

Frank Vandenbroucke

## **Devoting attention to the function of languages<sup>1</sup>**

The American comic Dave Barry wrote in one of his columns that Americans travelling abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that there are so many foreign languages still in use, despite all the progress of the last thirty years. This may sound facetious, but even within Europe there have been frequent claims that a great many of the languages of the European Union will become mere anachronisms in an English-speaking environment within the not too distant future.

### **Languages in Europe**

In the early 1990s, with the prospect of a Europe without internal borders, considerations of linguistic policy were chiefly governed by the fear that smaller languages would ultimately disappear, losing the battle to the more widespread languages, in particular English. Fortunately, other views now dominate in the debate about languages within Europe: the diversity of languages is seen as a valuable feature, and the future citizens of Europe will be multilingual. Since the start of the new millennium, the focal point of policy has shifted from “the language” as such to the interests of “the language user.” This was reflected in issues such as integration and familiarisation programmes for migrants, the use of languages in the institutions of the European Union, and the attention devoted to people who speak a minority language.

### **Focusing on the language user**

Within the Nederlandse Taalunie, the Netherlands and Flanders pursue a joint policy regarding the Dutch language. Until about fifteen years ago, that policy was still primarily focused on protecting the Dutch language. Today, the focus is on supporting those who speak Dutch or who wish to learn to speak Dutch, for example, by means of lexicographical facilities or good-quality teaching. This policy is in keeping with the general feeling within the population as demonstrated by a public survey held in 2005. Dutch and Flemish citizens are confident that Dutch will still be the language of government, the legal system and education in fifty years time. Most would consider it a real shame if this were not the case. At the same time, they consider it important to be able to speak other languages.

The Taalunie can no longer give Dutch a special position in relation to other languages, but it appreciates that Dutch is a language that citizens use alongside other languages. And this does not only apply to Dutch, of course. You as members of EFNIL – the European Federation of National Institutions for Language – are continually occupied with national languages at a national level. The fact that you have become a member of EFNIL is in itself proof that you are not focused solely on your own language or languages. You consider your language as part of the rich mosaic of languages with which Europe is blessed, and you want to collaborate with institutions from other language regions in order to produce a well-balanced language policy.

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<sup>1</sup> This speech has been abridged for publication.

### **The role of EFNIL**

EFNIL and its members are perfect partners in the development of a vision of the position of the languages that they represent within the European linguistic landscape: as a “mother tongue” or second language in their own countries and as a foreign language abroad. They find themselves in an excellent position from which to look into when and where which languages could be functional for which citizens. I consider that practicality to be a vital part of linguistic policy. As the Flemish Minister of Education, I want children to be able to start learning a second language from an early age, and to continue learning languages as they get older. English, French and German are of course very important languages for Flanders. French and German are the two other official languages of Belgium. They are also the languages spoken by our most important trading partners within Europe, who are also our closest neighbours: France and Germany. It is of course virtually impossible to overestimate the importance of the English language in a European and global context. However, other languages can also be included in our education system. Multilingualism is important for everyone, including those who start working straight after completing their secondary school education.

### **The specificity and expertise of EFNIL**

EFNIL can contribute to the development of a well-balanced vision of the practical functionality of every language represented by EFNIL. In other words, providing an answer to the question: which languages are useful in which situations for which European Union citizens?

Lastly: EFNIL has a great deal of expertise at its disposal, for example in the field of compiling dictionaries and in the field of terminology. Such data forms the basis for tools for our own native speakers. However, they must also facilitate the use of the language as a second language. I therefore agree with EFNIL's view that those linguistic resources, texts and dictionaries must be brought together and integrated into a multilingual European infrastructure. In turn, this should form the basis for the development of multilingual products, for ICT for example. I have high expectations of EFNIL in this regard.

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