Twenty-first-century perspectives on language planning in the Dutch language territory

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1. Introduction. The title of the present volume invites us to reflect not only on the past but also on the future. The latter appears to be a thrilling perspective for a historical linguist, the more so since, as far as I know, there is no linguistic discipline called “future linguistics,” as opposed to historical linguistics. To predict the future is a hazardous enterprise in every science, yet it appears to be sheer foolhardiness as far as forthcoming linguistic developments are concerned. Just imagine how a colleague of ours might have tried, one century ago, to predict the status, function, and use of Dutch in Belgium in the year 2000! Consequently, most linguists have refrained from engaging in similar predictions.

All of this notwithstanding, the question I want to address in this paper is how Dutch will develop in the future, which factors will be decisive, and what the interrelationship between various linguistic varieties in the Dutch language community will be like. I have been encouraged to thus enter the realm of linguistic futurology by the fact that results of some current research seem to allow for some insight into the future development.

In the Northern Netherlands some linguists currently detect a centrifugal tendency, i.e. increasing variation away from the conventional norm of Standard Dutch. I am referring here to what Stroop (1997a, 1997b) has called Poldernederland (Polder Dutch). An equally centrifugal evolution seems to be occurring in the South, where we are witnessing the development of a linguistic variety often referred to as Verkavelingsvlaams (“partitioned” Flemish) (Van Istendael 1993). The impact of each development is increasing because it coincides with still another factor. The process of dialect loss and leveling, which in Flanders started considerably later than in the Netherlands, is now gaining momentum. Consequently, many people are trading in their dialect in an increasing number of settings and functions for another variety of the language, which very often has a decidedly Southern flavor. The fact that both centrifugal developments, although unrelated, are occurring simultaneously may decisively influence the evolution of Dutch as a pluricentric language in the twenty-first century.

In this paper I will comment on data, observations, and predictions from mainly three sources:

a) Hans Van de Velde's (1996) dissertation on variation and change in spoken Standard Dutch between 1935 and 1993. His point of departure is an observation which, according to him, is shared by both linguists and laymen, viz. that the pronunciation of Standard Dutch is changing and that the discrepancies between the Southern and the Northern pronunciation are increasing (49).

b) a recent book by Jan Stroop (1997b): Poldernederlands. Waardoort het ABN verdwijnt (Polder Dutch. Through which Standard Dutch is disappearing). The second part of the title is another and even more extreme example of the predicting ambition of some linguists, an ambition which decidedly culminates in the very last sentence of Stroop's book: "Het Poldernederlands gaat een glorieuze toekomst tegemoet en wordt het Algemeen Nederlands van de eentwintigste eeuw" (There is a glorious future for Poldernederlands, which will become the Standard Dutch of the twenty-first century).

c) an article by Jan Goossens (2000) in Ons Erfdeel on what the author Geert van Istendael has called Verkavelingsvlaams.

2. Pronunciation. Van de Velde's research is based on radio recordings from 1935 through 1993, both in Flanders and in the Netherlands, an excellent source for the diachronic study of variation in the standard pronunciation in real time (Van de Velde 1997: 56).

- In Southern Standard Dutch the evolution over the past half century has been rather restricted. The norm seems to have remained the pronunciation standard as it was laid down by Blaauquaert in 1934. The /y/ is velar and shows no signs of rasping (keelschrapen), i.e. continues to be the "zachte g" (soft g). The place of articulation of the /l/ is mostly alveolar (tongpunt-r), yet the uvular (huig-r) is a viable alternative. Mostly /l/ and /l/ are pure monophthongs, despite an occasionally occurring diphthongization of /e/. In three subjects from the most recent period, Van de Velde detects a slight tendency toward a voiceless /v/ and /f/ in word-initial position, but in most cases the voiced pronunciation is the customary one.

- Older Northern Standard Dutch, i.e. the variety recorded for the period between 1935 and 1950, shows a monophthongal realization of /e/ and /o/ as well and voiced /v/ and /f/, though accompanied by some partly devoiced variants. /y/ can be both uvular and velar and is only partly devoiced. There is considerable variation in the pronunciation of /l/; the remarkable thing is, though, that in postvocalic position the customary [r] realization is absent in half of the cases.

- This variation seems to have been the prelude to the way these variables are pronounced in Present-day Northern Standard Dutch (after 1950). The innovations most characteristic of this variety appear to be a very distinct devoicing of /v/ and /f/ in word-initial position, a strong rasping (i.e. uvular vibration) of the /y/, and diphthongization of /e/ and /o/ becoming more and more prominent. The vocalic realization of postvocalic /l/ is rapidly gaining ground and trilled realizations have disappeared almost completely.

