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Pluricentric principles in the standardization of 19th century Dutch.

Abstract. As the official language of Belgium and The Netherlands Dutch is in a so-called pluricentric position. After the political split of the Netherlands at the end of the 16th century, French had become the prestige language of the southern Netherlands, later to become Belgium. From 1830 onwards, the year Belgium officially came into existence, a so-called Flemish Movement tried to improve the position and the status of Dutch. Several problems emerged simultaneously, one of them being that the Dutch language as it had been preserved in the southern parts was not at all prepared to assume the functions its advocates had in mind. Among other things it needed standardization, and the inevitable consequence seemed to be a steady rapprochement with the northern norm. Yet, not all Flemish activists agreed on the fact that strengthening the ties with the Dutch was a necessary, or even a desirable, evolution. Two factions may be discerned: those advocating domestic standardization (on the basis of the local dialect varieties), called particularists, and those insisting that the Flemings should take over as much as possible the standard language norms existing in the North. They are called the integrationists. Two interesting events, the so-called orthography debate and the first “Dutch Congress” in Ghent 1849 marked decisive victories for the integrationist tendency. Particularism, although by no means discarded, was from then on condemned to be an opposition movement, no longer capable of seriously challenging the integrationist dominance of the Flemish movement. Finally, the theoretical implications of this historic situation as far as language planning and linguistic policy are concerned, are discussed.

1. Introduction. Dutch is the official language of Belgium and of The Netherlands and may, consequently, be considered a pluricentric language in the sense of Kloss (1978, 66–67), where it means a language with several interacting centers, each providing a national variety, with at least some of its own norms. Clyne (1992) quotes the examples of Standard German in Austria, Standard French in Canada and Standard Dutch in Belgium, which he all labels as “a variety of a standard language limited to a certain national area” (Clyne 1992, 2). Bister & Willemyns (1988) developed the notion of “peripheral varieties” which are opposed to the variety of the “Center of gravity” of
standardization. Here too, Standard Dutch in Belgium and Standard German in Austria are explicitly mentioned.

As of today the pluricentric or peripheral character of Belgian Dutch is simply a matter of scientific categorization. It used to be different in the 19th century, when it was not always sure which way the standardization process of Dutch in Flanders was going to go. Indeed, after the renewal of interest following the short reunification of the northern and southern Netherlands from 1814 to 1830, the interest in standardization was very keen in a certain class of the Dutch-Belgian population. Writers such as Hendrik Conscience and others had started to write successful novels for a large public, a considerable number of people had acquired experience with using Dutch in administrative writing, science in Dutch and especially philological edition and explanation of Middle Dutch texts was very popular among the "men of letters", etc. This intellectual elite, however, experienced that Dutch as it had been preserved in Flanders did not fit the needs of modern written communication. Also, for language political reasons they were convinced that it was necessary to unify and modernize the language. This explains their interest in standardization. Yet, bitter fights were going to be fought on how this standardization should be implemented and it is in this debate that the pluricentric or peripheral issue was of overriding importance. Among other things, the linguistic unity of the Northern and the Southern varieties of Dutch was to serve as a weapon in the domestic fight against the predominance of French, the then prestige language of the country. However, the plea for unity did not convince all supporters of the so-called Flemish Movement to the same extent. We will discuss this in some more detail after a short historical overview.

2. Historical overview.

2.1. In the period directly preceding the political split of the Dutch language territory (second half of the 16th century) language standardization was gradually taking shape (Van den Branden 1956). Consequently, it could be expected that the splitting into two politically separated entities would have dramatic consequences. The center of gravity of standardization, indeed, passed from the South to the North (more or less the present-day Netherlands) which had come out victoriously and as an independent nation from the war against the Spanish rulers. Yet, the cradle of Dutch, Flanders and Brabant, remained under Spanish rule, underwent an economic and cultural decline and
was soon ruled out as far as its influence on the evolution of Standard Dutch was concerned (Van de Craen & Willemyns 1988).

