This special double issue of Multilingua is intended to honour professor Roland Willemyns (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium) on the occasion of his emeritus status and 65th birthday. The intentionally ambiguous title ‘Changing standards in sociolinguistic research’ both reflects the contributors’ (and Willemyns’s) concern with the evolving form of (and attitudes towards) the various standard languages they focus on, as well as their ambition to explore new approaches to language variation and language history, beyond the classic paths of sociolinguistic research.

Willemyns started his research career in the mid 1960s as a dialectologist and philologist of Dutch at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel under the wings of Adolf Van Loey, one of the foremost scholars of Middle Dutch. Soon after succeeding his supervisor he expanded his research area to the budding field of sociolinguistics. As one of the pioneers of sociolinguistics in the Dutch language area, he made groundbreaking contributions to the study of the social stratification of dialect and standard in Flanders and the Netherlands, including authoritative work on dialect loss and changing attitudes to the standard and its norms. The perennial opposition between Dutch and French in Belgian history further provided him with one of the most fascinating case studies for research into the sociology of language. Both his work on the Germanic/Romance language border and the classic case of Brussels as a laboratory for language planning and language shift assured his connection with the international sociolinguistic community. Meanwhile, he continuously applied the newest developments in the field of sociolinguistics at large to the historical study of the development of Dutch, culminating in at least three state-of-the art ‘histories of Dutch’ that fundamentally changed the standards for any future research in that domain (Burger, de Vries & Willemyns 1993; Willemyns 2003; van der Sij & Willemyns 2009). The urge to break away from communis opinio language historiography in favour of corpus-based historical sociolinguistics involving original doc-
documents from all layers of society also percolated into his most recent work on the historical sociolinguistics of 19th century Dutch. One can only eagerly look forward to the pending publication of his latest book *The story of Dutch*, the first comprehensive work in English on Dutch language history in almost thirty years (ever since Donaldson 1983).

Instead of compiling an umpteenth *liber amicorum* with a series of shorthand micro case studies for his *emeritate*, we chose to do justice to the ongoing inspiration of Roland’s work with a colloquium in Bruges in 2009, exploring new and innovative approaches to a selection of his key research themes. The present collection of new articles brings together the most inspiring and thought-provoking presentations from that conference, complemented with a number of invited contributions. Long-time colleagues and friends of the celebrated emeritus team up with young voices in the field of sociolinguistics to address topics that border on Willemyns’s main areas of expertise. Some contributors present a state-of-the art overview complementing Roland’s earlier work, others fundamentally question or reshuffle ‘commonly accepted linguistic truths’.

Ana Deumert (Cape Town) ventures into language standardisation theory and practice. Drawing on examples from isiXhosa in present day South Africa, she highlights the omnipresent ideological undertone in standardisation debates but also fundamentally questions the very viability of ‘standard languages’ as a meaningful category in both society and sociolinguistics. The decline of the ideology-laden ‘grand narrative of standardisation’ towards a ‘zombie category’ (‘they are essentially dead, but continue to structure our actions and experiences because we (social scientists and society at large) treat them as if they were real’) mirrors an ongoing discussion in the Dutch language area about the immanent/imminent death of Standard Dutch (Stroop 1998; van der Horst 2008) which was central in much of Willemyns’s (2007) recent work. The issues of destandardisation intertwined in this discussion (both in isiXhosa and Dutch) open new horizons for fundamental discussion on the very nature of standardisation and destandardisation as both linguistic and social processes in the years to come.

Leigh Oakes (Queen Mary, University of London) presents new data on attitudes towards French and English among young French-speaking Canadians. Collected in March 2010 during fieldwork in 4 francophone universities in the province of Quebec, the questionnaire results provide a present-day complement to Willemyns’s (1984, 1989, 1991) work on the sociolinguistic parallels between the multilingual situation in Canada and Belgium. The effectiveness of more than 30 years of massive language planning in Quebec has not affected the ongoing demand for measures protecting French, Oakes shows, nor has the influence of ‘globali-
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Attitudes towards ‘dominant’ English have shifted among youngsters, however, leaving behind the French-English conflict discourse of the 1970s and moving into a more complex and multi-layered identity debate with a designated place for English in the multicultural Quebec society of the 21st century.

Andrew Linn’s (Sheffield) contribution shifts the scene to language norms and functions in the history of Norway, one of the few countries likely to rival Belgium when it comes to perennial language planning endeavours. Against the backdrop of an appeased ‘cohabitation’ between Bokmal and Nynorsk Linn pursues the idea of present-day ‘parallel-lingualism’ in business and university settings, ‘the principle of using two languages in parallel with each other rather than automatically selecting one over the other.’ The competing varieties at play in these domains are no longer the two standards for Norwegian but Norwegian and English, instead, a situation causing concern worldwide (including Belgium, cf. Willemyns 2001). Linn’s passionate plea for academic agency in the struggle against functional erosion of national languages is in itself another call for changing standards in (linguistic) research.