One of Van de Velde's most interesting conclusions is that over the past sixty years variation has not really become more extensive, neither in the Netherlands nor in Flanders. There is no evidence that the norm has been abandoned, it has just shifted a bit. Around 1935, the time when in Flanders the norm for the standard pronunciation was firmly determined and accepted, the Dutch on the other hand started to slowly shift away from that norm, which used to be also theirs. This shift has gained momentum over the past decades, but has not been followed in the South. The North-South divergence has therefore, says Van de Velde, to be interpreted as a conversion that has not been carried to its completion. This is the point where Van de Velde makes his prediction. In Flanders, he argues, recent substandard varieties, e.g. Verkavelingsvlaams, will put growing pressure on the standard norm, causing increasing variation and eventually change. Most of those changes will be away from the Northern pronunciation habits and be more Brabant-flavored instead (1997: 60-61). However, it is my opinion that on the level of the Standard Language the main source of divergence will remain that more and more the Dutch will be moving away from the official norm of pronunciation, whereas most Flemings will adhere to it.

3. Poldernederlands. Let us now to turn to another "predictor," viz. Jan Stroop, who detects an equally centrifugal change in Northern pronunciation habits. Poldernederlands, as he has labeled it, is responsible for radical phonetic and phonological changes in the North. They have been initiated by the changes already acknowledged by Van de Velde in what he called Present-day Northern Standard Dutch (Modern noordelijk Standaard Nederlands).

The most prominent characteristic of Poldernederlands is the pronunciation aai for the diphthong [ei]: tijd 'time' > taaid, klein 'small' > klaain. Moreover, a similar change (Stroop 1998: 25-26) appears to affect other diphthongs as well: ui turns into [au] (buik 'belly' > bauk, huis > hau); and ou turns into [auu] (getrouwd 'married' > getrawnwd). The trigger for this lowering of diphthongs, Stroop argues, is the diphthongization of the long vowels already mentioned (ee > ei; eu > ui; oo > ou: been 'leg' > bein; neus 'nose' > nius; boon 'bean' > boun). This allows us to set up a nice, old-fashioned structuralist push chain:

- ee > ei (teken 'sign' > teiken)
- ei > aai (kijken 'to look' > kaaken)
- eu > ui (leuk 'nice' > luik)
- ui > au (buik 'belly' > bauk)
- oo > ou (boot 'boat' > boutes)
- ou > auu (getrouwd 'married' > getrawnwd)

In the short vowels Stroop detects the opposite movement, viz. a raising:

- a > e (dak 'roof' > dek)
- e > i (bellen 'to bark' > billen)
On the other hand the so-called Goise r (the vocalic realization of /t/, also called bekakte r ‘posh r’ by Stroop) is not part of Poldernederlands: some speakers use it, some do not.

In the perspective of this paper Stroop’s sociolinguistic comments on the origin and spread of Poldernederlands are more interesting than the systematic linguistic ones he offers. The origin is not, although this is often thought, the language variety of Holland or the Randstad. The real origin is socially and not geographically determined. It is interesting to note Van de Velde’s (1996: 266) remark, though, that “very wide diphthongs with a lowering of the first element [i.e. aai, RW] do not yet occur in our corpus.” The group of speakers responsible for both the rise and the very fast spread of Poldernederlands are young, highly educated females. Three out of four females under forty discussing “serious items” on radio or TV are speakers of Poldernederlands, Stroop says, adding that he has not yet succeeded in finding one male speaker with the same kind of background and using this particular language variety (Stroop 1998: 16-22). We know from many dialectological and sociolinguistic studies that females rather have a tendency to prefer standardized over less standardized varieties and, therefore, it is remarkable that in Poldernederlands it is females who have initiated this evolution away from the standard language. Stroop blames the authorities and the kind of education they provide (or fail to provide) for not having tried to stop an evolution which is, in a structural-linguistic sense, a very natural one and in the field of social behavior obviously a very attractive one.

Is Stroop’s reaction that of an angry schoolmaster shocked by people saying maaid instead of med, or are we indeed witnessing a large-scale change threatening to overthrow the whole phonological system of the Dutch language? And if so, why is Stroop so upset by that prospect? Systematic phonological changes affecting whole (sub)systems are known to have happened in all kinds of languages at all times in history. Grimm’s Law or the Great Vowel Shift for example caused many dramatic changes. Stroop’s reaction, therefore, is only to be understood from the language-political point of view that it may threaten the unity of the language in a pluricentric language community. Substantial change originating in one part of that territory is potentially disruptive in nature. Strangely enough, Stroop does not mention this aspect himself.

