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## On Some Speech Acts and Communication Patterns in Flanders and the Netherlands

### Abstract

Differences in language use can occur not only between nations speaking different languages but also between national varieties of the same language. For this reason, we chose to conduct a study in both Flanders and the Netherlands. In Flanders, the Gricean maxims manner and quality are the most important. Small talk among strangers is not very common and if one gets an invitation it is more than likely a sincere offer. If one wants to end a conversation, the phrase "I have to go, I have something else to do" is most frequently used. Some more prudence is called for when an invitation is rejected: an excuse is expected. The Dutch tend to use a direct style as well. Small talk is not considered necessary and it is generally accepted to turn down an offer using the word "no". Expressing disagreement in the Netherlands can be done using the rather direct expression "No, I disagree". An invitation is considered to be a sincere one and if one of the interlocutors wants to end a conversation, the other immediately lets him/her go. Contrary to expectations, the results show that in Flanders and the Netherlands rather the same communication strategies are used.

### Sommaire

Des divergences dans l'usage de la langue n'existent pas seulement entre les nations avec des langues différentes, mais aussi entre les variétés nationales d'une seule langue. C'est pourquoi nous nous sommes décidées à réaliser une étude en Flandre et dans les Pays-Bas. En Flandre, ce sont les maximes de la manière et de la qualité de *Paul Grice* qui sont les plus importantes. Le Small Talk avec des étrangers n'est pas d'usage et une invitation est à prendre sérieusement. Pour terminer une conversation, on se sert, la plupart du temps, de l'expression directe « Il faut que j'y aille, j'ai autre chose à faire ». Par contre, il faut faire attention dès qu'on décline une invitation, parce que dans ce cas-là, on attend une excuse. Dans les Pays-Bas, on se sert également d'un style direct. Le Small Talk n'y est pas d'usage non plus et une offre peut être refusée par un « Non » définitif. En cas d'unanimité, on peut se servir de la diction directe « Non, là, je ne suis pas d'accord ». Les invitations sont sérieuses et lorsqu'une personne voudrait terminer une conversation, on n'hésite pas à la laisser s'en aller. Contrairement à nos premières expectatives, les résultats laissent présager qu'en Flandre et qu'aux Pays-Bas, on se sert des mêmes stratégies communicatives.

### Zusammenfassung

Unterschiede im Sprachgebrauch kommen nicht nur zwischen Nationen, in denen unterschiedliche Sprachen gesprochen werden, vor, sondern auch zwischen nationalen Varietäten einer Sprache. Deshalb haben wir uns dafür entschieden, eine Studie in Flandern und in den Niederlanden durchzuführen. In Flandern sind die Griceschen Maxime der Art und Weise und der Qualität am wichtigsten. Smalltalk mit Fremden ist unüblich und eine Einladung ist ernst gemeint. Um ein Gespräch zu beenden, wird meistens die direkte Phrase "Ich muss jetzt gehen, ich habe etwas anderes zu tun" benutzt. Mehr Vorsicht ist geboten beim Ablehnen einer Einladung, dann wird eine Entschuldigung erwartet. In den Niederlanden wird ebenfalls ein direkter Stil benutzt. Smalltalk ist ebenso unüblich und ein Angebot kann mit "Nein" abgelehnt werden. Bei Unstimmigkeit kann man den direkten Spruch "Nein, damit bin ich nicht einverstanden" benutzen. Einladungen sind ernst gemeint und wenn eine Person ein Gespräch beenden möchte, lässt man sie/ihn sofort gehen. Anders als erwartet weisen die Ergebnisse darauf hin, dass in Flandern und in den Niederlanden etwa die gleichen Kommunikationsstrategien benutzt werden.

## 1. Background

In this article, the results of semi-expert interviews on communication strategies (SICS) in Flanders and the Netherlands are presented. This SICS questionnaire was designed by the

*JELiX* editors (Grzega/Schöner 2008) as an alternative to the DCT and MPJT data-eliciting methods. In a semi-expert interview on communication strategies, the informants are not asked to describe their own personal linguistic behaviour, but to describe general communicative behaviour in their nation. The informants are people working professionally with language such as language students, journalists and translators. The SICS were divided into five sections: starting a conversation; keeping up a conversation; being nice in a conversation; getting around very uncomfortable topics and ending a conversation.

