171. The Low Countries/Niederlande

1. Introduction

Although the name is occasionally used, there is no political entity called The Low Countries. In unofficial usage it may refer to various regions but when the focus is on language and culture it usually refers to the Dutch language territory in Belgium and The Netherlands. The latter is also what the editors of this volume had in mind. The main focus of the article will be on the multilingual situation, i.e. the contact of different languages as well as of varieties of the same language.

2. The Dutch language area

From the very beginning of the Middle Dutch writing tradition a linguistic contrast between an easternly and a westerly shaped variety can be witnessed. The overwhelming majority of all texts displayed decidedly western language features and the written language of the Middle Dutch period was firmly western (specifically Flemish) in its roots even in the non-Flemish parts of the language territory. In the 16th century, though, the economic and political center of gravity of the Dutch language area shifted to Brabant. During this period a standard variety of the written language was gradually taking shape. After the political split of the Dutch language territory during the last quarter of the 16th century the center of gravity of standardization 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. 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. Yet, it was gradually ruled out as far as its influence on the evolution of Standard Dutch was concerned. Holland’s 17th century is known as The Golden Age, reflecting both economic and cultural prosperity. Influential writers as Vondel, Hooft, Bredero, Cats coined the writing standard for ages to come in a Republic that had developed into one of the super powers of that time. In the 17th, but mainly in the 18th century efforts were made to regulate and uniform the language by means of dictionaries and grammars, a tradition started previously by the southern spraeckconstenaers of the 16th century. From a contemporary point of view it was definitely Lambert ten Kate (the first comparative linguist in the Low Countries) who proved to have the best insight in language change and linguistic evolution in general. It were less gifted colleagues of his, though, who were the most successful and influential. They deepened the gap between the spoken and the (over formalized) written language and their linguistic views came to be designated as ‘language despotism’. Yet, at the dawn of the 19th century, the northern written language could boast a complete set of ‘standardization instruments’. Weiland’s grammar (1805) and Siegenbeek’s orthography (1804) were there for the use of all who wanted to write standard, ‘cultivated’ Dutch (De Vries/Willemsyn/Burger 1995, 99ff). Meanwhile, and as a result of the Spanish War of Succession (1702–1713), the southern, ‘Belgian’ territories were passed on from the Spanish to the Austrian Habsburgs. Throughout the 18th century the consolidation of French as the more socially
acceptable tongue continued and Dutch had little official status, except at a local level. Yet, during the 17th and 18th centuries the unity of the northern and southern language varieties was not challenged by anyone and the great poets of Holland’s Golden Age were the important role models, highly recommended — yet much less complied with — by 18th-century Flemish grammarians and poets alike. The language situation deteriorated considerably when, in 1794, the Southern Netherlands were annexed by France: for the first time in history there was a massive official attempt to change the linguistic habits of the masses by suppressing the use of the Dutch language. The short-lived reunion of Belgium and Holland as one United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1814–1830) was of the utmost importance to the Flemings, who suddenly rediscovered their language for administration, politics, the courts, and higher education, areas where it had hardly been used for almost two centuries. A small group of cultural leaders and intellectuals were strongly influenced by both the Dutch standard language and the new linguistic opportunities. In this way the short period of reunion was decisive for the success of the Flemish Movement which would gradually succeed in turning the linguistic make-up of Flanders and Belgium upside down. By 1830 Belgium had become an independent constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system dominated by the bourgeois elite, which secured its position by adopting a poll-tax system (out of 3.5 million people, only 46000 had the right to vote). For this bourgeoisie, French was a natural choice as the language of the state. The government appointed only French-speaking civil servants and the discrimination of Dutch throughout the 19th century was general and very deliberate (Willeyns 2003, 185ff.).

3. Flanders

3.1. Social and political aspects of multilingualism

3.1.1. Belgium (+10 million inhabitants) is a trilingual and federal country, consisting of 4 different entities constituted on the basis of language: the Dutch speaking community (called Flanders; 58% of the population), the French speaking one (called Wallonia; 32%), the small German speaking community (0.6%) and the bilingual community of Brussels (9.5%). Since regional governments have legislative power the frontiers of their jurisdiction, being language borders, are defined in the constitution.

