How we look at CONGO

impact of the independence, the official apologies of the belgian government and the black lives matter movement on the representation of congo in flemish newspapers

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Abstract

*Dutch* - België heeft een tumultueus koloniaal verleden, zeker betreffende Congo. Tot op heden wordt gedebatteerd over hoe de Belgische bevolking daar precies tegenover staat. Hoewel de media vooral gebeurtenissen tonen waarbij een kritische blik heerst op het koloniaal verleden, besluit de literatuur dat er in België nog steeds een koloniaal discours gebruikt wordt om Congo te representeren. Dit wordt niet als positief aanzien, want zo wijst men op de westerse kolonisator als meerderwaardig ten opzichte van de gekoloniseerde bevolking. Toch heerst het idee dat er weldegelijk een positieve evolutie is in het gehanteerde discours. Dit onderzoek bestudeert volgende onderzoeksvraag: hoe is Congo gerepresenteerd in Vlaamse kranten? Gezien er een positieve evolutie verwacht wordt, resulteert dit in een eerste hypothese. Verder wordt deze evolutie onderzocht aan de hand van drie structurerende factoren, weergegeven in drie extra hypothesen: hypothese 2a gaat een negatief effect van de dekolonisatie in 1960 op die evolutie na, 2b een positief effect van de staatsverontschuldigingen aan Congo in 2002 door de paars(groene) regering en 2c een positief effect van de Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. Om dit te bestuderen wordt gebruik gemaakt van de kwalitatieve *colonial discourse theory* van Spurr uit 1993. Hierbij werd een nieuw dekoloniaal concept ter hedendaagse aanvulling geïntroduceerd, wat het mogelijk maakt ook gedekoloniseerde retorische kenmerken te identificeren. Dit onderzoek wees uit dat de eerste hypothese kan worden aanvaard: langzaamaan werd Congo steeds gedekoloniseerder gerepresenteerd. Hypothese 2a bleek foutief en eerder een (lichte) vorm van dekolonisatie kon worden vastgesteld. Hypothesen 2b en 2c werden beiden aanvaard: zowel na de officiële verontschuldigingen als na het hoogtepunt van de Black Lives Matter-movement was het discours gedekoloniseerder. Er kwam daarbij recent wel een tendens naar voor in *Het Laatste Nieuws* dat opnieuw neigde naar een meer koloniaal discours.

*English* - Belgium has a tumultuous colonial past, especially concerning Congo. Until this day, it is debated how exactly the Belgian population feels about it. Although the media mainly show events that are critical for the colonial past, the literature concludes that a colonial discourse is still used in Belgium to represent Congo. This is not seen as positive, as it points to the western coloniser as superior to the colonised population. However, it is believed that there is a positive evolution in the discourses used. This research examines the following research question: how is Congo represented in Flemish newspapers? Since a positive evolution is expected, this results in a first hypothesis. Furthermore, this evolution is investigated by means of three structuring factors, represented in three additional hypotheses: hypothesis 2a examines a negative effect of the decolonisation in 1960 on this evolution, 2b a positive effect of the state apologies to Congo in 2002 by the purple(green) government and 2c a positive effect of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. To study this, use is made of Spurr's qualitative colonial discourse theory from 1993. This introduced a new decolonial concept as a contemporary addition, which makes it possible to identify decolonised rhetorical features as well. This research showed that the first hypothesis could be accepted: Congo was gradually represented in a more decolonised way. Hypothesis 2a has been rejected because rather a (slight) form of decolonisation could be identified. Hypotheses 2b and 2c were both accepted: both after the official apologies and after the peak of the Black Lives Matter movement, the discourse was more decolonised. Recently, however, a tendency towards a more colonial discourse emerged in *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

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1. Introduction

In Ghent and the Flemish region, decolonisation is not a new concept. Criticism of Belgium's colonial past is very much alive among the population and is widely discussed in the Flemish media. In December 2015 the celebration of Leopold II's coronation 150 years previously led to immense protests, resulting in the tribute being cancelled (De Morgen, 2015). Even a children's festival such as that of Saint Nicolas is unacceptable (De Morgen, 2015). This is because Black Piet (*Zwarte Piet*) embodies the racial inequality that prevailed amidst Belgian colonialism.

The social debate about colonialism in Belgium is, as mentioned above, mainly conducted in the media—more specifically, in newspapers. Newspapers express a discourse in the way in which they report. A discourse is a collective group of ideas towards a certain subject (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The choice of a certain discourse and its impact on the relevant population groups—in this case, the colonised populations—are worth examining. A discourse works in two directions: a journalist is subject to a dominant discourse but also shapes reality using that discourse (Prins, 2002). A certain discourse can create a specific representation of a colonised population group, and this can, over time, become more deeply anchored in the reader's memory than reality (Steen, 2014). Such representations can thus be harmful. When they are based on stereotypes, they can stimulate a newspaper’s readership to perceive a population in negative terms (Prins, 2002).

Studying the discourse in newspaper coverage of the ex-colonies is also important, as the media today highlights the moments in which the Belgian population has adopted a critical stand towards colonialism. The Belgian population appears therein to have a critical attitude towards their colonial past. This, however, is not in line with the scientific literature. According to Ceuppens (2003), paternalistic thinking still often lurks beneath people’s words. Devriendt (2018) demonstrates that in school contexts, while there has been a shift in the social debate about Congo, Congo is still represented through a Eurocentric discourse. Various studies conducted within national contexts present the colonial conqueror as legitimate (Vanhee & Casteryck, 2002; Van Wymeersch, 2008).

Whether newspapers have changed their representation of colonialism is thus not a straightforward question. There is increasing debate in the media about the past, present and future (Verbeke, 2011), but whether this discussion proceeds in a critical manner and without stereotyping remains unclear. Researchers such as Vanhee and Castryck (2002) state that increasing attention has indeed been paid to the topic of colonisation but note that this attention has not yet been fully decolonised (Puype, 2017; Boudewijn, 2016; Vinck, 2006). This is true not only in the news media but also in literature, art, photography and education. The media itself occasionally adopts this critical stance (Radio 1, 2018; De Standaard, 2018; Het Nieuwsblad, 2017).

Studying newspapers could contribute to answering the following question: has the representation of Congo indeed become decolonised? In other words, has the dominance of European perspectives in terms of depicting the colonised disappeared? The literature, as indicated above, points towards the hypothesis that, while there is less acceptance of colonialism in the media today, it has not yet disappeared.

In this regard, a comparative study has been implemented which investigated whether there has been development in terms of Belgian newspapers’ representations. If there is more positive representation today, certain events must have caused this shift to occur. While the literature has paid relatively little attention to the specific topic of this study and possible pivotal moments, it is nevertheless important to consider the potential influence of particular structuring factors. Structuring processes or factors do not only bring about policy change but can also influence people’s opinions or attitudes (Peleman, 2006; Hondeghem, Maesschalck & Pelgrims, 2002). In this study the independence of Congo was chosen as a key turning point in Belgian colonialism, seen as a moment of crisis between the two countries. A second pivotal moment concerns the purple-green government of 1999 to 2007, which issued official apologies on behalf of Belgium for the deeds committed in Congo in 2002. This is seen as an important moment of reconciliation. Third, the Black Lives Matter movement has been used as another structuring factor. More specifically this focusses on the period of protests in Belgium against Leopold II, in 2020.

Adopting this methodology, this study closes some gaps in the (inter)national literature. A similar study has already been conducted on Rwanda, but not on Congo (Smits, 2013). Many existing studies have also examined books, magazines, comics and art about Congo. In each case, researchers found a colonial discourse. This is also true in international studies in which non-Western ex-colonies are examined (Rodriguez, 2010; Parameswaran, 2006; Schipper, 2012; Van Bever, 2005). However, a comparison of discourse in the past and the present has rarely been made, nor has related research focused on the potential structuring influence of various key moments.

This study’s research question is as follows: ‘How is Congo represented in Flemish newspapers, and what impact did three key moments in Belgium and Congo’s history on this representation?’. More specifically, the main goal is to test two hypotheses. The first is that Flemish newspapers have increasingly represented Congo in a less colonial way between independence and today. The second hypothesis is that this shift can be observed after the occurrence of three structuring factors: the moment of independence in 1960, the public policy issued by the purple-green government of 1999 and 2007 and the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020.

Central in this study is the discourse analysis method of Spurr: colonial discourse theory (1993). This analytical schema does however offer only a one-sided view on reality: it analyses newspaper articles with a set of colonial rhetorical features that can be tested. If one feature is identified, a text is considered to use a colonial discourse. This study adds inductively to Spurr’s scheme a set of decolonial rhetorical features which makes it possible to analyse articles more in depth. This way also a decolonised discourse can be identified and more specifically, with two concepts of features it is possible to study an evolution in depth.

This paper begins with a literature study that synthesises existing research on this topic. The first part of this literature synthesis discusses earlier research on the representation of Congo in Flemish newspapers and on international representations of other countries’ former colonies. In the second part of the literature study, the proposed structuring factors are reviewed. Next, the research methodology is reviewed, and details of the choices made regarding newspapers and regions to provide a more pragmatic justification are explained. The data collection and analysis methods are also elucidated. This concerns Spurr’s 1993 colonial discourse theory, Smits’ 2013 adaptation and the newly introduced concept. This paper terminates by considering ethical aspects, presenting a conclusion and discussion of the main results and identifying future concerns.

