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Dutch in the European Union:
The Language Policy of the “Nederlandse Taalunie”

“The support of the Dutch language requires the continuous efforts and attention not only of the authorities, but of all of us who cherish our Dutch language patrimony.”

Albert II, King of the Belgians

1. Introduction

1.1. During the French presidency of the EU (first half of 1995) the then French minister for European Affairs, Alain Lamarousse, suggested that the number of working languages of the Union be limited to five. Heavy protests from various sides has forced him to withdraw this proposition which would have radically changed the equilibrium between the official languages of the Union as it has been in existence from the very beginning of European unification onwards. Yet, it is clear that the language problems to which Mr. Lamarousse had been referring do persist and that his has not been the last proposition to try to remedy a situation which is often perceived as being too complicated and too expensive. It is also clear that, whatever “solution” one may come up with, is always inevitably to the detriment of the so-called “languages of lesser circulation”. Consequently, the future of these languages within the EU may be considered to be really threatened.

During recent years this problem has been analyzed in a great many books and articles and, inevitable, if a solution is suggested, it is either to change or not to change the present situation. Since these are the two only possible alternatives, there is no way I could escape one of them either. I shall, therefore, discuss various strategies which might enable the so-called smaller languages to avoid a decision which could only result in belittling their status and harming their prestige and I shall mainly concentrate on the example of Dutch and the way the Dutch speaking community in Belgium and The Netherlands is currently trying to defend the status of its language within the European Union.

1.2. Being a federation of 15 countries, the EU has to find a solution to cope with the 11 official languages in use. As of today and according to Decree # 1 of the E. E. C. of 15

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1 “De verdediging van het Nederlands verdient de voortdurende inzet en aandacht, niet alleen van de overheid, maar van allen die ons Nederlands taalpatrimonium ter harte gaan”. In an official speech at the Royal Palace in Brussels on 23 November 1995 (quoted in Knack, 29 November 1995).
April, 1958 all official languages of the member states are official languages of the EU. As a consequence a constant translating and interpreting activity is being displayed. Almost 2 million pages are being translated yearly and 570 full time and some 1600 free lance translators are working on a regular basis. The various institutions of the Union (the Council of Ministers, the Commission and the European Parliament) have some 10,000 meetings a year in which the services of interpreters are used. For 9 languages there are 72 combinations, which urges the presence of 27 interpreters at every meeting. In the case of 13 languages 42 interpreters would be needed at every meeting (Volz 1994, 90). Yet, the daily practice is somewhat different. The full interpreting system is only used for a limited number of meetings. In many cases interpretation is asymmetrical, i.e. from all official languages into only some contact languages. It is, then, taken for granted that all participants are able to understand at least one of these contact languages (Volz 1994, 90). Another habit by which a lot of nuance can get lost during the process, is the use of "indirect translations" (Duthoy & Fasol 1993, 26).

1.3. EU-decrees pass into the legislation of the member states immediately and automatically. They have, therefore, to be translated in every official language right away since, to safeguard judicial security, these translations cannot be left to the legislator of every member state (Labrie 1993, 135 ff). In parliament representatives from 15 countries have to debate as have the officials of those states in the enumerable commissions and committee meetings each and every day. Also, the citizens themselves have a right to address the EU instances directly and it seems inconceivable, that some would have the privilege to do so in their mother tongue, whereas this would be denied to others. In parliament one does not see why those representing Greek or Danish constituencies would not be allowed to use the language of those they represent, whereas politicians elected in France or Britain could do so without a problem. Why should a Belgian or Swedish "Eurocrat" not be allowed to prepare and present his dossiers in his Dutch or Swedish mother tongue and so on? It would only be fair that all of this, which is common practice now, would remain possible in the future. Yet, the more countries join the Union, the more languages are involved, the more urgent it becomes that the Union find a solution to the increasing number of practical problems the enforcement of the present rights involves. At the same time, though, the Union's basic principle, viz. that all citizens enjoy equal rights must not be violated and equal rights inevitably include equal linguistic rights as well.