3.1.2. The ‘language struggle’ which was going to dominate Belgian political life started in 1830. Although the new constitution provided for ‘linguistic freedom’, it was obvious that this ‘freedom’ was only profitable to the rich and the powerful, i.e. the bourgeoisie from Wallonia and Flanders, all of whom were French speakers. Hence, despite the fact that Dutch speakers constituted the majority of the population, no legal means was provided for their language. A so-called Flemish Movement started up almost immediately and fought a long lasting battle for cultural and linguistic rights for Dutch speakers. It took until 1889 for the gelijkheidswert to declare Dutch and French the two official languages of the country. It took a complete century to finally achieve the so-called Dutchification of the university of Ghent (in 1930), meaning that at last Dutch speaking university students were taught in their own language. Afterwards things developed considerably faster: two sets of laws in 1932 and 1963 guaranteed what had been the ultimate goal of the Flemish Movement i.e. the official and complete Dutchification of Flanders. The Walloons having been opposed to widespread bilingualism throughout the country, Belgium gradually turned to the territoriality principle model to accommodate the various linguistic groups. It officialized the language frontier as a domestic administrative border, made it virtually unchangeable and accomplished the linguistic homogeneity of the language groups and regions. Revisions of the constitution in 1970 and 1980 provided for cultural autonomy and a considerable amount of self-determination for the linguistically divided parts of the country. Subsequent constitutional changes in 1988 and 1993 finally turned Belgium into the federal country it is now (Coudenbergh 1989; Alen/Suetens 1993).

The most important exception to the territoriality rule is Brussels, where there is no geographical demarcation of Dutch and French speakers and, consequently, the personality principle is the only possible one. The case of the capital is rather special in that it had turned into a bilingual city, although it is located entirely within the Flemish region. The Frenchification of the
capital started in the 18th century and developed considerably during the 19th century (Witte and Baetens Beardsmore 1987). Immigration of Walloons and French certainly played a part in this but the decisive factor has been the Frenchification of considerable parts of the indigenous population and of Flemish immigrants, due to the fact that upward social mobility seemed hardly possible without shifting to French (Demetsenaere 1988). It was only after World War II that serious efforts were made to safeguard Brussels’ bilingual status and to secure the rights of the Dutch speaking population which had become a minority by then. Measures to slow down Frenchification started in the early sixties not so much through local regulations but mainly by extensive linguistic legislation on the level of the national, Belgian legislator (Willemyns 1997a). Yet the actual balance of power is uncertain since no official figures are available (Gubin 1978 explains why it is impossible to collect reliable data). According to Baetens Beardsmore (1983) at least six different categories of speakers are to be discerned using, in a combination of bilingualism and diglossia, from one up to six different languages and codes. Also, the rapidly expanding population of foreign origin accounts for the fact that for probably one third of the capital’s citizens none of Belgium’s languages is their mother tongue. For the overwhelming majority of those, French is their first ‘national’ language.

3.1.3. The Belgian language struggle has never been an exclusively linguistic problem but has always been intertwined with social and political issues as well. Yet, a considerable change in nature is to be discerned from the early sixties onwards when language problems were definitively replaced by so-called ‘community problems’ and the border between Wallonia and Flanders ceased to be a mere linguistic one in order to become a social one as well. This can be accounted for by major domestic economic changes. From the late fifties onwards a dramatic industrial development was witnessed in Flanders, turning this formally agricultural territory into a highly industrialized region, largely dominating the national political, social and economic scene. At the same time the outdated industrial equipment of Wallonia was slowly breaking down, giving way to a serious economic recession of which it has not recovered to the present day. In 1996 74.5% of the industrial gross added value was generated in the Flemish region (58% of Belgium’s population). Consequently, the cultural and linguistic balance of power shifted towards Flanders. The present-day social and economic unbalance between Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia is to be considered potentially disruptive for the continuation of Belgium’s existence, since it requires a considerable amount of so-called ‘solidarity transfers’ from Flanders to Wallonia (for 80%) and to Brussels (for 20%). Most of these transfers occur in the field of social security financing.