Afbeelding met tekst

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 1: Vooruit (1959, April 8). Het zal nu wel beter gaan in Congo! Vooruit, p. 1

2. Literature review

This academic literature study first explains the academic and societal relevance of this topic. Second, both international and national literature on the newspaper representations of ex-colonies are discussed. This section includes more extensive research on the representation of Congo through Belgian media channels and broader research on international representations of other countries’ ex-colonies. Finally, the three key structuring moments in Belgium and Congo’s history are discussed. This discussion forms the basis for the two hypotheses of this study.

2.1 Relevance

Between 1483 and 1876, a new trend of globalisation emerged. Several European explorers, mainly from major trading powers such as Spain, England and France, travelled to Africa. New kingdoms emerged, and new forms of trade, including the slave trade, flourished. This new phase in world history gave rise to colonisation. Large European trading powers appropriated African countries, and, under the guise of civilising missions, far-reaching and decisive relationships developed between the colonisers and their colonies. However, these oppressive relationships and the discrimination that characterised them became increasingly intolerable to African countries as the years passed. Colonised people were often treated inhumanely. This led to a great wave of decolonisation from 1950 onwards. During this period, Belgium and Congo formed a specific intangible past. To this day resentments between the two countries have not completely calmed. The horrific deeds committed in Congo are difficult to digest, and economic difficulties in trade relations with the African former colony continue.

During the colonial era, Western countries saw themselves as superior. This image of superiority was fiercely propagated in Belgian and Congolese media, culture and literature (Boudewijn, 2016; Vinck, 2006). It is a way of assigning meaning to the relationship between coloniser and colonised that can still be found today (Smits, 2013). For example, terms such as 'the civilised world' are assigned to the West, distinguishing it from African or 'non-civilised countries'. However, there have also been moments of reconciliation in the evolving relationship between Belgium and Congo. Committees of inquiry have been created, and official apologies have been made to Congo on Belgium’s behalf several times. Belgium's admission of guilt suggests a role of oppressor and a role of victim, attributed respectively to colonising Belgium and colonised Congo. A more positive, honest or even critical image of Congo in Belgian media, culture and literature may now be expected. How the colonised 'other' is represented, however, is unclear, and there is disagreement about the extent of decolonisation in discourses (Ceuppens, 2003; Devriendt, 2018; Vanhee & Castryck, 2002).

The aim of this thesis is to explore how Flemish newspapers have used a colonial discourse over the years in representing Congo. A colonial discourse involves a respresentation of the colonised as inferior and of the coloniser as superior and legitimate. Discourses are important to investigate because a discourse not only reflects but also constructs social reality (Boudewijn, 2016). A discourse is especially expressed through language. Language contributes to shaping the world precisely because certain discourses are hidden under everyday language use (Prins, 2002; Shotter, 1993). A discourse is twofold: on the one hand, the prevailing discourse influences journalists’ writings, but, on the other hand, journalists’ use of a particular discourse ensures that reality acquires that meaning. Layers of meaning are attributed in every piece of writing, which in turn impacts the the social world (Prins, 2002). Thus, discourses determine readers' reasoning.

Steen (2014) argues that the representations used in a particular discourse may become fixed and collectively shared. The sharing of such representations determines the extent to which the reality to which they originally refer becomes subordinate to the representations themselves. Representations from certain discourses are often based on negative stereotypes, which can cause discriminatory behaviour against and low self-esteem among the stereotyped group. Such representations can also lead to stereotype threat (Steele, 1997), meaning that when a person from a certain stereotyped social group attempts to not conform to the stereotype, they will do so regardless. It should therefore be hoped that the stereotyped and distorted representations of the colonised as inferior offered by the ruling discourse during the colonial era (van den Hoogen, 2008; Boudewijn, 2016) can be replaced by new images of the former Belgian colony of the Congo.

2.2 International and national literature

This subsection considers research literature on countries’ representations of their ex-colonies, focusing first on Belgian literature.

In 2013 Smits conducted a study in which she applied a colonial discourse analysis to Flemish reporting during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. She applied Spurr's 1993 colonial discourse theory to three Flemish newspapers. Spurr (1993) explicitly describes his theory as a discourse analysis method for journalism, and it is thus highly applicable to newspapers. Smits's aim was to determine the image that Belgium had of the crisis in Rwanda (2013). Her results demonstrate that the Flemish newspapers *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* relied on a colonial discourse. A clear dominant authority was still attributed to the coloniser, and a lower value was placed on the ex-colony. For instance, *De Morgen* included the quote 'the stronger will continue to meddle in the affairs of the weaker' (pp. 44) in an article about 'the Africa policy'. In *De Standaard*, Africa was still portrayed as a Belgian possession through phrases such as ‘Rulers, give us back our Africa’ (pp. 52). However, the third newspaper studied, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, scored much lower in terms of producing a colonial discourse.

Van Bever (2005) studied the subject in a broader way by including the general Belgian press and thus also French-language newspapers. Van Bever examined the representation of Mobutu during his rule over the Democratic Republic of Congo, which Mobutu renamed 'Zaire'. Mobutu ruled from 1965 to 1997. In the beginning, due to the Cold War, the media created a positive image of Mobutu. Belgium and other Western countries, such as the United States, were happy to support a leader who did not promote communism. However, Congo slowly fell into an economic crisis, and soon, Mobutu was seen as the main cause. As his support from the West dwindled, so did his favourable presentation in the press. Mobutu was suddenly presented as a dictator.

Both the above-cited studies also emphasise differences between newspapers. In Van Bever's 2005 study, different images were presented if a newspaper was more conservative (*De Standaard*) or more socialist (*De Morgen*). In other words, an ideological factor affects the way in which journalists report about ex-colonies. This was considered in the selection of newspapers for this study, as is discussed in more detail later.

Additional evidence of colonial discourses can be found in the international literature. Blijden (2018) argues that the Western mind is not yet as decolonised as one would like to believe. This is striking given that contemporary Western societies are usually more multicultural and that the colonial period is said to belong to the past. Blijden (2018) cites as an example Dutch people still proudly talking about ‘the Golden Age’, which could just as well be ‘the Age of Great Crime’ (p. 3). However, this confrontation with the past has yet to take place. A study by Parameswaran (2006) demonstrates how the well-known magazine *National Geographic* still relies on a colonial discourse in representing ex-colonies. In addition, Rodriguez (2010) conducted research into the United States’ reporting on the Spanish-American War. He found a strong colonial discourse with a typical imperialist ideology. Dunn, in his 1967 book *Imagining the Congo*, discusses how the prevailing image of Congo was generated by Westerners, who have a strong sense of who the 'Congolese' are without ever having been there. This sense comes from the popular media, including *National Geographic*, which often only reports on disease, violence and famine. Finally, two other studies demonstrate how ex-colonies are often underreported in Western media and treated in a discriminatory way (Erjavec, 2001; Carpenter, 2012).

Afbeelding met schermafbeelding, computer, monitor, laptop

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijvingBeyond this analysis of newspapers, other forms of media have been found to employ colonial discourses. Vinck (2006) notes that schoolbooks in Congo rely on colonial discourses in presenting the coloniser and colonised. A distinction is made between white and black, whereby black stands for 'bad' and white for 'good'. A white person is heroic, while a black person is a so-called 'hand of the devil'. Other themes that are typically discussed are the 'legitimisation of colonisation' and the 'sources of authority'. In a similar vein, Schipper (2012) found the *Tintin* comics to create a one-sided image of an underdeveloped Congolese population. Tintin is presented as superior to a skinny Congolese who barely knows Dutch. Schipper (2012) also demonstrates the clear idolisation of Tintin, who offers the Congolese various Western inventions that were completely unknown in Congo until his arrival. The indigenous population is thus represented as inferior. An example is cited in Matthijs' 2009 study. As can be seen in Figure 2 (Tintin au Congo, 1975), the Congolese are stereotyped as lazy. Though Tintin does not help with the work, he is ultimately praised as the intellectual mastermind behind the work (Matthijs, 2009). Criticism of the Congolese infrastructure can also be found in these few pages, and the Congolese are depicted as being able to speak using only primitive and childish terms, such as 'tchouk-tchouck' (Matthijs, 2009).

Figure 2: Hergé (1975). Tintin au Congo, 1975 [Comic].

At the time, the Belgian population believed that Belgium could educate the indigenous Congolese through, for example, civilising missions. This belief is often discussed in the international literature on how the colonised and the coloniser are represented. Hoogen (2008) further states that in the Netherlands, there was minimal reporting on the human rights violations that the Dutch committed in Zimbabwe. Thus, stereotypes are not the only way of offering damaging representations; the minimisation or concealment of an exploitative relationship is another. Dutch reporting on Zimbabwe was biased and did not correspond to the experienced reality of the Zimbabwean population. Hoogen (2008) cites the fact that the legal expropriation of the land of white farmers was the main topic of discussion even as black farmers' houses were burnt down and tens of thousands were driven off their land. By focusing only on the whites, the reporters made them seem to be the main victims.

These studies indicate the existing research focus on the prevailing discourses around the coloniser and colonised. Often one moment in history is chosen, and it is therefore difficult to ascertain whether there has been an evolution in the related representations. In this study such potential evolution through Flemish newspapers is examined, given that newspapers are considered a powerful channel for representation. Thus, the first hypothesis is as follows:

A positive evolution in terms of the representation of Congo in Flemish newspapers occurred between 1960 and 2021.

