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**TRANSLATION OF LANGUAGE VARIETIES IN THE  
FLEMISH DUBBING OF *HARRY POTTER AND THE  
PRISONER OF AZKABAN***

*Lenka Žárská*

**Abstract**

This article discusses the Flemish dubbing of the 2004 film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* with a focus on the language varieties and accents used in both the English and Flemish versions of the film. It briefly introduces the language environment of Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, and draws a comparison between the accents used in the English version of the film – Received Pronunciation, Estuary English, and regional accents – and in the Flemish dubbing, represented by the standard language, *tussentaal*, and regiolects. Special attention is given to the relationship between the variety of accent of the characters, and their positions in society and personal traits, concluding that while the Flemish dubbing is strongly inspired by the English original, there is also present a considerable influence of the social connotations of the different language varieties.

**Keywords**

Harry Potter, dubbing, language variety, English accents, Flemish, Belgian Dutch

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**1. Introduction**

IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY Flanders, the Flemish Movement came to life and, especially in its first phase, directed its attention to language. For centuries, the dominant language in the area was French, though most of the people of Flanders did not speak it – they spoke dialects of Dutch, or as they preferred to call it, Flemish. The members of the Flemish Movement knew that a new standardized language had to be created to compete with French. But the question was whether to take one of the existing dialects and transform it into a standardized Flemish language, or use the already standardized Dutch of the Netherlands, the northern neighbour of Flanders (Deprez 2012, 414). After a long discussion they decided in favour of the latter; however, this created a rather schizophrenic situation: although Dutch finally

became the official language of Flanders (and one of the three official languages of Belgium), the population actually spoke, and for the most part still speaks, different varieties of this language. This situation is nowadays reflected in media, film, and also dubbing, where one meets with the issue of using the particular varieties in translation. The focus of this article is on how the language varieties are translated in two language versions of the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* – the English original and the Flemish dubbing, especially in regard to the position of the characters in their society and their personal traits. The film was released in 2004 and is based on the children's novel of the same name, the third in the Harry Potter series, written by the contemporary British author J. K. Rowling.

To compare the accents and language varieties spoken in the two versions of the film, it is necessary to begin with a brief introduction of the varieties spoken in Flanders, as well as a description of the accents used in the original film. The next segment then discusses the main characters, and is followed by an analysis of other characters who show interesting language variations in both English and Flemish. First, the focus lies on the differences between the varieties used in the two film versions, and further on the characters using regional varieties or accents in both languages.

## **2. Language situation in Flanders**

There are three official languages in the Kingdom of Belgium: Dutch, French and German. In the five northern provinces of Belgium, which are known as Flanders, the official language is Belgian Dutch (in Dutch *Belgisch-Nederlands*, as opposite to *Nederlands-Nederlands* spoken in the Netherlands), sometimes referred to as Flemish.<sup>1</sup> In the five provinces in the south, known under the name Wallonia, the official language is French, and in a small area on the border with Germany, German is acknowledged as the official language in addition to French. Brussels, the capital, geographically located in Flanders, is an independent region and has two official languages – Dutch and French. This language division is strict, especially when it comes to official communication: in Flanders, communication with the government is only allowed in Dutch, in Wallonia only in French; in Brussels, both languages can be used. This separation has been deemed necessary after years of conflict between speakers of the two languages, with French having a historically stronger position in the area.

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion with Dutch spoken in the Netherlands, throughout this article the term Flemish will be used for Belgian Dutch.

However, as has already been mentioned in the introduction, the language environment in Flanders is more complicated. A number of different varieties of Dutch can be distinguished there: firstly, there is the standard language (*standardtaal*), secondly an in-between variety which is, in literature, most often referred to as *tussentaal* (literary ‘in-between language’), and lastly there are regiolects or dialects.

The standard language or *standardtaal* is the variety which is most similar to that of the Netherlands, but it still differs on a number of linguistic levels: “phonetic, phonological, morphological, lexical, semantic, syntactic, prosodic (especially intonation) and perhaps even in voice quality” (Van Bezooijen 2002, 19, translation mine). While it is used as the written norm, it is rarely spoken in everyday life (Lybaert 2015, 99), and according to Geeraerts the inhabitants of Flanders have a similar relationship to the standard as to “a nice suit worn on Sundays” (2001, 341, translation mine): it is necessary to have one, but nobody feels comfortable using it (*ibid.*). However, it is the variety that is spoken in official communications and also on national news, generally in formal and impersonal situations. In everyday life, the Flemish distance themselves from this variety (Kleknerová 2016, 10), and therefore people who speak *standardtaal* in an environment where it is not necessary can be perceived as arrogant or as trying to keep at a distance from their conversational partners.