3.2. Linguistic varieties

3.2.1. Flanders is characterized by a rather complicated use of several codes. The theoretical range of the linguistic continuum reaches from dialect on the one side to standard Dutch on the other, with several intermediate codes in between. The decisive criterion is dialect interference: the more one goes into the direction of the standard, the less interference can be noticed. The diglossic and bilingual situation as it used to exist in the 19th century (Willemyns 1999) has gradually been dissolved during the first half of the 20th century. Linguistic legislation already mentioned and the gradual loss of all functions for French resulted in Flanders becoming monolingual. Dialect loss and dialect leveling, having gained momentum after WW II, are responsible for the disappearance of the former diglossic situation in Flanders at large, with the exception of the province of West-Flanders, where the former situation: regional dialect in informal and the (intended) standard in formal and some semi formal situations still persists. The use made of the various codes also depends on the communicative competence of the individual. During the last few decades the mastery and the use of regional dialects have declined dramatically and, at the same time, the use of and the proficiency in the standard variety has considerably increased. Consequently, the communicative competence of most youngsters and most inhabitants of the central regions of Flanders has shifted towards the right pole of the continuum.

3.2.2. The close contact which exists between French and Dutch in Belgium in general and in bilingual Brussels in particular has led to a considerable amount of linguistic interference (Willemyns 1996). The
contact situation also entailed consequences for the standardization process of Dutch itself. Aware of the fact that the societal influence of French in Flanders could only be successfully repelled by an equally standardized and normalized version of their own language, a majority of Flemings advocated strict language uniformity with Holland and in so doing pushed the standardization process in a northern direction.

4. The Netherlands

4.1. Linguistic varieties

4.1.1. The fact that almost half of Holland’s ± 16 million people live in the Randstad (the large urban agglomerations in the west of the country) is very revealing, not only for the social but also for the linguistic make-up of the country. From the Randstad, where the modern Dutch standard language took shape from the 17th century onwards, it spread geographically as well as socially over the rest of the territory, at first only within the borders of the Netherlands, and afterwards also in Belgium. A map shown in Hagen (1989) illustrates how dialect use and mastery increase the further one moves away from the Randstad. Yet, more recent studies (all discussed in Willemyns 1997) demonstrate that very often matters are much less straightforward and more complicated. Both the acceptance of and the attitudes towards linguistic varieties are determined by the fact that the western flavored standard language is not only the supra regional means of communication but also the sociolect of the so-called ‘better situated’ classes in the country at large. Negative attitudes mainly derive from social resentment against this particular sociolect-function of the standard language. Socially determined linguistic attitudes are the strongest in the Randstad itself: the habitual language of the popular classes in this highly urbanized region, called stadsdialecten (urban dialects) mostly provoke negative attitudes. Despite the fact that, from a purely linguistic point of view, the so-called regiolecten differ more widely from the standard than the urban dialects do, the attitudes towards them are generally more favorable, mainly because they mostly (still) lack the social stigma. The regiolect, Hoppenbrouwers (1990) says, is “a complex of non-standard varieties in a given region”. Although, overall, dialects appear to lose ground rapidly, there is no unanimity among scholars as to the pace of their disappearance. Based on the observation that certain morphonological rules which are typical for the dialects, yet are not present in the standard language, are still productive (e.g. morphological umlaut alternations) some linguists believe that the dialects are still very much alive and that their existence is not (yet) threatened (e.g. Hamans 1985, 135). Other studies, though, demonstrate that such prognoses are dangerous for one because there are different ways to evaluate the data but also because the importance of attitudes is either neglected or overestimated. A discrepancy has indeed been observed between positive attitudes towards the dialects on the one hand and yet a rapid decrease of those dialects on the other hand. Also, there appears to be no more direct relationship between dialect proficiency and dialect usage: even in places where proficiency is still high, we observe a dramatic and rapid decrease in the figures of dialect usage (Willemyns 1997).

4.1.2. It has never been possible to identify a clear cut border between the dialects spoken on both sides of the Dutch-German border which have in common such important features (not existing in the Dutch standard language, nor in the more western dialects) as e.g. the so-called Saxon common plural, morphological umlaut alternations in the building of the diminutive or of the plural, or the tone opposition (stoottoon > < sleeptoon) shared by Limburg and the bordering German Rhineland. Yet, due to dialect decline and the ever increasing penetration of the respective standard languages on both sides of the border, what used to be a dialect continuum is rapidly falling apart into two different language areas. Studies published in Bister-Broosen (1998) detail all aspects of this evolution and demonstrate how the differing standard languages even affect the dialects themselves. As far as the state border between The Netherlands and Flanders is concerned, the most relevant observation is that not a single distinctive bundle of isoglosses is running parallel with it. Consequently, the West- and East-Flemish dialects constitute a continuum with those spoken in the Dutch province of Zeeland, as do the dialects of the Belgian provinces Antwerpen, Vlaams-Brabant and Limburg with those of the Dutch provinces of Noord-Brabant and Limburg. Yet, here
4.2. Language contact

