

Bilingualism, Diglossia and Language Planning : Three Major Topics of Sociolinguistic Concern in Belgium*

door

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The aim of this lecture is to introduce in a nutshell the linguistic or sociolinguistic problems to be encountered in Belgium and to discuss the ways they are currently being investigated by (socio)linguists.

Although one might theoretically distinguish between domestic and crossnational linguistic problems in Belgium, none are purely domestic since they are either in origin and/or in their further development, related to the fact that the different language groups in Belgium use a language which is not only used elsewhere, but is moreover used immediately across the national border. None of these language groups (Dutch, French and German) constitutes the centre of gravity of the evolution of these languages. Although I would not go as far as Haugen who says that every language in Belgium „belongs to its neighbours” (Haugen 1966 : 928) it is obvious that the fact of speaking a so-called exoglotic language determines linguistic fate as well as interrelation.

Before turning to the linguistic situation of the Dutch speaking part of the country which will bear the main focus of my lecture, I should give you some basic information concerning the part played by language issues in Belgian political life, as well as the linguistic facts which account for it. I should like to start with a quotation from my Brussels colleague Hugo Baetens Beardsmore, a distinguished scholar of bilingualism :

„Language is the most explosive force in Belgian political life” he says „...language loyalties override all other questions that form part of the body politic of Belgian life, uniting conflicting ideologies, drawing together social classes with contradictory interests, producing bedfellows who without the common bond of a mutually shared language would have little contact” (Baetens Beardsmore 1980 : 145).

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Val Lorwin, one of the best informed foreign observers of the Belgian political scene, adds to this :

„Along with Canada, Belgium is one of the few developed states whose citizens publicly ask, not only whether the national state *will* survive, but even whether it *should* survive” (Lorwin 1972 : 407).

Since language is a decisive issue in Belgium you should also be aware of the actual balance of power in our various linguistic communities. Belgium is a small, trilingual country with approximately 10 million inhabitants, more than 60 % of whom are Dutchspeaking. These are approximate figures since an official language census has been abolished by law and it is therefore impossible to know for certain how many of the inhabitants of the bilingual area of Brussels (10 % of the nation's population) belong to which language group. We might get an idea of the actual situation by using the figures issued by the Belgian army, concerning the language status of its recruits (we have a conscription in Belgium). On 1. January 1980, 62.79 % of these recruits were Dutchspeakers, 36.76 % Frenchspeakers and 0.45 % Germanspeakers.

Belgium is a semi-federal country consisting of 4 different entities constituted on the basis of language. The Dutchspeaking community is located in the North of the country, the Frenchspeaking one in the South, the Germanspeaking community occupies a small territory in the East of the country and the fourth entity is the bilingual community of Brussels, located in the centre, yet entirely within the Dutchspeaking territory. Since regional governments have a (yet restricted) legislative power in this area, the frontiers of their jurisdiction (being language borders) are defined in the constitution. The language status of each Belgian village or town is therefore easy to determine and the same holds true for every inhabitant, with the exception of the inhabitants of Brussels, since one's official language is not a matter of personal choice but of the territory one lives in.

The title of my lecture then is inspired by the three major problems the Dutchspeaking Belgians (Flemings as they are called) appear to be confronted with. What language the Flemings speak is indeed essentially determined by :

- a. the confrontation with the Frenchspeaking compatriots, accounting for bilingualism ;
- b. the interaction of standard language and local dialects, accounting for the diglossic aspect ;
- c. the interaction of Dutch as used in Belgium and in the Netherlands, which accounts for the language-planning part.

I shall now consider each of these three topics.

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As you are certainly aware there exists a large body of literature on bilingualism and a still impressive, though lesser body of literature on diglossia. It is therefore out of the question to even attempt to give a survey, however restricted, of what has been written on both subjects. It may be useful, however, to point out why several authors have claimed that bilingualism and diglossia are not unrelated subjects. Baetens Beardsmore for example states :

„As one moves through different varieties of a language one moves along a scale of differentiation which may lead to the point of mutually unintelligible dialects. Once mutual unintelligibility has been reached one is faced with the same conditions as pertain to bilingualism” (Baetens Beardsmore 1982 : 32).

The question as to whether this relation between bilingualism and diglossia does exist in Dutchspeaking Belgium depends on how we define diglossia. We shall return to that in a moment.