The object of this study is the language use in Flanders and the Netherlands. The official language in both cases is Dutch. As there are still misunderstandings about what language is spoken in Flanders (Flemish? Belgian? French?) a short overview on the Dutch spoken in Flanders, based on Willemys/Daniels (2003) and on De Vries/Willemys/Burger (2003), follows. Flanders is a region in Belgium that consists of the five northern provinces of Belgium: West Flanders, East Flanders, Flemish Brabant, Antwerp and Limburg. In this region, the official language is Dutch. The two other official languages spoken in Belgium are French and German. However, Dutch has not always been an official language in Belgium: Dutch acquired an official status in 1932. Before, the upper class spoke French and French dominated education and public life. This changed with the introduction of the law of 1932, by which Belgium was divided into two monolingual communities and Dutch became more important. To be able to fulfil this new role, the Dutch spoken in Flanders had to be standardized. At that time there were two movements: the particularistic and the integrationist movement. The first group wanted to develop a new standard from the regional dialect, the second group wanted to make the standard Dutch spoken in the Netherlands the norm. The latter group won the debate, so the standard from the Netherlands became the norm in Flanders.

Although the Dutch spoken in Belgium is the same language as the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands and follows the same norms, there are still quite a number of differences in vocabulary and pronunciation. That is why in linguistic research on Dutch the terms *Belgian Dutch* (*Belgisch Nederlands*) and *Netherlandic Dutch* (*Nederlands Nederlands*) can often be found (Vandekerckhove 2005: 380).

With this paper, we want to draw a comparison of pragmatics in Flanders and the Netherlands. Grzega (2006: 196) notes that pragmatic differences concern not only communities with different languages, but also communities with different national varieties of the same language, which has often been neglected by researchers. There has been a lot of attention in linguistic research for the differences and similarities in Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch phonology, vocabulary and grammar, but pragmatics have, to our knowledge, not yet been subject of investigation. We first discuss the results for Flanders, then the results for the Netherlands and at the end of our paper we turn our attention to the differences we found with the SICS questionnaires.

## 2. Data Collection

A sample of the SICS questionnaire can be found in the introductory article to this volume of *JELiX* (Grzega/Schöner 2008).

### 2.1. Contacting People and Distributing the Survey

As we carried out this investigation working from Germany, we decided that the best way to reach as many informants as possible was to make the survey accessible online. We used the website [www.esurveyspro.com](http://www.esurveyspro.com) to create an online questionnaire.

Potential informants were contacted by e-mail. In the e-mail we explained briefly the background idea of eurolinguistics and the aim of our investigation and we inserted the link through which they could access the online questionnaire. We thought this way of working would offer us more filled in questionnaires than sending an e-mail with the questionnaire attached and having to ask the informants to send it back. Moreover, we put a message on various Internet forums that deal with the Dutch language and a call to fill in the questionnaire was published in an e-magazine that deals with Dutch.

## 2.2. Problems Encountered

The main problem encountered concerns the number of questionnaires that were filled in completely. For Flanders, 18 informants filled in the questionnaire completely, although 29 informants filled in the first section. For the Netherlands, more than 100 people looked at the online survey. 18 of them filled in the first section, but only eight people filled in the last section. Another problem is the range of age of the informants. The Flemish informants have an average age of 24, the Dutch informants are aged between 40 and 60.

Considering the answers given by the informants, we clearly noticed a lack of attention. Although the informants were asked to describe the linguistic behaviour in their nation, they often answered with “I would say...”. Moreover, we noticed a form of conditioning in regard to the answers. To render some of the questions more understandable and more easy to fill in, examples of possible answers were given in the SICS. We noticed that a lot of informants answered only citing the already given examples and that there is very little input from their own. All this means that we should not treat the results of this investigation as detailed facts, but rather as general tendencies.

## 3. Results: Flanders

### 3.1. Starting a conversation

Dutch, like most other European languages, has an informal and a formal pronoun. *Je* and *jij* are the informal forms (the latter is the stressed form) and *u* is the formal form. 11 out of the 29 informants also mentioned the Flemish substandard forms *ge* and *gij* (the latter is again the stressed form), which become *u* in the object case. The forms *ge* and *gij* are seen as very formal in standard Dutch, they are for example used to address God or the Queen, whereas they have a neutral and informal connotation in Flanders.