2.3 Structuring factors

To study a possible evolution, a timeline of structural moments that may have had an impact must be selected. Peleman's 2006 research demonstrates how structuring processes or factors can influence people's attitudes and opinions concerning a certain subject. An evolution in opinions can thus be caused by these structuring processes or factors. Structuring factors can also advance an agenda item or, in other words, determine what is discussed in the media (Hondeghem, Maesschalck & Pelgrims, 2002). Therefore, ideally, a moment of crisis and a moment of reconciliation should be used to identify the period in history where an evolution can be observed.

Real ruptures are difficult to define. Van Wymeersch (2008) indicates that neither Congo nor Belgium ever wanted a complete break with the other, as Congo could not suddenly stand on its own feet alone, and Belgium still had economic interests in the country. Verbeke (2011) concurs and adds that there could therefore not be a total shift in the prevailing discourse. The relationship between the colonised and the coloniser is no longer as it was then, but the colonial discourse has not completely vanished. Still, Verbeke cites pivotal moments which must have had at least some influence on this discourse. Some examples are the decolonisation in 1960, Lumumba’s murder in 1961, the Simba rebellions between January and November 1964, the parliamentary inquiry in 1999 and the official apologies of the Belgian government in 2000 and 2002.

Congo’s Independence Day on 30 June 1960 seems by far the most significant moment in the Belgium–Congo relationship, as it caused a major break in Belgium's policy (Verbeke, 2011). Thus, it was chosen as the crisis moment for this period. The choice of a reconciliation moment was less obvious. Verbeke (2011) states that an anchor point in a relationship such as this must be determined based on emotional stratification. For this study the Belgian government's apologies in 2000 and 2002 were chosen. These were a result of the parliamentary commission of inquiry and were the subject of considerable news coverage (Verbeeck, 2007). They therefore were emotionally alive in Belgium. For context, in the year 1999, for the first time in Belgian history, a purple-green government came to power under Prime Minister Verhofstadt. The government reflected a new, more left-wing ideology which was primarily liberalist, social and green (Verbeeck, 2007). This government remained in power until 2003, after which it partly succeeded itself as a new government, referred to as Verhofstadt 2, came into power. This new government was completely purple, as the green parties were absent. This continued to be the case until 2007. It was a remarkable government formation that existed during the two periods in time in which the state of Belgium issued official apologies to Congo. Therefore, this apologizing purple-green government will be seen as the second pivotal point in this study.

As this study unfolded, society changed around events and a new pivotal moment presented itself. On 25 May 2020, an incident in the United States flooded the world news: George Floyd died after a violent confrontation with a white police officer in the United States. Following this, the international movement Black Lives Matter gained support and media attention. Although the focus during this period was mainly on police violence against Afro-Americans, the central idea of the movement became slowly more prominent: black awakening and protest against racism and discrimination (Taylor, 2016). This movement intertwined with a series of protests against Leopold II, because of his actions in the Congo (Goddeeris, 2020). The goal of these protests was the ‘decolonisation of the public space’. This was also reflected in Flemish newspapers with titles as “Statue of slave trader replaced by statue of Black Lives Matter demonstrator” (De Morgen, 2020) or “Brussels decolonisation working group starts: ‘Erase colonial references, but don't forget them'.” (De Standaard, 2020). The movement can therefore be seen as an emancipatory movement with the influence to put certain topics on the agenda of media. In other words, they almost directly influence media reporting. It is also a recent phenomenon and can thus offer new insights into existing research, which has largely focused on events prior to 2000. This all means that the Black Lives Matter movement lent itself ideally as the framing of a contemporary sample. As seen in the previous examples, the Black Lives Matter movement seems to be influencing the representations of Congo positively: the newspapers specifically use articles and titles that put emphasis on the criticism outed by the Belgian population. So we become a third pivotal moment, that can also be considered a moment of reconciliation.

Based on this brief summary of certain pivotal moments in the relationship between Belgium and Congo, it can be concluded that decolonisation, as a crisis moment, and the rule of the purple (and occasionally green) government between 1999 and 2007, and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, as moments of reconciliation, represent theoretically relevant structuring moments when considering how representations of Congo have evolved over time. Therefore, the second hypothesis is as follows:

1. Evolution in the discourses used by Flemish newspapers to represent Congo can mostly be seen around key historical moments.

This hypothesis can be broken down into three sub-hypotheses, each focusing on one key moment:

2a. The Independence Day of Congo on 30 June 1960 had a negative impact on these discourses.

2b. The official apologies of the Belgian purple-(green) government from 1999 to 2007 had a positive impact on these discourses.

2c. The Black Lives Matter Movement of 2019 had a positive impact on these discourses.

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative method

The qualitative research method of discourse analysis was used to study the research question and to test the hypotheses. Discourse analysis is a longstanding technique in qualitative sociology. Foucault was Foucault is among the best-known figures associated with the term. He described a discourse as a way of representing knowledge about a certain subject (Davies et al., 2001). A discourse can then influence how topics are thought about and how ideas are implemented. In this study the qualitative analysis technique is employed to determine which discourses was used in various articles in Flemish newspapers.

The specific discipline used in this research was critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). Here, the focus is on how social power relations are described and abused or, in other words, how dominant viewpoints and inequalities are reproduced in texts. This methodological focus is well suited to the purpose of this research, namely examining representations of a specific country through the discourses that prevail in a different country’s newspapers. As demonstrated in the literature study, a colonised discourse has often been dominant in Flemish newspapers when representing Congo. The goal of this study is to determine whether this tendency still prevails in the Flemish newspapers produced today.

This research relied on two hypotheses, for which quantitative would theoretically be more suitable. However, the qualitative manner was chosen. The reason for this choice was that even with an expectation in mind, the focus is still on looking for meaning: more specifically, a change in meaning-making over time. The qualitative research method focuses explicitly on these kinds of meanings. The emphasis of this research is therefore on how the meaning has shifted.

Critical discourse analysis is a systematic form of analysis. This means that the choice of samples was guided by methodology and literature. The analytical method was tested by means of a pilot study, which provided insight into the effectiveness of the research techniques (Cusell, Kooijman, Lamers, & van Wirdum, 2013).

3.2 Sampling

Leopold II of Belgium originally appropriated Congo and named it the 'Congo Freestate’. After his violations of numerous human rights were declared inhumane, the king was obliged to hand his colony to the Belgian state. The choice to study the representation of Congo in Belgian newspapers relied on the attention that the relationship between these two countries has received. Many countries struggle with their colonial past, but, in Belgium, the debate is much more fundamental (Smakman, 2011). Investigations are still being conducted into what occurred during and after decolonisation. There is considerable disagreement, and the deeds that took place in Congo are a hotly debated topic internationally. In short, Belgium has perhaps the most reported colonial history (Smits, 2013), which supports the choice to observe and analyse the discourses used to represent its ex-colony.

The choice to study Flanders was both compelling and pragmatic. First of all pragmatic as an author living in Flanders and managing the Dutch language better than the French. Additionally, Belgium is a multicultural state, which Flanders represents well. Other areas, such as Wallonia, are much less densely populated, especially in the south, and many white families can still be found in local communities (Join-Lambert, 2014). A debate on multiculturalism is much more difficult to conduct when people of different cultures do not often interact with each other. This problem does not exist in Flanders.

For pragmatic reasons the number of studied Flemish newspapers was set to three. Newspapers allow for extensive application of discourse analysis. The purpose of the critical discourse analysis method is specifically to determine which discourse is used in a text. The Flemish news media, which serve to spread news among the Flemish population (Dixhoorn, 2009), best represent this discourse. Since it is mainly newspapers that have a textual component, they are a suitable subject for the application the qualitative research method.

The process of deciding which three Flemish newspapers to study required taking certain important factors into consideration. The newspapers needed to provide a broad picture of the prevailing discourse in the Flemish media about Congo yet be limited enough to be extensively studied. As noted in the literature study, editorial ideology plays a major role and acts as another structuring factor alongside the two chosen moments in the relationship between Belgium and Congo. Flemish newspapers originated one by one in a period of pillarisation, during which political ideas were strongly followed. A newspaper belonged to a specific pillar and could therefore easily distinguish itself from its colleagues. *De Standaard* was part of the Catholic pillar, *Het Laatste Nieuws* was part of the Liberal pillar, and *De Morgen* was part of the Socialist pillar. From the 1960s onward, however, ideologies began to merge into one another, in the start of 'de-pillarisation'.

However, the pillarisation is still strongly reflected in Flemish newspapers (Smits, 2013). In 2016 Prevenier wrote extensively about *Het Laatste Nieuws*’ journey. Though various newspapers and press agencies lost their positions during de-pillarisation, they still wanted to distinguish themselves from each other. A non-profit organisation was established under the name *Het Laatste Nieuws* Foundation to ensure the ideological continuity of that newspaper. *Het Laatste Nieuws* is the most popular newspaper in Flanders; it is mainly read by working-class families and features liberalist ideas (De Bens, 1997). *De Morgen*, renamed so after a bankruptcy (before that ‘Vooruit’), can be described as socialist and progressive (Smits, 2013). Finally, *De Standaard* is still Christian-inspired and fits the conservative spectrum of ideologies (Smits, 2013; Van Bever, 2005). Thus, these three newspapers together form an appropriate reflection of the Flemish population, as the prevailing ideological visions are represented therein. Additionally, these newspapers represent the Flemish population in terms of quality and popularity. While *Het Laatste Nieuws* is categorised as the most popular newspaper, the other two newspapers prioritise quality, meaning that they target the elite of the population.

