviews were content-analysed, using an inductive approach. This allowed us to move away from the reporters' own words towards a more abstract categorisation, so that particular instances could be combined into a larger whole or general statement (Chinn and Kramer, 1999). Finally, the interviews' most salient passages were translated into English by the researchers. For reasons of confidentiality, the interviews were anonymised. The reporters' superiors did not have access to information that might reveal their identities.

Findings

In this section, we discuss our findings, which we categorised as follows: language acquisition and development (5.1), language knowledge (5.2) and language use and avoidance (5.3). In section 5.4, we take a closer look at translation in both newsrooms.

Language acquisition and development

Our sample contained few journalists claiming advanced linguistic ability (i.e., C according to the CEFR) in either Dutch or French. Schooling and home environment play a vital role in the development of linguistic ability; the Dutch-speaking reporters who grew up in the Brussels area referred to a natural affinity with the language, as, growing up, it was everywhere. The department they work at also impacts language ability, as it determines how often the reporters are asked to use French or Dutch. Francophone journalists with an elementary level of Dutch are often found in teams that cover mainly

Wallonia-based news stories (with little opportunity to speak Dutch), and the other way around. In both newsrooms journalists reporting on federal politics are expected to have level B or C in either Dutch or French.

Most of the francophone journalists, regardless of their levels, felt that Dutch classes at school and college or university failed to offer them a high level. Both the French- and Dutch-speaking reporters attributed this mediocre level to the language classes being too theoretical and impractical, and remember them as 'difficult' and 'boring'. However, one French-speaking journalist insisted that one owes it to oneself to go beyond the courses. That paradox, often conscious, between the desire to learn and the lack of motivation to do so was observed often, among both francophone and Dutch-speaking reporters.

Even though their employers offer training courses, interviewees from both sides of the language barrier admitted that they do not make much use of them. Reasons mentioned are the absence of a strict management policy, a lack of time and irregular working hours. In their current professional lives, this lack of commitment can also be attributed to the need to speak the other national language more fluently, which is not demonstrated on a daily basis.

On the Dutch-speaking side especially, we noticed an awareness of the declining levels of French among Dutch-speakers in the newsroom, in favour of a rise of English. This decline of French-language proficiency is especially observed by the older generation of journalists and is paired with feelings of frustration, aimed at both younger journalists, but also towards management's hiring policies: 'What I am really critical of when hiring journalists is that language proficiency is sorely lacking among young journalists. I sometimes feel ashamed on their behalf when I hear young colleagues make a phone call in French'. Older reporters also refer to the exam they had to take when applying for a position as a journalist/producer at VRT, which, at the time, 'included a very important linguistic aspect. We had to know three languages, both actively and passively'.

Indeed, younger Dutch-speaking journalists admit their level of French is quite poor. A few of them put forward that this is due to a lack of practical experience in French, which translates into a lack of confidence. A journalist noted that colleagues 'isolate themselves from the rest of the newsroom when they have to make a phone call in French, because they are so fearful of making mistakes in public'. Another journalist suggests that colleagues are also afraid to speak French on camera, because they know that they will be scrutinised by thousands of spectators.

Interestingly, many francophone journalists claim that Flemish journalists are significantly better at French than they are at Dutch. This representation causes both feelings of admiration and embarrassment and also explains why, according to them, most exchanges with their Flemish peers are done in French. Some of the journalists express a level of unease when confronted with their linguistic shortcomings in the field. Next to below-par schooling, they also refer to a lack of confrontation with Dutch in other contexts. Several journalists mention the role of dubbing in Wallonia, while Flemish television broadcasters, either public or private, have always subtitled foreign content.

While, generally, Dutch-speakers master French to a certain level, that does not necessarily apply to the younger generations. The journalists observed, for example, that older Flemish politicians speak French near perfectly, while this is not the case for their

successors (even if, in their opinions, these younger politicians still achieved a very satisfactory level). Moreover, Flemish reporters perceive an increasing level of Dutch among French speakers. One Dutch-speaking journalist described it as follows: 'We no longer have that self-evident quasi perfect level of French, and on the French-speaking side, you do see that there are several [reporters] who are coming on leaps and bounds in Dutch'.

Language knowledge

Our respondents all express that in multilingual Belgium, one should master the other community's language, both in a private and in a professional context. One Flemish reporter stated: 'In our country, you are actually handicapped if you speak French poorly'. The sentiment that, as a Belgian, one should strive to be able to speak both official languages, was notable throughout our interviews, whether the journalists were able to or not; they all express a need for Belgians – and for Belgian journalists in particular – to being as close to bilingual as possible.