In which situations do people use informal or formal forms?

1. All informants said that children address their parents with an informal pronoun (*je*, *jij*, *ge* or *gij*). Older relatives are also mostly addressed with the informal pronoun; only two informants noted that the formal pronoun is used in this situation.
2. All informants agreed that among themselves colleagues use the informal pronoun. It is also typical that employers use the informal form to address their employees, whereas employees address their employers mostly with the formal form, although 5 informants said that it depends on the workplace situation.
3. Pupils address their teachers typically with the formal pronoun, while teachers address their pupils typically with the informal pronoun.
4. People would typically use the formal form to address strangers in the street and administration officials. Clerks and customers would also address each other reciprocally with the formal form.
5. There was no agreement on how business partners address each other. 12 informants answered that in this case the formal pronoun would be used, whereas 12 others said

that business partners would use the informal pronoun. 5 informants noted that the choice depends on the situation.

When people answer the phone at home, they will most typically say *Hallo* or *Hallo met* + name. Only 3 informants noted that people do not use a greeting term and only say their name when they answer the phone. The most common telephone answering phrase in work situations is *Goedemorgen/middag* (good morning/afternoon) or *goedemorgen/middag* + personal name + company name.

### **3.2. Keeping Up a Conversation**

In this section we asked the informants for typical small talk and taboo topics in their nations. Small talk can be considered as “a conventionalised and peripheral mode of talk” (Coupland 2000: 1). Two important questions arise when we want to use small talk. The first one is in what situations small talk is (not) common. The second question is what are safe topics in different nations. 20 informants answered the questions in this section.

First we asked the informants in what situations it is common to start small talk. Half of them answered that it is rather rare and unusual in Flanders to start small talk at all. It was often noted that there is a difference between the city and the country and the age of the people. Older people living in the country will start small talk more often than young people in the city. The suggestions for places where small talk is possible were very diverse, probably due to the fact that small talk in general is not very common. Some answers were: when queuing (4 informants); with family and neighbours (4 informants); and when something unexpected happens or when people are irritated about something (3 informants).

In everyday life small talk is rather uncommon. Situations where it is considered not usual to start small talk are for example: in waiting rooms (8 informants); while queuing for the toilet (6 informants); and in elevators (6 informants).

The most popular small talk topic is the weather. All informants agreed that this is a common and safe topic. Other possible small talk topics are: politics and general complaints (both 8 informants); the situation itself, e.g. when the bus comes too late (7 informants); sports (6 informants); local news (deaths, weddings,..), gossip and recent events (4 informants).

Taboo topics are salary (13 informants) and sexuality (13 informants). Further taboos are very personal matters (5 informants) as well as religion and drugs (both 3 informants). 3 informants noted down politics as a taboo topic. So politics can both be a safe and a taboo topic. We think that it depends on the way people talk about politics. If people talk about politics in small talk, it is most often with a certain disdain (“Oh those politicians, they are all the same...”). It is rather taboo, though, to talk about personal preferences in politics.

The informants were also asked if people in their nation use more small talk in a business conversation than in a private conversation. There was no clear line in the answers here. 9 informants said that people tend to use more small talk in a private conversation than in a business conversation, 7 said it is the other way round. 4 informants said that people use as much small talk in business conversations as in private conversations.

### **3.3. Being Nice in a Conversation**

In this section the informants were first asked how people in Flanders typically express their opinion on a topic. 13 out of 18 informants said that most people would first give their

opinion on the topic and then give reasons for this related to the issue itself. In addition these two strategies were each chosen by 6 informants:

- Bit by bit:
  - 1: you say your opinion on aspect A
  - 2: you give issue-related reasons for this
  - 3: you say your opinion on aspect B
  - 4: you give issue-related reasons for this
- - 1: you present diverse opinions and arguments
  - 2: you say your own opinion

With the other question in this section, we wanted to find out whether an invitation is generally an honest offer or rather just a politeness phrase in Flanders. 16 out of the 18 informants said that when someone offers something, you can assume that this is a sincere offer.

