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Different countries, one language – an integrated language policy: language policy in the Dutch language area and the role of the Taalunie

Abstract

In this contribution we describe the institutional setting for language policy and language infrastructure within the Dutch language area. We start with a brief introduction to the Dutch language, its position and the challenges it faces. Subsequently, we provide a short description of the structure, objectives and main domains of activity of the Taalunie, as the common body for language policy of the countries that share Dutch, and of the INT – the Institute of the Dutch Language – as a central actor in this infrastructure. We conclude our contribution with some suggestions for further exploration and collaboration between our national language institutions within EFNIL. We hope that our description offers elements of comparison with the situation in other language areas and ideas for further discussion about appropriate ways to strengthen the multilingual character of Europe and to adapt the language landscape to the rapidly changing needs of our continent.

1. Dutch language

Dutch is a middle-sized language. With its approximately 24 million native speakers, it ranks eighth within Europe and around fortieth worldwide in terms of size. Although speakers of Dutch often consider Dutch a minor language, objectively it belongs with the world's major languages. It is the third most-spoken Germanic language, after English and German. It is the official language of two member states of the European Union, i.e. the Netherlands and the Flemish Region of Belgium and – together with French – of the bilingual capital area of Brussels. Outside Europe it is used in Surinam and a number of smaller islands in the Caribbean area (e.g. Curacao, Aruba and Sint Maarten).

Dutch is learned as a foreign or as a second language by a large number of non-native speakers: children and youngsters as well as adults. Each year, approximately 1.25 million people learn Dutch as a second language, of which about 100,000 are adults. More than 400,000 pupils learn Dutch as a foreign language in secondary schools, esp. in neighbouring areas in Germany, the French-speaking part of Belgium and the north of France. There are more than 30,000 students of Dutch at an academic level in approximately 180 Dutch departments within uni-

versities in 40 countries worldwide. Each year around 2,500 students take the examinations for the certificate of Dutch as a foreign language, issued under the authority of the Taalunie.



Fig. 1: Dutch in the world

2. Language planning and language policy: the institutions

Two institutions are principally responsible for language policy and planning with regard to the Dutch language, one on a more political level and one on a more infrastructural level. Both institutions collaborate closely with each other. The political institution is the *Taalunie*¹ and the infrastructural organisation is the *INT* (*Instituut voor de Nederlandse Taal*).² These two institutions are in active contact with other organisations that have scientific, practical or educational interests in Dutch, e.g. the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam, the Academy for Dutch Language and Literature (KANTL) in Ghent, and many others.

The point of departure of our language policy is that Dutch is in a healthy state. Never before has there been so much activity and production in Dutch, both in the spoken and the written language, with an unprecedented variety of topics belonging to a huge number of social domains, knowledge areas and sectors of human activity.

¹ Taalunie or officially Nederlandse Taalunie is the Union for the Dutch Language; see: <http://over.taalunie.org/dutch-language-union>.

² INT or Institute for the Dutch Language; see <http://ivdnt.org/the-dutch-language-institute>.

This was also the outcome of a recent survey *Staat van het Nederlands*³ commissioned by the Taalunie. The objective of the survey was to measure the use and relevance of Dutch in different social domains in the Dutch-speaking language area over time. The survey was carried out by researchers of the Meertens Institute (Amsterdam) and the Ghent University. The results of this 2017 survey support the view that Dutch is a dynamic language used in all domains of society. This means that we do not consider our language to be threatened or overall to be in a defensive position, but as a healthy language in a rapidly changing society, able to adapt itself to this continuous change. We come back to this later in this contribution.

The Taalunie is an intergovernmental organisation which was founded by Treaty in 1980 by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Kingdom of Belgium. Since Belgium is a federal state in which language and cultural matters come under the exclusive authority of the language communities, the oversight of the Treaty on behalf of Belgium has been delegated to the institutions of the Flemish Community, i.e. the Flemish Government and the Flemish Parliament. According to the Treaty the main aim of the Taalunie is the integration of the Netherlands and of the Dutch-speaking Community of Belgium as far as language and literature are concerned. As of 2004 the Republic of Surinam has joined the founding countries as an associate member country and nowadays there are collaborative structures with the Caribbean islands as well.

Although the Taalunie comprises only a limited number of (associated) member states and although its competence is limited to the relative small domain of language and literature, to a certain extent it can be compared to the much larger European Union. With respect to language and literature the participating states have given up a part of their national sovereignty, conferring certain aspects within these domains to a common, international body; for other aspects the states keep their sovereignty but may choose to collaborate with the other countries within the structures of the Taalunie, in a way that is comparable to the subsidiarity model in the European Union. A good example of the first category is the official orthography of Dutch, which has become the exclusive competence of the intergovernmental body, excluding autonomous spelling legislation or ruling by the separate countries themselves. Language learning and teaching, on the other hand, remain the competence of the sovereign member states as integral parts of their school and educational policies. The involvement of the Taalunie in this latter domain is complementary to national efforts and aims at creating as much synergy between the countries as possible.