Concerning bilingualism, for the francophone respondents, the grass is greener on the other side. Equally aware of the need to master both languages in a Belgian journalistic context, most French-speaking reporters consider their Flemish colleagues 'bilingual', but do not label themselves as such. In fact, for most journalists with a basic or intermediate level of Dutch, using that label seems to be a way of widening the gap between themselves and their colleagues.

We found that the perceived ideal of a bilingual Belgian journalist is not part of the newsroom reality. In both newsrooms, the necessity to speak both French and Dutch well was made explicit by journalists covering politics, and to a lesser extent, sports. At RTBF, however, the editor-in-chief admits that overall, the level of Dutch among the staff is not excellent: 'We do not have many journalists who are able to take part in a televised debate with our Flemish counterparts. The others get by, but are not at that level'. While the francophone journalists would prefer to speak Dutch more fluently, they put the importance of Dutch into perspective when they explain the day-to-day activities in the newsroom: Dutch is considered an important skill in theory, yet an elevated level does not seem absolutely necessary in practice. The respondents' explanations are the specific nature of skills required in audio-visual media, the strategic use of a foreign language, and the collective nature of dealing with a foreign language, all of which we explore below (cf. 5.3; 5.4).

The VRT news broadcast's editor-in-chief states that speaking French 'to a degree that allows reporters to perform well in a Belgian context is absolutely expected'. One reporter mentions the need for French in a more informal professional context, that is, when communicating with RTBF colleagues: 'I can't say I speak French daily, but it's not far off. On the one hand, it is about following court cases in French or judicial inquiries. But also, about the interaction with RTBF colleagues. We work closely with the people who keep an eye on legal affairs and police, so French is actually super important'. This echoes what reporters at RTBF said: collaboration is required as, for one, the jargon used is often challenging and field specific. Moreover, being at the back of the room at a trial, implies

not everything can be heard clearly, leading reporters to turn to each other for help. Covering the same topic, and being at the same place for a long time in a particular environment encourages a connection between journalists from both newsrooms.

According to the editors-in-chief at both RTBF and VRT, being able to speak and understand the other community's language is just one of the many skills required before a journalist can join the team. The Flemish editor-in-chief elaborates: 'I think that journalism benefits more from people who might not be as proficient in a language or technology, but who are willing to learn and be flexible. In my opinion, someone with a PhD, who has French down to a tee and can write the perfect email in French but is unable to enter a bar in Roubaix, Valenciennes and get the people to talk, is a much bigger problem'.

Language use and avoidance

Both the RTBF and VRT journalists would like to be more proficient in Dutch or French, but nevertheless manage to do their jobs. However, when they absolutely must speak Dutch or French, those who are not confident about their abilities will rely on avoidance strategies.

One senior Flemish journalist commented, 'For my younger colleagues French is a huge problem, so everyone will pass up on the opportunity to speak it'. In other words, field reporting and interviews in Wallonia are avoided, or passed on to other colleagues who master the language. A few of the VRT journalists also referred to the practice of editing out the questions asked in French, and only leaving in the French speaker's answer, to cut back on subtitling efforts. This way, they also avoid making mistakes in front of a highly critical TV audience.

On the francophone side, reporters with the lowest abilities in Dutch will equally avoid the assignment. As newsroom protocol allows journalists to switch topics, when faced with the challenge of filming in Flanders or interviewing someone in Dutch, they will arrange for a colleague to do it. 'I opt for avoidance because, more often than not, someone else is able to a better job', one of the journalists confessed, stressing that, as they are a relatively long-serving employee, they were able to pass off this behaviour as normal within the team. This strategy has its limitations, as there is not always someone available. One reporter added, 'If I call my sources and they tell me they do not speak any French, I might ask my editor if we can send someone else (…) if this is not possible, I have to find a way of doing it'.

When it comes to 'ways of doing it', creative solutions to the language problem were mentioned on either side of the language barrier, ranging from spending more time on preparation and taking language courses (in their own time and/or organised by management) to asking for colleagues' help.

The respondents often framed the use and/or avoidance of either French or Dutch in the VRT and RTBF newsrooms in the context of an audio-visual medium. A francophone TV reporter described themselves as a 'package builder'; 'I realise that the skills required in our profession are increasingly bound up with information. It is crucial to have a good sense of synthesis, to understand the salient points of a topic quickly and be able to make it

visually attractive and to visually translate an idea. I do not think that language is the priority; it is secondary'. The reporter expresses that this medium transcends the use of language. Nevertheless, for a newsroom that produces two televised newscasts of around 35 min each day, the use of Dutch comes up against time constraints. Given the lack of time, preparing a topic in Dutch poses an additional problem, namely French-speaking journalists have fewer contacts on the other side of the language border so the whole process has to be carried out in Dutch. In this case, most francophone respondents describe making specific preparations as soon as possible, for example, vocabulary searches or checks using tools such as (print or online) dictionaries, online translation tools, preparing questions in advance using Dutch sources. However, French is preferred, as it allows for time-consuming voiceovers or subtitled translations during the editing process to be avoided.