### 3.4. Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

In this section we asked which ways are used to turn down an offer and which ones to express disagreement in Flanders. We asked the informants what kinds of linguistic means are used to say “no” in their nation. 18 Informants answered this question. In the following table, it is shown how many percent of these 18 ticked a certain expression (the respondents could tick more than one answer):

<i>Q: If people want to turn down an offer or an invitation, what kinds of linguistic means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?</i>	%
A vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” Or “No, I have something else to do.”	83
A concrete brief and true excuse (if there is one)	61
A concrete long and true excuse (if there is one)	50
A concrete brief and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse)	44
A phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again.	39
A direct phrase that means “no, I don’t feel like going there/doing X.”	33
A phrase like “I will have to think about it”, though you won’t surely contact the person again.	22
A concrete long and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse).	17

One of the informants mentioned that it highly depends on how well you know the person whose offer you are turning down. The better you know them, the shorter and more truthful the excuse will be.

The next question was how people express their disagreement with somebody else’s opinion in Flanders. This question was answered by 18 informants. The following table shows how many percent of these 18 informants chose a certain expression (they could tick more than one answer):

<i>Q: If people disagree with somebody else’s opinion, what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?</i>	%
a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...”	94
a phrase like “(No), I disagree.”, “(No), I have a different opinion.”	83
a direct “No”	50
a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but wouldn’t you also think that ...”	44
people just shake their heads	33
people just make a disapproving look	28
people just say nothing at all and remain silent	22

a phrase like "I think you have to think about this again."	17
never the word "No"	0
a phrase like "I think we have to think about this again."	0
people just smile	0

This shows that people in Flanders are quite direct when they give their opinion. It is for example no problem to say "No, I disagree" when your opinion differs from your conversation partner's opinion.

### 3.5. Ending a conversation

In this last section, people were asked how you typically end a conversation in Flanders, as ending a conversation is a potentially embarrassing and face-threatening phase of a conversation. We asked the informants what people in Flanders would say if they want to end a conversation. Again, this was a tick-the-box question (it was possible to tick more than one box). 18 informants answered this question. In the following table is shown how many percent of them chose a certain expression:

<i>Q: What do people say to show that they want to end a conversation?</i>	%
a phrase like "I have to go now, I have something else to do"	83
say what they have to do now (if there really is something)	72
a phrase like "I don't want to bother you any longer"	61
a phrase like "It's already late now"	50
invent a reason	22
a simple "OK, good-bye now"	11
a phrase like "we've already talked for too long"	0
a phrase like "I want to go now"	0

We also asked the informants if the other person then immediately lets them go or first tries to persuade them to stay. 15 informants said that the other person immediately lets you go, 7 said that they will try to persuade you to stay.

### 3.6. Summary

If we summarise all these results for Flanders, we can say that people in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium typically use a direct style. In Gricean terms (1975) the maxims of quality and manner are the most important ones. People do not tend to do much small talk with strangers. An invitation is normally a sincere offer and if you want to end a conversation, it is common to say: "I have to go now, I have something else to do". Some more prudence is called for if you want to reject an invitation, in this case mostly an excuse is expected.

## 4. Results: The Netherlands

### 4.1. Starting a conversation

All Dutch informants gave the pronouns *je* and *jij* (plural: *jullie*) for informal situations and the pronoun *u* for formal situations. None of them mentioned the pronouns *ge* or *gij*, except for one person who mentioned that these are often used in Belgium but not in the Netherlands. A closer look at the distribution of these pronouns is asked for:

1. 11 out of 15 informants said that children would address their parents with an informal pronoun. 3 informants noted that it would depend on the family, one of them mentioned that religion plays a role here. In Protestant families, so the informants, the children use the formal pronoun to address their parents. One informant said that

children would avoid addressing their parents with a pronoun, they would for example say: “Mum, does Mum know where my keys are?”

2. There is no clear agreement among the informants about how children address older relatives. 3 persons noted that children in this situation would use the formal pronoun, 5 said that children would use the informal pronoun and according to 6 informants both are possible. Again one informant wrote that children would rather avoid using pronouns with older relatives, so they do not have to make the choice.
3. All informants agreed that colleagues among each other use the informal pronoun. Such an agreement, however, was not found for how employers and employees address each other, but the majority said that people would use the informal pronoun reciprocally or that it depends on the company people are working for.
4. All informants said that teachers address their pupils with the informal pronoun. How children address their teachers depends mostly on the school they are in.
5. All informants agreed that people use the formal pronoun to address administration officials. A majority of the informants said that the formal pronoun is also used when clerks address a customer in a store and when people address strangers in the street. How customers address a clerk in a store mostly depends on the kind of store.
6. Business partners will most usually address each other with an informal pronoun. But here again, it often depends on the company they are working for.