Richard Watts (Berne) re-explores the tension between language, dialect and national identity in Switzerland and in the UK, a theme on which Willemyns has published throughout his career in the Flemish context (Willemyns 1997, 2005). Applying Dennis Preston’s (2010) notion of the linguistic attitudinal cognitorium — a speaker’s set of beliefs about a specific variety — and Deumert’s (this issue) aforementioned concept of standardisation as a zombie category to standard/dialect attitudes among the Swiss and the British, Watts illustrates the highly varying pervasiveness of standard ideology discourses between both countries. The British urge to spread a language history that had the polished and ‘best’ variety of English as an inevitable outcome was supported by processes of deliberate scholarly revisionism. It comes as no surprise that the very same mechanisms were also applied to some of the most original sources for ‘pure’ or ‘natural’ English: folk songs. Whether the actual performers (or, in language, the actual speakers) will have the last word, eventually, remains to be seen.

Apart from speaking in his own specialist voice as a scholar of language contact and conflict, Jeroen Darquennes’ (Namur) contribution reveals the mature academic offspring of his former supervisor (and Willemyns’s close academic ally and friend) Peter Nelde.

Starting out with a discussion of language conflict situations involving European language minorities, Darquennes presents a tour d’horizon of methodological concepts that have evolved from present-day contact linguistics over the past few decades. He detects the urgent need to support the ambitious EU programmes in the realms of language protection,
preservation and promotion with sound multi-disciplinary scholarly knowledge, the outcome of which should be ‘a comparative study of the sociology of corpus planning in the context of autochthonous European language minorities.’ It comes as no surprise that Willemyns's projects on the historical sociolinguistics of language contact in Belgium (Willemyns & Vandenbussche 2006) have been integrated in those plans as one of the models for comparative research across Europe.

Klaus Mattheier (Heidelberg) supplies a further ambitious historical counterpart to Darquennes’ desired research programme, by foregrounding an encompassing study of the ‘social and cultural history of European languages’. Next to classic ‘historical grammar’ and historical pragmatics, this comparative European language history should include the history of language use, language contact and language awareness. Ambitious as this may seem, ever since the early 1980s various German scholars (including Mattheier) have carried out a series of sub-projects directly linked to this research programme, thus constructing the oft-neglected roots of historical sociolinguistics in the German Forschung. Mattheier’s (1998) work on social language stratification in Germany during the long 19th century also inspired Willemyns’s (2009) groundbreaking project series on language use and language variation in Flanders between 1794 and 1914, which became the very first research cluster in socio-historical linguistics in the Low Countries at large.

Joachim Gessinger’s (Potsdam) work and PhD research team in the early 1990s also provided inspiration for Willemyns’s first studies in historical sociolinguistics. His present contribution can qualify as an excursion into recent socio-historical linguistics, tracking the perception of language varieties and language variation in the Berlin/Brandenburg area. Using both recordings from the 1960s and recent language data (50 years onwards) Gessinger suggests that his analyses may indicate that a new regional standard variety is currently developing in Brandenburg. Elements of folk linguistics and perceptual dialectology once again play a central role in this contribution, which also ventures into the realm of destandardisation issues.

Hans Van de Velde, Mikhail Kissine, Evie Tops, Sander van der Harst and Roeland van Hout (Utrecht / Université Libre de Bruxelles) bring the standardisation debate home to Willemyns’s language area with an article on spoken standard Dutch in the Netherlands and Flanders. Willemyns published extensively on the language-external factors that shaped the pluricentric Dutch language territory (and continue to do so) and played an active role in the ‘integrationist’ efforts of the Dutch Language Union, the official language planning body supporting and promoting the Dutch language. Using both radio recordings spanning a 60-year period and present-day data from the northern and southern part of
the Dutch language area, the authors look into actual phonetic and/or phonological convergence or divergence between northern and southern Dutch. Their evidence indicates that although ‘two divergent pronunciation standards (are) developing on autonomous grounds’ there is no risk whatsoever of ending up with ‘two divorced standard languages’ any time soon.

The closing contribution to this issue presents the latest ‘offspring’ of Willemyns’s major research thread on the social history of 19th century Dutch. Rik Vosters (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Gijsbert Rutten (Leiden) tackle the myth of linguistic degeneration in the Southern Low Countries during the 18th and 19th centuries. Contrary to what many reference works have claimed ever since the 19th century, the ‘generally accepted truth’ of spelling chaos and lack of orthographic tradition in Flanders does not stand the test of archive research. Vosters and Rutten thus provide yet another case study that illustrates how the real standardisation of Dutch as observed in original documents was overshadowed by philological historiography driven by a standard language ideology. As such, the article does credit to both the ongoing inspiration of Willemyns’s work and the device of his academic alma mater in Brussels: scientia vincere tenebras, ‘to conquer darkness through science’.

As a guest editor I am extremely grateful to Richard Watts for welcoming this collection of articles in *Multilingua*. Dick, thank you very, very much for this gesture of academic respect and friendship to a man we both cherish and for the patience and understanding shown during the editorial procedure.

All contributors deserve a big thank you for sharing their engaging scholarship and for their punctual collaboration. I can only hope that one day I will be able to return some of their willingness ‘far beyond the call of duty’ to bend tight academic schedules, other deadlines and administrative burdens in order to make this issue possible in an extremely short timeframe.

Finally, in the name of all the contributors I wish to thank the intended recipient of this modest token of honour, friendship and respect for his inspiring work both in the past and in the many, many years to come. Roland, thank you for changing and raising the standard in your and our academic field, not in the least in what it means to be a true Doktorvater. Da je ze nog vele meug meugen.

References


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