

Linguistic Proximity and Global Flows of Television: A Study With Gatekeepers

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This article starts from two principal observations. First, television flow studies have abundantly demonstrated that language is an important factor in the global circulation of television programs. Second, scholarly work on the global television industry has shown that the television executives who trade in television programs function as highly important gatekeepers within global television flows. When combining these two observations, the question arises about which ways language is a significant criterion in television buyers' purchasing decisions. In-depth interviews with five prominent heads of acquisitions with major broadcasting networks in the Dutch-speaking region in Europe reveal that gatekeepers' perceptions of audiences' linguistic preferences largely explain why they prefer programs in English and Dutch. In addition, the interviews reveal that a number of vicious circles reinforce the global dominance of English-language content.

Keywords: television, globalization, linguistic proximity, English, gatekeepers

Few scholars will disagree that language plays a key role in international flows of television programs. Empirical studies on the global circulation of television from the 1970s on (e.g., Amezaga Albizu, 2007; Antola & Rogers, 1984; Biltreyst, 1992; De Bens & de Smaele, 2001; Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974; Varis, 1974, 1984) have pointed to two major linguistic trends. First, television stations tend to prefer programs imported from countries with a similar cultural-linguistic makeup. The circulation of Argentinean, Mexican, and other Spanish-language telenovelas is a case in point: Although they are exported across the globe, their circulation is strongest within the Spanish-speaking world. A second trend demonstrated by these flow studies is the global dominance of English-language television programs. Across the world, American, and to a lesser degree British, Australian, and Canadian Anglophone, television products complement broadcasting in the local, national, or regional language. Indeed, global

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Date submitted: 2016–07–29

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flows of television cannot be understood without looking at the role of language. In Waisbord's (2004) words, "Languages delineate cultural boundaries that articulate flows of television programming" (p. 372).

Language in Global Television Flows: Current Theories and Research

From a theoretical and empirical point of view, these trends have been dealt with most extensively by cultural proximity theory (Iwabuchi, 2002; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005; Straubhaar, 1991, 2002, 2003, 2007). This theory was originally developed to understand the strength of regional flows in media. It explains that audiences tend to prefer culturally "proximate" media products: products that are similar to their own local or national culture. Within these dynamics, language plays a central role, as Straubhaar (2007) points out, "The clearest line of demarcation in cultural proximity is language" (p. 26). Together with cultural, historical, ethnic, religious, sartorial, and other similarities, the use of a common language explains why Brazilian programs do well in Portugal and Mozambique, why Mexican television sells well in other Latin American countries and Spain, and why Hong Kong media do well in (some parts of) China. These dynamics gave rise to so-called *geolinguistic regions* (Sinclair, 1999, 2003; Sinclair, Jacka, & Cunningham, 1996): "regional space[s] defined by not just geographical but cultural and linguistic proximity" (Sinclair, 1999, p. 221). Quantitative audience research has confirmed that linguistic proximity is a highly powerful component of cultural proximity (Ksiazek & Webster, 2008).

Cultural discount theory (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 1997; Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; McFadyen, Hoskins, & Finn, 2000) points to similar dynamics. It proposes that media products that are culturally very different from a target audience's background suffer from a *cultural discount*: The audience will be less likely to use these media products; hence, their value on the global television market is lower. Building on the work by Hoskins and his colleagues, Collins (1989, 1994) focuses specifically on the role of language in cultural discount. He points out that the extent to which an audience is familiar with a media product's language indeed plays an important role in how likely viewers are to use it.

In essence, cultural proximity theory and cultural discount theory put forward the same idea: Audiences tend to prefer media products that are similar to their own cultural background (cultural proximity theory) or dislike those that are not (cultural discount theory). Yet, these theories also have quite dissimilar paradigmatic roots and aim to explain different phenomena. Cultural proximity theory developed in an attempt to explain the power of regional flows, which seem to challenge the dominance of American/Western flows. It does so by stressing the agency of local audiences, who do not just passively consume whatever American/Western products are forced on them (cf. cultural imperialism theory), but rather actively look for products that match their cultural background, interests, and identities. Cultural discount theory, on the other hand, which developed from economic analyses rather than audience studies, attempts to explain the dominance of American products in global media flows. This dominance, Hoskins and his colleagues (Hoskins et al., 1997; Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; McFadyen et al., 2000) propose, is not due to the ideological power and hegemony of the United States (cf. cultural imperialism theory), but rather should be understood from the low cultural discount American products enjoy on the global market. The United States is a very diversified market and produces more culturally "neutral" media products, which therefore also happen to appeal to audiences abroad. In addition, the fact that American producers can make considerable profit in their (large) home market enables them to sell their products

abroad under the local market value. As such, cultural discount theory has been read as an economically liberalist attempt to defend and rationalize the so-called “dumping” of U.S. media products abroad. More generally, cultural discount theory radically dismisses analyses made by early cultural and linguistic imperialism theorists, who focus on the role that flows of American/Western/Anglophone media products play in the relationships of structural domination that enable the center to culturally, ideologically, and economically dominate the periphery (e.g., Galtung, 1971; Lee, 1979; Mattelart, 1979; Phillipson, 1992; Schiller, 1969, 1976). Cultural proximity theory takes a less radical and less liberalist stance than cultural discount theory in stressing that, although it is important to take the agency of the audience into account, the significance of structural power should not be ignored (e.g., Straubhaar, 2007).