Nowadays, the everyday language is mainly represented by the second variety, *tussentaal*. This variety, sometimes also referred to as *Soap Vlaams* (“Soap Flemish”, because of its frequent use in television soap operas) or *Schoon Vlaams* (‘Pure’ or “Beautiful” Flemish), has in the recent decades gained popularity among the inhabitants of Flanders, partly replacing the use of dialects and regiolects. However, for a long time, this variety has not been acknowledged and was often viewed as an inferior manner of speaking, spoken by people who had tried to use *standardtaal* but were not successful in doing so (De Caluwe 2002, 60). This attitude has changed in the last decade, and *tussentaal* is nowadays perceived as “the language which the Flemish ... feel comfortable speaking, (a) language which shows regional differences, but even so can be understood in the whole of Flanders and is meant as a general Flemish language” (Goosens *qtd.* in De Caluwe 2002, 60, translation mine). It is the variety that most Flemish use in communication with their friends or family or in informal communication outside their homes. Linguistically, *tussentaal* stands somewhere between *standardtaal* and regiolects, showing characteristics of both. Although it slightly varies in different regions, it is mostly based on the regiolect of Brabant. It can differ from *standardtaal* in many linguistic categories, such as phonetics, morphology, lexicology, and grammar. *Tussentaal* is also in no way standardized, and in reality exists more as a continuum: that is why some authors make a distinction between “higher” *tussentaal*, with more similarities with the standard,

and “lower” *tussentaal*, in which more regional characteristics are used (Grondelaers and Van Hout 2011, 234).

Nevertheless, in contemporary Flanders, regiolects and dialects still also hold quite a strong position. In literature, these are most often divided into four dialect groups or areas: West Flemish (*West-Vlaams*), East Flemish (*Oost-Vlaams*), Brabantian (*Brabants*) and Limburgish (*Limburgs*). Out of these four, West Flemish is the most homogenous group, and it is the regiolect which is nowadays most often spoken by the young generation (De Caluwe and Van Renterghem 2011, 68). It differs from *standardtaal* in many aspects, most distinctly in terms of phonetics, and is also often ridiculed by the speakers of other varieties in real life as well as in the media. The most dominant regiolect of Flanders is Brabantian, which has also become the basis for *tussentaal*. Brabantian is spoken in the province of Brabant, most notably in Antwerp, the biggest Flemish-speaking city. Both East Flemish and Limburgish hold a weaker position in the area, although it is interesting to note that Limburgish differs from the other regiolects in one important aspect – it has characteristics of a tone language, meaning that the tone in which a word is said can change its meaning.

### **3. Language varieties in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban***

Although language environments in England and Flanders significantly differ, in the context of the film, the used varieties and accents can be seen as highly comparable in terms of the circumstances of their use. It is important to note that while in the Flemish version different language varieties are used, in the English original most of the characters speak Standard English with an accent.<sup>2</sup> However, as accents of English have a prominent social role, for the purposes of this analysis they are perceived as comparable to the Flemish varieties.

The first prominent accent used in the English version of the film is Received Pronunciation (RP). It is the accent with most prestige, not bound to any particular region, but rather a social class. RP serves most often as a model accent for non-native learners of English. However, it is in reality spoken by only a small percentage of the English population (Hughes 2005, 2-3). The accent is sometimes referred to as BBC English or BBC Pronunciation, based on the fact that it is the accent used

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion about the difference between Standard English and other accents and varieties, see *Standard English: The Widening Debate* (1999), edited by Tony Bex and Richard J. Watts.

on national news. This is largely comparable to the position of *standardtaal* in Flanders: it is a prestigious variety, described for instance as “the language of the political, cultural and economically dominant group” (Jaspers 2002, 138; Geeraerts 2000, 95-96 qtd. in De Wachter and Heeren 2010, 148) which is not bound to any geographical area and is used as the model for learners from abroad. Incidentally, it is also nicknamed VRT-taal, (‘VRT language’) because of its connection to the news presenters on the national TV, VRT. The main difference is that *standardtaal* is a standardized language variety, whilst Received Pronunciation is an accent, and “it is widely agreed ... that while all RP speakers also speak Standard English, the reverse is not the case” (Trudgill 1999, 118).

Another accent that is extensively used in the film, especially by under-aged characters, is Estuary English (Lundervold 2013, 60). It is an accent with characteristics of RP as well as of the London dialect Cockney or local dialects spoken in the southeast of England, and is often defined as a “compromise” or a “neutral” variety (Hughes 2005, 5) between the two. In this sense, it can be brought into comparison with the Flemish *tussentaal*, which stands linguistically also in between the prestigious variety and the local ones, and offers the speakers a more natural and balanced way of speaking than either of the two extremes.