Newspapers never represent the discourse among an entire population, as there is always a part of the population that does not read a newspaper. Consequently, these three newspapers cannot be a perfect reflection of the most important ideas among the Flemish people. However, they can be used to provide a possible answer to the research question. Twenty editions of each newspaper from each of the three key moments in time were studied. To obtain a clear view of the possible influence of these moments, it was decided to analyse a sample of 10 newspaper editions both before and after each specific event.

The first moment, the crisis moment in the relationship, has a clear date. Congo achieved independence on 30 June 1960. However, the periods before and after were chaotic and might provide an unclear picture of the discourse. To obtain a more nuanced view, newspaper editions from one year before independence (1959) and one year after independence (1961) were analysed.

The reconciliation moment in the relationship between Belgium and Congo was still more complex to specify. The reign of the purple-green government extended from 1999 to 2007. The commission of inquiry into the acts committed in Congo was created in 2000, while the report which led to the government's official apology was not published until 16 November 2001. This study focused on the year in which the official apology was issued, 2002, in which both Prime Minister Verhofstadt and Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Michel apologised. Verhofstadt did so on behalf of Belgium for its moral responsibility in Lumumba’s murder. Michel apologised to Lumumba's family and the Congolese people. While the commission of inquiry was not a hot topic in the popular media, the apology was spoken of considerably both nationally and internationally. Therefore, this year was most suitable for study. Again, the selected newspaper editions were retrieved from the year before and the year after (i.e., 2001 and 2003). The pilot study that tested the proposed analysing techniques also focused on this sample.

To use the Black Lives Matter movement as a third pivotal moment, there is also the need for a more specific year. The movement originated in the United States from the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013, for the death of a 17-years old Afro-American boy (Lebron, 2017). However, it was not until the death of George Floyd that they achieved international publicity. As the aim of this third pivotal moment is to study effects on discourses in Belgium, the year 2020 is selected as the sample year.

A sample consisted of 10 editions of a specific newspaper. There were therefore 18 different samples when including the pilot study. For instance, there were six samples of *De Morgen*: two around the period of independence, two around the period of the official Belgian apologies and two around the Black Lives Matter movement.

3.3 Negotiation of access

Negotiating access is often an important issue when conducting qualitative research. One cannot simply intrude into the personal worlds of individuals, so such research often involves numerous ethical issues and guidelines. In this research, however, negotiating access was not a problem. Most archives of the selected Flemish newspapers can be found online. The Royal Library of Belgium alone offers many historical editions of newspapers online (City of Ghent, n.d.), though these are mainly from the period prior to 1950, as the more recent newspapers can be found in the newspaper archives. In addition, all newspapers could be found in the Ghent University Library from the year 1888 onwards.

3.4 Ethics

Ethics is a broadly defined concept with many facets. In Mortelmans' 2013 manual for qualitative research, he states that one should always consider the moral rules that apply when conducting qualitative research. These rules mainly concern the relationship between the researcher and the respondent whom they are researching. Ethical rules exist because conflicts may arise between what the researcher is trying to achieve and the rights and interests of the respondent. However, due to the nature of this study, this only applied to a limited extent. The object of this study was not a person or a group of persons; rather, the study concerned a written public media outlet. No individuals were extensively dealt with or investigated. Additionally, ethical issues are often linked to negotiating access. This was not a problem because the data could be found online.

An important ethical aspect that does apply to this research paper is correct quoting. When a statement is made, the source that originally featured this statement must be cited appropriately (Mortelmans, 2013). In addition, the purpose of the study must be transparent. This was ensured from the start of this paper. The American Sociological Association’s code of ethics (2018) identifies additional ethical principles that should be kept in mind when conducting research. For example, the 'Professional and Scientific Responsibility' general rule states that a researcher should always write with respect, even when they disagree with the thoughts of another sociological researcher. Given that this study includes socially relevant themes such as racism and discrimination, it was important to ensure that no subjective opinion is concealed beneath the written text. Finally, the choices made in a study must always be justified so that there is always transparency. The choices made in this research are extensively dealt with in the Sampling and Data Collection sections.

3.5 Critical discourse analysis

3.5.1 Theoretical framework: colonial discourse

Spurr (1993) designed a 'colonial discourse' analysis technique that can be applied to journalism. The central focus of his research was on how language affects the exercise of colonial power. The present study follows the focus of Spurr (1993) in investigating Flemish newspapers.

Spurr's technique involves identifying various colonial rhetorical features which indicate that a text uses a colonial discourse. In Spurr’s definition these rhetorical features are ‘ways of writing about non-Western peoples’ (p. 3). They therefore point to a prevailing discourse about a certain colonised group of people. Rhetorical features are an analytic technique where the focus is more on studying what a text ‘does’ rather than what it ‘is’ (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009). The effect of these rhetorical features on the readers is thus the emphasis. A writer uses rhetorical features to convince the readers of a certain point of view (Editors, Schellens & Steehouder, 2010), although the writer may not be fully aware that they are doing so. These features grow over time and can therefore be used unconsciously by a journalist.

Spurr (1993) lists 12 rhetorical features that indicate a society is colonially reporting on another ethnicity. Together, these features form, as Smits (2013) says, ‘a repertoire for colonial discourse, available for the purpose of representation’ (p. 33). Surveillance is the first rhetorical feature and indicates the power and authority that the journalist appropriates by placing themself at the center of the structure. Such a journalist will describe what 'there is to see', and the differences in identity between them and the 'foreign' population group are emphasised. The coloniser is therefore authoritarian, more advanced in development and removed from the 'primitives'. To such journalists, important subjects are those regarding which cultural differences between the two groups are evident.

The second characteristic is appropriation, which refers to the appropriation of the colonised country’s natural resources, a phenomenon mainly associated with European colonisation. The indigenous people themselves, as well as their land, are assumed to belong to the Western country. Third, aestheticisation refers to the reduction of the local population to objects of emotions, drives and desires. They are described as having primitive, elementary needs that the colonisers have suppressed with reason. The fourth characteristic, classification, is somewhat similar: the colony is viewed, controlled and investigated through Western ideas and ideals. The indigenous population, unlike the West, has not undergone modernisation, and this is seen to immediately explain their failures.

Debasement is the fifth rhetorical characteristic; it refers to self-glorification of one's own group and humiliation of the other group. By metaphorically lowering the colonised, a coloniser can raise themself. The sixth characteristic, affirmation, fits in here, as the authoritarian Westerner has a constant need to praise themself. They want to be in control and in this way steer others morally. The seventh characteristic is that of negation, which removes the other group from language and history. The indigenous population is deliberately ignored or is presented in a very negative way.

Eighth, the West takes its own values and norms for granted and does not allow the colony to place them in its own context. The indigenous people are expected to conform to Western values and norms. This is the characteristic of idealisation. The ninth core characteristic is insubstantialisation, which is the justification of domination. It is seen as being in the nature of a 'better' people to dominate the more ‘primitive’. Naturalisation, which is the tenth characteristic, follows. There is the long history that shows that nature and culture are the great forces that interact and that cooperation/counteraction always, regardless of the process, ensures a just outcome. Naturalisation follows this principle, claiming that it’s just the way of nature that some countries become colonised and some colonisers.

The 11th and 12th characteristics are eroticisation and resistance. Eroticisation depicts the native as an object that must be dominated due to its eroticism, which one can abhor or desire or both. It is the idea that the indigenous population is considered an object of desire that, as a strong man, one must and will conquer. The second is a remarkable feature. Spurr states his assumption that in almost every discourse of colonialism there is also resistance. It is precisely by attempt to present a critical understanding that one’s biased views of the colonised are revealed.

The above characteristics represent an extensive set of tools with which to work. a very extensive set of tools to work with. Thus, in 2013, Smits created a functionally convenient new classification of these characteristics, with four new combination characteristics:

1. Optimisation (idealisation, aestheticisation and insubstantialisation): The three combined characteristics point to a distortion of reality whereby the indigenous peoples are presented as primitives without proper values and norms who are fully subject to primal human drives.

2. Trivialisation (debasement and eroticisation): The two combined characteristics are used to explain why the indigenous people occupy the inferior position. Negative traits are attributed to the indigenous and highly magnified.

3. Justification (affirmation and naturalisation): The two combined characteristics legitimise, as it were, the domination of ‘inferior’ primitive peoples.

4. Observation (surveillance and negation): The two combined characteristics are connected by the idea that the focus is on external features and not necessarily the indigenous people. This way of presenting the reality is about a perception of reality.

Spurr’s other three characteristics, appropriation, resistance and classification, each stand alone alongside the four combination characteristics. If one can identify at least one of these seven features, a newspaper article can be considered to employ a colonial discourse. Furthermore, if certain rhetorical characteristics are found in an article, one can immediately determine in which colonial way the colonised are seen. For example, the characteristic of justification indicates a discourse with no critical attitude towards the domination of the colonised. Optimisation and trivialisation together indicate a stereotypical image of primitive inferiority.

Although the basic idea behind Spurr's theory is discourse analysis, wherein discourses are retrieved, described and linked to certain classifications, content analysis is also central to this process. In content analysis the characteristics that can be found in a text are tested. In the present research, this means that these different rhetorical features are identified, counted and compared. Content analysis can therefore be placed alongside classical discourse analysis. Content analysis is used to register the characteristics; discourse analysis provides room for interpretation.

3.5.2 New concept: decolonial discourse

Spurr (1993) and Smits (2013) applied the discourse analysis one-sidedly, as they limited themselves to detecting rhetorical functions that indicate a colonial discourse. Likewise, the general literature hardly mentions recognising a decolonised discourse. The aim is here to answer the question of how a decolonised discourse can be identified. Thus, four decolonised rhetorical features are elaborated. They follow the same principle as the seven colonised rhetorical features: if one can identify at least one in a newspaper article, that article is considered to have a decolonised discourse. An evaluation of both rhetorical function groups across different newspaper articles and through the years can provide a more nuanced picture of the prevailing discourse and its possible evolution.

