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Language variation policy in the Dutch language area

1. Introduction: why do we need language variation policy?

A relevant question for a language policy organisation is whether it needs to develop a language variation policy. An important aspect of language is that every language is a variable system and, in addition, that variation is omnipresent in society. Therefore, an inclusive society should, in our view, pay attention to its linguistic varieties. By ignoring or excluding varieties, we ignore or exclude the speakers of those varieties that do not (fully) conform to the standard variety. If we strive for an inclusive society, situations in which language users are prevented from using their own variety require that a language policy should be developed.

In 2018 the *Taalunie*, the Union for the Dutch Language, appointed a Dutch-Flemish scientific committee to provide advice on the issues of language variation and language variation policy. Their report was delivered in December 2018. Based on this advice, the *Taalunie* drew up an implementation plan for its language variation policy in the Dutch language area. In this paper we will briefly describe this project and the main results. First, however, we will introduce the Union for the Dutch Language.

2. What is the *Taalunie*?

The *Taalunie* is the Union for the Dutch Language. It is the common body for language policy in the countries that share Dutch as an official language: the Netherlands, Belgium and Suriname. Together these areas constitute what we call "the Dutch language area". More specifically:

– **The Netherlands** is virtually 100% Dutch-speaking. **Belgium** is a multilingual country, with Dutch being spoken in the northern region (Flanders), French in the south (Wallonia) and a small German-speaking area in the east. Brussels, the capital, is officially both French- and Dutch-speaking. In 1980 cooperation between the Netherlands and Flanders in the field of Dutch language policy was confirmed by founding the *Nederlandse Taalunie*, or the Union for the Dutch Language.

[1] We thank Reinhild Vandekerckhove for her valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

– In **Suriname**, South America, Dutch is the sole official language and more than 60% of the population speak it as their mother tongue. Suriname gained independence from the Netherlands in 1975 and has been an associate member of the *Nederlandse Taalunie* since 2004. Alongside Dutch, Sranantongo is the dominant lingua franca in Suriname.
– **Aruba, Curacao and Sint Maarten**, all islands in the Caribbean, are independent countries that belong to the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The islands of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba are 'special municipalities' of the Netherlands. Dutch is one of the official languages on all six islands but it is the mother tongue of only a small proportion of the population. The lingua franca and mother tongue of most people on Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao is Papiamento, a creole language. The population of the three northern Antilles – Sint Maarten, Saba, and Sint Eustatius – is predominantly English-speaking.

The *Taalunie* was founded in 1980 by an international treaty between the Dutch and Belgium kingdoms. Its mission is as follows (Article 2 of the *Taalunie* Treaty):

1) The *Taalunie*'s goal is to integrate the Netherlands and the Dutch community in Belgium in the field of Dutch language and literature, in the broadest sense.
2) This includes: language and literature as an academic subject, literature as an art, language as a means of academic communication, language as a means of literature, education in language and literature, and, more generally, language as an instrument of societal contact.

The *Taalunie*'s tasks are formulated in Article 3 of the *Taalunie* Treaty:

– the development of the Dutch language;
– the enhancement of knowledge and responsible use of the Dutch language;
– the enhancement of Dutch literature;
– the enhancement of the study and dissemination of the Dutch language and literature abroad.

From these tasks it follows that the *Taalunie*'s main mission is to enable and enhance the use of Dutch, for all speakers and in all societal domains. It is important to note that the treaty does not restrict this task to *standard Dutch*. This means that varieties of Dutch and their interactions with the standard language are also part of the *Taalunie*'s working field.

3. Language variation project: starting points

As already mentioned, in 2018, the *Taalunie* appointed a Dutch-Flemish scientific committee to provide advice on language variation and language variation policy. The committee was chaired by professor Reinhild Vandekerckhove from the University of Antwerp. This committee composed a *visietekst*, a vision statement on language variation. In January 2019, the *Taalunie* published an implementation plan on language variation (see below).

The starting point for the committee was an advisory document on language variation previously drawn up by the *Taalunie*[2] which needed an update. The update had to pay specific attention to the following topics:

1) To **Suriname**, which has been associated with the *Taalunie* since 2004. Since then, the *Taalunie*, together with its partners, has initiated various projects in Suriname and/or with Surinamese partners. As for language variation, the Dutch standard variety spoken in Suriname can be seen as a third standard variety in the pluricentric Dutch language area, alongside Dutch-Dutch and Belgian-Dutch. Consequently, a starting point for the vision statement was that a vision on language variation in the Dutch language area should also pay attention to language variation in Suriname.
2) To the **regional languages** within the Dutch language area that are officially recognised in accordance with the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. It is the Ministry of Internal Affairs that decides on recognition requests for regional languages in the Netherlands; the *Taalunie* has an advisory role in this process. Regional languages that are recognised as such cannot, strictly speaking, be considered varieties of Dutch. The *Taalunie*'s policies, however, may apply to all dialects and dialect groups in the Dutch language area, irrespective of whether they are located in an area that has a regional language recognised by the European Charter.

The updated advice also aimed at incorporating recent societal developments such as **globalisation, mobility** and **digitalisation**, which have led to an intensification of language diversity and language variation. As such, the objective was to formulate a realistic framework for language variation policy.

In its vision statement, the committee pointed out various dimensions of language variation, namely geographical, ethnic, social and situational variation. With respect to the geographical dimension, both variation within the standard language varieties (Dutch in the Netherlands, Belgium and Suriname) and regiolectal or dialectal variation is accounted for. The committee provided a sociolinguistic framework for language variation, general starting points for this framework being (1) the intrinsic variability of language and (2) the language user, his/her communicative needs and his/her language repertoire.