The original version of the film also presents a number of local accents: next to Estuary English it is Cockney, West Country, and Northern, Scottish, and Irish English (Lundervold 2013, 55). Contrastingly, the Flemish version only uses two local varieties, West Flemish and Brabantian, as will be explained later in the analysis.

#### 4. Main characters

The three main characters of the film are thirteen-year-old students Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Although the characters develop as the series progresses, their general characteristics continue to correspond to those which were introduced in the first book (and film) of the series.

Hermione Granger is the most intelligent of the three, constantly striving for the best marks, and also repeatedly referred to as “the brightest witch of [her] age” (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 2004, 01:32:08-01:28:12 and 02:04:33-02:04:36). Especially in the earlier stages of the story, she is described as being passionate about following rules. This is also reflected in the way she dresses throughout the films – her robe is always neat and proper, in contrast with those of her friends Harry and Ron, who style their clothes in a more casual manner. In the

English version of the film, Hermione speaks with the accent with most prestige, RP (Lundervold 2013, 72), which is also often regarded as the most correct. In the Flemish dubbing, Hermione speaks *standardtaal*, the variety that has been introduced as socially comparable to RP.

Harry Potter, the hero of the series, is mostly portrayed as brave and big-hearted, characteristics typical for someone belonging to the Gryffindor House at Hogwarts. Throughout the series, he proves himself to be intelligent and resourceful, although not as much as Hermione Granger. Harry is known to break the rules when necessary, but he does not purposely go in search of problems: “I don’t go looking for trouble, ... Trouble usually finds *me*” (Rowling 2004, 60, original italics). He is often dressed more casually than Hermione, but still in accordance with the rules. In the original, Harry Potter’s accent “is placed in the Estuary English accent category, but in reality his accent is somewhere on the continuum between RP and Estuary, that is actually quite near RP” (Lundervold 2013, 85). This is reflected in the Flemish dubbing: although the variety that Harry speaks has characteristics of *tussentaal* (with mostly phonetic elements typical for *tussentaal*, but also one lexical and one morphological element), it is in reality very close to *standardtaal*.<sup>3</sup>

The last of the main characters is Ron Weasley. Ron fulfils the role of a loyal friend to Harry, with whom he shares the majority of his adventures. Ron is remarkably generous, despite his family being poor, but does not obtain good marks at school, suffers from an inferiority complex and has a tendency to come to hasty conclusions. He also does not have a strong regard for rules – throughout the series, he often copies homework from his cleverer friends and is not strictly against cheating if it brings the desired results. When it comes to the way he is dressed in the films, there is an obvious step down from both Hermione and Harry: Ron often prefers being comfortable over following the dress code, and so for instance he does not wear his robe in a number of scenes in which the students are dressed in uniforms. In the English version of the film, Ron Weasley speaks Estuary English which shows fewer characteristics of RP than that of Harry (Lundervold 2013, 76), but this is reflected in the Flemish dubbing only partly: Ron speaks a higher form of *tussentaal*, like Harry, and their varieties are very comparable, with Ron using only slightly more non-standard variants than his friend (Žárská 2018, 52). Nevertheless, the inspiration in the original is evident, not only in the choice of variety, but also considering how many standard or local elements the characters use in their language.

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<sup>3</sup> A detailed analysis of the non-standard varieties used in the Flemish dubbing can be found in the author’s thesis, “Taalvariatie in de Vlaamse Nasynchronisatie van *Harry Potter en de Gevangene van Azkaban*” (2018, Masaryk University).

## 5. Characters with differing varieties

While many of both major and minor characters speak a relatively comparable variety in the two films, there are also those that differ. The three most noticeable differences are in the speech of Draco Malfoy, a fellow student of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Hogwarts professor Minerva McGonagall, and Argus Filch, the caretaker.

Draco Malfoy attends Hogwarts together with the three main characters, but belongs to a different house, one that is often associated with dark magic and evil wizards. He is also an enemy of Harry and shows opposite personality traits to those of the main character – he is arrogant, selfish, and very proud of his pure family background. In the original version of the film, Draco Malfoy speaks with an Estuary English accent, while in the Flemish dubbing he is one of the few underage characters who speak *standardtaal*, the others being Hermione Granger and Percy Weasley, both portrayed as very intelligent and inclined to follow the rules. However, using this variety for Draco Malfoy does not seem to refer to a tendency to respect the rules, but rather to his arrogance and the fact that he is trying to be perceived as better than his peers.

