

The Dutch-Speaking Community and its Challenges in the Twentieth Century

Marc van Oostendorp

1. Introduction

Dutch is a West-Germanic language which has an official status in three nation-states: the Netherlands, Belgium and Surinam. Altogether, the number of speakers of Dutch approximates 22 million, according to the Dutch Language Union (Nederlandse Taalunie, NTU), the official body to which the Dutch and Flemish governments have outsourced their language policies, as well as all policy connected to Dutch-language literature. The NTU notes on its website that for this reason, Dutch counts as the 8th biggest language within the European Union, and the 37th biggest language in the world in terms of the number of native speakers.¹

From the point of view of European language policies, the Dutch-speaking community in Europe is interesting for a number of reasons. One of these is that it consists of two culturally rather different groups: the Dutch and the Flemish. Another reason is that these two groups do not just work together very closely, but have decided to effectively establish a common linguistic policy which is quite unique in the world. A third reason is that Dutch enjoys a rather special status among the official languages of the European Union; it does not belong to the group of bigger languages such as German, Polish or Italian. But it is sometimes considered to be the 'biggest of the smaller languages of Europe' since the number of its speakers is larger than that of e.g. the Scandinavian languages, Czech or (European) Portuguese.

This article will focus mostly on the point of view of the Netherlands, even though the Flemish counterpart of things will also be taken into account. We will show that the Dutch language attitude at the beginning of the 21st century is a rather relaxed one; the average Dutch person does not seem to suffer from a lot of anxiety regarding the state of his language, even though of course occasionally certain concerns are expressed. We will also demonstrate that this attitude is not without justification. There are at present no immanent dangers threatening Dutch in the Netherlands. At the same time, this does not mean that the language policies in the Low Countries leave nothing to be wished for.

2. The Dutch Language Union and other aspects of formal language policy

Officially established in 1980, the NTU is a common government body for the Dutch and Flemish governments. All policies regarding the Dutch language and literature have been delegated to this particular body.

In Van Oostendorp (2008) I have given an overview of the activities and structure of the NTU around the change of the millennium (1995-2005). This structure is still in shape, except that Surinam became involved in the organization as an observer in December 2003. Here I will briefly summarize the main points about the structure of the organization.

Formally, the NTU is guided by the ministers of culture of the participating countries, who alternate chairmanship. The day-to-day administrative business is conducted by a Secretariat-General, which has its seat in The Hague, very close – at about 1 km distance – to the seat of the Dutch Parliament. The Secretariat-General employs both Dutch and Flemish officers, and, although this is not an official policy, the position of Secretary General alternates between a Dutch and a Flemish high official in practice. Because of its international character, the policy of the NTU is not under direct control of either of the national Parliaments; rather there is an 'Inter-Parliamentarian Committee' in which representative members of both parliaments have taken their seats. A final organ of the

1. <http://taalunieversum.org/taal/vragen/antwoord/4/>; checked on January 7, 2010

NTU which is worth mentioning in this connection is the Council for the Dutch Language and Literature, which consists of a number of 'experts', such as scholars, literary authors and representatives of institutions of secondary education.

According to a recent English-language brochure, "The aim of the Language Union is to support users of Dutch around the world so that the language can continue to be as dynamic and vigorous as it is today." This may suggest a rather unwarranted optimism about the possibilities of state language policy, but in actual practice, the NTU is involved in a number of activities of (mostly) corpus planning. In recent years, it has invested for instance in subsidies for various electronic dictionaries, in tools for machine translation and other computational methods, etc.

For the past few years, it also has been a goal of the NTU to become more 'visible' for the general audience. One tool it uses for this is by adopting a 'theme' for every year; this concerns topics such as 'the use of English' or 'dialects'. A commercial enterprise conducts an opinion poll about such a topic, and furthermore the NTU organizes a day in which people can listen to presentations about them and have discussions.

Notwithstanding these activities, the NTU is probably best known among the general public for its role in the spelling debates. Both in the Netherlands and in Flanders, orthography is a matter of the law. An NTU committee decides about spelling issues as well as the spelling of individual words; these decisions result in a *Woordenlijst Nederlandse Taal* (Word List of the Dutch Language), commonly known as the *Groene Boekje* (Green Book), after its cover.²

The legal status of the *Groene Boekje* orthography is marginal. Within the Netherlands, it is binding only for people in public office and for school pupils, and no sanctions are specified for using a different spelling even for these two groups. In spite of this, many people seem to attach a very high importance to the fine details of the work of the NTU committee. Since 1995, an official update of the *Groene Boekje* is prepared every ten years. Both in 1995 and in 2005 the announcement of spelling changes caused a lot of turmoil in the press, both in the form of letters to the editor as well as editorials. (The changes typically concern the precise way in which compounds are spelled.) In 2005 this eventually led to an alternative spelling guide, the *Witte Boekje* (White Book) which was adopted by many news media outlets in the Netherlands.³

The debates probably led to some damage in the image of the NTU, although these things are hard to quantify, if only because in the end these debates only played a role for a small elite. In any case, the present PR activities of the NTU should probably be partly seen as a way to repair this image problem. Again, the impact of it is probably relatively small and restricted to a specific group within the population.