1.4. Finally, let it be reminded that the problem is not necessarily to be solved in the best possible, in the most efficient or practical way. It is to be solved it in a way acceptable to all 15 countries and 11 language groups involved and that is the really tough challenge. Baetens Beardsmore (1994) points out another challenge, viz. that it might be expected that the solution the EU will eventually adopt for the language problem should be an example and a model for future similar institutions being confronted with similar problems.
2. The present-day situation

2.1. As far as the actual internal functioning of the various EU-institutions is concerned, we mainly refer to the results of an enquiry carried out by Schloßmacher (1994) among a sample of members of the European Parliament and officials and employees of the various institutions of all member states, before Sweden, Finland and Austria had joined. It appears that, on all levels, French and English are by far the dominating languages (90% of all communication is carried out in those two languages by officials and employees). The other 7 languages share the remaining 10%. In internal communication the share of French and English is two thirds for French and one third for English. In external communication though, i.e. with partners outside the EU, the opposite occurs. In oral communication Members of Parliament use English more often than French and they use their own language considerably more than the administration does. In written correspondence with the EU-instances MPs are using other languages than French or English ten to twelve times more often than the staff does.

2.2. Given this situation, many people have been looking for possible alternatives. On the ground of the fact that using all languages on an equal basis would be too expensive and cause too many technical problems, every now and then solutions are advocated to abandon the official use of all languages. Yet, the financial and technical problems are really not as considerable and as consequential as it is often pretended.

2.3. Although the European Parliament (EP) spends one third of its budget for language related costs, the total cost of translating and interpreting in all departments of the EU, as of today, is some 85 million dollars a year which amounts to less than 2% of the total budget of the EU (Naets 1994). In other words, the financial cost is by no means as dramatic as it often sounds. The fact for example, that the member states cannot make up their minds as to where the EP is ultimately to meet, results in a constant commuting between Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg, which costs more than all of the language costs put together (Naets 1994). The leasing of a new parliament building in Strasbourg alone costs 55 million dollars a year, not to mention the cost of two other fully equipped buildings, one in Brussels, the other one in Luxembourg!

2.4. The cost, therefore, is not a real obstacle. What about practical problems? Could they ever be more ponderous than the ones resulting from being forced to make a choice between languages? A paramount question to be solved would be: supposing that some languages should be denied some of the official functions they now possess, on which basis are we going to make the decision, who will be the losers? The problem is urgent mainly as far as oral language use is concerned and it is in this domain that a decision on the relative importance of languages would be needed.

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2 De Standaard, 24 March 1994

SOCIOLINGUISTICA 11/1997
2.5. It is very tempting to try to find a scientific solution to the problem since, on the basis of various parameters, it should not be impossible to determine the status of one language as compared to others. Some of the criteria often quoted are: the numerical strength of the languages (i.e. the number of native speakers\(^3\)), their economic strength (gross national product of native speakers\(^4\)), their extent of usage in economic, political and scientific communication, the number of countries in which they are used as official languages;\(^5\) the contact status of a language, i.e. in how far a language is in asymmetric dominant use or used as a lingua franca.\(^6\) Ammon (1994) has analyzed and documented all those variables in detail. His most important conclusion is that trying to put the statistics to a practical use reveals that they cannot possibly serve the purpose. For one, the status of a language within the EU may be different from its status on a world scale. English, of course, is the most poignant example in this respect. Economic arguments are not a solely decisive factor either, as the status of German reveals. Also, frequently figures appear to be much less important than other factors which are much harder to quantify, viz. attitudes and other psycholinguistic factors. French often appears to benefit from an attitudinal bonus, whereas Spanish and Portuguese are handicapped in this respect and are prevented from playing the important role one might expect on the basis of their international status and number of speakers.

In general, we observe that various languages score differently according to which criterion is used and we lack a standard or measure able to estimate the relative weight and value of various alternatives. The inevitable conclusion is that none of all possible variables or criteria is convincing enough to eliminate certain languages.

3. Reactions and strategies

The description of real language use within the EU has revealed at least two amazing things; viz. that French is used considerably more than English and that the use of the other languages is incredibly restricted. The reactions of the French and the German language groups to this situation have been discussed in Willeyns & Bister (1995) and since space is rather limited I'll immediately pass to the way the Dutch language community tries to cope with the present situation.