4. The main points of the vision statement

In this section we discuss the main points covered by the advice from the scientific committee. The document states that **there are no 'good' or 'bad' varieties**. However, in specific contexts some varieties are more appropriate than others.

[2] "Variatie in het Nederlands: eenheid in verscheidenheid. Beleidsadvies opgesteld door de Werkgroep Variatiebeleid van de Raad voor de Nederlandse Taal en Letteren" (2003). To be found on www.taalunie.org.

Therefore it is considered crucial that language users know which varieties are appropriate in which contexts. This "**register sensitivity**" is presented as a central concept for language variation policy.

In some contexts the **standard variety** is the most (or even the only) appropriate variety. Thus it is essential for language users to master this variety. This does not, however, mean that other varieties must be banned or stigmatised. Indeed stigmatisation must be prevented as it may lead to the exclusion or even discrimination of speakers of non-standard varieties. The advisory committee advocated a bottom-up approach to language variation in terms of the needs of the individual language user.

Language variation should not be discouraged; instead, it should be appreciated and respected, and register sensitivity should also be fostered. At the same time it is necessary to recognise the need for **norms in certain domains**, such as education. As the advisory committee pointed out, norms may be more or less strict. It advocated a so-called **dynamic and inclusive norm** for the standard variety and noted that the norms for spoken standard language may be less strict than the norms for formal written language.

Register sensitivity implies that language users are able to choose the right variety for a specific context, from their **full repertoire of varieties**. In other words, it implies that language users know how to use their linguistic knowledge in an optimal way.

A crucial aspect in the Dutch language area is that **language attitudes and language policies differ** between the Netherlands, Belgium and Suriname. Whereas in Belgium there is a rather strict norm for spoken standard language, the norm in the Netherlands is much less strict and, thus, more inclusive. This difference has to do with historical socio-political circumstances in Belgium and especially with the predominance of French in higher administration and certain 'higher' domains of public life until the end of the 19th century. Once Dutch became the only official language in Flanders, the accelerated and intensified standardisation process led to a strong focus on 'good' versus 'bad' language use.

As a result, colloquial varieties of the standard language often qualify as standard Dutch in the Netherlands whereas such varieties qualify as non-standard Dutch in Belgium. This holds, for instance, for the so-called *omgangstaal* ('colloquial language') or *tussentaal* ('in-between language') in Flanders. The advisory committee explicitly acknowledged the 'modern' prestige of these colloquial varieties.

In Suriname the situation is different yet again. Although Dutch is the official language, used in many contexts and generally acquired at an early age by around 60% of the population, languages such as Sranantongo, Sarnami and Javanese are widely used, especially in non-formal contexts. Obviously, this has consequences for the language. The standard variety of Dutch in Suriname differs quite clearly from European varieties of the language. In addition, perceptions of the Dutch language and the Dutch play a role, the Netherlands being the former coloniser of Suriname.

We thus see different language situations in the three parts of the Dutch language area. The different groups of Dutch speakers have different attitudes towards and perceptions of the standard language and of its interaction with non-standard varieties. It is clear that these different situations, attitudes and perceptions may require a different emphasis in language variation policy.

5. The *Taalunie*'s policy on language variation

As noted above, an implementation plan on language variation was published earlier this year, based on the committee's vision statement. In this plan we formulated our policy intentions for implementing the committee's vision. Here we highlight the most important elements of our implementation plan.

We defined three domains for implementing our language variation policy: *acquisition planning*, *corpus planning* and *status planning*.

5.1 Acquisition planning

The *Taalunie* has started a separate project to investigate the complex and sensitive problem concerning the role of standard language and variation in the educational domain. For this project we appointed another committee, consisting of Dutch and Belgian experts on language variation and education. A report will be delivered on this issue in late 2019.

5.2 Corpus planning

We believe that describing language variation contributes to register sensitivity. Therefore

- Our aim is to describe variation within the standard language. We are encouraging the description of the three standard varieties of Dutch as spoken in the Netherlands, Belgium and Suriname, paying attention to both lexical and grammatical variation. We have several on-going language description projects. We will intensify the focus on language variation in these projects.
- We also see the benefits of describing dialects and other varieties in the Dutch language area. Although we will leave the initiative of describing non-standard varieties to local or regional communities, we are willing to contribute with our knowledge, expertise and infrastructural facilities.

5.3 Status planning

Our aim is to change attitudes towards language variation in the Dutch language area. Linguistic reality shows that language variation is omnipresent. This situation

asks for a better understanding and greater acceptance of language varieties. A better understanding of the inherent variability of language will also give rise to greater awareness of the central position of the standard variety.

How can we achieve this change in attitude? We will try to get the following messages across:

– There are no good or bad varieties of Dutch but only varieties that are more or less appropriate in specific contexts. In other words, a proper way of dealing with language variation asks for register sensitivity (or "register proficiency").
– Good knowledge of the standard language is a prerequisite for full participation in our societies. In addition, attention to and respect for language variation has added value, both for the individual language user and for society as a whole.

We will investigate situations in which communication is hindered by a low status or even by the stigmatisation of varieties or by societal exclusion. In these cases, policy measures concerning language variation are needed. The different attitudes in the three parts of the Dutch language area mentioned above may require different policy measures.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper we described a language variation project carried out by the *Taalunie*. The outcomes of this project are a vision statement and a policy implementation plan. In the latter we argue for more attention to be paid to language varieties in relation to acquisition planning, corpus planning and status planning. In 2019 we will turn these policy lines into concrete projects, in cooperation with our network partners.

Bibliographical information

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