Professor Minerva McGonagall is described as an old woman, strict but fair, loyal to the school and its headmaster. Although she keeps her distance from the students throughout the story, during the time of conflict in the later books and films, she is one of the few people that Harry Potter can fully trust. In the English version of the film, Minerva McGonagall “seems to be speaking with an RP accent with a hint of Scottish” (Lundervold 2013, 78), which has to do with her Scottish background, implicated by her name, and further developed in the later writings of J. K. Rowling. This connection has been omitted in the Flemish version of the film, where Minerva McGonagall speaks *standardtaal*, like all the other professors at Hogwarts. Given her position as a teacher and her being characterized as strict, it would be surprising to find McGonagall speaking any other variety, seeing that as late as 2011 there have been calls for *standardtaal* to be recognized “as the only acceptable variety in schools, both inside and outside the classroom” (Lybaert 2015, 107, translation mine).

The last character whose speech shows considerable differences in the two versions is Argus Filch, “a bad-tempered, failed wizard who waged a constant war against the students” (Rowling 2004, 99). Filch is universally hated, being stern and paranoid, constantly complaining to the headmaster that the punishments which the students receive for breaking the rules are not sufficient and that the school should implement corporal punishment instead. Argus Filch is also a Squib, a person of magical background that cannot perform magic, and Filch struggles with this identity, directing his anger towards the students. As he cannot use magic, he was never



able to finish school, and is therefore uneducated and unrefined. In English he speaks with a Cockney accent, which is a regional accent of London, “typically identified as a working-class accent” (Lundervold 2013, 45). This has again been ignored in the Flemish dubbing, where Argus Filch speaks *standardtaal*. It is highly possible that this variety has been chosen based on the fact that Filch is an adult working at school, which is in accordance with the earlier notion of *standardtaal* as the only accepted variety for this environment.

## **6. Translation of regional varieties**

In total, there are three characters in the film who speak a regional variety in both the English and the Flemish versions. In the English version, the number of characters whose speech shows characteristics of a regional variety is higher than in Flemish, but most of these varieties are translated either into *tussentaal* or even *standardtaal* (as for Argus Filch or Minerva McGonagall, discussed in the previous paragraphs). When it comes to using a Flemish regional variety as an equivalent to an English one, the characters that are of interest are Rubeus Hagrid, gamekeeper of Hogwarts, Madame Rosmerta, owner of a pub in the magical village of Hogsmeade, and Stan Shunpike, conductor of the magical Knight Bus. Nevertheless, it is necessary to indicate that while these speakers are perceived as being speakers of regional variety in the Flemish dubbing, their language is in reality on a continuum between being a ‘lower’ *tussentaal* showing regional characteristics and a regiolect.

Rubeus Hagrid is a half-giant, twice the size of an average person. He is the gamekeeper of Hogwarts, and starting with *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* also the professor of Care of Magical Creatures. Despite being much older, Hagrid is a friend of Harry Potter, and is characterized as being kind-hearted and loyal, though not very cultured. To the characters of the story, it is a known fact that Hagrid has never finished his education – he was expelled from Hogwarts following an accusation of murder, of which he is later cleared. In the books as well as in the films, Rubeus Hagrid speaks with a West Country accent, which has been confirmed in an interview with Rowling in 2001 (Santika 2016, 33). West Country English is a variety spoken in a primarily agricultural area and points to the lower social standing of the speaker (*ibid.*, 33), but, based on Rowling’s interview, also serves to present Hagrid as “simple and humble” (*ibid.*, 34). The dialect can also suggest the lower level of education of the speaker which is, in the story, supported by the fact that Hagrid cannot spell correctly. In the Flemish dubbing, Rubeus Hagrid uses the West Flemish regiolect (Žárská 2018, 44). Not only are both varieties

spoken in the western part of the country, they also show other similarities: West Flanders is the most agricultural area of Flanders, and on TV and in other media, as well as in real life, speakers of the West Flemish dialect are often ridiculed for being of less than average intelligence (for example in a popular TV sketch from *In De Gloria* series ridiculing the West-Flemish archetype Gerrit Callewaert, who in his dialect complains that West-Flemish speakers on TV are subtitled in standard Dutch, while, ironically, Dutch subtitles run under the recorded image) and have the reputation of being simple farmers. There is therefore a certain parallel between the two dialects: both stereotypically represent people of a lower social class and education, and are connected to mainly agricultural areas.