Let me first consider the problem of bilingualism. As was obvious from the previous account I gave of the linguistic situation in Belgium, there is no doubt that this country is a multilingual one (I shall, incidently, use the terms „bilingual” and „multilingual” indiscriminately since there is no essential difference between the two mechanisms).

For a nation to be labeled multilingual one of the two following possibilities should apply :

- either most of its inhabitants should be proficient in two or more languages
- or two or more languages should be in official use, the country nevertheless consisting of two or more monoglot groups of inhabitants.

The latter is undoubtedly Belgium's case. Yet it should be pointed out that even in multilingual societies of this nature, there are usually more or less large numbers of bilingual individuals, who function as linguistic mediators between the two groups present (Baetens Beardsmore 1982 : 5). An investigation into the cultural, linguistic or educational problems of these individuals can be termed a study in individual bilingualism. Since that is not my purpose at the moment, I shall on the contrary deal with so-called societal bilingualism (Fishman 1966).

The language frontier between Germanic and Romance languages crosses Belgium and has always done so, since this frontier never coincided with political borders. None of the medieval principalities that were to make up most of modern Belgium were linguistically homogeneous. Although bilingualism thus has a long history in Belgium it has changed considerably in nature during the centuries.

Bilingualism in the Middle Ages hardly affected the inhabitants of the monoglot areas, since only the nobility was in contact with French, the language of the King of France, who was feudal Lord of Flanders. From the Burgundian period onwards most of the Dutchspeaking area was confronted with a Frenchspeaking court in Brussels so that gradually other classes of the population were affected by the prestige language of the court. Individual bilingualism therefore spread through the upper classes of the Dutchspeaking society and this progress continued while new historical events took place.

By and large the most important was the political split that occurred at the end of the 16th century as a result of the civil war which opposed the southern and northern provinces of the Netherlands against the rule of the Roman-Catholic Spanish Habsburgers. For a time it looked as if all of the Netherlands would succeed in overthrowing Spanish dominance but finally only the northern part of the country managed to do so. From 1585 onwards, the year the last major Flemish city, Antwerp, fell into Spanish hands, we witness an ongoing and soon irreversible split of the Netherlands into two separate countries, the precursors of present-day Holland and Belgium. The North was, from now on, a linguistically homogeneous country since Dutch was the only language in use in its territory.

Not so in the South. Both the clerical dominance in intellectual and cultural life and economic stagnation caused a vast wave of emigration to the North, an enormous brain-drain of upper and middle class people and the intellectual elite in a northern direction. The South in this way lost most of its social and intellectual leaders. In the 17th century the newly developing upper class accepted the French language orientation already possessed by the Flemish nobility. The language of the common people, on the other hand, never managed to develop into a supraregional tool of communication and only survived on a dialectical level. We witness thus the birth of a situation characterized by bilingualism with diglossia, as Fishman was to call it (Fishman 1967).

Moreover, since all of the Frenchspeaking territories remained under Spanish dominance, this increased considerably the weight of Frenchspeakers in the Southern Netherlands.

The war of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713) saw our territory pass to the Austrian Habsburgers and throughout the 18th century one saw :

„further consolidation of French as the more socially acceptable tongue, as the language of the aristocracy and more and more also of the wealthy middle class who tried, as elsewhere in Europe, to mimic their betters. In

fact a knowledge of French became a necessity as it was the official language" (Donaldson 1983 : 24).

As a matter of fact from that moment onwards societal bilingualism almost ceased since Dutch, or the dialectical reminders of it, had almost no more official status. Individual bilingualism continued to exist but must have been limited to only part of the upper and middle classes since the lower classes still had no knowledge of French.

The language situation deteriorated even more when, in 1795, the Belgian territories were annexed by France, and its inhabitants were considered citizens of the newly created French republic. Due to Jacobin centralization this implied an attempt to systematically and completely assimilate the Flemish population (as well as all non-Frenchspeaking citizens of the Republic for that matter) without taking into account regional traditions, language and culture. Every citizen, whatever his linguistic or cultural origin and background had to be Frenchified as quickly and thoroughly as possible. One should realise that this had never been the case before. Whatever foreign rulers we may have had, no one ever displayed any interest in changing the language habits of the mass of the population, limiting themselves to the use of French as the language of administrative contact and government.