In sum, we can say that there is more variation allowed in the Netherlands than in Flanders.

The most common telephone openings at home are *Met* + name and first name + last name, for example *Jan Smit*. In business conversations, the name of the company is added: Name + company name and often a greeting phrase as well: *Hallo/goedemorgen/goedemiddag met* + name + (company name).

#### **4.2. Keeping up a conversation**

In this section small talk, also called phatic communion (Malinowski 1923), is in the focus. 11 informants answered the questions in this section. We asked the Dutch informants in what situations small talk is common or even required in their nation. The majority of them answered that it is never really required and that there is usually silence. It is not so common to start small talk at all. The situations in which you can use small talk are, according to the informants, waiting rooms, stores and while queuing. When we asked the informants when it is not common to start small talk, the large majority answered that small talk is not common in elevators and while waiting for the toilet. Two informants said that it is uncommon to start small talk before or after church service.

Common small talk topics are, according to the informants, the weather (9 informants); general complaints (5 informants) and the news (4 informants). One of the informants wrote that the most important convention is that you strike a decidedly negative tone, no matter what the subject is. So it is more usual to complain about something than to be positive. Taboo topics on the other hand are money issues (8 informants), sexuality and religion (both 5 informants) and very personal matters (2 informants). In Ventola's terms (1979) Dutch small talk topics are indirect.

The last question in this section concerned small talk in business conversations. We asked the informants if people are expected to do more, less or as much small talk in a private conversation as in a business conversation. However, there was no agreement among the informants about this. 4 informants said that people do more small talk in a private conversation, 4 said that people would do more small talk in a business conversation and 5 noted that people do as much small talk in a business conversation as in a private

conversation.

### 4.3. Being Nice in a Conversation

Here the informants were asked in which way the Dutch would typically present their opinion on a topic. There was one expression that was clearly ahead of all the others, namely: 1. you say your opinion - 2. you give reasons related to the issue itself. 7 informants out of 11 chose this expression. All other strategies were only ticked once.

With the second question in this section we wanted to find out if an invitation of a Dutchman is typically an honest offer or just a politeness phrase. A large majority (73 %) noted that this would be an honest offer. One of our informants even added: “The person making the invitation would be rather upset if you don’t take [the invitation]. Generally, the Dutch only ACT nice when they MEAN nice”.

### 4.4. Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

In order to get to know how the Dutch handle uncomfortable topics without losing face, the informants were asked how an offer is turned down. The following table shows the linguistic means used in the Netherlands to express “no” and how many informants chose the various possible expressions. A total of nine informants answered this question, with the possibility of ticking more than one answer. The table shows how many percent of the informants chose a certain expression.

<i>Q: If people want to turn down an offer or an invitation, what kinds of linguistic means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?</i>	%
A vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” Or “No, I have something else to do.”	67
A concrete brief and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse)	56
A phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again.	56
A concrete brief and true excuse (if there is one)	44
A direct phrase that means “no, I don’t feel like going there/doing X.”	33
A phrase like “I will have to think about it”, though you won’t surely contact the person again.	33
A concrete long and true excuse (if there is one)	11
A concrete long and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse).	0

One informant added that an indirect phrase meaning “No, I don’t feel like it” is used as well. One could for example say “I’m not sure if I like that” to turn down an offer or invitation.

Another way to find out how the Dutch get around uncomfortable topics, was to let them describe how disagreement is expressed in a polite way in the Netherlands. The following table shows how many percent of the 9 informants who answered this question chose the various possible expressions to express disagreement.