At VRT, the reporters also refer to the tension between tight deadlines and subtitling, and might persuade the francophone interviewee to speak Dutch, if his/her level is sufficient: 'If I notice in a short pre-interview that it is actually not that bad, then I will push them to speak Dutch'. However, as was confirmed by many Flemish journalists, the interviewee's level of Dutch must be sufficient. In other words, intelligibility is paramount, and misunderstandings must be avoided at all costs. The reporters underline that, when an interviewee's Dutch is not good enough, getting the correct message across trumps all time constraints: 'I think then it is easier for French speakers if they just speak their own language. Nuances will be expressed more clearly than if you are forced to speak Dutch'.

We previously discussed the embarrassment among most French-speaking reporters about their poor command of Dutch. Some francophone reporters will therefore deliberately challenge the cliché of the monolingual dominant French speaker and employ Dutch as a (strategic) sign of respect, to establish rapport and 'please' Dutch-speakers. This strategy is perceived as a crucial asset to make mutual (professional) relationships run smoothly, both with sources and Flemish colleagues. More than just a strategic move, however, the approach is used to show respect, which is underlined as crucial when approaching interviewees.

This is echoed in the Dutch-speaking newsroom: French is sometimes employed as a facilitator, to connect with others and set the right mood: 'Here in Belgium, I try (…) to speak the language of the person I am interviewing, to kind of assist them. I requested the interview, so I will adjust'. More than a problem, the journalists consider the process of finding a common language a journalistic tool, another way to engage with the news source: 'To me, language is a way to connect and to find out information. As soon as language becomes a stumbling block for one of the parties, one should look for a way to bypass that'. However, when that process prevents them from making the deadline and endangers intelligibility, pragmatism prevails. Within that process of language negotiation, a compromise might sometimes lead to the best outcome: 'I actually support the Belgian principle where everybody speaks their own language. I ask the question in Dutch, and somebody answers in French, or the other way around. That seems to be the best of both worlds'.

For a few reporters we interviewed, part of their journalistic mission is language-related. More than offering a bit of 'couleur locale', they consider including a foreign

language an intrinsic part of the report. Some even take it further: rather than striving for audience comfort, or 'giving the audience a break' as one Flemish reporter described it, they preferred to keep the original language with subtitles. Moreover, if a source speaks a different language, then 'we should adapt'. One of the Dutch-speaking journalists summarised it as follows, 'It has more to do with my mission: (…) I want to expose issues or explain things, and then I try to find the right person. If that person happens to be a French-speaking professor who is very knowledgeable about nuclear physics, I prefer that professor to someone who is less knowledgeable in Dutch, even though there is a perceived additional difficulty'. If extra time or effort is required, the reporter will accept this, as this next Flemish journalist confirms: 'I feel you lose journalistic finesse, if the interviewee tries to perform in a language that is not her own. So, I have them speak French, and then we will provide a decent translation afterwards, so no meaning is lost'.

Translation: An informal, collective and collaborative newsroom practice

In all interviews, we noted how, the journalists are instilled with the urgency of the news, whether in the field or in the newsroom. When faced with a linguistic issue, the general feedback was that, 'in one way or another, we'll get there'. While communicating with sources directly, in, for example, interviews or mail correspondence, we already mentioned the perceived Belgian ideal of bilingualism. On the Dutch-speaking side, there was a preference for a compromise when time is short, meaning everyone speaks their own language. Nevertheless, sound bites in a foreign language need to be translated (either through subtitles or dubbing) for use in a VRT or RTBF news broadcast.

Although the respondents generally describe translating as a time-consuming additional task, it is something these reporters (have to) do themselves. However 'annoying' this task might be, its necessity is recognised by most reporters. One Flemish reporter stated: 'As a journalist, you have to be able to translate well; that's just obvious'. At RTBF, reporters are supposed to subtitle sound bites, if they have the time. If time is limited, dubbing is allowed. According to them, the technical tools in the newsroom do not allow them to subtitle optimally. Moreover, producing a voiceover allows a broader understanding of a Dutch excerpt, whereas, when subtitling, word-for-word understanding is required. Subtitles are indeed used with a desire to be clear when attributing responsibility for statements on the screen; journalists wish to emphasize to what extent the specific choice of words is not a journalistic one, but the interviewee's responsibility (Conway, 2008). This entails a perfect translation of every single word, and no paraphrasing.