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5 German and French are an official language in 3 member states; Dutch, Swedish and English in 2; the remaining ones in only one country.

6 In this respect only English is really important.
3.3. The Dutch speaking community

3.3.1. The defense of the position of Dutch is coordinated by the “Nederlandse Taalunie” (NTU), an international body to which both the Belgian (resp. Flemish) and the Dutch governments have handed over their prerogatives in linguistic and cultural affairs (Willemsyns 1984). Its official position in this matter is to try to safeguard the status of all official languages in the European Union, and its Secretary-General states: “If one is concerned with the prosperity of the EU, one has to advocate a policy of multilingualism. The NTU will be happy to function as a partner and a coordinator in this respect. It decided to be actively involved on four fronts simultaneously, viz. language attitudes, language technology, the propagation of literature and culture and the cooperation with other language communities having similar interests” (Van den Bergh 1994). I will now elaborate on the strategies the Nederlandse Taalunie choose to develop:

3.3.1.1. It made the decision to concentrate its financial and other efforts on language technology, mainly on programs for automated translation, which, in the current state, often tend to neglect all but the three “major languages” of the Union. Only through an intensive use of language technology, the Taalunie feels, will the Union be able to continue its active multilingualism and at the same time see to it that the cost remains within reasonable limits. The danger that lesser used languages will soon considerably lag behind on the language technological level is very real indeed. The automated translation program “Syntran” is used by almost all of the EU institutions and its further development is financed, as far as the so-called larger languages is concerned, by the EU directly. Not so for the other languages which, as the prime ministers of Flanders and the Netherlands have denounced, constitutes a discrimination of those languages (Willemsyns 1996), since, the only way for them to be included is if they are willing to partly pay for the considerable cost themselves. The Taalunie, therefore, has decided to participate financially in the incorporation of Dutch in Syntran as well as in the Eureka project “Eurolang”, an experimental and technologically very advanced new system for automated translation in which Dutch was completely neglected since it originally involved only English, German, Italian and French (Actieplan 1994). According to the Haagse Courant (21 December 1994) the cost to adapt Syntran would be approximately 600.000 guilders. Half of this amount is paid for by the European Commission.

3.3.1.2. As a further step the Nederlandse Taalunie has started negotiations with language planning organizations in other EU-countries in order to combine their efforts and to develop common strategies (Willemsyns 1994). As its Secretary General says: “An extremely important aspect of our linguistic policy regarding the EU is the cooperation with other middle large language groups. It is important indeed to stress that Dutch be considered the smallest of the group of large circulation languages instead of the largest of the group of small circulation languages. Ours is a linguistic community of 21 million speakers which is almost as many as the Portuguese, the Greek an the Danish put together” (Van den Bergh 1994, 30). Consequently the “Actieplan” of the NTU reads: “The Taalunie will suggest to the other language groups to organize a mutual conference on the policy
of the European Union regarding the middle large languages... It should treat of, among other things: language as a legitimate criterion for a conscious cultural policy, the cultural paragraph of the Maastricht treaty, languages interests and the media policy, the policy in the field of literature, the position of the various languages as far as the translation and interpreting policy of the European institutions is concerned. This way a permanent cooperation framework can be – set up between the participating language groups, in view of a mutual defense of their interests on a European scale”.

3.3.1.3. Furthermore, the strategy includes a more substantial support for the study of Dutch abroad, aimed at enhancing the self-evidence of the inclusion of this language in university curricula and, so doing, increasing the prestige of the Dutch language abroad. The experience with the promotion of the study of Dutch at universities abroad (the so-called Neerlandistiek extra muros), shows that in many cases this level of self-evidence has not yet been reached. The “Actieplan” of the Nederlandse Taalunie states in this respect: "Our aim must be that Dutch be treated as a major field of university study in all member states of the E. U.". One cannot but wonder why this has not been accomplished a long time ago already. Anyway, a policy will have to be devised guaranteeing that the presence of Dutch culture abroad becomes self-evident and that the teaching of the language on both the secondary and university levels throughout the world grows more attractive. During recent years a more penetrating promotion of the Dutch language and culture at home and abroad has finally become a top priority for the Nederlandse Taalunie. Until now the Low Countries appear to have very much underestimated the importance of the promotion of their language. As I stated on a previous occasion: "Dutch at this very moment is an official European language but by no means a generally acknowledged European language of culture. In order to safeguard the former position it will have to secure the latter one".7 Dutch culture is very much appreciated abroad but the report of an investigating committee (the so-called “Commissie Gevers”) has demonstrated that cultural manifestations directly related to language are much less popular. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that the positive attitudes towards paintings, sculptures, music etc. be transferred also to language related expressions of culture.

