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Inleiding/Introduction/Einführung¹

Geachte gasten, beste collega's,

als wij de oprichtingsconferentie van de EFNIL 15 jaar geleden in Stockholm als de eerste conferentie laten tellen, is dit onze 16^{de} (zestiende) jaarlijkse conferentie. Ik heet u allen van harte welkom.

Ik dank onze gastvrouw, onze collega mevrouw Steurs, en meneer Marten Vidal, voor de vriendelijke en informatieve ontvangst. Hartelijk dank ook aan mevrouw Wolfensberger, Directeur-Generaal van de Directie Cultuur en Media in het Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, en aan de heer Buyse, Algemeen Afgevaardigde van de Vlaamse Regering in Nederland, voor hun bemoedigende welkomstwoorden.

Het feit dat ook mevrouw Fink-Hooijer, Directeur-Generaal van de tolkendienst van de Europese Commissie tot ons gesproken heeft, vatten wij op als teken dat taal, taalcultuur en talenbeleid ook in de toekomst belangrijke thema's van de Europese Unie zullen blijven.

Ik begroet de collega's en gastsprekers, die met hun voordrachten de kern van het programma van deze conferentie vormen, en heet ook de andere gasten uit Brussel en de centra voor wetenschap hier ter plaatse welkom.

De leden van EFNIL zijn gisteren al op de algemene vergadering samengekomen. Vandaag wil ik u opnieuw verwelkomen op het hoofdedeelte van de conferentie. Vooraleer ik als Noordduitser het risico loop Nederlands met Plattdeutsch te vermengen, schakel ik maar liever over op een neutralere taal.

¹ Dear guests, dear colleagues, if we count the foundation conference of EFNIL in Stockholm 15 years ago as conference no. 1, this event today is our 16th annual conference. For this, I welcome you all most warmly. I thank our hosts, our colleagues Ms Steurs and Mr Vidal, for their kind welcome. I thank Ms Wolfensberger, Director General of the Department of Culture and Media at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and Mr. Buyse, the General Representative of the Flemish government in the Netherlands, for their encouraging addresses. We take the fact that Ms Fink-Hooijer, Director-General for Interpretation at the European Commission also talked to us as a sign that language, language culture and language policy remain important topics on the agenda of the Union. I greet the colleagues and guest speakers whose presentations form the core of the conference, and I also welcome the other guests from Brussels and local research centres. The members of EFNIL already met yesterday for the General Assembly. Now I welcome them for the main part of the conference. Before I, as a North German, risk mixing up Dutch with Low German, I will switch to a more neutral language now.

In each of the 15 years since EFNIL was founded, we have chosen various themes for our conferences that are of special importance for the languages and language politics and policies of the EU states and other European countries as well as for the linguistic diversity of Europe in general. I will spare you and myself an enumeration of all of the conference topics. A complete list is available in last year's conference proceedings and on the EFNIL website. Let me just remind you of the general themes of the last three conferences:

- in Helsinki in 2015, we discussed the use of language in public administration in various European countries;
- in Warsaw 2016, we dealt with stereotypes and linguistic prejudices in Europe;
- and last year in Mannheim, the functions of our member institutions for the standard languages of their countries were presented and discussed.

The Mannheim conference ended with a panel discussion on whether to “*leave your language alone*” or whether “*a language must be cared for*”. Hans Bennis, who, unfortunately, cannot be with us today, concluded his statement with an appeal to language communities and language institutions to accept the existence of variation within language. To quote him: “language institutions should see language variation as an issue that deserves a prominent position on the agenda. Dialects, regiolects, sociolects, and ethnolects are important varieties of a language that are directly related to the identities of language users”. Thus, it is not surprising that our hosts suggested “Language variation in Europe” as the theme for the present conference. The General Assembly in Mannheim was happy to accept this proposal.

During the preparation for this conference a subtitle was added: “Language variation as a factor of increasing language complexity and as a challenge for language policy”. This specification was needed because *language variation* is a cover term for a multitude of phenomena related to different sorts of varieties and uses of a language. Several ‘lects’ could be added to the four ‘-lects’ that Hans mentioned, for instance *natiolects*, *mediolects* and *genderlects*. *Variation* itself is a vague term. Its many different readings and uses can perhaps be summarised in an abstract definition that variation always refers to cases where and when a basic entity or structure exists in or develops into various forms. Depending on whether we look at a language as an ensemble of structures and units or at various uses of a language, language variation can refer, among other things, to:

- the different regional and social varieties of a language (dialects, argots, registers, etc.)
- the different forms and structures of a language that enable us to express the same meanings in different ways, namely lexical, phraseological and syntactic variation;
- the different functional and professional forms, structures and uses of a language;

- the medial varieties of a language in its spoken, written and digital uses;
- the specific forms and structures of a language in its public and private uses, including various textual and situational uses;
- the different forms and uses of a language depending on the age and/or gender of the speakers and/or the situation where they meet;
- the change in forms and structures of a language over time.