This new concept of decolonial rhetorical features was a complex process. Inductively, a first sketch was laid out by reading some first newspaper editions in the period of 2010 – a randomly chosen period to not intervene with the key moments in this study. It soon became clear that the discourses could not only be labelled as colonial. The outline of some initial rhetorical functions was then further elaborated using academic literature, which will be discussed below. Thus, an initial set of four functions was created, which could be adapted inductively as new aspects emerged in the data analysis.

The first decolonised rhetorical function is recognition. Huggan states in his 1989 study that the start of decolonisation lies in the identification and dissociation of the colonial discourse. In other words, one can only speak of decolonisation when there is recognition of colonised discourse. Blijden's 2018 research also supports this view. She argues that although the ideas of a multicultural society and citizen equality prevail, the reality is not as decolonised as people think. Her example of the Dutch population failing to distance itself from the notion of the Golden Age demonstrates that there is still no recognition of the crimes that were committed in the Dutch ex-colonies during this period.

The second decolonised rhetorical feature is *détournement*. This concept comes from Debord and Wolman (1956) and was applied by Kelly in 2014. In *détournement* a dominant negative discourse about a colonised population group is misused or mocked in such a way that it highlights the opposite characteristics of the group. This tactical way of using the dominant discourse, according to Kelly (2014), ensures that the reader begins reading the dominant discourse in a skeptical way. In this way, the reading public is 'asked' to participate in decolonisation. Kelly (2014) links this application of decolonisation to the neocolonialism described by Buescher and Ono (1996), who note the continued colonial discourse as being masked by the addition of contemporary discourses still used to mark other population groups as inferior. Decolonised discourse only exists when one does not want to oppress these groups. *Détournement* is an emancipatory translation of this idea that fits well as a decolonised rhetorical function.

Moral responsibility is the third rhetorical feature. Here, a comparison is made with a widely known and abhorred phenomenon or person. A well-known example of this is the Holocaust rhetoric (Van Assche, 2010). Applied to the specific object of this study, the Congolese population would be compared to the Jews and Leopold II to Hitler. The purpose of this comparison is to gain sympathy from the reader. It creates a collective form of victimhood, which in turn triggers the reader's sense of moral responsibility. When the audience attempts to take moral responsibility, decolonisation result.

The fourth decolonised rhetorical feature is that of personification. As with the previous rhetorical feature, the idea here is to exemplify a situation through an individual figure to make a story more appealing. When hearing about a large group, it is more difficult for the reader to identify with members of that group and thus have empathy. Schilperoord and Maes (2003) confirm this. Their study indicates that a text is more likely to be understood when there is a personal focus on someone. In other words, when a situation involving discrimination occurs, it will be considered more unreasonable when it is reported from the perspective of one person. Extending this to the object of study, when a writer focuses on a specific victim of colonisation, more empathic attention is elicited, causing the reader to question colonisation.

These four features work as a concept that adds to Spurr's existing colonial discourse theory and creates a clearer picture of colonisation in texts. If both decolonised and colonised rhetorical features are found, a researcher can still evaluate which discourse is predominant. In this study, this approach allowed an even more detailed comparison to be made, revealing whether an evolution could actually be discerned, and if so, what this evolution looks like.

Given the introduction of this concept, there was a constant need for evaluation during the study. Through this evaluation, these characteristics could be further adjusted in an inductive way. The first test was the pilot study. Then, the full predefined analysis is applied to the first five newspaper editions as part of the actual study. Thereafter, the analysis technique was again adjusted to the practical situation, and only then was proceeded to the next five newspaper editions.

Some observations were made after conducting the pilot study. The rhetorical features of Spurr (1993) and Smits (2013) lent themselves ideally to this kind of analysis, yet the analytical scheme also required some inductive adjustment, mostly concerning the decolonial features. The pilot study detected few decolonised rhetorical features. This may have had several causes, such as the limited number of articles, the specificity of the rhetorical features or an absence of decoloniality in the texts. The latter is difficult to prove, since hardly any colonised rhetorical functions were found, and the general tone provided a different impression. The events in Congo were reported in a factual manner, which made it impossible to ascribe a colonised discourse to it. Therefore, two new rhetorical functions were added for the analysis.

The first additional decolonised characteristic is neutrality, which uses a factual representation of reality. Although 'factual reporting' is not a novel term in the academic literature on journalism, it is a rhetorical feature in early use. According to the convergence hypothesis, all media will evolve towards a factual and objective model (Hallin, 2009). This means journalists will increasingly report in a neutral way, leaving room for political independence[[1]](#footnote-1). In this framework, objectivity is central. The discourse is one in which the factual representation of an event prevails (White, 2009). Hallin (2009) states that this convergence hypothesis has not yet been fulfilled in the media; however, the neutral discourse is the opposite of a colonised discourse and can therefore be highlighted here. When a journalist presents the facts to inform the reader neutrally, this indicates decolonised writing.

The second additional rhetorical feature is absence. This refers to an absence of colonised—and decolonised—rhetorical functions. Bailey (2007) describes this as the 'representational importance of absence' (p. 117). The absence of a certain discourse may indicate that there has been a shift in that discourse. The absence of certain rhetorical functions also indicates a certain 'framing context' (Nielsen, 2002). When a researcher focuses only on clearly present rhetorical features, much information is lost: both the presence and absence of rhetorical features are of great importance (Menninghaus et al., 2015). In recognising this, a researcher can categorise even articles that adopt a rather neutral tone as featuring a decolonised discourse. Whereas with neutrality as a rhetorical feature the writer lists the facts, with absence, the writer does hint at questions about reality without arriving at the other decolonised features. Articles that question a colonial past or the actions of individuals, for instance, do not fall under the recognition feature because they are not directly challenging colonial discourse, but they do indicate the absence of a colonial discourse.

Thus, alongside the list of seven colonised characteristics, six decolonised characteristics are proposed, which make a more useful and applicable analysis scheme with a greater balance, which in turn allows for the avoidance of biased assumptions.

4. Data-analysis: three periods in time

4.1 The independency (1959 – 1961)

The actual results of this study are as follows. At the first pivotal moment between Belgium and Congo examined herein, namely decolonisation, a slight movement was discerned. The newspapers shifted from an overabundance of colonial discourse characteristics to a more decolonised discourse after 1961. This contradicts the hypothesis concerning a negative effect. However, the pattern is not strong. In articles from both 1959 and 1961, mainly colonised rhetorical functions were found, though these were somewhat more balanced in 1961 with an increasing number of decolonised elements.

In particular, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* followed this trend. In 1959 hardly any decolonised features existed in these publications. When they did exist, they were mainly in the form of isolated articles, in which, for example, Lumumba was the focus. This meant that there was a need for the rhetorical characteristic of recognition, as becomes clear in this quote from *De Standaard*: 'After 80 years of colonisation, Belgium must put an end to this degrading system that we no longer tolerate' (De Standaard, 1959, pp. 6). Nevertheless, both newspapers had a clear tendency towards colonised discourse features. *De Standaard* often used characteristics such as appropriation and classification, whereas *Het Laatste Nieuws* mainly used optimisation and justification. As an example, this excerpt clearly demonstrates the appropriation characteristic:

Our Congolese economy, which is almost exclusively oriented to the extraction of raw materials, remains vulnerable, because its fate is closely linked to the price offered on the world market. ... That is not all. Congo is a vast country. It has many other energy possibilities. We therefore ask that no effort be neglected in valorising some of them in order to promote the establishment of new industries. This should work out the normal balance of the country. (*De Standaard*, 1959, p. 6)

The first sentence is the most telling: the journalist states that this is about the Congolese economy but precedes the term with the word 'our' to emphasise that the Congolese economy belongs to Belgium. The further discussion about how the country could be put to greater use also references Congo as a possession.

*Het Laatste Nieuws*‘s use of the justification characterisation can be seen in the passage below. By praising the Belgian government for its deeds in the Congo, the journalist not only denies the horrors committed but also elevates Belgium as a Western country over the colony, which should be happy with the help of this benevolent Western country. This is most sharply indicated in the first few words, where the writer disregards the opinions of outsiders. The writer states that all who have been to Congo must agree with this view—the outcome of the domination is just:

Those in the South who know more about Congo, because they have lived there or have read about it, and who are in favour of a human solution to the racial question, believe that the Belgian government should be thanked for its constructive efforts to solve the Congolese question along reasonable and honest lines. (Het Laatste Nieuws, 1959, p. 5)

Another rather telling fragment was found in *Het Laatste Nieuws*:

As a result of the purge, which was started by the government immediately after the bloody riots in January in Leopoldstad, those who were living in Leopoldstad illegally and who had no job or permanent place of residence were driven out to their native village in the bush. (Het Laatste Nieuws, 1959, p. 1)

Classification is expressed here where Western ideals of permanent residence are applied and maintained. By referring to the brousse as a ‘place of birth’, the journalist also uses the characteristic of observation. It is mainly the word usage in this sentence that demonstrates the difference between 1959 and the modern day. Words such as 'purge' and 'the great chastisement' in the title of the newspaper article now have a purely negative connotation.