3.3.2. A very interesting aspect is that in some European countries there is a general feeling that the efforts of their very own European civil servants and politicians to secure the position of their own language are largely insufficient. This feeling is not limited to the Dutch language community, as is shown by Domaschnew’s (1994, 34) comment: “In diesem Sinne hat man außerhalb Deutschlands den merkwürdigen Eindruck, daß viele Deutsche selbst im Begriff sind, ihre eigene Sprache im Umgang mit dem Ausland zugunsten des Englischen aufzugeben”.

A similar complaint is indeed often to be heard within the Dutch language community, with the typical touch, though, that very often it is thought that mostly the efforts of the Dutch in this respect are definitely insufficient as opposed to the more militant behavior of the Flemings. Examples of similar complaints are discussed in Willemyns (1994), with

7 Quoted in De Standaard, 25 October 1993
the remark that there is actually a considerable amount of Dutch who are really making substantial efforts to enhance the international prestige of their language and culture. Yet, instances of the opposite seem to be quoted more often. The fact is that, both in Holland and in Flanders we are witnessing a great deal of interest in the mother tongue, but a major difference between Dutch and Flemings may be that both are not necessarily interested in the same aspects. In Holland more attention is paid to the so-called internal aspects, i.e. in which way the language is written, spoken, used, whereas in Flanders it is external aspects on which the attention is focused, viz. the function, the status and the prestige of the language. These aspects correspond to what is known, in sociolinguistics as corpus and status planning. Yet, as far as a common language policy of both countries is concerned, these differing points of view are much more complementing each other than that they should be opposing ones.

3.3.3. Finally, I want to stress the encouraging evolution that Dutch speaking members of the European Parliament as well as cabinet ministers of the Dutch and Flemish governments are currently displaying a very intense activity as far as the defense of the interests of the Dutch language are concerned. Let me just quote a few examples:

- the unfortunate decision regarding the linguistic functioning of the “Merkenbureau” in Madrid has been substantially improved thanks to the prompt reaction of Flemish and Dutch EP-members (Fasol 1994a) who also made sure that similar misfortunes were not to be repeated in the future;
- All Flemish EP-members actively supported the Belgian Defense Minister’s move to have Dutch accepted as an official language of “Eurokorps” (Fasol 1994a);
- The heads of State and governments of the EU on 10 December 1993 seconded a Belgian-Dutch declaration on the equal status of all languages in the EU. It states, among other things, that “the languages of all member states are officially recognized and have to be used as such” and it stresses the principle that “the acceptance of linguistic diversity and of cultural pluralism is a basic fundament of the European construction”.

3.4. The European parliament itself

Even before Sweden, Finland, and Austria had joined, the language problem had been the concern of the EP and it has been organizing hearings, financing research and commissioning specialists’ reports (Baetens Beardsmore 1994). After Lamarousse’s suggestion,

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8 A very unfortunate example has been set, though, by the Dutch Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs, M. Patijn, who declared, on a Taalunie-conference in Brussels 22 of June 1995: “Practical work and the process of decisions are not to be interfered with by principles. One may expect negotiators to be multilingual and to use this capacity whenever it is in the interest of their country. Whenever I send them to Brussels they ought to return with substantial results rather than with the feeling of having saved the fate of the Dutch language” (quoted in De Standaard, 23.06.1995)

9 De Standaard, 11 December 1993
quoted before, the EP, on 19 January 1995 unanimously voted a resolution, the main points of which are: the equal official status of all 11 languages is a basic principle of the EU; appointing working languages would downgrade a considerable amount of EU-inhabitants to “second class citizens”; multilingualism is one of the core values of European culture and civilization; all citizens must be able to address each and every EU-institution in their own language; technical and financial arguments in this respect are irrelevant and shall not be considered.10

4. Conclusions

Evaluating all the information and taking into account the linguistic habits already firmly established, a number of conclusions can be drawn and recommendations made as far as the use of languages in the EU is concerned.