Not much is known as to the background of Madame Rosmerta; she is an attractive woman who works in her pub called The Three Broomsticks and is friends with the Hogwarts professors, as well as the Minister of Magic. She does not have a significant role in the books nor in the film, but is generally portrayed as a positive character. Rosmerta is the only woman in the series who speaks with a Cockney accent (compared to eight men), and the only woman in the Flemish dubbing who does not speak *standardtaal*. In contrast to Rubeus Hagrid or Stan Shunpike (to be discussed later), her speech is not marked in the books. In the Flemish dubbing, the character uses features of the Brabantian accent, particularly with elements used in the area of the city of Antwerp, the capital of the Brabant region (Žárská 2018, 47). Because not much is known about her character, it is assumed that the choice of her language variety has mainly been influenced by the English original. As an alternative to Cockney, the London accent, the accent of the biggest Flemish city has been chosen. However, in contrast with Cockney, which has rather negative connotations and is seen as one of the less prestigious accents, being often connected with the lower class and identified as unsophisticated (Lundervold 2013, 88), the Brabantian accent has the position of a central accent. It is often used on TV because it is believed that Brabantian is generally understandable to all speakers of Flemish and is the most “neutral” of the regional varieties (Van Hoof 2013, 239). The English and the Flemish variety therefore correspond only on the basis of them being geographically connected to the capital and the biggest city, but their connotations in regard to the social context are rather different and therefore not reflected in the translation.

Stan Shunpike is the last character in the film whose speech shows regional characteristics in both the English and the Flemish versions. He is a conductor of the Knight Bus, “emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard” (Rowling 2004, 30). Stan, like Rosmerta, is a minor character, and only appears in one scene of the film. In the book, Harry describes him to be “only a few years older than he was; eighteen or nineteen at most, with large, protruding ears and a fair few pimples” (ibid., 31). Stan also does not look particularly well-groomed in the film: he

has crooked teeth, pimples, and his uniform is sloppy and wrinkled. He gives a rather uncultured impression and does not come across as highly intelligent, though he is curious. Stan Shunpike speaks with a Cockney accent in the original film (Lundervold 2013, 74) as well as in the book – apart from Rubeus Hagrid, he is the only character in the book whose speech is marked. Interestingly enough, in the Flemish version of the film, Stan does not use the same language variety as Madame Rosmerta – who in the original speaks with the same accent – but talks with a hint of the West Flemish accent instead, or rather *tussentaal* with local West Flemish elements (Žárská 2018, 49). This is possibly connected to his personality and appearance: being uncultured and not taking care of oneself is stereotypically connected rather to West Flanders than Brabant or Antwerp, which are seen as the cultural and economic centres of Flanders. As has been mentioned earlier, while Cockney carries the connotation of an accent typifying a person of lower class or education, Brabantian does not, and it is therefore possible that it has purposely been avoided for a character who shows these particular features.

## **7. Conclusion**

Throughout this article, it has been demonstrated that the Flemish version of the film has been made with close attention to the language variety which the particular characters speak. A strong influence of the original film is evident. In most cases, the characters in the dubbing speak a variety or accent which suggests a similar position in society or reflects the same personal traits as the original variety.

During the analysis of the three protagonists of the film, it has been determined that not only the accent or the variety, but also the extent to which the speech of the characters comes near to either the prestigious accent (RP or *standardtaal*) or the more neutral variety (Estuary English or *tussentaal*) is inspired by the original, as well as being based on the particular personal traits of the characters.

For the three characters whose speech differs in the two versions, it has been suggested that it has been their position in society as well as their personal characteristics which have had an influence on their speech: in the Flemish context, it would be inappropriate for the two adults who work at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to use a regional variety, and that is why they both speak *standardtaal*. Also Draco Malfoy, a proud and arrogant student of the school, speaks *standardtaal* rather than a variety more comparable to the original Estuary English (that being *tussentaal*), because it corresponds better to his personality.

Lastly, an analysis has been offered of three characters who speak a regional variety in both versions of the film, and a number of suggestions have been made as to why these particular varieties have been used in the translation. It has been

noted that a similarity of the two varieties in terms of social connotations has had an influence on their use, as well as characteristics of the area where the variety is spoken: West Country, an agricultural dialect connected to lower social class and low education, has been translated into West Flemish, a dialect of the most agricultural area of Flanders, whose speakers are often viewed as uneducated and unintellectual. Cockney, the accent of the capital and the biggest city of England, has then been replaced by the regiolect of Antwerp, the largest Flemish-speaking city and cultural and economic centre of the region. However, one case has been introduced in which the similarity of the area where the variety is spoken has been put aside, and a variety was selected whose social indications and stereotypes better fit both the character and the social connotations of the original variety.

It can therefore be concluded that while the inspiration of the original has been substantial, in the context of Flemish dubbing the position in society and the personal characteristics of the characters also play a significant role in the translation of language varieties.

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