Participation in the NTU is important for the Dutch government, since it involves all policies with respect to the Dutch language, which arguably is the most important language of Dutch public life: schools and school exams are generally in Dutch, court cases are held in Dutch, the parliament meets in Dutch, all laws are written in Dutch, etc. Interestingly, this status of the Dutch language is not very strongly anchored in the Dutch law, and not in the Constitution at all.⁴ The most important law is probably the Law on Higher Education (*Wet op het Hoger Onderwijs*) which states (Art. 6a):

Classes should be taught and exams should be offered in Dutch.⁵

2. *Het Groene Boekje. Woordenlijst Nederlandse Taal*. Den Haag: Sdu, 2005. The NTU also publishes an online edition on its website: <http://woordenlijst.org/>

3. Genootschap Onze Taal. *Witte Boekje. Spellinggids van het Nederlands*. Utrecht: Spectrum, 2006.

4. Since the 1990s in particular Christian(-Democrat) parties have proposed several ways of implementing the Dutch language, but with no success. The present government, which is dominated by these parties, made it own of their goals in 2007 to come with a good proposal for a new article with the Constitution, but so far with no visible success.

5. Het onderwijs wordt gegeven en de examens worden afgenomen in het Nederlands.

But which also immediately mentions two possible exceptions:

- a. when the teaching concerns the language in question, or
- b. if the specific nature, the structure or the quality of the teaching, or otherwise the origin of the participants requires such, conforming a code of conduct which has been established by the authorities.⁶

It goes without saying that the second clause makes the whole article all but vacuous; a result of this is that at present about 80% van Master level education is conducted in English.

It may also not be a coincidence that the most explicit law has been formulated exactly in the real of higher education, one of the very few areas of the public sphere where Dutch has suffered a considerable loss. I will say more on language attitudes among the Dutch population in section 3.

To some extent, the position of the 'second official language' of the Netherlands has been taken care of in more detail: in particular since Frisian (another West-Germanic language) has been recognized as a regional language by the Dutch government when signing the European Charter for Regional Languages or Languages of Minorities. The Dutch government guarantees education in Frisian at all possible levels, the right to use Frisian when addressing oneself to the authorities of the province of Fryslân, etc. However, also in this case the adoption of all these laws can be seen as a sign of the relative difficult state in which Frisian currently as compared to its much larger sister.

I think that at the same time it is fair to say that concerns about Frisian are often seen with some irony by the Dutch intellectual community. Well know was a 2000 column by the influential columnist Ronald Plasterk in the equally influential political tv show, in which he stated: ""Why does ever yone in Holland believe that Frisian is a separate language, while there are more speakers of Turkish in Amsterdam than speakers of Frisian in Leeuwarden [the Dutch name of the capital city of the province of Fryslân]? Is that racism? . . . I am not opposed to Frisian, but ever ybody should understand that this language is a myth." In spite of this ironic attitude, the status quo of Frisian goes uncontested. Interestingly, Plasterk became the minister of Culture and Education in 2007, and as such responsible for the Dutch policies with respect to Frisian. One of his first official acts was to give a speech in Frisian which he claimed that "his heart beat warmly" for the language.

The fate of other minority languages is more worrisome. Two other regional minority languages - Low Saxon and Limburgian - have received some level of recognition, as well as two non-regionally defined languages - Yiddish and Roma-Sinti. From a financial point of view, these recognitions are completely insignificant, and also otherwise it is easy to demonstrate that the recognition is symbolic in each of these cases. The number of speakers of Yiddish is very small, and mostly consists of Americans and Israelis who live as expatriates in Amsterdam; furthermore, these people speak eastern dialects of Yiddish, rather than the 'autochthonous' western Yiddish spoken in the Netherlands, when the language succumbed to a Dutch state policy directed towards making all Jews speak Dutch in all circumstances, even at home and in the synagogue.

A milder version of a similar policy has become more popular in the 2000s for the larger minority languages such as Turkish and Moroccan Arabic (or Berber). Until the mid 2000s, various policies had been in place which offered at least part of the school education for children of ethnic descent in their native language. The last version of this policy, called

6. a. wanneer het onderwijs met betrekking tot die taal betreft, of

b. indien de specifieke aard, de inrichting of de kwaliteit van het onderwijs dan wel de herkomst van de deelnemers daartoe noodzaakt, overeenkomstig een door het bevoegd gezag vastgestelde gedragscode.

Onderwijs in Allochtone Levende Talen, was abolished in 2004, and not replaced by any similar policy.

Finally, we should mention Sign Language, which similarly has suffered from neglect. A state committee, led by Anne Baker, a professor of linguistics at the University of Amsterdam, advised formal recognition of the Sign Language of the Netherlands as early as 1997. After this, almost nothing happened, except that a few measures have been taken to grant Deaf people the right for sign language interpreting in some cases.

3. The language attitude of the Dutch

The current attitude of the Dutch towards their own language is an intriguing one.