These aspects and referents of variation are not independent from each other. They may overlap or merge when, for instance, speakers who come from different social groups or professions express the same meaning in their specific ways or when different meanings are attributed to the same expression depending on the social group or profession of its users or when speakers of different social groups have different preferences for dialectal varieties.

One of the theoretical and empirical problems is how to distinguish between variation and plain difference. Variation always implies similarity and difference. However, when we look at two idioms, how do we decide whether they are varieties, let us say, dialects of the same language or just two different languages? There have been frequent disputes in Germany as to whether the various regional forms of Low German (*Plattdeutsch*) are dialects of German (*Hochdeutsch*) or varieties of a separate language Low German. The European Charter of regional and minority languages lists Low German as a separate regional language. We will soon hear about a politically more relevant discussion concerning the question as to whether the languages spoken in the countries that were different parts of former Yugoslavia are separate languages or regional varieties of a common South Slavic language. One of them, Croatian, has already been accepted as one of the official languages of the European Union.

Three criteria are used in this discussion and others of the same sort: mutual comprehensibility, lexical and formal similarity, and speakers' estimation or conviction as to whether their idiom is a separate language or a variety of a common language. The third criterion is difficult to deal with because of the many uses of the word language itself. Experienced dialectologists and sociolinguists quite often come across speakers of rather similar regional or social varieties who call even a close, 'neighbouring' social or regional variety a "completely different language". This often implies an assessment of the other variety or language as being primitive, coarse or ugly. The distinction between elaborate and restricted codes that was made in the early stages of sociolinguistics is reminiscent of such assessments between speakers of different language varieties.

For this conference, three sub-topics were selected from the many aspects and dimensions of language variation:

- 1) Aspects of language-internal variation;
- 2) Aspects of variation between different languages;
- 3) Implications of variation for language policies and language practices.

In relation to sub-topic 1): Internal variation, the regional, social, medial and ethnic varieties of individual languages have been field and object of research for many years. We have all learned to live with variation in our mother tongue, that is, to use or at least understand different varieties of the language. The Austrian Romanist Mario Wandruszka discussed this in one of his monographs as “multilingualism of the mother tongue” (“muttersprachliche Mehrsprachigkeit”).² The internal multi- or plurilingualism, so to speak, is, however, not the same for all speakers of a language. It has to be acquired within a family, local society and at school. We will hear and see presentations on internal variation in several languages used as national languages in various countries.

As for sub-topic 2): Variation between different languages, at first sight, it does not make much sense to speak of variation between different languages when we look at them as independent ensembles of units and structures. They are not varieties of each other, just different. Variation between languages, however, can be studied when the same speakers switch between different languages in their communication depending on the social and situational conditions of actual language use, for instance, when Luxembourgers, depending on specific social or situational contexts speak or write either French, German or Luxembourgish, or when Maltese speakers switch from Maltese to English or vice versa. Here sociolinguists are challenged to study and describe the conditions for variation between the languages involved. At previous conferences, we have heard from representatives of the European Commission how they cope with an extreme linguistic situation, that is, the variation between 24 languages within the various European bodies and institutions. The situation there is, however, more complex: in Luxembourg and Malta, the same people can vary between three or two languages; at the Commission, however, there are no individuals who vary between using all 24 official languages.

Finally, in connection with sub-topic 3): Implications of variation for language policies and language practices. Variation within an individual language and between the uses of different languages is an essential part of linguistic reality. Because of the different attitudes of different social groups towards different varieties of a language or the use of other languages, variation may lead to social problems and conflicts. They are, therefore, a challenge for language policies, especially for language education. In some of the contributions to this conference we will, hopefully, learn about the ways and means by which national or regional administrations and educational institutions cope with language variation within their realms. There is always the question of how much language variation makes sense at school. Should pupils just be made aware of language variation or should the actual use of varieties also be taught? Fortunately, language lessons at school

² Wandruszka, Mario (1981): *Die Mehrsprachigkeit des Menschen*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag. [Ungekürzte Ausgabe. ISBN 3-423-01723-6].

are no longer limited to learning and improving national standard languages. Pupils are acquainted or should be acquainted with the social and functional varieties of the language, at least on the basis of good examples.

Beside all the levels, dimensions and manners of variation, the quest for and the definition of language **in**variants must not be forgotten. Something must be left above or within all variants and varieties so that we can speak of an individual language such as Dutch, French, German or Polish. Something must be there that makes communication between speakers of different language varieties possible. As in music, a basic tune or pattern must be heard or seen behind all the many varieties to consider them variations of the same language. This, however, could itself lead to another conference.

All that remains now for me is to say a big thank you to our hosts, especially the local organisers Johan Van Hoorde and Kim van Helmond and to wish us informative and stimulating presentations and discussions. Let us carry on making this happen.

Hartelijk dank
Thank you very much
Merci beaucoup
Vielen Dank

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