Regardless of their ideological differences, both theories strongly contribute to our understanding of the role of language in global flows of television. Audiences’ preferences for culturally and linguistically familiar media products help explain both the strength of flows between countries/regions that share a common language (e.g., Brazil/Portugal, Germany/Austria) and the global dominance of English-language productions. More specifically, Collins (1989) describes a kind of two-tiered linguistic proximity in which products in the local/national/regional language are favored over English products, which are in turn preferred over products in other foreign languages—or “have the next lowest cultural discount” (pp. 354–355)—because of the strong position English enjoys globally as a second and foreign language. He therefore concludes that “language has been, and will continue to be, an important factor favouring Anglophone producers of tradable information in international markets” (p. 355).

This two-tiered cultural-linguistic proximity helps explain Straubhaar’s (2007) finding that Europe has, in contrast to Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, not experienced a strong regionalization of television flows and continues to import large quantities of Anglophone products. As Straubhaar points out, the European television market is linguistically and culturally less coherent (Schlesinger, 1993), and most European countries can therefore not rely on regional imports. American television programs are a popular alternative to the more expensive home-produced programs (De Bens & de Smaele, 2001), especially outside of prime time.

These theories also leave at least one important area of inquiry open. Whereas cultural proximity theory relies mostly on audience studies, and cultural discount theory developed out of macroeconomic analyses of the global television market, the role of intermediaries, or “boundary spanners” (Bielby, 2011; Hirsch, 1972), remains underresearched when it comes to the role of language in international television flows. Yet, research has shown that an understanding of the practices of individual buyers and distributors of television programming is essential if one wants to comprehend global flows of television, and is needed to complement theory and research on more abstract conceptions such as the audience or the market (e.g., Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Cantor & Cantor, 1986; Havens, 2003, 2006; Kuipers, 2011; Moran, 2009; Moran & Keane, 2006). Indeed, classic flow studies tempt us to think in terms of countries importing and exporting television programs, but the actual decisions are made by the television executives who visit the television conventions, fairs, and festivals, and who operate within the boundaries set by the business culture and the instructions and budgets provided by their broadcasting networks. As Kuipers (2011) points out, “Buyers are the gatekeepers of national television, making all crucial decisions and conducting all negotiations about television imports” (p. 549).

Field research has pointed out how the specific business culture in which these television executives operate has a strong, “relatively autonomous, overdetermining influence” (Havens, 2006, p. 6) on television flows. Bielby and Harrington (2008) likewise point out that, “while it may seem that international program flows are built upon simple business arrangements, their success is, in fact, sustained by a complex web of culturally bound business practices” (p. 16). There are, for instance, different classes of companies that enjoy different levels of prestige, which also reflect wider imbalances in economic power (Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Havens, 2006; Kuipers, 2011). There are the informal rules, customs, and rituals of how different parties approach and negotiate with each other. There are the business strategies used by distributors to increase revenue, such as package deals, selling formats rather than canned products, and the like. And, very important in the context of this study, are the methods buyers use for evaluating which programs are likely to be successful in their home market, and which are not.

As Bielby and Harrington (2008) point out, buyers work with a great deal of insecurity. Even domestic television production is characterized by uncertainty about the potential success of programs, and this insecurity is more intense in the global arena. Their study reveals that, in addition to more tangible resources (e.g., audience ratings in other countries), the aesthetics and perceived quality of programs play an important role. Here, buyers rely on their own expertise and experience in the international television market but also to a significant extent on their own cultural interpretations and emotions. As Bielby and Harrington found, “participants in the culture world of television freely engage their own and one another’s affective resonance with a series as they vouch for its potential to entertain” (p. 141). As such, buyers fulfill the role of “surrogate” consumers (Bielby, 2011; Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Havens, 2006) as proxies to audiences’ tastes and behaviors.

So, as product appraisers “trading in the exchange of cultural products whose value goes beyond the mere economic to users” (Bielby, 2011, p. 529), buyers (need to) engage in a balancing act between “concrete,” “rational” criteria—“empirical evidence”—and “cultural,” “aesthetic” (p. 536) considerations, such as judgments of emotional appeal, originality, and entertainment values, in their search for suitable content that is “culturally resonant entertainment” and that “comport[s] with local audience tastes, regulations, and standards” (p. 529).

Although the significant role of television buyers has been clearly established, one aspect that has not been studied extensively is how the language of television programs figures in this complex web of considerations and loyalties and bears on buyers’ decisions and negotiations in the international television market. If, as flow studies and studies on cultural proximity and geolinguistic regions have pointed out, language is a highly significant factor in global television flows, and, at the same time, television professionals have a strong hand in which programs are imported and exported, language must play a role in their purchasing decisions.

In addition, it would be relevant to ascertain how, in the broader “discursive circuit” (Bielby, 2011, p. 527) surrounding distribution, the professionals’ discourse interacts with the policy level and to inquire into the impact of European television trade quota. The European Union’s “Television Without Frontiers” directive requires broadcasters to “reserve for European works a majority proportion of their transmission time, excluding the time allotted to news, sports events, games, advertising, teletext

services and teleshopping” (Art. VI-16-1; see European Union, 2010). Although media policies are not the central point of interest of this study, it is a fact that gatekeepers have to function within the boundaries set by them. Especially as one of the aims of the directive was to reinforce cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe (see Kaplan, 1994), the role of the quota appears to be a pertinent factor.

Finally, it is important to discuss our approach to language in this study. Although language is a point of inquiry in many of the flow studies and cultural proximity/discount theory scholarship mentioned, the engagement with language in these studies is relatively limited, as they consider language primarily as the form or package of a media product, not as part of the content. Whereas studies in international communication frequently consider language as “transparent,” as “a neutral tool of communication” (Mowlana, 1996, p. 109), sociolinguists and critical language scholars have long been pointing out that language is deeply cultural and ideological (Fairclough, 1989; Pennycook, 1994). Especially worth mentioning is the work of Pennycook (1994, 2007, 2010), who integrates a focus on aspects of agency with a regard for structure, thus moving beyond the classic binary of more Marxist versus more liberalist/functionalist approaches (see Kuppens, 2013, for a more thorough discussion).