An important part of the Southern political and cultural elite fled to the North, depriving the Flemish community of most of its leaders. Its language could only survive on a dialectic level, the more so since the affairs of state were run by the successive foreign occupying governors in French (Willemyns, 1993). Dutch remained the vehicular language of the majority of the population but it was almost exclusively used in its dialectic form and under a superstructure of French as the language of culture and prestige. Southern efforts to keep up with the northern linguistic evolution eventually could not be maintained (De Vries & Willemyns, 1993). In the North, though, the large number of (mostly wealthy and influential) southern immigrants accounted for a permanent live contact with Southern Dutch, which was, at that moment still, the prestige variety of the language. The written language “created” for the translation of the official *Statenbijbel* (Bible of the States, 1637) was decidedly “southern” in flavor. It became the basis of the subsequent northern written language and writing tradition, thus preventing northern and southern varieties of the language from growing too far apart (Vanden Branden, 1956).

2.2. During the 17th and 18th centuries the unity of the northern and southern language varieties was just a “matter-of-fact statement”, hardly challenged by anyone. The great poets of Holland’s “Golden Century”, especially Vondel, Hooff, Huygens and Cats appeared to be the important models, highly recommended by 18th-century Flemish grammarians and poets. The playwrights (the so-called Rederijkers), too, particularly stressed the predominance, both linguistic and literary, of their northern colleagues (Smeyers, 1959).

2.3. The “myth of a Flemish language”, Suffeleers (1979) claims, was born in 1830 (the year of Belgian independence) mainly by the doing of the Flemish “Roman Catholic traditionalists” and their aversion for the Northern protestant state Belgium had just left. It was indeed the “West-Flemish particularism”, led by fundamentalist priests, which was the hard-core nucleus of resistance against “protestant Holland” and its language variety. According to Gezelle, the most famous 19th-century Flemish poet, the “half Jewish, half heathen High Dutch” endangered the Flemish “soul” even more than French (Willemyns, 1993). Belgium’s French speaking ruling class (Waloons and gallicized Flemings alike) welcomed the notion of a
distinct "Flemish" language: since such a "vernacular" could never enjoy any prestige whatsoever it could easily be ruled out as an official or even a working language of the state.

3. Integrationism and particularism. In 1830 Belgium had become an independent constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system dominated by the bourgeois elite, and a Dutch-speaking majority which was politically powerless since popular vote did not exist and parliament was elected by less than 5% of the population (Lorwin 1972). Both the voters and the elected were rich, powerful and French speaking. Although the constitution proclaimed that the use of language was to be "optional" (Lorwin 1972), in reality French was the only language used in administration and in public life in general, both in the French and the Dutch-speaking parts of the country.

3.1. "Independence" had been preceded by the reunion of Belgium and Holland as one United Kingdom of the Netherlands. This union, although short-lived, was of the utmost importance to the Flemings. They suddenly rediscovered the use of their language for administration, politics, justice and education, areas where it had hardly been used for nearly two centuries. A small group of Flemish cultural leaders and intellectuals was very much influenced by both the Dutch standard language and the new linguistic opportunities. After 1830 they were to form the hard core nucleus of the so-called Flemish Movement, which, at the very beginning was anything but a movement. What was eventually to become a mass movement to enhance the linguistic and cultural rights of Belgium's Dutch-speaking majority, initially appeared to be of interest to only a handful of "taalminnaars en letterkundigen" ("mother tongue enthusiasts and men of letters") as they called themselves. During the initial period they were already split over several political issues which were going to determine and flavor their struggle for the century to come, e.g.:

—"orangism" vs. "belgicism", i.e. opponents and partisans of the re-split of the Dutch language territory after the Belgian "Revolution" causing the collapse of the "Verenigd Koninkrijk der Nederlanden" ("United Kingdom of the Netherlands", 1814–1830);

—anti-clericalism vs. Roman Catholicism, supporters of the liberal and the Catholic parties respectively, the former being op-
posed to, the latter in favor of, religious or clerical interference in state matters.