4.2.1. A considerable amount of foreign languages are spoken by immigrant groups in The Netherlands. According to Van Bree and De Vries (1996, 1144) the largest ethnic minorities are (1) Turks, Kurds, Moroccans and other Mediterranean groups (2) Surinamese (3) Antilleans from Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao (4) Moluccans, and (5) Chinese. Also, there is the special group of the Indo-Dutch, the descendants of marriages between the Dutch and the indigenous people of the former Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). All groups, with the exception of the first and (partly) the fifth speak Dutch, alongside with (sometimes even without) their languages of origin. To the first group “Dutch is a second language with high prestige used particularly in formal situations and informal situations where speakers do not share a common tongue” (Van Bree/De Vries 1996, 1147). Special educational provisions are made not only to help them acquire mastery of Dutch but also to keep or gain proficiency in their native tongues. There are no such provisions for Surinamese and Antilleans, since Dutch is the official language of their country of origin. Consequently, the Dutch as spoken by those people is often considered a distinct variety of European Dutch. This is also partly the case with the language variety of the Indo-Dutch.

4.2.2. The only autochthonous contact language in The Netherlands is Frisian which has regional official status in the province of Friesland (± 4% of the total population). It is in limited official use as a language of provincial and city administrations, of education, of the media and of the courts. There is some active promotion of the language by the regional and almost none by the national authorities. No census figures are available as to the mastery and the use of Frisian. According to surveys some 94% of the Frisians can understand Frisian, 73% can speak it, 65% can read it and only some 10% can write it (Gorter 1996, 1154). The active usage of the language is mainly concentrated in the domains of the family and the neighborhood and the patterns of usage reveal that it is the habitual tongue of some 70% of the rural population and of only some 40% of the city dwellers. Its use in the educational system is still very limited. Since 1980 it has become an obligatory part of the primary school curriculum and since 1993 it has “obtained a modest place in the first three grades of secondary school” (Gorter 1996, 1155). The use of Frisian in the educational system is considered one of the spearheads of language policy, which is mainly coordinated by the Fryske Akademie, a mostly scholarly body engaged in both status and corpus planning. The publication of a scientific dictionary (with normative authority) is under its way and the spelling system the Akademie has devised has been officially authorized by the provincial government in 1980. There is no prescriptive grammar yet; Tiersma (1985) is a reference grammar written in English. Dutch authorities have always been insecure and often rather hostile in dealing with the Frisian situation. Most of the time they have been reluctant to grant official rights to Frisian speakers and as of today the official policy is mainly one of tolerating rather than of promoting or supporting the Frisian language. The Frisians, on the other hand, are increasingly influenced by Dutch and this contact not only affects the language itself but still gives way to language shift, mainly in the upper social strata and the urban population. Also, the migration pattern (with yearly some 25000 Frisians leaving the province and approximately an identical number of non-Frisian Dutch immigrating) is potentially threatening for the use and eventually the survival of Frisian (Gorter 1996).