Method

Materials

The current study attempts to fill this gap by means of in-depth interviews with five highly prominent gatekeepers in the television market in the Netherlands and Flanders (the Dutch-speaking community of the federalized state of Belgium). More specifically, it concerns the heads of acquisitions of both the Dutch and Flemish public broadcasters (NPO and VRT), as well as the two major commercial networks in the Netherlands (RTL and SBS Broadcasting) and one of the two major commercial networks in Flanders (Medialaan; SBS Belgium responded negatively to our interview request). Table 1 provides details of the television professionals we interviewed.

Table 1. Overview of Respondents.

Name	Function	Network	Type	Stations
Hilde Debackere	Head of media acquisitions	VRT	Flemish public	één, canvas, Ketnet, Op12
Rozan Hamaker	Head of acquisitions	SBS	Dutch commercial	SBS6, Net5, Veronica
Mignon Huisman	Head of acquisitions	NPO	Dutch public	AVRO, BNN, EO, KRO, MAX, NCRV, PowNed, TROS, VARA, VPRO, WNL
Luc Janssens	Head of acquisitions	Medialaan	Flemish commercial	VTM, 2BE, Vitaya, JimTV, KZoom
Gijs Tulleken	Head of acquisitions series and films	RTL	Dutch commercial	RTL4, RTL5, RTL7, RTL8, RTL Lounge, RTL Crime, RTL Telekids

All five respondents are key gatekeepers in the television market in the Dutch-speaking region of Europe. As heads of acquisitions, they personally conduct negotiations about the import of foreign television programs, and visit the international television trade events, which are highly important occasions in the global television market (Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Havens, 2003, 2006; Kuipers, 2011; Moran, 2009; Moran & Keane, 2006).

All interviews were conducted at the offices of the interviewees, except for the interview with Hilde Debackere, which was carried out by telephone. Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. The semistructured interviews were based on a list of 55 questions that was structured thematically. However, this list was used flexibly: Phrasing was adapted to the language use of the respondent, the order of the questions was changed when this contributed to the natural flow of the conversation, and additional questions (aiming for clarification, perspective-widening, rerouting, etc.) were used extensively. The interviews typically started with introductory and ground-mapping questions (e.g., description of job profile, factors informing decision to buy a program), next moved on to more specific questions about several aspects of the role of language (questions about the extent to which language plays a role, respondents' conceptions of viewers' preferences as far as language is concerned, language as a factor in their department's [un]written policies, etc.), and ended with closing questions (e.g., whether they would like to add anything to the interview).

The interviews were transcribed and coded using rather general thematic labels as a means to find returning ideas, practices, and perceptions, which were created during the coding process (in vivo). The coding process served to organize and structure the material; it was complemented by a more holistic approach, which regarded each interview as a contextual whole rather than the sum of unconnected chunks. All interviews were conducted in Dutch; we translated the excerpts included in the Results section.

Context

The Dutch and Flemish television markets constitute an interesting case study for several reasons. First, with both markets being relatively small, they rely to a considerable degree on imports from abroad. Second, although the large majority of foreign imports are in English, other languages (French and German, most notably) are also present in broadcasting schedules in both markets. According to empirical data for 2009–2013 obtained from the European Audiovisual Observatory (Kevin & Ene, 2015), Flemish and Dutch national channels broadcast about two thirds “non-European” (fiction) content, slightly above the pan-European average of 62%. Although there is no further breakdown as to the exact origin of non-European works, it is indicated that the category primarily refers to Anglophone content (see also Lange, 2014). Interestingly, the balance of European and non-European content differs meaningfully between public and private channels. More specifically, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, fiction programming on the private channels in the Netherlands (86.4%) and Flanders (77.2%) is overwhelmingly non-European, whereas on the public channels only one fifth (the Netherlands) to one third (Flanders) of fiction programming originates outside Europe.