In 1961 this discourse still prevailed in Flemish newspaper reporting on Congo. Justification and observation existed to almost the same extent as in 1959. The difference, however, was that in 1961, one can identify a cautious use of decolonised rhetorical functions. The neutral characteristic mainly emerged in reporting on events such as the riots and civil wars that followed decolonisation. The absence characteristic was also recognised on occasion. For example, *De Standaard* (1961, p. 1) wrote the following: ‘The Japanese, too, look down on the Congolese with “colonial” disdain’. Here, the use of the words 'also' and 'incidentally' adds an emotional value to the sentence, indicating that the writer disapproves of the way the Congolese people are represented perceived.

Ultimately, a trend was visible, but it did not include a major turnaround as expected and certainly did not have the expected direction. In *De Morgen* this trend was not present at all. Instead, both periods had characteristics of both discourses, and, in 1959, the discourse actually tilted more towards the decolonised side than it did in 1961. In line with what was found in the other two newspapers, the most common rhetorical functions used in this Flemish newspaper were neutrality and absence for decolonisation and appropriation and justification for colonisation.

4.2 The official apologies of the Belgian state (2001 – 2003)

Between 2001 and 2003, a rhetorical pattern came to the fore across the three Flemish newspapers. Although in both years no consensus could be reached, clear tendencies could be discerned. In 2001 the discourse tilted much more strongly towards colonisation than was the case in 2003.

In 2001 the most striking feature was the frequent use of trivialisation and justification. The debasement of the Congolese people was central, alongside the elevation of the West. This feature was shown both subtly and less subtly, as can be seen in the following examples of trivialisation: ‘Yesterday a worried Senegalese man gave me a map of Africa carved out of wood’ versus ‘Princess Diana regularly flew to Africa with the Belgian airline. She did not even demand special treatment on board. "We are already happy that you fly directly to all those countries"’ (De Morgen, 2001, p. 17). The characteristic of justification was found where journalists stated that in Congo one could look for ‘the goodness of man’, whereby one could ‘share life with fathers, nuns and brothers who have been giving the best of themselves for years in the former Belgian colony’ (De Standaard, 2001, p. 10). This rhetorical function also emerged in less conspicuous expressions such as ‘I do not consider bribes to be a contribution to the further development of the country’ (De Standaard, 2001, p. 10).

Nevertheless, there was also room for neutrality and absence in 2001. An appropriate example is the following quote: ‘Many contemporary African film-makers never saw African films in their youth. In the Belgian Congo, the missionaries made films. As a child, I saw films that were not made by, but for and with Africans’ (De Standaard, 2000, p. 31). Absence often includes criticism in a subtle form:

Although there is no doubt about the scholar's good intentions – he wanted to learn about African art and command respect for it from the whites – his expeditions had a less attractive side by today's standards. After all, the European researchers brought back priceless works of art from Africa to compensate their moneylenders, and in the colonial era the blacks had little to say about that. (De Standaard, 2001, p. 9)

Statements like these are easier to associate with decolonisation than statements of neutrality. In the case of neutrality, the writer of the article chooses to represent factually what happened. This way of reporting seems easily overlooked, but it does not have to be. In one article the following event was found: ‘Sabena deploys all of its long-distance aircraft for an air bridge between Congo and Brussels. In 18 days' time, 35,000 compatriots were evacuated’ (De Standaard, 2000, p. 23). Here, neutrality is used to achieve a decolonised discourse. While there is room to insert a colonised framework, the opportunity is—consciously or unconsciously—missed.

Thus, examples of decolonised features are certainly present, although they are somewhat lost next to features of justifications such as the following:

The new district on the Exhibition Grounds lent itself perfectly to honouring deserving fellow citizens, with the exception of such oddities as a General Cabra (street). The man did himself credit during the First World War and during the work of civilisation in the Belgian Congo, where not everyone was willing to be civilised. (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2000, p. 17)

When studying the editions from 2003, a shift was found towards a larger number of decolonised rhetorical characteristics. Neutrality and absence took the upper hand, with, for the first time, some examples of *détournement* and moral responsibility.

*Détournement* is expressed in the following example: ‘No statues for Hitler, that goes without saying, but for King Leopold II, who according to some has more victims on his hands than the Führer’ (De Standaard, 2003, p. 12). Many journalists criticised the past with statements such as ‘The colonial debate about the Congo must come. If not during this ten-day period, then at least afterwards. *Schol* (i.e. raising a glass)’ (De Morgen, 2004, p. 32). Here, the emphasis is on absence.

However, colonised functions were not absent. This is well reflected in the following excerpt from *De Standaard* (2000, p. 17), in which justification emerges:

Of course the Church made mistakes, but who didn't? There was exploitation, there was misery. But we did not come for power, but to help. ‘Dominer pour servir’, it was said then. The population was often grateful for the protection and education we provided.

Whereas *De Standaard* in 2003 (p. 12) makes the comparison with Hitler to denounce the past, in 2004, the newspaper uses the comparison again in the form of trivialisation, where Hitler is used to justify the actions of Belgium:

It is a pity that Marc Reynebeau speaks of a Congolese holocaust ... However, the differences are clear. The aim of the holocaust was the extermination of certain races, such as Jews, and of the handicapped, homosexuals and so on. What happened in the Free State of Leopold II cannot be compared to that. (p. 20)

Thus, although the decolonised discourse predominated, there was not yet an unambiguous picture in 2003. Both discourses still alternated.

When comparing the different Flemish newspapers, it was noticed that *Het* *Laatste Nieuws* in both periods reported less on Congo and on acquired property than the other two newspapers did. The relevant articles were also much shorter, which complicated the analysis. However, the rhetorical characteristics found were closely in line with what was found in the other papers in the 2003 period. On the contrary, in none of the *Het Laatste Nieuws* articles published in 2001 could a decolonised characteristic be found. The two others, *De Morgen* and *De Standaard*, both featured a wide range of those rhetorical features. There were few newspaper-specific tendencies here, as they both engaged in moderate and extreme versions of discourse framing.

4.3 The ‘Black Lives Matter’-movement (2019 – 2021)

With the third pivot point, some additional trends were observed. The discourse in both years was much more decolonised than at the previous points of articulation. Whereas, in 2019, colonial rhetorical functions could still be found, these almost completely disappeared in 2021, at least for *De Standaard* and *De Morgen.* *Het Laatste Nieuws*, however, went in a different direction.

In 2019, before the Black Lives Matter movement gained public attention in Belgium, all three Flemish newspapers still had colonial discourse functions. In particular, trivialisation and resistance could be identified. For example, *De Morgen* wrote the following on 22 January 2019: ‘Not because I believe that elections are a panacea for tackling the numerous problems in [Congo]’ (p. 2). By insinuating that Congo is a country full of problems, the newspaper engages in humiliation, which falls under the rhetorical characteristic of trivialisation. Resistance can then be found in the following quote:

Early next year Placide Mumbembele is indeed coming to the AfricaMuseum to examine our inventories. I want to stress that we will work together in an open and constructive atmosphere. Whether works of art will actually be returned is not yet formally under discussion. (De Morgen, 2019, p. 53)

The journalist states that he/she understand the Congolese people’s request to return stolen works of art, only to announce one sentence later that they will not be fulfilling that request. By attempting to position themselves critically regarding the theft despite refusing reparations, they fall in line with resistance.

Finally, the rhetorical characteristic of appropriation also emerged in 2019, as recognised in the following passage with the emphasis on 'our' Congo:

Under the name Bacongo Limburg (meaning 'our Congo'), Het Stadsmus, together with some partners, is looking for stories about Congo's colonial past. The aim is to delve into the common history of Belgium and the Congo and to map out its impact on Limburg. (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2019, p. 36)

However, the colonial discourse in the newspapers was limited to these three recurring features. In all three Flemish newspapers, the discourse tilted predominantly towards the decolonised side. The rhetorical element of recognition was frequently identified in sentences such as 'Africans in Europe still feel the yoke of colonisation every day. Returning the looted works of art is part of the decolonisation process’ (De Morgen, 2019, p. 52) and ‘The AfricaMuseum, which reopened in early December after five years of renovation, wants to distance itself from the colonialist view and from the glorification of Leopold II who, as king, was responsible for the bloody colonisation of Congo’ (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2019, p. 17). Both sentences criticise the deeds that were committed. Neutrality and absence also appeared, although to a lesser extent.

Then, in the year 2021, a greater evolution became visible: the decolonised discourse took over even more strongly, making use also of more explicit forms of criticism, such as *détournement*, moral responsibility and personalisation. These features can be described as more active features, while the other ones like absence and neutrality can be described as more passive forms of decolonialisation discourses. It was particularly striking that in the 10 articles published in *De Standaard* in 2021, almost not a single colonial rhetorical feature could be found, although the most articles related to the Congo could be found in this newspaper.

The following quote from *De Morgen* serves as an ideal example with which to demonstrate *détournement* in this period:

I was on that committee, but I was not a full-fledged expert. When I look back, I think there was still a very colonial atmosphere about that committee, while the weight of politics also weighed heavily. I was just the nigger of the commission, you can write that like that. (De Morgen, 2021, p. 10)

The writer begins here with a passage that can be attributed to recognition, by referring to a colonial atmosphere that still prevails, but then proceeds to *détournement* by using the word ‘nigger’. This is a word with a negative connotation which was often used in the past by the coloniser. This use of the word by a black person, to apparently mock it, perfectly fits *détournement*.

Personification was also found in *De Morgen*: ‘For black people who are still treated badly, he is the symbol of equality. Where Leopold II and colonisation embody the past, Lumumba stands for the future’ (De Morgen, 2021, p. 10).