Although the change detected so far is restricted to pronunciation, there is reason enough to believe, says Stroop, that a brand-new variety of Dutch is being created and that its spread and generalization will be fast and almost impossible to stop. But then, of course, the inevitability of this conclusion has not been convincingly demonstrated yet. Since our language territory consists of two countries, a change in one of them may represent a challenge indeed. A change in both parts at the same time yet in opposite directions is a much greater challenge still, some might say a potential disaster. Yet, according to many sources, this is exactly what seems to be taking place.

4. Schoon Vlaams. The Southern centrifugal tendency is the development of a variety based on essentially Brabantic characteristics often referred to as Verkavelingsvlaams, or recently by Goossens (2000) as Schoon Vlaams. Although it has been pointed out by some that the genesis of this variety has to be related to the current process of dialect loss, it has not, in my opinion, been emphasized strongly enough that the one is indeed a direct, and probably also an inevitable consequence of the other. The process of dialect loss and leveling, which in Flanders started considerably later than in the Netherlands, is now gaining momentum. Consequently, many people are replacing their dialect in an increasing number of settings and functions for another variety of the language. Thanks to a considerable number of studies over the past decades (cf. Willemyns 1997 for an overview) we know that in many cases the variety replacing the dialect is not the standard language but an Umgangssprache or regional standard which very often has a decidedly Brabantic flavor even outside the Brabant region.

The most characteristic way in which this Schoon Vlaams differs from the norm, Goossens (2000) says, is not pronunciation or even the lexicon but grammar, and the grammatical features in question have been directly borrowed from central southern dialectals (he discusses adjective and pronounal inflection as examples). As a consequence, Goossens argues, we are dealing with two different languages, both of which have their own specific linguistic structure. And he continues (11): “I don’t think that Flanders needs two languages: one which is Dutch for use in official and formal situations, and one which isn’t Dutch for every day usage” (dat Vlaanderen geen behoefte heeft aan twee talen, een die Nederlands is voor officieele en formele aangelegenheden, en een die dat niet is, voor alledag).

This is a strange and even bewildering remark. Adapting one’s linguistic behavior to the formality of the setting is a rather normal and natural reaction, occurring spontaneously in almost any community. It is not different in nature from the diglossic communication patterns which used to exist not only in Flanders but in many other places all over the world as well.

Although I can understand the reasons for Goossens’ language-politically based observations, I am less worried than he is by what he calls a new kind of bilingualism and which I rather consider to be a normal and even unavoidable evolution in cases of spontaneous dialect loss. In most cases of dialect loss the substitute for the disappearing dialect starts out as an Umgangssprache characterized by a large amount of regional interference. The next step usually is the generalization of the standard to the detriment of regional standards, once they have served their purpose. Some people, including Goossens, would prefer to skip the intermediate variant and proceed to the generalization of the standard right away. If at all, this would only be possible with extensive language-planting measures and it would at any rate take a couple of generations.

The real danger, many people feel, is that this informal Schoon Vlaams threatens to spill over into situations where it is not deemed fit and thus to become a rival of the standard language. Such an evolution might indeed be potentially disruptive for the unity of the language territory and this would explain both Stroop’s rejection of Poldernederlands and Goossens’ negative reaction to Schoon Vlaams. This does not mean that they agree, though: “De populaire geschreven van een paar nogal luidruchtige Nederlandse taalkundigen over wat zij het Poldernederlands noemen, blazen de verschillen in Nederland onnodig.
op" (The popularizing publications of a few rather noisy Dutch linguists on what they call Poldernederlands are dramatizing the differences in the Netherlands without reason), Goossens (Goossens 2000: 13) says.

5. Language planning. Since both authors are asking for language-planning measures, let us have a brief look at what kind of action could possibly be taken. From a purely scientific-linguistic point of view, there is no need to do anything at all. We can lean back and observe how things develop. What is happening now does indeed allow for a privileged view on change in progress, a unique chance for any sociolinguist. But if we do not want to narrow down our scope to (participant) observation, if we agree that language-political concern for the status of the Dutch and the unity of the language territory is legitimate, even if linguists, the present-day evolutions may, in view of the circumstances, be considered as rather disturbing indeed.