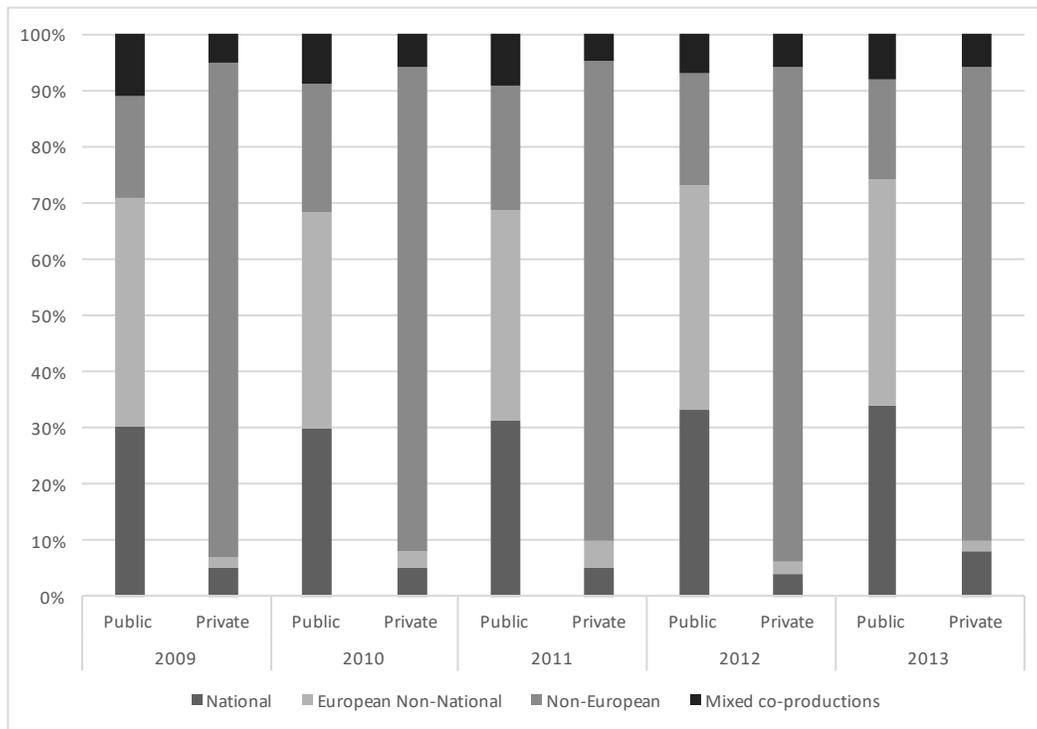


Figure 1. Origin of programming, public versus private Dutch channels 2009–2013. From *European Fiction Works on TV Channels* (p. 23), by D. Kevin and L. Ene, 2015, Strasbourg, Germany: European Audiovisual Observatory. Copyright 2015 by European Audiovisual Observatory.

Third, in both the Flemish and the Dutch market, television programs are subtitled, which theoretically makes language a (potentially) more important factor than in countries where foreign-language content is dubbed. Finally, both markets show a significant degree of resemblance (e.g., the languages present in their schedules) but also exhibit interesting differences (e.g., linguistic tensions in Belgium).¹

¹ The relationship between Belgium's two main language groups—speakers of Dutch and those of French—has historically been a difficult one. The presence of French in certain public arenas (e.g., universities) in the Dutch-speaking region in particular has often been a sensitive issue.

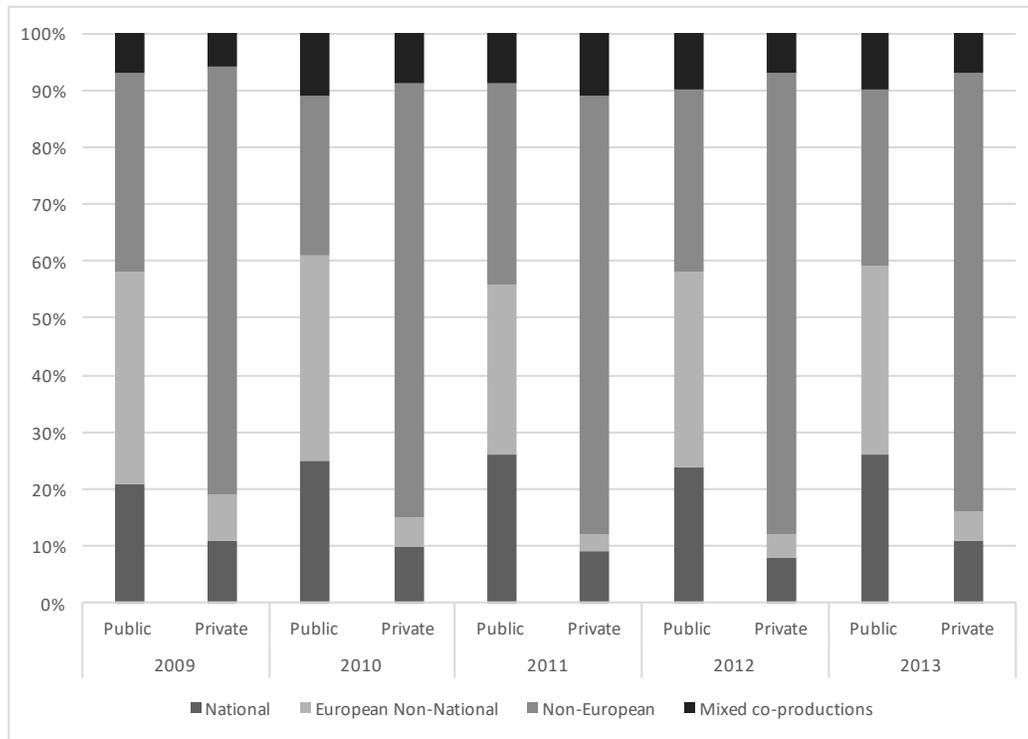


Figure 2. Origin of programming, public versus private Flemish channels 2009–2013. From *European Fiction Works on TV Channels* (p. 27), by D. Kevin and L. Ene, 2015, Strasbourg, Germany: European Audiovisual Observatory. Copyright 2015 by European Audiovisual Observatory.

Before turning to the results of our study, it is useful to elaborate a bit more on the linguistic context. The Netherlands is an officially monolingual country,² whereas Belgium has three official languages (Dutch, French, and German). Although English is not an official language in Flanders or the Netherlands, it holds a strong position in both regions. In the Netherlands, it is the most widely taught foreign language in the educational system (before German), and in Flanders, it is the second most taught language (after French but before German). The Flemish and Dutch rate highly in English proficiency, especially the younger generations. A study conducted with students in secondary schools in 16 EU countries, for instance, found that Dutch and Flemish students in secondary education are among the most proficient when it comes to reading, writing, and listening in English. In both regions, English is the foreign/second language in which they are most proficient, despite the fact that in Flanders, French takes up many more hours in primary and secondary education (European Commission, 2012b).

² In addition, Frisian is recognized as an official regional language in the Friesland region.

The latter finding has been related to the pervasiveness of English in popular media, not in the least on (subtitled) television (Edwards, 2014; Kuppens, 2010). Both in the Netherlands and Flanders, the dubbing of fiction programs is highly uncommon, as it is too expensive for a small language region (Kilborn, 1993) and is not accepted by these audiences (Mera, 1999).