As far as the lower classes were concerned this did not work out but as far as the bourgeoisie was concerned, it did, at least from Napoleonic times onwards, since the bourgeoisie was eager to cooperate with the French as their privileges increased. Together with the nobility they supported both the French rule and the French language claims.

At the end of the French period societal bilingualism had almost completely disappeared but it was to be restored almost miraculously from 1814 onwards. Since the Congress of Vienna decided to reunite the Southern and Northern Netherlands under the Dutch King William I, for all practical purposes we returned to a situation with Dutch as an official language. William did indeed believe that his new unitarian state should have one overriding national language especially since 75 % of the population of his Kingdom was Dutchspeaking. However, since French continued to enjoy a privileged position in administration, law and education and moreover a quarter of the population had French as its mother tongue, we remained a bilingual state. No individual bilingualism was to be encountered with the Frenchspeaking Walloons and the vast majority of the Dutchspeaking population of Holland ; it existed only in a limited social category in Flanders.

The North-South Union was short-lived however and Lorwin describes the linguistic situation in the newly created Kingdom of Belgium in 1830 as follows :

„The internal social language barrier within Flanders cut off the masses of peasants, workers and lower-middle-class-elements from those who should have been their natural cultural leaders. The elites were as Flemish in their territorial roots as the masses. But they often knew only enough of the Dutch language to command servants or workingmen : French in the parlour ; Flemish in the kitchen. Language differences thus not only created a gap in communication ; they also carried a load of social dominance and social resentment”.

(Lorwin 1972 : 388).

In the Constitution of 1831 the language question was dealt with rather laconically as follows :

„The use of the languages spoken in Belgium is optional ; it may be regulated only for acts of the authority and for judicial affairs” (art. 23).

Bearing in mind Lacordaire's statement that :

„Entre le faible et le fort, entre le pauvre et le riche
C'est la liberté qui opprime et la loi qui affranchit”

i.e.

„Between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor
It is liberty which oppresses and the law which liberates”

it is quite obvious that this linguistic freedom was only profitable to the strong and the rich, i.e. the Belgian bourgeoisie from Wallonia and Flanders, all of whom were Frenchspeaking. So despite the fact that Dutchspeakers went on to constitute the majority of the population, no legal means was provided for their language and societal bilingualism almost existed less that it used to be during the French period.

It would take us out of our depth to fully develop the influence of the important so-called Flemish Movement, a broad linguistic and cultural movement which started from the very beginning of the Belgian state and has finally succeeded in establishing the rights of the Dutch language in a state which had begun as a complete francophone nation, at least officially. Complete but for the linguistic habits of the common people who had always remained faithful to their native tongue.

In the last 150 years it is curious that, the Frenchspeaking Flemish upper-classes having almost completely ceased to exist, individual bilingualism has dramatically diminished while, on the contrary, societal bilingualism has fully developed since both French and Dutch are not only legally but also practically of equal value and use.

Another oddity in the Belgian bilingual situation is that, although individual bilingualism is required for most major offices, almost no one feels very comfortable about it. There are indeed really conflicting attitudes towards bilingualism. The Walloons never really liked it whereas the Flemings are still so impressed by the past, that most of them actually still consider it to be a threat, an interim stage in language shift, as has been the case for so long. Yet it is still a practical necessity to make the collaboration of both communities at all possible.

The ambiguous attitude towards bilingualism is reflected in the schoolsystem: all education is basically monoglot and experiments like those in Canada with among other things immersion programs and the like are forbidden by law. Yet there is an extensive program in foreign language teaching in Belgium and the amount of language instruction has been laid down by law. Instruction in the other language of the country is of course provided though it needs not to be the first foreign language learned by the pupils. Mostly a secondary school curriculum provides instruction in three foreign languages to which, depending on course option, Latin and Greek may be added. Even at the university level language instruction is largely provided. This leads to a level of knowledge of foreign languages in Belgium (though mostly in Flanders) which is considerably higher than in neighbouring states.

Today bilingualism is seldom brought about by bilingual socialization as it used to be in the past in Flanders. Since most bilingual skills are learned at school it might perhaps be more appropriate to call it „foreign language proficiency”. This proficiency e.g. does not at all guarantee a nativelike command of the second language nor an extensive acquaintance with the culture of the group whose language one has learned to master.