³ *Staat van het Nederlands 2017*, ‘State of Dutch’, a report by Kathy Rys, Marten van der Meulen, Wilbert Heeringa, Maarten van der Peet, and Frans Hinskens from the Meertens Institute (KNAW, Amsterdam) and Fieke Van der Gucht and Johan De Caluwe from Ghent University.

The tasks – belonging to both levels of competence as described in the previous paragraph – can be divided into three main domains: (a) language planning, language policy, language care in the strict sense, (b) language teaching and learning, both within and outside the language area and (c) literature and language-based culture, as for example theatre or song texts. The Taalunie as a whole has a somewhat complex structure, consisting of four bodies defined in the Treaty: (a) a Committee of Ministers composed of the ministers of Education and Culture of the Flemish and Dutch governments, as the decision-making body, (b) the Interparliamentary Commission composed of Members of Parliament of the Flemish Parliament and of the States-General of the Netherlands, as the body for parliamentary control, (c) the Advisory Council for Dutch Language and Literature, as the policy advisory body, and last but not least (d) the Secretariat-General, as the unit responsible for the preparation and execution of the policy plans and activities.⁴ To the outside world the Secretariat-General is the most visible part of the organisation, to such an extent that it is often identified with and referred to as the Taalunie as such. It is composed of some 35 staff members. Its headquarters are in The Hague, with a secondary office in Brussels. The activities of the secretariat involve relationships with a whole series of external partners and experts, including many work groups and commissions with temporary or more permanent status. Figure 2 represents the structure of the Taalunie.

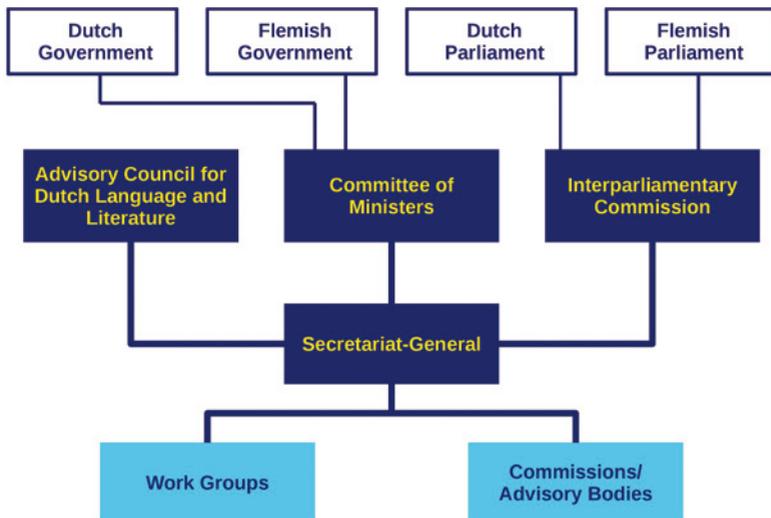


Fig. 2: Structure of the Taalunie

⁴ At all levels Surinam is represented as well, given its status as associate member of the Taalunie. The Antillean Islands are represented through declarations of collaboration.

The Taalunie has an annual budget of about €10,000,000. The major part of it is contributed by the Dutch and Flemish governments: two-thirds by the Dutch and one-third by the Flemish government. Part of the money is intended for the financing of other institutions, among which is the INT, which has regular funding by the Taalunie of about €2,000,000 per year. This institute was formerly known as the Institute for Dutch Lexicology (INL) and has been transformed into a broader institute for language infrastructure, which comprises not only dictionaries and text corpora but other language resources as well, such as terminological data, grammars and language tools such as parsers, named-entity recognition and the like. INT is an autonomous institution and a legal entity under Dutch law, and reports directly to the Committee of Ministers of the Taalunie. Its main base is at the University of Leiden, with a secondary office at KU Leuven, campus Antwerp. The General Assembly of EFNIL accepted INT as the second member institution representing the Netherlands in October 2017.

The Taalunie and INT collaborate closely but from different perspectives: the Taalunie as a policy organisation and the INT as a centre of scientific and technological expertise. The collaboration follows a pragmatic and instrumental policy line. The aim is to contribute to a situation in which all knowledge, competence, resources and tools on Dutch language are available for all users, i.e. for the scientific study of Dutch, for the development of tools and devices for the Dutch-language market and for the efficient and effective use of Dutch in all circumstances and environments, for all categories of users, both native and non-native.