Successful change, developments which eventually succeed, are mostly the results of compromises between what is called taalnatuur and taalcultuur, i.e. between the natural evolution on the one hand and language-planning efforts to bring it under control on the other hand. Since in these particular cases taalnatuur has been allowed to proliferate, it is quite comprehensible that the call for remedial action is growing louder.

Both Stroop and Goossens are complaining about what they call the language-permissive climate in the schools, which tolerates or even favors these kinds of “excesses.” Both are urging the authorities, specifically those responsible for school and education, to increase the number of “language-pedagogical” efforts. Van de Velde, on the other hand, proclaims that, as far as pronunciation is concerned, it would not be advisable for language planners to try to intervene. Yet, in general, he too agrees (2000: 38) that some “counseling of the standardization process on the part of the authorities, the schools and the media might not be unwise” (het zou niet onverstandig zijn om het standaardiseringproces in Vlaanderen nog een tijde vanuit de overheid en via o.a. onderwijs en media te begeleiden). At any rate, it is questionable whether the time is ripe for new language-planning initiatives and whether they will be able to generate a sufficient amount of sympathy and cooperation.

Language planning on a private as well as on an institutional, official level has essentially determined both the structure and the use of Dutch in Belgium (Willemsys & Haeseryn 1998). During the nineteenth century two waves of so-called particularism failed to prevent the official Flemish cultural establishment from adopting an integrationist point of view. Consequently, the majority policy has always been that the standardization of Dutch in Belgium ought to proceed in accordance with the evolution in the Northern Netherlands. The underlying motivation was a political one: to be able to use the prestige of Dutch as the official language of Holland in the domestic language struggle with French, the former prestige language in Belgium (Willemsys 1996).

However, since the language question in Belgium has been settled for some time already, the purpose of integrationism has been fulfilled. Consequently, the relationship between the varieties of Dutch on both sides of the border is increasingly the habitual one between pluricentric language varieties. Attitudes and habits, built up in the past, will continue to play an important role, but they have ceased to be decisive factors.

In pluricentric language territories societal evolution on either side of national borders may vary considerably and so may its influence on linguistic evolution. Also, there is no reason why the evolution should be identical or even analogous on both sides of the border (De Schutter 1998). The leveling force in the language territory at large is, consequently, far weaker than in each part of it taken separately. Centrifugal tendencies will only be leveled out or slowed down if there is a common standard language, firmly established in both form and function and if this situation has already existed for a considerable length of time. Yet we all know that precisely in Flanders, with its shattered linguistic history, this tradition is still rather young and probably not strong enough to exert the preserving influence just mentioned (Van de Velde 2000).

It is very hard to predict whether language-planning efforts, equally strong on both sides, might eventually succeed in overcoming so many simultaneous problems. It is even questionable whether such efforts may reasonably be expected, in Flanders for the reasons I already explained, in the Netherlands because there has never been an integrational tradition in the first place. One of the problems is that no language-planning authority exists which might take responsibility for this kind of language-planning initiative and although the impact of linguistic diversity between parts of a pluricentric language community should not be dramatized, the problem at hand is one worthy of our utmost attention. Although language planning has worked in the past even without specific coordinating bodies, one of the challenges of the twenty-first century might precisely be that this will no longer be possible. In view of this rather complicated situation it is not surprising that Goossens’ analysis stops short of offering or suggesting possible remedies. I will not offer any either, since my space is limited. Let me, therefore, conclude with a couple of ifs:

- if the tendencies mentioned should indeed continue in the way feared by Van de Velde, Stroop and Goossens, and
- if people are found who are ready and willing to do something about it, then an enormous language-planning effort on a scale never witnessed before will have to be devised and implemented.

6. Conclusion. Before jumping to conclusions, we should be very well aware of the fact that the prognoses mentioned above are highly speculative. Poldernederlands is a very neatly defined notion, but whether it will have the projected far-reaching consequences surely remains to be seen. Verkavelingsvlaams, on the other hand, is a rather confused notion, since it has become sort of a collective noun for various different tendencies which may still develop in divergent directions.

Most important of all, in a historical perspective everything we have been discussing so far is short-term change, brought about and spread in specific portions of the population in different parts of the language community. However attractive structural explanations may appear, the question whether short-term
change will eventually evolve into long-term change, lasting change affecting the language and its norm, will depend upon sociolinguistic factors determining the spread of change through time and space. The usual variables like social and occupational class, age group, gender, as well as domain specification and language-planning factors are likely to interfere with this process. Predictions, therefore, are not very helpful, except for this one: the linguistic evolution of Dutch in the twenty-first century promises to be an exiting and thrilling affair, worth close observation and participation!

References