Most francophone journalists described using tools such as (paper or online) dictionaries, automatic translating systems or translations in context (e.g., Reverso Context) and relying on Dutch press releases, articles from Dutch-speaking media or Flemish media's social media accounts. One reporter stated: 'Once a subject has been chosen, we are sometimes asked to come up with a story within two or 3 h. We do not 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'.

The reliance on francophone press releases and media is confirmed by the Flemish journalists: 'On a daily basis, when press releases arrive in French, I will have a quick

look. And we also look at other media websites, including the RTBF site'. The Dutch-speaking reporters also refer to translation dictionaries and online translation tools presenting language in context. When it comes to online translation tools, many of the respondents admit to using it, but generally when 'it is just one word I am not sure about', or 'when I need to translate something quickly'. This hesitancy towards automatic translations is echoed among the older journalists in particular. Still, nearly every reporter stresses the importance of one's own language skills: 'You might think with all those Google Translates and the technological evolution that language skills are becoming less important. (…) However, being able to use a language, to be able to understand the finer things, has become more important (…) That goes especially for journalists, to quickly and accurately recognize certain nuances'.

Whatever the linguistic proficiency ideal is for a journalist, as it stands, linguistic ability and frequency of exposure vary greatly among newsroom staff at VRT and RTBF. One of the most significant insights from the interviews, however, was the joint effort involved in the treatment of foreign languages. From our French-speaking informants, we learned that the collective knowledge of Dutch is considered sufficient: at least a few journalists should speak it well, but not necessarily all of them. The francophone editor-in-chief approves of this collective proficiency: 'There is always someone who can help (…) It is not hard to find someone who can translate 20 s of sound'.

All respondents stated that, when they are unable to translate an interview clip, encounter a strong accent or an expression they do not know, or want to make sure their translation is accurate, they ask colleagues to check before their work goes on air. The fact that there is always someone around to help, is confirmed on the Dutch-speaking side. In addition, several Flemish reporters refer to the in-house translation department, which mainly consists of native speakers of French, German and English.

Some of the Flemish journalists, in particular those covering foreign affairs or the federal government, discuss their close working relationship with French-speaking colleagues. As they often spend a lot of time together travelling, bonds are formed. This allows translation issues to be solved collectively: 'In the past, I have just gone over to our French-speaking colleagues, asking 'What do they mean by that for god's sake?', as it was one of those quintessential French expressions'. This confirms our previous finding at RTBF: there, Dutch as a journalistic practice involved discussion between journalists, film editors and cameramen, depending on the availability and linguistic ability of newsroom staff. More than a collective and collaborative effort, translation also seems to be an almost 'informal' part of the news production process, completed in 'the margins' of the official process.

Discussion and conclusion

This study on the views and use of language of TV reporters in a multilingual country demonstrates that, in the context of Belgium, acquiring both French and Dutch is considered a (growing) problem. What is more, a perceived lack of proficiency can lead to embarrassment. Moreover, among some senior Dutch-speaking TV reporters in particular, frustration arises about more junior colleagues' declining levels of proficiency in French. 20 years ago, Wynants (2001) pointed out that francophones feel Dutch-speakers were

perceived as having a better command of French than the other way around. However, they also referred to the perception of a 'tendency towards a better balance', meaning that younger Flemish generations are less proficient in French than their elders. Among the reporters we interviewed, we indeed perceived a generational change.

Our previous studies (Bouko et al., 2018; Standaert et al., 2020) revealed that French-speaking reporters tend to admire bilingualism and frame it in an ideal way, in line with Bloomfield's idealized approach of 'the native-like control of two languages' (Bloomfield, 1933: 56). Although both French- and Dutch-speaking reporters admire bilingualism, claim that every Belgian should strive to be able to speak both most important official languages, and most feel embarrassed for their language levels, initiatives to make the newsroom more bilingual do not appear to be a reality. In fact, both francophone and Dutch-speaking journalists rely on a series of creative coping mechanisms to deal with each other's language, ranging from avoiding assignments to collaborating with colleagues in their own or counterpart's newsroom, especially when 'out on the job' (cf. legal affairs and police matters). The journalists also expressed an awareness of language use possibly being employed strategically towards interviewees, and as a sign of respect. Intelligibility, however, remains paramount: the reporters favour interviews in the language of their broadcast and switch to the interviewee's native language in case of intelligibility issues. Political issues regarding the presence of the other language in the news were not reported, unlike in other contexts: at the Canadian French-speaking broadcast Le Droit, the analysis of the presence of English by watchdog associations make the reporters fear complaints when they interview English-speaking respondents who are not perceived as essential to the story, compared to French-speaking alternatives (Gendron et al., 2019). This priority of intelligibility in the language of the broadcast confirms how journalists rather privilege domestication strategies (Perrin et al., 2017). Furthermore, when in Dutch, interviews at the RTBF are often voiceover translations, while interviews are systematically subtitled at the VRT. Voiceover translations allow journalists to manage intelligibility issues that arise when the reporters do not understand specific vocabulary. In doing so, they avoid rigidly implementing the search of accuracy, which would lead to a loss of communication impact (Matsushita, 2019). Furthermore, voiceover translations save time compared to subtitled ones, as was also claimed by Canadian reporters (Gendron et al. 2019).