On the other hand the former influence of French in Flanders and the close language contact in bilingual Brussels with, for the French-speaking, an important substratum of Dutch, has led to a considerable amount of linguistic interference. „Flandricisms” in Belgian French and „Gallicisms” in Belgian Dutch are rather impressive and constitute persisting first rate targets for normative mothertongue teachers on both sides of the language border. Flemish and Walloon dialects (the former to a greater extent though) display a huge amount of interference from the other national language, easily to be discerned on the lexical level but also present at the morphological and syntactical levels (cfr. e.g. Deprez-Geerts 1977).

The influence of French, often considered a threat, has also consequences on a language political and the language standardization

levels. Since from the very beginning the domination of French in Flanders was often said to be necessary because there was no real Dutch standard language and because of the overwhelming influence of dialects, the great majority of Flemings advocated strict language unity with Holland and therefore influenced the standardization process in a northern direction (Willemys 1981a). The call for linguistic uniformity with Holland was (and up to a certain point still is) frequently used as a weapon in the Flemish Movement with which one initially hoped and finally succeeded in regaining all the legitimate rights for the mothertongue in Flanders (Willemys 1981a). In almost the same way as Frenchspeaking Canadians in Québec one obviously managed to benefit from the cultural prestige of the other country using the same language (Willemys 1984a).

Studies made in Brussels and in the surrounding areas have established the fact that the use of dialect in that region is considerably lower than in the remaining part of Flanders. The inhabitants of this area (and this was explicitly mentioned by the subjects) do give up their dialect on purpose. They all seem aware of the fact that the influence of the dominating French standard language is only to be successfully repelled by another standard language, the Dutch one and not to be achieved by a dialect of that language (Willemys 1979, Van de Craen-Langenakens 1979, Van de Craen 1980, Janssens 1982).

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Since nevertheless the rôle played by dialects is still important I should now turn to the second part of my lecture, a discussion of diglossia. The term *diglossia*, as you know, was coined by Ferguson and there is no way, I'm afraid, to avoid quoting once more the so often quoted definition he gave :

„Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which in addition to the primary dialect of the language, which may include a standard or regional standard, there is a very divergent, highly codified, often grammatically more complex, superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of literature, heir of an earlier period or another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary communication". (Ferguson 1959 : 336).

Ferguson, in this respect, speaks of L and H varieties (Low and High) and gives examples of such diglossic communities as the

Arab community, Greece and, to a lesser extent, Germanspeaking Switzerland.

Nobody, familiar with the Flemish situation, will claim that diglossia, as defined by Ferguson, does really exist in Flanders. Yet some authors do call the Flemish situation a diglossic one, encouraged by other linguist's definitions, among them Gumperz' and Fishman's. Gumperz, in the first instance, made us realize that diglossia occurs not only in multilingual societies having several „official" languages, nor only in societies using a more classical and a more popular variant of a language, but also in societies displaying different dialects or functionally differing language variation of any kind (he quotes as an example the New Delhi situation) (Gumperz 1961 and 1964).

Fishman, on the other hand, terms diglossia a form of coexistence of two (or more) languages or language varieties, the social class values and class-bound functions of which are complementary (Fishman 1967 and 1971).

This may have been the reason why Baetens Beardsmore lists Belgium as a diglossic community (Baetens Beardsmore 1982 : 33) and why many other Flemish linguists agree with him. Other linguists, on the contrary, are not very happy with this extension of Ferguson's definition. I'll confine myself to the discussion of the case of Deprez who, in his PhD dissertation includes a postscript with the very significant title *Vlaanderen is geen diglossische gemeenschap* („Flanders is no diglossic community", Deprez 1981 : 154-158).

His major arguments seem to be :

a. Any possibility of differentiating between e.g. the Swiss-German situation and, say, Flanders, Holland, England etc. is lost should every dialect-standard relationship be called diglossic. This echoes an opinion put forward by Hudson (1980 : 55) and which, I think, is irrelevant*. Since the paramount criterion for diglossia seems to me that different codes have different *functions* in society it is quite obvious that both Flanders and England are indeed diglossic. The question which really matters is to know how separable the situations are in which one speaks different codes and I shall try to demonstrate that there is indeed a situational switch which cannot be labeled but diglossic.