In other popular media as well, English is the most dominant foreign language in the Netherlands and Flanders. A recent study by Edwards (2014), for instance, shows that 75% of the songs in the Dutch music charts have an English song title. Edwards also mentions computers, the Internet, and print media as important sources of contact with English.

The predominance of English is a relatively new phenomenon, which went hand in hand with the decline of German after the Second World War (Clyne, 1995; Ridder, 1995). Hence, younger generations rate their English proficiency more favorably than do older generations (European Commission, 2012a).

Results

In general terms, the interviews confirm the findings from previous studies on television acquisition: Television buyers use a number of criteria to decide which products they purchase, including quality of the program, price, country of origin, long-term contracts and relationships with distributors, package deals, profile of the target audience, needs within the broadcasting schedule, and so forth. In addition, from the interviews, it became clear that the language of a program is also an essential criterion. In the current analysis, we focus specifically on the role of language and how it interacts with other criteria (price, target audience, quality, etc.).

Language and Television Programs: General Findings

The heads of acquisitions we interviewed confirmed that the language of a program is a very important factor in their purchasing decisions. All five have a strong preference for Dutch- or English-language programs; buying programs in other languages is not unthinkable for most, but much less likely. For both Dutch and Flemish gatekeepers, French and German are the main other foreign languages besides English that can be broadcast on the television stations they work for. As Rozan Hamaker of the Dutch commercial broadcaster SBS Broadcasting pointed out,

Hamaker: Dutch, English, and Flemish,³ and that's it. . . . Well, there are exceptions to this rule, like German or French, but . . . then we are really talking about exceptions. . . . We will never buy a Norwegian program, for instance, *never*. Except when it is an interview with Anders Breivik, for example. But otherwise, we'd never buy a Norwegian program.

Interviewer: Not even when it is of very high quality?

Hamaker: No, never.

³ "Flemish" is not a separate language from Dutch; rather, the term refers to Dutch as it is spoken in Flanders, which differs from Dutch as it is spoken in the Netherlands mainly in pronunciation.

Interviewer: Would you buy *The Killing*?

Hamaker: It's Danish, so we will not buy it.

That being said, the interviews also make clear that preferences for specific foreign languages are not stable. Heads of acquisitions of both public and commercial broadcasters pointed out, for instance, that German programs are less likely to be broadcast today than a decade ago. The reason is that German programs generally reach smaller and older audiences. For commercial broadcasters, these older viewers are not very valuable, as they are not the target audience of advertisers. Interestingly, the representatives of the Dutch and Flemish public broadcasters also described their declining interest in German programs by referring to the age of their viewers.

Whereas broadcasting German-language programs is becoming increasingly less evident, programs in Scandinavian languages are ascendant. Although Rozan Hamaker is not considering Scandinavian acquisitions (yet), several other respondents pointed out that the advent of high-quality Scandinavian television series over the past years (e.g., *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, *Borgen*), a phenomenon also referred to as the "Nordic noir wave" (Bondebjerg, 2016), has made the shows more acceptable for broadcasters. Luc Janssens of the Flemish commercial broadcaster Medialaan, for instance, pointed out,

As soon as [a program] is not in English or Dutch, we'll immediately say, "Ow ow ow ow ow, let's not spend too much attention on that." So, English and Dutch are always on our top shelf. . . . But I must say, on [our smaller stations] JIMtv and Vitaya, we can afford to give things a try which do not necessarily fit within that classic pattern. . . . The other day, we had a discussion about a Scandinavian series, and we said, "Maybe we should give it a try for once." Eventually, we didn't, but maybe in the future, we will.

Public broadcasters appear to be more open to Scandinavian series, but here as well, they will generally be broadcast on the smaller niche channels.⁴ Hilde Debackere of the Flemish public broadcaster VRT, for instance, discussed the considerations that lead the network to program Scandinavian series on niche channel Canvas rather than on general channel één:

This was one of the reservations we had, like, "Mmm, Swedish on één, that might be a bit too difficult." Of course, we see that Scandinavian series increasingly find their way on the international market: *The Killing* and *Borgen* and even *Solsidan*. But here as well, *because* they are in a different language, they are being programmed on Canvas. [Language] isn't the only reason, but it definitely plays a role. I think—this is just my

⁴ This is also corroborated by a study (Favere, 2016) tracking the origin of crime series on the main Flemish public and commercial television stations between 2009 and 2015. It found an overall predominance of nonnational, primarily Anglophone content (61% or about two thirds), supplemented by Dutch-language content on the general channels and Danish (19%) and Swedish (14%) works on the public broadcaster's niche channel.

personal opinion—if *Borgen* would be in Dutch, if it would be a series from the Netherlands, I think we would put it on één.

The finding that Scandinavian series are becoming more acceptable and German series are on the decline is surprising, given that German is a language that viewers in Flanders and the Netherlands are more familiar with than Scandinavian languages. At first glance, this seems to indicate that in the end, the language of a program is not that significant after all—that its quality prevails. However, as we discuss later, it is exactly the perceived relationship between the language and the quality of a program that has made Scandinavian television programs more acceptable.

For now, we focus on two conclusions. First, as we already pointed out, the increasing openness to Scandinavian series demonstrates how gatekeepers' preferences for specific foreign languages and not others are not static. Second, the references to the aging viewership of German series, and to the idea that programs in Scandinavian languages belong on niche channels, point out what is actually the central point of focus in considerations about the role of language in television acquisitions: the audience. This relationship is discussed more thoroughly next.