<i>Q: If people disagree with somebody else’s opinion, what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?</i>	%
a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...”	67
a phrase like “(No), I disagree.”, “(No), I have a different opinion.”	67
a direct “No”	44
a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but wouldn’t you also think that ...”	33
people just shake their heads	22
people just say nothing at all and remain silent	22

a phrase like "I think we have to think about this again."	22
people just make a disapproving look	11
a phrase like "I think you have to think about this again."	11
people just smile	11
never the word "No"	0

One informant added that the way of expressing disagreement depends on how well you know the person you are talking with and that it also depends on the subject you are talking about.

The table shows that in the Netherlands disagreement is expressed in a rather direct way and that it is accepted to use the word "no".

#### 4.5. Ending a Conversation

Not to know how to end a conversation properly can be embarrassing for both interlocutors. The informants were asked to describe how the Dutch show that they want to end a conversation. The following table offers an overview with phrases that are most used. It is shown how many percent of the 9 informants who answered this question ticked a certain expression.

<i>Q: What do people say to show that they want to end a conversation?</i>	%
a phrase like "I have to go now, I have something else to do"	78
say what they have to do now (if there really is something)	67
a phrase like "I don't want to bother you any longer"	56
invent a reason	44
a phrase like "It's already late now"	33
a phrase like "We've already talked for too long"	22
a simple "OK, good-bye now"	22
a phrase like "I want to go now"	11

Moreover, we asked the informants whether the Dutch try to persuade the other to stay or if they immediately let go the other. 7 informants said that in the Netherlands you will immediately let go the person that wants to end the conversation, 3 informants answered that the other will try to persuade him/her to stay.

#### 4.6. Summary

Summarising the results for the Netherlands, we can say that the Dutch tend to use a direct style in conversations. Small talk is not considered necessary and it is generally accepted to turn down an offer using the word "no". Expressing disagreement in the Netherlands can be done using the rather direct expression "No, I disagree". An offer or an invitation is considered to be a sincere one and if one of the interlocutors wants to end a conversation, the other immediately lets him/her go. This means that the maxims of quality and manner (Grice 1975) are the most important ones in the Netherlands.

### 5. A Comparison Between Flanders and the Netherlands

#### 5.1. Starting a Conversation

There is a very clear distinction between Flanders and the Netherlands when it comes to the use of pronouns. In Flanders the substandard forms *ge* and *gij* are widely spread next to the standard forms *je*, *jij* (informal) and *u* (formal). According to the standard, the forms *ge* and *gij* are archaic and can only be used in solemn speeches and prayers (Cockx 2000: 141)

whereas they are neutral in Flanders and are often used in every-day live.

Research on this topic has been done by Koen Plevoets, Dirk Speelman and Dirk Geeraerts (2008) and by Reinhild Vandekerckhove (2005). The *Spoken Dutch Corpus* was investigated and the results of this project go even further than our findings. Plevoets/Speelman/Geeraerts (2008: 202) found out

“on the whole that the Netherlands is more uniform than Flanders. Stylistic variation, for instance, is uniform in the Netherlands, whereas it comprises two dimensions in Flanders. The first axis was found to discriminate between colloquial and polite style, whereas the second axis distinguished spontaneous from monitored speech. Furthermore, there is little regional variation in the Netherlands, while the Flemish regions show profound differences. The social stratification in both countries is remarkably similar, however. [...]. In both countries, there is also a clear sex difference, in that women use the familiar forms, while men move between familiar and polite forms.”

According to Vandekerckhove's results, there is no contrast between polite and informal forms in colloquial Belgian Dutch: *ge* and *gij* (*u* in object case) are used in Flanders both as informal and formal pronouns and there is no difference in Belgian Dutch between what Brown and Gilman (1960) called T-pronouns and V-pronouns (Vandekerckhove 2005: 383).

This contradicts our findings as all of our informants mention *u* and not *gij* to be the formal pronoun in Flanders. Also, only 11 out of 29 informants mentioned the substandard forms *ge* and *gij*. However, this contradiction can be explained by something Vandekerckhove (2005: 383-384) mentions: in written language, education and in the media, the northern based standard is still the norm. So in a lot of public domains the forms *je*, *jij* and *u* are still used and very common. The choice of the pronoun in Belgian Dutch depends therefore on the domain and the register of the conversation.

Also the question on telephone openings in this section showed a divergence between Flanders and the Netherlands. When people in Flanders answer the phone, the most common opening phrases are *Hallo* and *Hallo met + name* whereas in the Netherlands people always give a self-identification first, most common is just to say the name or the say *met + name*.