Translation, an essential element of the gatekeeping process (Perrin et al., 2017; Valdeón 2020; 2021) tends to be perceived as part of the job – albeit a strenuous and time-consuming one – of a journalist in a multilingual country, or organisation (Bassnett and Bielsa, 2009). The reporters at RTBF and VRT are 'journalators', a term Van Doorslaer (2012) coined to qualify the (abundant) use of individual and invisible translations when preparing journalistic texts. In the reporters' everyday professional context, dealing with a foreign language is generally a creative and collaborative effort, and this can be said about translation as well. Our respondents particularly emphasized the informal and collective translation processes. This illustrates once more how, contrary to some persistent myths, translation has always been conducted collectively (e.g., Huss, 2018). It is common practice in journalism, especially in small newsrooms where the roles of the different members are often intertwined (Van Rooyen and Van Doorslaer, 2021). Moreover,

deadlines, the urgency of the news and the situational context encourage 'informal' collaboration among colleagues within and – at times even – across newsrooms. This observation is consistent with van Doorslaer's take on the matter, for whom 'translating is everywhere, there are no formal translator functions' (Van Doorslaer, 2010: 181). Translation seems to be an invisible task. Furthermore, Davier (2014) points out that younger journalists are hesitant to ask for help when translating as it is perceived as a job that does not require explicit language skills, or in other words, an 'easy' task.

In sum, translation in the context of these two 'national' media outlets proves to be an informal, creative and collaborative form of journalistic practice.

As studied here, journalists' language practice also shows the non-alignment that can exist between the different levels of analysis of journalistic production as established by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). Our research focuses on the first two levels of the hierarchies of influence model, that is, individuals and routines. The discursive postures of most journalists show an interest, at least formally, in the language of the other community and what is happening there, as well as an advantage, in terms of journalistic practice, in mastering Dutch or French. Our point here is not to determine to what extent these discourses correspond to concrete reality, but to situate them in relation to Shoemaker and Reese's third level, the organisations. At this level, the editorial lines, the composition of audiences and the organisation of (human) resources in news organisations show that what happens on the other side of the border often remains secondary. Yet, if this is commonplace in the description of the Belgian media landscape, which is almost always presented as dual and divided, the first two levels – individuals and practices – allow us to qualify this vision. Furthermore, we are thus able to offer a more precise, and therefore more nuanced, look at this issue. The recent emergence of individual and bottom-up initiatives aimed at covering news via columns, sections or podcasts produced in both languages, or via a collaboration between Flemish and French-speaking journalists, confirms this interest highlighted by the interviews, while validating that at the level of news organisations, things remain globally static.

Further research into cross-newsroom and cross-language barrier collaboration concerning language use could reinforce or nuance the so-called 'divided' Belgian mediascape. Moreover, since editorial lines influence the way journalists conceive their roles, and, therefore, skills, investigating news reporters at commercial networks – or local broadcasters – could reveal potentially differing views, and to what extent linguistic skills are a significant asset in those settings. Finally, we recognise that our chosen methodology, that is, analysing the journalists' discourse about language practices, might be somewhat removed from said practices. Although relying on observation to map out how and to what extent Dutch or French are used in the newsrooms on either side of the language barrier is challenging – because it is utterly unpredictable and anything but systematic – we believe that further field research focusing on the reporters' practices would open the door to more fine-grained analysis of our findings.

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Notes

1. In a voiceover, the original speech is paraphrased and not translated word-for-word by a reporter or by the news anchor (Conway, 2008). Voiceover and dubbing are both techniques for translating a message. However, while voiceover lacks most of the emotion and tonality of the original audio, dubbing is much more precise as it maintains the tonal, emotive and technical richness of the original soundtrack. Oral translations at RTBF can be considered voiceover translations.
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