Important products and services in the framework of INT-Taalunie co-operation include the (digital) orthographical dictionary of Dutch (the ‘green booklet’), the scientific grammar of Dutch that is part of *Taalportaal* and the general grammar for non-scientific users ANS, the web service for Dutch language advice *Taaladvies.net*, and various bilingual dictionaries for languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Indonesian, Portuguese, Italian, Polish, modern Greek, Swedish, Danish, Finnish and Croatian. Monolingual lexicographical resources include the large historical dictionaries covering all periods of the language from the oldest documented Dutch to the modern day. These dictionaries have all been digitised and integrated in one lexical database, the so-called *Geïntegreerde Taalbank*.⁵

3. Language and society

We think that the history of the past forty years supports the conclusion that the institutional setting as described above has proven to be efficient, capable of achieving the objectives for which it was intended and created. Among its strong points we include:

⁵ ‘Integrated Language Base’.

- that there is an officially recognised institutional setting for language policy and language planning, which appears to be indispensable for a medium-sized language such as Dutch;
- that the intergovernmental structure directly involves all the countries and regions in which Dutch is the official language or at least one of the official languages, a structure which is unique among the so-called pluricentric languages;
- that there exists a close relationship between the relevant national departments – education and culture – and a direct involvement of the ministers who are responsible for these departments. This guarantees that language policy is considered to be an integral part of a broader educational and cultural policy.

Of course, there are also weaknesses to be listed. One of them is the relatively small budget, at least in comparison with the budgets of surrounding languages such as French and German. Another weakness perhaps lies in the fact that the organisational structure is rather heavy, with four constituent official bodies and explicit, somewhat complex bureaucratic procedures, involving different countries and regions, with different political, juridical, cultural and linguistic traditions and expectations, which make the identification of unified common policies a very elaborate issue.

The Netherlands, Flanders, Surinam and the Caribbean Islands are substantially different societies with different needs, in terms of language as in other areas. In some member countries, and in particular in the Netherlands, Dutch is traditionally almost unchallenged as the language of government, legislation, jurisdiction, education, media and so on; in other areas it has to share this status with other languages. In Belgium, Dutch has existed in the shadow of French for almost a century, during which period French was the only official language of the state as a whole. Dutch had to establish its position of equality with French. This explains the complexity of language attitudes and the explicit nature of language legislation in Belgium. In Surinam the language situation is again entirely different, with some twenty languages of different size and a majority of citizens that are plurilingual, with monolingualism as the exception.

This brings us to the public debate in our language area. Many language-related issues are at the very centre of political discourse and constitute conflicting points of view within society and public opinion. Examples are the threat of loss of functional domains to English in higher education and in scientific publications, changes in the vocabulary and grammar of Dutch, the rise of non-standard varieties of written Dutch as the consequence of modern media, the challenge of digitalisation, increasing diversity and plurilingualism as the result of migration, the variability within Dutch itself, including the relationship between standard and non-standard varieties, and between the national varieties of standard Dutch (so-called Dutch Dutch, Belgian Dutch and Surinam Dutch) and the increasing impact of new informal varieties of spoken language, often referred to as neostandards.

An important ongoing debate concerns the position and the status of dialects, regiolects, sociolects and ethnolects. The Taalunie is not a policy organisation exclusively for standard Dutch; it also covers policies with regard to varieties of Dutch. However, it is not clear to what extent the Taalunie should be active in this domain. Even more complicated is the relationship between Dutch and officially recognised but related minority languages such as Frisian, Limburgish and Low Saxon in the Netherlands. And – related to this – there is the fact that the Netherlands and Flanders are rapidly emerging as multilingual societies at various levels. These challenges may lead to different and to some extent conflicting policy attitudes. One can take a multilingual view in which Dutch is not the only point of reference but can still be considered as occupying a central position. This theoretical attitude clearly differs in a non-trivial way from a policy standpoint that considers Dutch to be the only relevant and legitimate language in the area. The choice between models implies complex and delicate issues, given the relationship between languages and language varieties on the one hand and identity aspects on the other, with identity as a factor of increasing importance in present-day society.

4. The international dimension and EFNIL

In our view EFNIL may and should play an important role in the development of a shared vision of language policy in the context of Europe. Together we should be able to express a common view on the role of language policy. Moreover, we could support each other in establishing a virtual centre of expertise for European languages in which centres within the participating countries/languages collaborate to make data, corpora, tools and other (digital) resources available for language users, professionals and researchers. One example: the digital grammar Taalportaal/ Language Portal is a platform in which all knowledge about the grammars of Dutch, Frisian and Afrikaans is made available in a digital form to the international community. German (Grammis; IDS) will soon be integrated in the same environment. The infrastructure of the Language Portal is available and could be used for other languages as well. In this way, in the context of EFNIL, we can contribute to the establishment of shared infrastructural instruments and services for our European languages. More possible ways for European collaboration are available and should be explored, e.g. influencing the political agenda on language issues (both at the national and the European level), sharing best practices in language matters, providing a platform for discussion, promoting research on language topics that transcend national borders, etc. In short, we are convinced that EFNIL could and should assume a more ambitious role and even aim at a leading position in the field of language policy and language infrastructure within Europe.

Bibliographical information

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<http://www.efnil.org>