5. Linguistic integration

In both parts of the Dutch language community efforts towards cultural integration (i.e. to minimize the consequences of centrifugal tendencies) started almost immediately after the political split and can be exemplified by three interesting language planning initiatives: (a) The North, having become a protestant state, was badly in need of an appropriate translation of the Bible. The language of the resulting Statenbijbel (Bible of the States 1637), actually shaped for that purpose by a commission carefully composed of members representing all dialect regions from the South as well as from
the North, carefully combined northern and southern language features; (b) From the beginning of the 18th century onwards there appeared to be great need for a comprehensive dictionary of Dutch and here also we witness constant negotiations between northern and southern scholars on how to start and accomplish this project. The real work only started some 100 years later, sponsored by the Linguistic and Literary Congress bringing together writers and scholars from the Netherlands and Belgium on an annual basis. Serious editing started in 1851 and the Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal (WNT) can be considered the second major project aiming at closer cultural integration of both parts of the Dutch language community. Also, the very existence of those biannual Linguistic and Literary Congresses is a considerable integrationist effort in its own right (Willemyns 1993); (c) A third initiative very essential to language unity is the mutual concern for orthography. From the beginning of the 19th century onwards it was acknowledged that spelling reforms needed administrative approval and reinforcement and we witness governmental action to maintain orthographical uniformity in both countries. A large number of official reforms as well as aborted attempts made it a difficult task to secure this uniformity which was nevertheless always maintained. These three examples (and others, not mentioned here) show that there has been a constant desire for cooperation and integration which finally culminated in the creation of De Nederlandse Taalunie [Dutch Linguistic Union]. It was installed under a treaty passed by the Dutch and Belgian governments in 1980, transferring to this international body their prerogatives in all matters concerning language and literature. The '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 and a Scientific Council for Dutch Language and Literature (Willemyns 1984). 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 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. The activities of the Nederlandse Taalunie lie both in the fields of corpus and of status planning.

6. German speaking Belgium

Apart from Flanders, there is yet another territory in Belgium where a Germanic language is spoken. It is divided into two parts which, in linguistic literature, though not in any administrative sense, are known as Neubelgien and Altbelgien (Nelde 1979). The former is Belgium's official German speaking part, in the latter German has by now become a minority language in an officially French speaking territory (Willemyns/Bister-Broosen 1998). Both areas are situated in the eastern part of Belgium, adjacent to Germany and Luxembourg. In the 13th century the Land van Overmaas, to which these territories belonged became part of the Duchy of Brabant and shared its general and linguistic fate for a long time. Through the end of the Ancien Régime a triglossic situation had developed: Dutch was the language of the administration, High German the language of the school and the church, and the population communicated by means of a local dialect of which it is impossible to determine on the basis of linguistic criteria, whether it is to be regarded a Dutch or a German dialect (Nelde 1979, 69). From the split of the Low Countries onwards the region was subject to the same Frenchification process already discussed in § 3.1 for Flanders at large. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815 the region was split: part of it (later: Neubelgien) went to Prussia, the rest (Altbelgien) remained in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, after 1830 in Belgium. Yet, in 1839 a considerable part of the latter returned to the Dutch King Willem I and is known since as the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. As a result of the Frenchification policy of the Belgian authorities and of the loss of four fifths of its speakers to Luxembourg, French gradually superseded German in all official and formal domains in Altbelgien. Since it is geographically situated in the Walloon part of Belgium, the Frenchification was never stopped and as of today French is its sole official language and Ger-
man, if still used at all, has become limited to the private domain (Nelde 1979). The fate of Neubelgien was completely different. During the time it was part of Prussia (afterwards the German Empire) German was firmly established not only as the official language but also as the habitual means of communication of the population. The situation changed dramatically, though, when after WW I the Versailles Treaty allocated the region to Belgium. The Belgian authorities provided for no autonomy or linguistic protection and both the habitual Frenchification policy and the usual mechanisms of upward social mobility accomplished that French not only became the language of administration but also increasingly a language mastered and used by the upper social strata of the population. Yet, the approximately 65000 inhabitants eventually profited of the struggle of the Flemings against Francophone domination. Linguistic legislation of 1963, installing the territoriality principle, upgraded German to an official language of the area, which, as a consequence of the constitutional changes discussed in 3.1 became an autonomous region. The Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft as it is now officially called comprises the cantons of Eupen and Sankt Vith (some 65000 people on 867 square kilometers) and has identical qualifications as the Flemish and Walloon communities. Through the means of an own parliament and government its population now constitutes, as Héraud (1989) observes, probably the best protected linguistic minority in Europe. German is the official language of the administration, education, the judicial system etc. and it is the every day language of the population.

7. Literature (selected)


Van Bree, Cor/de Vries, Jan (1996) “Netherlands”, in: Goebel et al., 143–152.


172. Die deutschsprachigen Länder/The German-Speaking Countries

1. Gegenstandsbereich


2. Zur Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Länder

Die Länder mit Deutsch als National- oder Amtssprache haben eine lange, komplexe Geschichte, aus der hier nur wenige Stationen skizziert werden können. Aus ihrem Verbund im mittelalterlichen Heiligen
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