4.1. All languages must keep their status of official EU-languages. Not only should all official documents be available in all languages, it should also be guaranteed that every person or institution can continue to use his own language in his relations to any EU department.

4.2. The (active and passive) use of all languages must be guaranteed and promoted in the EP. Foreign language proficiency should never be allowed to limit the democratic rights of the electorate and the elected. In all formal meetings the use of all official languages has to be made possible technically and practically. Yet, in some cases, symmetrical translation might be acceptable.

4.3. Yet, in every day practice, it will be inevitable that relying on so-called working languages will stay a common habit. Trying to combine this with the democratic rights of the speakers of all languages, a few suggestions can be made. As far as documents is concerned, and taking into account the judicial aspect combined with considerations of efficient functioning, the only way to restrict the cost of translation is: to limit the number of documents being issued in the first place; to formulate stringent rules as to the relative priority of documents (not all documents have to be available in all languages at the same time); to stimulate the development of language technology (automated translation); to promote high quality standards and continued training for translators. As far as interpreting is concerned symmetrical translation is essential in all formal meetings but asymmetrical interpreting has to be accepted in some other ones. For interpreters a similar effort has to be made regarding high quality standards and continued training.

4.4. One should be very much aware, though, that such restrictions will always have consequences going far beyond language use proper. Even the huge majority of those displaying ample multilingual competence and skills feel more at ease using their mother tongue.

10 De Standaard, 20 January 1995
Consequently, having to debate complicated and often very technical, yet important issues in another language always goes to the detriment of the non-native speaker. Even those very competent in a foreign tongue will experience that they lack the possibilities of nuance and stylistic or rhetoric differentiation, native speakers are very comfortable with. It will restrict their persuasiveness and limit their democratic right to participate in debate on the basis of equality. Those being able to make use of their mother tongue will inevitably acquire a much more powerful position and get an undeserved advantage!

4.5. On the other hand, as I advanced in a review of Labrie (1993) in this journal: as soon as practical problems will grow to the point that the every day functioning of the Union has become impossible, the solution to use English as the sole working language will appear to be unavoidable. From the moment onwards that more than one working language is taken into account one will be confronted with the insolvable problem of determining criteria explaining why certain languages should be preferred to the detriment of other ones (Willemyns & Bister-Broosen 1995). Also, it may at least put an end to the already existing discriminating practice of using two or three working languages, and so doing reducing the other ones to second plan languages (Schloßmacher 1996).

4.6. Yet, and in order to stimulate multilingual skills in all EU officials and employees and an enlarged foreign language competence within the Union at large, we will need a real foreign language policy in all member states, a policy securing that foreign language instruction in all countries be not only intensified but also rendered more communicative and more effective. We are confident that foreign language teachers and other experts will find ways to achieve this goal, provided that governments are actively promoting positive attitudes toward foreign language usage and are determined to create a real multilingual environment in every country. They should definitely bear in mind Baetens Beardsmore’s statement that “A recommendable language policy on the European level has to positively discriminate the members of smaller language communities, who are always at risk of having to defend their points of view in a foreign language (of larger circulation), thus restricting their power of dissuasion” (Baetens Beardsmore 1994, 14–15).

5. References

62

Roland Willemyns


sociolinguistica

Internationales Jahrbuch für Europäische Soziolinguistik
International Yearbook of European Sociolinguistics
Annuaire International de la Sociolinguistique Européenne

Herausgegeben / edited by / édité par
ULRICH AMMON · KLAUS J. MATTHEIER · PETER H. NELDE

11

Einsprachigkeit ist heilbar –
Überlegungen zur neuen Mehrsprachigkeit Europas
Monolingualism is curable –
Reflections on the new multilingualism in Europe
Le monolinguisme est curable –
Réflexions sur le nouveau plurilinguisme en Europe

Sonderdruck

Max Niemeyer Verlag
Tübingen 1997