Television Acquisitions, Language, and the Audience

All respondents pointed out that programs in languages other than English or Dutch are not purchased very eagerly simply because they attract smaller (or commercially less desirable) audiences. Although they do not rely on formally gathered empirical data on the relationship between language and audience size, their experience tells them that this relationship is very strong. In the words of Luc Janssens,

What does the past tell us—how does the Flemish viewer respond to a series which is not in Dutch or in English? Well, the results are simply what they are: *They just don't want it*. So, even the best series or movies, if they're not in English or Dutch, they will always have a more restricted potential.

Rozan Hamaker also referred to audience ratings as a central point of consideration for not or rarely buying non-Dutch- or non-English-language programs:

We're a commercial company, and we have to make money. We don't cater to a small, specific target audience; we go for the masses, and the masses . . . even *Kommissar Rex*, which is a German police series, did not perform very well.

Gijs Tulleken of the Dutch commercial broadcaster RTL used a similar rhetoric, suggesting that heads of acquisitions with public broadcasters might be more open to, for instance, French series because they attach less value to audience ratings. However, as we discussed earlier, heads of acquisitions of public broadcasters too cite low audience ratings as a reason for their reservations against non-Dutch- or non-English-language programs. At the same time, Mignon Huisman of the Dutch public broadcaster explains that NPO aims to "show a very nice, varied range of movies, in terms of language as well as culture," although

this is less the case for series, she pointed out. Hilde Debackere, on the other hand, explicitly claimed that the Flemish public broadcaster does not have such aspirations, and also stressed that any other ideological considerations, such as the linguistic tensions in Belgium, do not have an impact on acquisitions. As such, the overall conclusion is that, for both Flemish and Dutch and commercial and public broadcasters, (potential) audience ratings are the key link between language and television acquisitions.

A next question, then, is why audiences dislike television programs in certain languages. As subtitles provide viewers with translations, comprehensibility can play a partial role at most. Although only an empirical study with audiences can provide conclusive answers to this question, it is, nevertheless, interesting to look into the opinions of gatekeepers. For, as explained in the theoretical framework, with buyers functioning as surrogate audiences, the line between the audience and the gatekeeper is not as clear-cut as it is often thought to be.

Several of the buyers we interviewed explained audiences' preferences for Dutch- and English-language programs in terms of the effort it takes to watch a program in another language. Unfamiliar languages are described as "a threshold," "an impediment," and "tiring." The need to read subtitles in particular was often cited as a burden for viewers. Because of their familiarity with English, some respondents pointed out, Dutch and Flemish viewers do not need to read subtitles of English-language programs very closely. Luc Janssens referred to audiences' inclination to choose "the path of least resistance":

When opting for a program in a different language, you run the risk that viewers will choose the path of least resistance, and start flipping channels, and end up with a competing channel which perhaps offers a lower-quality series, but they end up there and stay. And meanwhile, you have *Borgen* or *The Killing* on a different channel, and it scores a fraction in audience ratings. . . . Some people, they hear something in a foreign language, do not understand it, are too lazy to read subtitles, and off they are.

In addition, the respondents explained that Dutch and Flemish viewers' familiarity with English enables them to understand certain types of verbal humor that cannot be translated in subtitles.

At the same time, according to our respondents, viewers' preference for Dutch and English programs cannot be reduced to mere practical motivations. Foreign languages also carry specific cultural connotations, which also have an impact on viewing behavior. Mignon Huisman, for instance, pointed out that American English is associated with a certain "cool" with young audiences. According to Gijs Tulleken, as far as movies are concerned, Spanish activates connotations such as "arty," "less commercial," and "art house." Highly relevant is also the link between language and connotations related to "quality." Although all respondents claimed that they themselves do not rely on language to assess the quality of a program, several of them are convinced that viewers do. Gijs Tulleken, for instance, remarked, "I think that, when you broadcast a program in which Armenian is used, people will automatically expect that the quality will be lower." Evidently, these connotations are not static but subject to change. Hilde Debackere pointed out that,

Because of the hype which has been created around the Scandinavian series, people will also think, “Oh it’s in Danish or in Swedish, that will be interesting, that will be a good series.” While by now, there’s just as much garbage among [the Scandinavian series] than—you know. So, in one way or another, language does activate some kind of . . . antenna.

As pointed out earlier, these findings do not reveal anything about audiences’ attitudes or behaviors, but only about gatekeepers’ conceptions of audiences’ attitudes and behaviors. Still, they have important implications, as television buyers do rely on these conceptions in their purchasing decisions. The significance of the connotations languages carry underscores that language is more than just the “package” of a television program. Although Zhu (2008) remarks how English has a reputation for “quality,” “reliability,” “superiority,” and “credibility” (p. 74), he refers to this reputation as a continuing byproduct of its colonial legacy. However, as the statements by our respondents suggest, first, the relationship between a language and its connotations should not exclusively be located in the past; such relationships are continuously being re-evaluated. Second, media do not only benefit or suffer from linguistic connotations; they also contribute to them: High-quality television programs in a specific language can lead to that language being associated with quality. In this sense, the connotations a language carries can lead to a vicious circle: When English is associated with high-quality television, English-language television will sell well globally, which yields the capital that is needed for making television with a high production value, which reinforces the association between English and high-quality television.

A final explanation for the dominance of English language that our respondents advanced pertains to the ubiquity of English in Dutch and Flemish society. Hilde Debackere pointed out that English is the language of the entertainment industry: “If you listen to the radio [in Flanders], you’ll also hear a lot less French music than English music.” Here again, we notice how the dominance of English-language media is self-reinforcing: Because it is so ubiquitous in Dutch and Flemish media, it is regarded as more acceptable for television audiences, which leads to more acquisitions of English-language programs, which reinforces the ubiquity of English in Dutch and Flemish media. In cultural-linguistic proximity terms, we could state that the ubiquity of English in the media has made it a much more “proximate” language than languages such as French and German, which are closer in purely geographical terms.