Yet, defining the position of the Southern variety of Dutch vis-a-vis the Northern one and improving its legal status in the competition with French were the common preoccupations of all factions (Elias & Willemsen, 1973). However, not all Flemish activists agreed on the fact that strengthening the ties with the Dutch was a necessary, or even a desirable evolution. The two factions to be discerned were:

a) those advocating a standard language development on the basis of the local varieties, i.e. a domestic standardization. They were called **particularists**,  

b) those insisting that the northern model should be followed and that the Flemings ought to take over as much as possible the standard language norm as it already existed in the North. They were the **integrationists** (Willemyns, 1993b).

3.2. In retrospect it becomes apparent that a decisive integrational victory had already been gained in the so-called “orthography debate” (Couvreur, 1975). Due to the political split and the lack of contact during the period 1585–1814 the orthography of Dutch had developed differently in the Southern and the Northern parts. In the (northern) Netherlands orthography had gradually become more uniform and in 1804 the so-called Siegenbeek-system was generally (and officially) accepted (De Vroede 1950; Couvreur 1975). The southern situation, on the other hand, was rather chaotic (Suffeleers 1979, 19) and felt by the integrationist faction to be a major handicap for the unity of the language across state borders. A committee, led by J.F.Willems (later to be hailed as the “Father of the Flemish Movement”) devised a spelling system which was, except for a few details, identical with the one in use in the North. Willems and his committee succeeded in overcoming the heavy resistance of the particularist faction in favor of their “own, Southern” system. They also managed to gain government approval and by Royal Decree in 1844 their orthography was proclaimed the only official one (Couvreur 1975, 1463). Some 20 years later both The Netherlands and Belgium agreed on a completely identical orthography known as the “De Vries & Te Winkel-system” (ibid.). From then onwards, orthographic unity never was a problem anymore.  

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condemned to be an opposition movement, no longer capable of seriously challenging the integrationist dominance of the Flemish Movement.

3.3. Another important moment was the convening in 1849 of the first Nederlandisch Congres (Dutch Congress) which was to bring together in Flanders, "men of letters" from both the South and the North. In planning and organizing this Congress, the Ghent based orangist and integrationist faction of which, after Willems' death, F. Snellaert had taken the lead, was actually pursuing a double goal, viz.:

a) jointly favor "the advancement of the Dutch language and literature"

b) strengthen the Flemish Movement in order to force the Belgian government to enlarge the role and function of Dutch as an official language of the country.

In fact, these are but two aspects of one and the same ambition. In trying to rally the Dutch to their cause they hoped to strengthen the integrationist tendency in the Flemish Movement. And by thus demonstrating the linguistic unity of Northern and Southern Dutch they intended to use the prestige of the official standard language of the Netherlands in their domestic struggle against Belgian advocates of French. By ingeniously intertwining both issues and simultaneously stressing both corpus and status planning items, the initiators of the Congress hoped, and eventually succeeded, to determine the evolution in the direction they believed was the only possible one to guarantee ultimate success (Willemyns, 1993b).

3.4. Ultimate success was not to be predicted, though, during the period immediately preceding the Congress. The Dutch in general were rather indifferent to the cause of the Flemish activists (Vanacker 1982) and did not want to interfere in what they erroneously considered to be "domestic Belgian policy". Consequently, only a handful of Dutch "men of letters" attended the Congress, determined moreover, to tackle only the first of the two goals mentioned, viz. the "advancement of the Dutch language and literature", which they understood in a strictly scholarly way. As far as language and linguistics were concerned, they wanted to stick to corpus planning and a scientific, not a (language) political approach. On the other hand, the domestic particularist faction neither participated nor attended.
4. Toward integrating the South and the North. In organizer Snellaert’s view the purpose of the congress was to secure that “the common language would be used in common unity and love” (De Vroede 1950, 294–295) and his letter of invitation stated, among other things that:

—“‘when a nation is split by different governments, one must seek means to give uniform functioning to the different parts of one body’” (Handelingen, 2)

—“‘The congress shall provide means to treat of all things aiming at the preservation of the Dutch stock’” (Handelingen, 3)

Consequently, in his opening speech Snellaert immediately stressed the political significance of the meeting, going beyond the official aim as voiced in the letter of invitation:

“‘Since, so far, trying to keep the Netherlanders together with political ties has failed, let us now try to find means to strengthen the moral ties (“zeedelyke banden”). Let us reach out for each other and help each other mutually’” (Handelingen, 13).

4.1. The papers of the Dutch participants, on the contrary, all stressed the scholarly side. Gerth van Wijk’s presentation would appear to be the most consequential one since his appeal to compose a new grammar and a complete dictionary “for our common tongue” (Handelingen, 85–90) was taken very seriously and eventually lead to the composition of a very extensive dictionary, the Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal (“Dictionary of the Dutch Language”). It was the Dutch linguist Matthias de Vries who started this dictionary, written in the tradition of the Deutsches Wörterbuch of the Grimm Brothers. De Vries got his final instructions from the second Congress in Amsterdam 1850 and started effective work shortly after that (Wils, 1956). It turned out to be a very long-lasting lexicographic enterprise since, although it is nearing its completion now, it has not yet been brought to an end. By 1998 the 40th and last volume will have been published, making the WNT the largest dictionary in the world (De Vries & Willemyns, 1993). From the very beginning financial support was provided by both the Dutch and Belgian governments. Today it is the binational Instituut voor Nederlandse Lexicografie (“Dutch lexicographic Institute”) at the University of Leiden which is in charge of finishing the dictionary (Van Sterkenburg, 1976).

In retrospect the most positive thing to be said about the “First
Congress" is that it was the first of a long series. It will always be the merit of the first and of those who convened it that they made subsequent accomplishments at all possible. For a long time the Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkundige Congresen neither profoundly determined the course and policy of the Flemish Movement nor did they directly influence the situation and status of Dutch in Belgium. Yet, the First Congress was a pioneering event and subsequent ones positively contributed to one of the goals (or at least, strategies) of the Flemish Movement, viz., intensifying contact with fellow Dutch speakers of the North and gaining sympathy and support in The Netherlands for the Flemish cause. So doing, it contributed significantly to what has always been one of the major goals of the Flemish Movement, the "cultural integration of the North and the South".

4.2. The pursuing of integration has, in spite of occasional particularist opposition, continued and grown stronger up to the present day. The "Nederlandse Taalunie" ("Dutch Linguistic Union") is the paramount achievement in integrationism so far. It was installed under a treaty passed by the Dutch and Belgian Governments in 1980, transferring to it their prerogatives in all matters concerning language and literature. This "Nederlandse Taalunie" is composed of 4 institutions:

— a "Committee of Ministers", comprising ministers of both countries;
— an "Interparliamentary Commission", comprising MP's of both countries;
— a "Secretary General"
— a "Scientific Council for Dutch Language and Literature".

Since it would lead too far to go into details here, I refer to my article on the subject (Willemyns, 1984) and will restrict myself to the following: aiming at "integrating as far as possible the Netherlands and the Dutch Community of Belgium in the field of the Dutch language and literature in the broadest sense" (art. 2), the Treaty of Linguistic Union and the resulting Nederlandse Taalunie is:

"undoubtedly a remarkable piece of work . . . and a very unusual occurrence in international linguistic relations, since no national government has so far conceded to a supra-national institution what is generally considered to be its own prerogative, i.e. to
decide autonomously on linguistic and cultural affairs". (Willemyns 1984, 221).

This way the circle is closed again and in 1980, for the first time since 1830, language, literature and culture of both the Northern and the Southern Netherlands are again under the supervision and the auspices of one single body, the Nederlandse Taalunie.

References


