Language variation in the Dutch language area

Towards a realistic and supportive language variation policy

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Assignment

formulate a vision on language variation and language variation policy
for the Dutch language area

Starting point

Former advisory document
by the Dutch Language and Literature Council of the Taalunie (2003):

Variatie in het Nederlands: eenheid in verscheidenheid.
Taalvariatiebeleid in taalunieverband

➔Update needed

Update: relevant developments

(1) 2004: Surinam becomes associated member of the Taalunie

former advice explicitly excluded Dutch in Surinam

current advice includes Surinam

(2) How to deal with 'regional languages'?

officially recognized in accordance with the European Charter for Regional and minority languages

Publications by the Taalunie in 2016 and 2017 led to reactions by representatives of the regional languages in the Dutch language area

➔ advice needs to adequately define the position of the regional languages in the Dutch language area and the position of the Taalunie in this respect

(3) Societal evolutions

Increasing globalisation, mobility and digitalisation

➔Intensifying language diversity and language variation

➔The advisory text needs to incorporate this by formulating a realistic framework for language *variation* policy.

What kind of text?

- An advisory tekst ➔ not a policy document in itself

- However, we do establish a **policy framework** ➔ potential frame for future policy

Purview
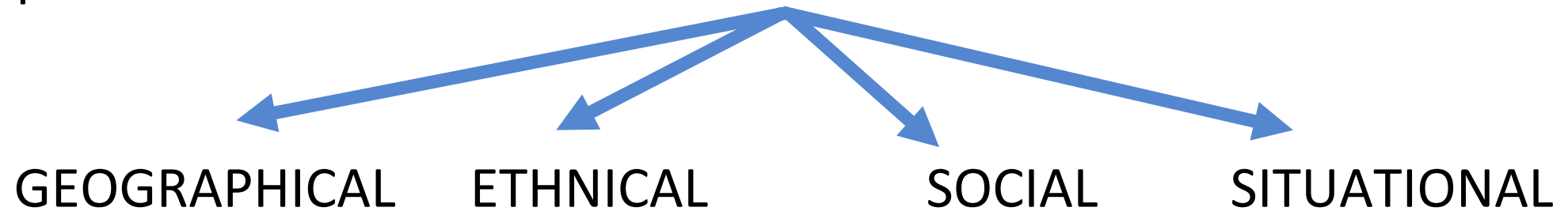
Outside the scope of the advice:

- The regional languages in the Netherlands that have been recognised by the European Charter for regional and minority languages **in themselves**
- The influence of English or other languages on the position and use of Dutch
- Sign language
- Dutch on the Caribbean islands ⬅

However, advice does cover ALL dialects belonging to the Dutch dialect continuum

Has been focused on in several Taalunie and Taalunie-related documents, e.g.:
http://taalunieversum.org/inhoud/meertaligheid.

Within the scope of the advice:

all spoken and written varieties of Dutch

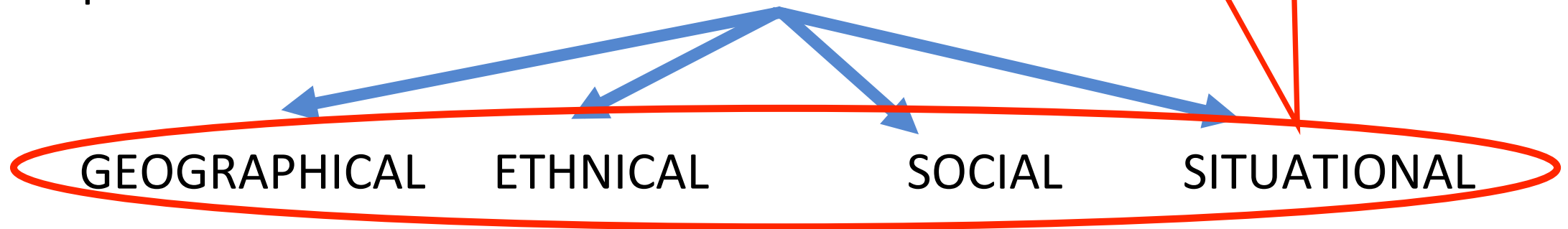GEOGRAPHICAL   ETHNICAL   SOCIAL   SITUATIONAL

BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE STANDARD LANGUAGE

Purview

No static dimensions
Interaction

Within the scope of the advice:

all spoken and written varieties of Dutch

GEOGRAPHICAL   ETHNICAL   SOCIAL   SITUATIONAL

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE STANDARD LANGUAGE

Focussing on language variation ≠ neglecting the standard language:

Standard Dutch or *Algemeen Nederlands*
is not called into question in the advisory text

Context (scientific findings)

- Changing (standard) language reality
  - ➔Dialects disappear, but the need for regional profiling does not >> colloquial languages fulfil this role and standard languages become more variable.
  - ➔More and more people learn Dutch as a second/third/… language and appropriate it

- Language = an instrument for identification and self-profiling
  - ➔Does 'neutral' language exist?
  - ➔Tension neutrality/normativity versus identity/diversity

- Language relationships and language attitudes differ between the Netherlands, Belgium, and Surinam

- Language varieties can be hard to discriminate
  - ➔Where does colloquial language stop and does (informal) standard language start?