Language and Television Pricing

The gatekeepers we interviewed have diverging experiences of the role language plays in negotiations and deal making on the international television market. Some of them see no relationship between the pricing and the language of a program, and have no recollection of language ever being mentioned in a negotiation. Other respondents, such as Luc Janssens, for instance, explained that in difficult negotiations, language can sometimes be used as a means to put pressure on a distributor:

When a negotiation is very difficult, it can happen that we say, “Guys, hold your horses, you know that a German-language product does not find a large audience, we’re taking

a risk here. In fact, *you* should be sponsoring *us*, because we're playing a pioneering role here" [*laughs*]. So in that sense, language is being used.

Gijs Tulleken used an almost identical example: "Saying something like, 'It's German, so we're not buying this at the moment, or for a lot less?' We'll definitely use that, definitely."

In addition to language being explicitly mentioned as leverage in negotiations, Luc Janssens sees another way in which the language of a program is related to its price:

Something which does not sell can be bought at a lower price. So in that sense, [language] does play a role. In general, a seller will more easily find two potential buyers on an English-language product, whom he can play off against each other. While, if someone is offering an Italian series, they'll probably be surprised if anyone is willing to buy it; so if I make an offer and say, "Take it or leave it," I'll probably get it. So indeed, of course it has an influence.

In addition, the costs involved in subtitling and/or dubbing have an impact on the price of television programs. As Gijs Tulleken explained, subtitling a program or movie in an unfamiliar language like Chinese is very expensive, and this has an impact on the price a buyer is willing to pay for the product. Therefore, a buyer will be willing to pay more for an English-dubbed version of a program than for the ("undubbed") original. Here, again, we see how the ubiquity of English on the global television market is self-reinforcing. In the next section, we deal more in-depth with the specific role of subtitling and dubbing.

Subtitling, Dubbing, and Remakes

Not only do some buyers prefer an English-dubbed version over an original in an unfamiliar language, but a similar logic also applies to Anglophone remakes of television series. Luc Janssens explained that he would prefer an American remake of a Scandinavian program over the higher-quality original:

If we hear, "There will be an English language version of [the Danish/Swedish series] *The Bridge*," well, then we are interested. Why? Well, because language isn't an issue anymore then. I have seen *The Bridge*, and it is a super enthralling, commercial series; if it would get a good English version, it could be a very interesting series for us. It's really a dilemma we're having now: Should we go for the original, go for quality, and put aside our linguistic dogmas, or do we stick to our basic ways of thinking? I think we should stick to our basic approach, because of the history [we have had with non-English-language programs].

Here, again, the interviews point out how language ("linguistic dogmas") constitutes a variable that plays a role independent of other issues such as culture and quality: Merely the fact that a program is in English makes it more appealing for a buyer. This strong significance of language in gatekeepers'

purchasing decisions is further illustrated by common practices in the subtitling and dubbing of fiction and nonfiction. As we pointed out, both in the Netherlands and Flanders, the dubbing of fiction programs is highly uncommon. One exception is children's television: As (young) children cannot read subtitles, dubbing is the only option. Another exception is reality television programs and documentaries, in which replacing the original voice-over with a Dutch voice-over is a common practice. It is considerably cheaper than dubbing fiction, and the fact that lip-synching is not an issue makes it more acceptable with the audience. According to our respondents, replacing the voice-over makes a program more accessible and more pleasant to watch because viewers do not need to read subtitles. Mignon Huisman further explained that broadcasters also use it as a way to make an imported program look like a domestic production. In addition, Gijs Tulleken pointed out, replacing the voice-over of a documentary is also used as a means to introduce some form of consistency, for instance, in a program that consists of features in different languages. When all features use the same voice-over, the program looks more like an integrated whole.

These last findings underscore again that the choice for dubbing or voice-over is about more than comprehensibility. Previous studies already have pointed to the cultural implications of dubbing; Bielby and Harrington (2008), for instance, found that dubbing is often used to censor certain programs, modify their cultural meanings, and localize them. They state that in some cases, dubbing even "literally transforms the product into one that genuinely incorporates the local cultural meaning" (p. 136). When using subtitles, the viewer still has access to the original language content and the program will appear less "local."

Interestingly, the mere fact that children's programs need to, and nonfiction programs can, be dubbed enables gatekeepers to purchase programs from countries they would not consider for fiction acquisitions for adult audiences. Different respondents expressed their preference for Scandinavian children's programs, for instance, and French documentaries are also much more readily purchased than French fiction programs. Hence, again, the interviews demonstrate the significant role the language of a program plays, irrespective of other variables.

Language, Television Acquisitions, and Policy

As pointed out earlier, language plays an important role in television acquisitions, but the significance of language can be reduced largely to broadcasters' aspirations to reach a wide (or commercially interesting) target audience. With the exception of Mignon Huisman's ambition to offer the NPO audience a linguistically varied menu of television programs, the gatekeepers we interviewed reported that there are no rules or policies with regard to language and television acquisitions within the broadcasting networks they work for.

There is, however, one set of regulations to which they have to conform: The European Union's "Television Without Frontiers" directive, which requires broadcasters in EU states to reserve a majority of their transmission time for European works. Although all respondents are aware that such a directive exists, they all stressed that it has no implications for their work, and most of them even claimed to not even know the exact quota. The reason for this, they explained, is that such quotas are met regardless. As audiences prefer domestic programming over imported programs, and, in addition, as British programs

are also prominent in Dutch and Flemish broadcasting schedules, the European quotas are met without effort. Hilde Debackere, for instance, explained,

There is a television directive indeed. I do not know the exact quota anymore, but we have so much own productions that we never have to choose in function of the quota. And also, with our [long-term] contract with the BBC, I mean, that is all European, you know. It never happened that we had to say, "Oops, we cannot broadcast that American movie because we will not meet the European quota."