There was another striking aspect that did not go unnoticed in the analysis: a large number of colonial features were found in *Het Laatste Nieuws*. This was also the newspaper that reported the least on matters concerning Congo, which already has been observed throughout the pivotal moments. Although the discourse was like that of *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* in 2019, it backtracked in 2021, and an abundance of features such as trivialisation, observation and justification could be identified. Justification, for instance, was be found in the use of terms such as 'the colonial empire' and 'the Congolese adventure' (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2021, p. 12). There was no acknowledgement that the colonial past was not always rosy, especially for the Congolese. Meanwhile, an example of observation and trivialisation from *Het Laatste Nieuws* is as follows:

Those who yearn for some African warmth can indulge themselves in the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. You can explore the museum with various activity books or a museum game. But even if you opt for the classic museum tour, you will be surprised. VR goggles effortlessly catapult you into Congo and you can dance to the swinging rhythm of the Congolese rumba. Shake those hips! (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2021, p. 68)

Here, the journalist employs stereotypes, with a clear focus on the country's external features. Congo is presented as a dancing child, which amounts to trivialisation, whereby the journalist strongly demeans Congo and sharply contrasts it with Belgium. Another example of trivialisation is the following passage:

‘The island on a rubbish heap’, he himself calls the 180-room resort in the heart of the Congolese capital, just off the busy Boulevard du 30 Juin. ‘Every night I deploy four people to get everything around the hotel clean again. The dirt is everywhere, while the many street traders also leave their plastic waste behind every night, clogging up the sewers. So we clean it up, because otherwise nobody would do it,’ he tells us at the beginning of another long working day. (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2021, p. 12)

In general, in the transition from 2019 to 2021, the newspapers increasingly tended towards a decolonised discourse. However, while *Het Laatste Nieuws* also mainly used a decolonised discourse in 2019, it adopted a more colonised style in 2021.

5. Data-analysis: evolution

As the aim of the data analysis has been to apply the analytical scheme, the features had to be counted in the data. This resulted in the following datasets: Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5, respectively concerning each of the Flemish newspapers: *De* *Morgen*, *Het* *Laatste* *Nieuws* and *De* *Standaard*.

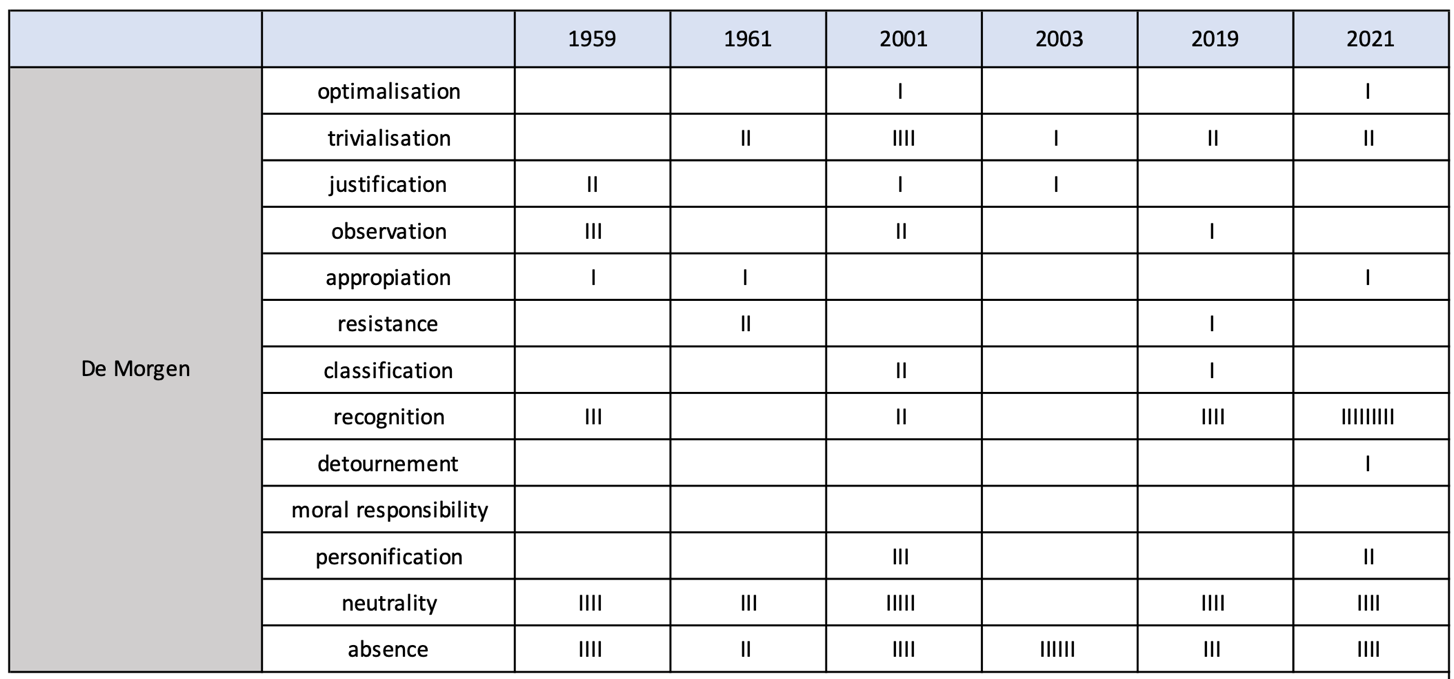


Figure 3: rhetorical features De Morgen

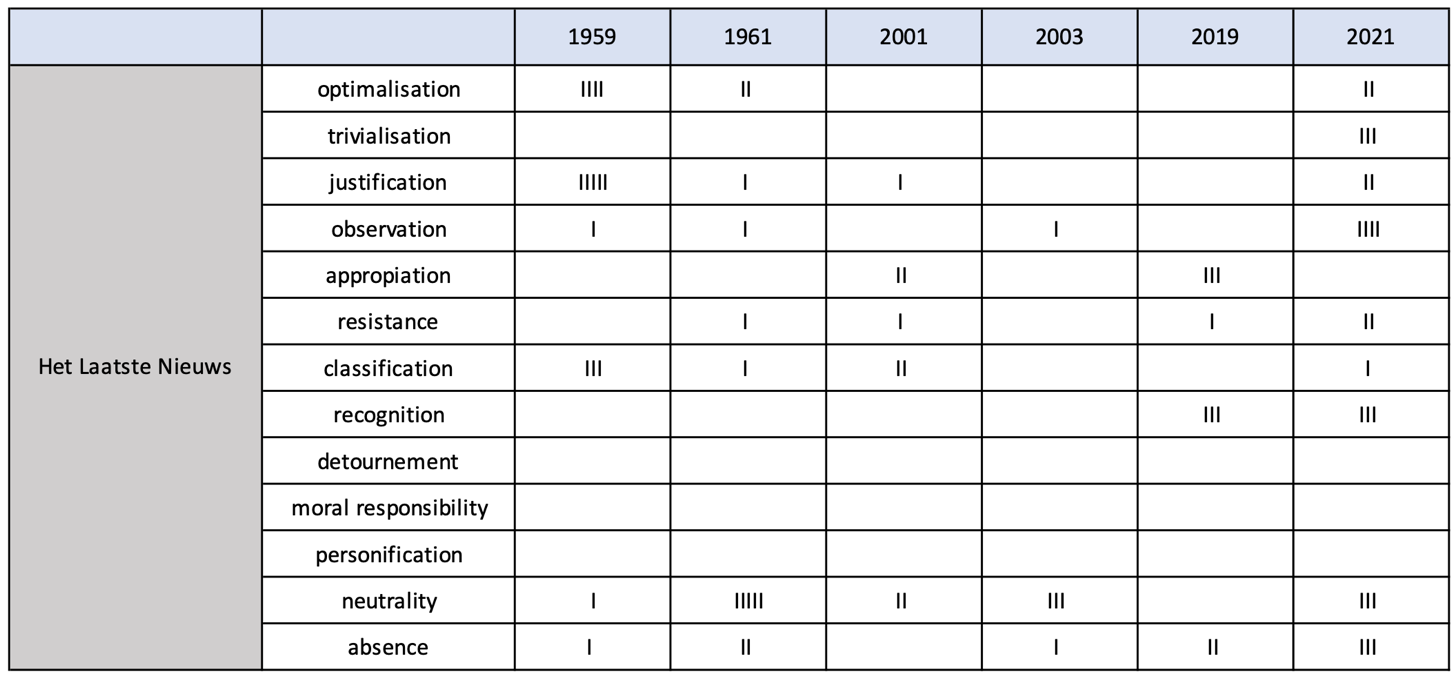


Figure 4: rhetorical features Het Laatste Nieuws

Afbeelding met tafel

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 5: rhetorical features De Standaard

To summarise these results, the following bar charts were made. One newspaper by one, it is possible to see the evolutions in using (de)colonial rhetorical features (Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8).

Figure 6: Summary of used features De Morgen

Figure 7: Summary of used features De Standaard

Figure 8: Summary of used features Het Laatste Nieuws

In the data also some other trends could be noticed. As they are not the subject of this study, they will only be highlighted shortly. Nevertheless, these could be interesting aspect to consider analysing in future studies. These trends are related to differences in the newspapers. The first trend is that the expected effect of the ideology not directly could be identified in the data. In the literature overview, multiple authors concluded major differences between the conservative newspaper *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* (Van Bever, 2005; Smits, 2013). However, in this study, *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* were closest to each other concerning trends around the pivotal moments. Also, studies in the literature overview selected *Het Laatste Nieuws* as the most decolonized. On the contrary, especially more recently, an opposite effect could be identified in this research.