Approach

- Language diversity = self-evident in present-day society
  - ➔ Language variation ≠ avoidable noise

- A diverse society calls for a dynamic and inclusive approach to standard language

- Norms for formal written language can be fairly strict and clearcut

- For spoken language (and for informal (online) written language) a strict dichotomy between standard and non-standard is often not workable

- Language varieties are not correct or incorrect, inferior of superior in themselves

➔**Convenient starting point:**

register choices related to communicative context

Policy problem

Friction between normativity and linguistic reality of the speaker

Norms are (potentially/in certain circumstances) restrictive

A contemporary language variation policy should enable the language user to use and master his or her language (varieties) in all suitable contexts, without being restricted or impeded by language

Axioms for language variation policy

- **No good or bad**

There are no good or bad language varieties ➜ such terms definitely have to be avoided in any form of language policy.

- **Register sensitivity**

➢ Language users benefit from acquiring register sensitivity

➢ A proficient language user is aware of register variation and is able to use language varieties in a flexible way, according to the actual communicative context

➢ Apart from awareness, register sensitivity also requires respect for language variation

- **A central position for the language user**

➢The language user determines what 'appropriate' language looks like

➢Not a **top-down** language variation policy starting from the standard language, but a **bottom-up** language variation policy starting from the actual range of language varieties

➢The language user must be optimally enabled to use (his or her) language

- **Realistic language variation policy**

➢Acceptation and **respect** for geographical, ethnical, social, and situational language variation inside and outside the standard language should be self-evident

➢ Recognition of the need for language **norms** in certain domains, for example education

➢Consequently we need an externally established and fixed norm for the standard language

- **Realistic language variation policy**

➤That norm may be an **open, inclusive, and tolerant norm**

➤For formal written language the norm may be quite strict

- **Realistic language variation policy**

➤ The Netherlands, Belgium and Surinam share a language, but orient towards different language centres

  ➤ A partly different norm for the Netherlands, Belgium, and Surinam
  ➤ Three separate norm centres, within the three countries.

➤ Recognition of the dynamic prestige of colloquial language

(as opposed to the traditional prestige of the standard language)

Potential implications for policy domains

Just a few examples for a selection of domains:

- education
- governmental communication
- healthcare
- justice
- media

Potential implications for policy domains

Just a few examples for a selection of domains:

- education
- governmental communication
- healthcare
- justice
- media

In connection to the above-mentioned:
- Sharpen standard language proficiency
- Teach language norms
- Focus on register sensitivity
- Give space to colloquial languages

Potential implications for policy domains

Just a few examples for a selection of domains:

- education
- governmental communication
- healthcare
- justice
- media

Especially in healthcare for the elderly and mental healthcare: variety-specific and register-specific language tools are needed

Potential implications for policy domains

Just a few examples for a selection of domains:

- education
- government communications
- healthcare
- justice
- media

In connection to a realistic language variation policy:
VRT (Flemish Radio and Television): increasing support among broadcast employees for a more dynamic language policy

General policy recommendations by the advisory committee

- Recognise the intrinsic variability of language, but also the need for normativity in certain domains

- Start from the language user and his or her language repertoire and communicative needs

- Do not discourage language varieties, but foster appreciation, respect, and register sensitivity

Taalunie: policy organisation for Dutch

- The Taalunie is a policy organisation for all varieties of Dutch, so language variation is a natural object of our policy.

- Fostering appreciation and respect for language varieties belongs to the responsibilities of the Taalunie.

- Our attention and support for language variation will never be at the expense of our attention and support for the standard language.

Taalunie: implementing language variation policy

- **Status planning**: foster appreciation of and respect for language variation and register sensitivity.

- **Corpus planning**: strive for (better) description of and access to language varieties, because this contributes to register sensitivity.

- **Acquisition planning**: support the implementation of appreciation, respect, and register sensitivity in education.

Taalunie: implementing language variation policy

- The Taalunie has started a new project: how to deal with standard language and language variation in Dutch and Flemish **education**?

- The Taalunie stimulates, facilitates, and supports projects that lead to (better) **description and access** of language varieties in the Dutch language area.
  - Dutch-Dutch, Belgian-Dutch, Surinam-Dutch
  - Dialects of Dutch
  - Etcetera

Taalunie: implementing language variation policy

- The Taalunie will work out this policy in a separate implementation plan.

- The publication of the advisory text and the implementation plan is planned for early 2019.

Thank you for your attention!