Rozan Hamaker equally referred to the fact that the large shares of domestic programming and British (reality) programs on the SBS channels makes meeting the quota for European content not something for which special efforts need to be made. These findings are very significant; first, because it appears that, at least for the Dutch and Flemish market, the quotas seem to have become redundant. More important, however, is the question whether the quotas, if they have any effect at all, are actually serving the purpose they were set out to serve. One of the central aims of the directive was to protect Europe against the homogenizing forces of the American entertainment industry and to reinforce cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe (see Kaplan, 1994). However, when television gatekeepers almost exclusively turn to domestic and British productions to meet the quota, the original goal of the directive is hardly being served.

Conclusions

This study started from two principal observations: Television flow studies have abundantly demonstrated that language is an important factor in the global circulation of television programs, and scholarly work on the global television trade industry has shown that the television executives who trade in television programs function as highly important gatekeepers within the global television trade. When combining these two observations, the question arises about which ways language is a factor of significance in television buyers' purchasing decisions.

In-depth interviews with five prominent heads of acquisitions in the Dutch-speaking region in Europe revealed that the language of a program has a very significant impact on their decisions. More particularly, as they learned from experience that programs in languages other than Dutch or English rarely find wide and commercially interesting audiences, they are strongly inclined not to buy those, unless they are bought at a reduced price and are to be programmed on smaller stations and/or outside of prime time.

From the interviews, it became clear that gatekeepers' perceptions of audiences' linguistic preferences almost exclusively explain why they prefer programs in some languages more than others. For both commercial and public broadcasters, the ambition to appeal to a wide and young audience leads our interviewees to show a strong preference for programming in Dutch and English. Other factors, such as ideological considerations, personal linguistic preferences, or EU quotas have very little to no impact, they claimed.

These findings have many implications, and we focus on four in particular. First, there is the question of what these results entail for cultural proximity theory. This theory explains that viewers prefer programs that are similar to their own cultural and linguistic background. At the same time, audiences are, in their choices, also always limited by what they are provided with by broadcasters. As our interviews show, however, when it comes to language-related aspects of global television flows, these gatekeepers rely strongly on their conceptions of their target audiences' linguistic preferences. As such, these gatekeepers' acquisition practices appear to only reinforce the dynamics of linguistic proximity: As they feel that audiences tend to prefer programming in familiar languages, programs in those languages are exactly what they will be offered by broadcasters. This dynamic is reinforced by the fact that gatekeepers' conceptions of audience linguistic preferences are not based on formally gathered empirical data. As such, the vicious circle appears hard to escape: As long as programs in less proximate languages are not broadcast (or broadcast only on niche channels), they cannot prove their potential for success.

Second, there is the finding that the gatekeepers we interviewed appear to adhere to the liberalist conceptions of the cultural discount theory. More precisely, according to them, it is not the media that influence the audience's linguistic tastes and preferences; rather, they just follow them. These very same interviews, however, suggest that the relationship is much more complex: The mere finding that the success of Scandinavian television series (e.g., *The Killing*) has made audiences more open to other Scandinavian series indicates that media also influence the degree to which audiences accept or tolerate a certain language. Yet, none of the interviewees explicitly acknowledged the idea that media distributors do not just respond to market dynamics but also might shape them.

It is also interesting to reflect on the specific situation of the Netherlands and Flanders as regions where television is generally subtitled instead of dubbed. As Kilborn (1993) points out, there are several reasons for this tradition: The Dutch-speaking region is small, which makes the cost of dubbing relatively high. At the same time, Dutch is not a minority language in either country, so there is no immediate need to use dubbing as a way to confirm its importance and relevance (in contrast to, e.g., Welsh or Catalan). Both countries also have very high literacy rates, and Dutch and Flemish audiences have also simply become accustomed to reading subtitles. Kilborn also raises another interesting reason: In many European countries, he claims, audiences have more enlightened attitudes to foreign languages and less of a tendency to "equate 'foreignness' with all that is strange, incomprehensible or potentially threatening" (p. 649). Later in his article, he concludes that, "if only more broadcasters . . . could be persuaded to adopt more enlightened attitudes toward language conversion, this would immediately bring benefits for the [linguistically fragmented] European media industries" (p. 654). However, the common idea that a tradition of subtitled television leads to more open cultural attitudes and understanding might be a misguided one. For, as we have seen in our study, it is precisely when dubbing or voice-over is used on Dutch-language television (i.e., children's television, documentaries) that buyers open up to programs that are not from Dutch- or English-speaking countries. In this sense, it seems that it is precisely the practice of subtitling rather than dubbing that leads to more culturally homogeneous broadcasting schedules.

A final point pertains to the extent to which English will continue to dominate international television flows. As our analysis points out, linguistic preferences and connotations are not static, but

historically and contextually dependent. As such, small experiments with acquisitions in “unfamiliar” languages, programmed on niche channels and/or outside prime time, can gradually develop into more significant trends. At the same time, however, at a number of points in our analysis did we find indications that the dominant position of English is self-reinforcing. As long as English dominates broadcasting schedules, it will be perceived as a proximate language, which will contribute to its dominance. As long as English is equated with high-quality programming, it will generate the necessary capital on the global market to maintain its high production value, which will contribute to the idea that English equals high quality. As long as broadcasters first and foremost buy the English-language products they feel the audience prefers, those will be the programs the audience will be watching, which will reinforce the perception that those are the programs they prefer. Vicious circles such as these do not provide proponents of a more linguistically diverse television landscape in the Netherlands and Flanders (and beyond) with much hope for the future.

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