According to Lentz (1997: 94) a century ago the Dutch answerer opened the conversation by saying *Hello*, like in Flanders is still done today. He studied directories, books on etiquette and theatre plays and girls' books to be able to explain this change of pattern in the Netherlands. One of the main arguments for self-identification he found in directories: it saves time and thus also money. In the 1920s the Dutch telephone company introduced a minimal period for interurban connections free of charge: “The company did not charge interurban telephone calls in case of wrong connections, if both participants ended the connection immediately” (Lentz 1997: 103). So it was for the callers more advantageous to know straight away who was on the phone, so they could hang up when there was a wrong connection.

## 5.2. Keeping Up a Conversation

In order to investigate how a conversation is kept up, the informants were asked to describe the behaviour concerning small talk in their nation. Both in Flanders and in the Netherlands, small talk is not considered to be necessary. Many of the informants even suggest that it is rather not done and that quite some people may feel bothered if small talk is started.

Both in Flanders and in the Netherlands the weather and general complaints are the most common small talk topics, whereas money (how much one earns) and sexuality are taboo topics.

### 5.3. Being Nice in a Conversation

With regard to being nice in a conversation, the informants were asked how opinions typically are given in their nation. Both in Flanders and in the Netherlands opinions tend to be given in the following way: you give your opinion and then you give reasons related to the issue itself.

### 5.4. Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

In order to get a view on how to get around uncomfortable topics without losing one's face, we asked the informants to describe how an offer typically is turned down and how disagreement generally is expressed. Both in the Netherlands and in Flanders, a vague excuse like "No, I don't have time" or a concrete, brief and true excuse is accepted to turn down an offer. Expressing disagreement is in both nations generally done by saying "I see what you mean, but...". Using the expression "No, I disagree" is accepted as well both in Flanders and in the Netherlands.

The tables below offer an overview of how many percent of the informants of each group (F stands for Flanders, N for the Netherlands) chose a certain expression to be the most typical one to handle uncomfortable topics. There were 18 informants for Flanders and 9 informants for the Netherlands.

<i>Q: If people want to turn down an offer or an invitation, what kinds of linguistics means are used to say "no" in a polite way in your nation?</i>	<b>F</b> %	<b>N</b> %
A vague excuse like "No, I don't have time." Or "No, I have something else to do."	83	67
A concrete brief and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse)	44	56
A phrase like "(I don't know yet) I'll let you know", though you will surely not contact the person again.	39	56
A concrete brief and true excuse (if there is one)	61	44
A direct phrase that means "no, I don't feel like going there/doing X."	33	33
A phrase like "I will have to think about it", though you won't surely contact the person again.	22	33
A concrete long and true excuse (if there is one)	50	11
A concrete long and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse).	17	0

<i>Q: If people disagree with somebody else's opinion, what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say "no" in a polite way in your nation?</i>	<b>F</b> %	<b>N</b> %
a phrase like "Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ..."	94	67
a phrase like "(No), I disagree.", "(No), I have a different opinion."	83	67
a direct "No"	50	44
a phrase like "Yes, I see what you mean, but wouldn't you also think that ..."	44	33
people just shake their heads	33	22
people just say nothing at all and remain silent	22	22
a phrase like "I think we have to think about this again."	0	22
people just make a disapproving look	28	11
a phrase like "I think you have to think about this again."	17	11
people just smile	0	11
never the word "No"	0	0

### 5.5. Ending a Conversation

In order to complete a conversation successfully, one should know how to end it properly. We asked our informants how a conversation typically is ended and again the results for Flanders

and the Netherlands were very similar. In both cases, the most commonly used expressions are: “I have to go now, I have something else to do” or people say what they have to do.

## 5.6. Summary

The language used in Flanders and in the Netherlands is the same. This, however, does not necessarily have to mean that the conversation strategies used in both nations are the same. We, both being Flemish, expected that some major differences would come to show. This is because, in Flanders, the stereotypical Dutchman is seen as a person who is very direct, who can explain things very well, who might come over as being rude sometimes and who seems to know everything best. From this investigation, however, we have to conclude that Flemish and Dutch people behave in quite the same way concerning strategies used in the contexts we studied.

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