Another trend that could be identified, was the underreporting in some newspapers. *De Standaard* always scored highest on amount of newspaper articles concerning Congo. *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* had less articles to be found. *De Morgen* mainly in 2021, whereas *Het Laatste Nieuws* presented those difficulties in the period of 2019. As discussed shortly in the literature overview, underreporting could also indicate certain discourses used by the journalist in newspapers. In general, the most underreported pivotal moment seemed to be the official apologies of the State of Belgium. A last trend that could be interesting to mention, is the words used in the newspapers. *Het Laatste Nieuws* used in 1959 almost consistently the word ‘nigger’ to describe the Congolese population, in contrast to ‘blacks’ in the other two newspapers. In 2021 a difference that come afront was how *De Standaard* was the only one using Democratic Republic of Congo, while the others always used the simplified version: Congo.

With the data analysis now complete, Figure 9 presents an overview of the complex set of results.

Figure 9: Timeline of the results

This figure demonstrates how the representation of Congo has generally become increasingly decolonised. The three pivotal points in the timeline are clear turning points that partially explain this evolution.

6. Conclusion and discussion

There is a social debate about colonialism in Belgium and this debate often features in the Flemish press, more specifically in Flemish newspapers. The aim of this study was to determine whether the representation of Congo in these Flemish newspapers is still colonised. More specifically, the central research question was “How is Congo represented in Flemish newspapers, and what impact did three key moments in Belgium and Congo’s history on this representation?”, which follows up on the academic literature stating that those discourses are still colonised and adding the possibility of identifying an evolution in those discourses over time. This possible evolution was studied by considering three pivotal moments: the independency of Congo in 1960, which represented a crisis moment; the official apologies issued by the purple-green government in 2002, which represented a moment of reconciliation; and the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, which served as a topical addition. Two hypotheses were formulated:

1. A positive evolution in terms of the representation of Congo in Flemish newspapers occurred between 1960 and 2021.

2. An evolution in used discourses by Flemish newspapers in representing Congo can mostly be seen around key moments in history.

The second hypothesis was broken down into three subhypotheses, each focusing one key moment.

2a. The Independence Day of Congo on 30 June 1960 had a negative impact on these discourses.

2b. The official apologies in 2002 of the Belgian purple-(green) government from 1999 to 2007 had a positive impact on these discourses.

2c. The Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020 had a positive impact on these discourses.

Using a combination of critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis, three Flemish newspapers were analyzed: De Morgen, De Standaard and Het Laatste Nieuws.

Spurr's 1993 analytical scheme formed the basis of the basis of this research. The present study also employed a simplified version of Smits’ rhetorical features. This scheme lent itself perfectly to this analysis, as it is a very easy way to analyse newspapers to identify a discourse. However, there has been chosen to add to this scheme, as it could only capture a one-sided view of reality. This way it was possible to recognise decolonised features as well as colonised ones. After several rounds of data collection and adjustments, some conclusions were drawn. First, Spurr's analytical scheme (1993) could benefit from a modern update. For example, there was little mention in his scheme of features in which the past is denied. The use of terms such as 'colonial empire' - whereby the colonial past is justified, is also difficult to attribute to the existing rhetorical features, as is criticism of contemporary decolonisation initiatives. Second, the introduced new decolonised concept is not yet perfected. The rhetorical feature of recognition often proved too narrow during this study and could thus benefit from expansion. There is also room for an additional feature, as when criticism is expressed – because now it can’t be categorised into the feature of recognition, but the outing of critics is stronger than absence.

Data analysis confirms the first hypothesis. There has been indeed an evolution in the discourses used by Flemish newspapers. Although the discourses today are not yet fully decolonised, there has been a major evolution since Congo’s decolonisation. The effects of the three pivotal moments are more complex. In general, the independency of Congo had little impact on the newspapers’ representations of Congo. Hypothesis 2a is therefore rejected. However, the official apologies issued by the purple-green government did have the expected positive effect. More decolonised rhetorical functions were found in the newspaper editions of 2003 than in the editions of 2001. Finally, the positive effect of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 was also confirmed, at least in *De Morgen* and *De Standaard*. In 2021, decolonised characteristics prevailed. Moreover, more active rhetorical features were used, compared to more passive features in 2019 and 2003. *Het Laatste Nieuws*, however, was an exception; after 2020, there was a turnaround, whereby the balance tended towards a colonised discourse in 2021 more than in 2019.

In the conclusion of this study, it is important to interpret the results obtained during the course of research. For this purpose, this section provides an overview of the academic literature on the subject of colonial discourses in newspapers. Previous research indicated that the contemporary discourses used when discussing Congo is still colonial (Blijden, 2018; Van Bever, 2005). However, this study succeeded in offering an answer to the question whether an evolution has occurred in the common history of Belgium and Congo. While a colonial discourse could indeed still be identified, especially in the newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws,* - it seems to have reached a ‘final phase’. Following independency and the other two pivotal points considered in this research, decolonial rhetorical characteristics became increasingly dominant in the considered newspapers.

How can this evolution be explained? First, the independency of Congo was seen as a crisis moment in the relationship between Congo and Belgium and a more negative discourse was expected in the year that followed. However, a slight positive tendency has instead been identified. An explanation for this could be found in the literature. Van Wymeersch (2008) states that neither Belgium nor Congo ever wanted a complete breakup with the other, as there were too many economic interests at stake. This could explain that a major shift in the prevailing discourse did not take place.

Second, a possible moment of reconciliation was examined: the apologies of Prime Minister Verhofstadt and Foreign Minister Louis Michel in 2002, which occurred during the reign of a unique purple-(green) government. As expected, a clear tendency towards a more decolonised discourse was found here. This shift is underexposed in the academic literature. However, a turnaround in a relationship like this is believed to be brought about by an emotionally layered moment, which this period of inquiry commissions and official apologies in Belgium’s name could represent (Verbeke, 2011; Verbeeck, 2007).

Following this idea, a third pivotal moment was studied. The 2020 Black Lives Matter movement caused a worldwide outcry against, among other issues, colonial supremacy and resulted in considerable media coverage (Goddeeris, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that such a global phenomenon had a positive influence on the coverage of the former Belgian colony.

However, when examining the various Flemish newspapers, some differences became clear: *Het Laatste Nieuws* scored consistently higher on colonised rhetorical features. What was most remarkable, is the shift towards a more colonised discourse after 2019. The academic literature has no conclusive answer for this trend, but some explanatory aspects are plausible. Kunelius and Ruusunoksa (2008) state that news stories became more polarized, with an increased entertainment function, due to the rising competition of social media. Considering that *Het Laatste Nieuws* is defined as a popular newspaper, it is plausible they take a more distinct viewpoint in their discourses. The Black Lives Matter movement can be seen as contesting this polarisation, but also contesting the rise of more ‘everyday racism’, which seems to be more and more accepted (Schaap & Essed, 2017; De Morgen, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that the two more decolonised newspapers, considered being more nuanced and intellectual, connect more with this side of the dialogue.

This study represents a condensed version of contemporary reality. A master's thesis can never encompass the whole of reality and due to pragmatic reasons, the dataset of newspapers and editions was limited. Second, selection bias is a common risk in all types of discourse analysis. In this thesis, it must be considered that provided hypotheses biased what could and couldn’t be recognised as rhetorical features. Lastly, as seen in the data, a more general trend towards decolonisation in the discourses was found. Between the pivotal moments the discourses also shifted slightly, as for example seen in 1961 – 2001, and more recently, in general more active decolonised features could be found.

Because of these limitations, some suggestions for further research are considered. It is recommended studying the results in a broader sense in the future, for example, by analysing other newspapers and more editions of the newspapers, as well as media such as cartoons, school handbooks and social media. Note that the reality of news coverage, certainly in its contemporary form, is extremely complex and therefore requires a more modern and complex analytical scheme, which this study has taken first steps towards developing.

Ultimately, this thesis offers an interesting, innovative and contemporary view on Belgium’s representations of Congo, with the potential to use the results of this study to further analyse these representations in the future.

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Appendix

Data: drie Vlaamse kranten

Photo: Vooruit (1959, April 8). Het zal nu wel beter gaan in Congo! Vooruit, p. 1

Newspaper editons:

1. De Morgen
   1. 1959: 10 articles concerning the period January - April
   2. 1961: 10 articles concerning the period September - December
   3. 2001: 9 articles concerning the period January – April
   4. 2003: 9 articles concerning the period September - December
   5. 2019: 10 articles concerning the period January – April
   6. 2021: 10 articles concerning the period September - December
2. De Standaard
   1. 1959: 8 articles concerning the period January – April
   2. 1961: 9 articles concerning the period September - December
   3. 2001: 10 articles concerning the period January – April
   4. 2003: 10 articles concerning the period September - December
   5. 2019: 10 articles concerning the period January – April
   6. 2021: 9 articles concerning the period September - December
3. Het Laatste Nieuws
   1. 1959: 9 articles concerning the period January - April
   2. 1961: 10 articles concerning the period September - December
   3. 2001: 9 articles concerning the period January – April
   4. 2003: 10 articles concerning the period September - December
   5. 2019: 7 articles concerning the period January – April
   6. 2021: 10 articles concerning the period September - December

1. It must be noted that this is about discourse analysis. Objectivity and factual reporting are both key concepts in journalism (Jensen, 1974), which does not directly indicates it is parallel tot the discourse carrying the same name. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)