* „However, Fishman (following John Gumperz) also extends the term diglossia to include any society in which two or more varieties are used under distinct circumstances. This may be a regrettable development, as it would seem to make every society diglossic, including even English-speaking England (i.e. excluding immigrants with other languages as their mother-tongues), where different so-called „registers" and „dialects" are used under different circumstances..."

b. second argument : a growing part of the population socialises its children in the standard language. Although some of these youngsters do learn a dialect afterwards, some don't. An increasing part of the population moreover has accepted the H-variety as an every day language which is even used in informal circumstances.

c. Since more and more Flemings renounce dialect even in informal situations there is less and less justification for labelling the Flemish situation a diglossic one. As soon as part of the community — inevitably comprising many intellectuals — doesn't speak dialect anymore, diglossia must be considered out of question.

Since Deprez may be right but not quite, I think we should turn to the actual situation for information. I believe that I should give a survey of what the situation really is and then try to find a convenient way to label it (in this order, thus avoiding having to do the opposite).

A recent investigation I carried out in Flanders shows, among other things, that (Willemyns 1981b) :

1. at least 85 % of the Flemish student population (undoubtedly an „intellectual” group) knows a dialect*. Since the notion of „dialect” is hard to make clear and unambiguous in a written inquiry, it is indeed almost certain that even of the remaining 15 % some do indeed master a dialect, even without acknowledging it.

2. The entire 85 % appears to use the dialect, most of them regularly, some only occasionally.

3. Dialect usage varies from almost a 100 % in very informal, to a mere 2 % in highly formal, situations.

Since this investigation was carried out in a young and intellectual group of the population and everyone, including Deprez, admits that those are the people most likely to display least dialect knowledge and usage, it may be assumed that for the whole of the population a more substantial percentage still knows a dialect and uses it in even more circumstances than my subjects.

This situation with alternative use of different codes of the same language according to the greater or lesser formality of the situation seems clear enough to be called diglossic. Yet I agree that the Flemish situation is, for more than one reason peculiar ; I'll discuss three of these reasons :

1. In a previous paper I tried to explain how solidarity, power and indulgence determine code choice (Willemyns 1981a). I summarize this for you :

* The geographical variable plays an important rôle though : percentages vary from 98 % in West-Flanders to 72 % in Brabant.

- In Flanders dialect is the usual vehicle of conversation between people with the same geographical background, whether or not they belong to the same social class. To this extent the solidarity of common origin and mother tongue (i.e. the local dialect) quite easily overcomes the difference in social class and even the formality of many situations
- On the other hand, the influence of power can be considerable when not all interlocutors originate from the same region or find themselves in very formal situations, thus disadvantaging every one who has an insufficient command of the language variety expected in these circumstances, i.e. a variety as close as possible to the standard language. So on the institutional level group solidarity is superseded by power
- Until a few decades ago, as I told you before, the rôle of the H-variety was not performed by Dutch but by French. The end of the dominating position of French caused a kind of „communicative vacuum”. The members of the upper classes had been taught and trained almost completely in French but could not or would not any longer use this language in the appropriate situations it was meant for. This French training, however, often entailed an insufficient command of the Dutch standard language and caused a rather complaisant attitude towards linguistically deviating behaviour in general, an attitude quite different from other linguistic and cultural communities. This indulgence, to a certain extent still exists today and more or less impedes the implicit penalties one might expect for wrong or inappropriate linguistic behaviour.

The interesting side of this situation is that, though it still exists, it is rapidly giving way to another, more common condition and it is rather fascinating to observe this ongoing change.

2. Although, as comes forth from the inquiry previously mentioned, the change in progress has not so far significantly damaged dialect mastery, it certainly has changed the domains of standard language usage, first of all among the younger generations. As many linguists point out, standard Dutch is indeed gaining in prestige, not the least in the attitudinal field.

3. Finally as a third peculiarity of the Flemish situation, there is the language political aspect of standard Dutch usage mentioned previously, which prevails in the Brussels region but certainly is not unimportant in the rest of Flanders.

Returning now to Deprez' conclusion that rather than diglossia one should use the term „dialect-standard language-community”

to characterize the linguistic situation in Flanders, I cannot but disagree. The conditions I have just briefly discussed are not to be regarded typical for a normal dialect-standard language-community and therefore I persist in calling them diglossic, although this fits neither with Ferguson's nor with Gumperz' and Fishman's definitions. But since standard and dialect do undoubtedly have a different function in Flemish society and functional difference seems to me to be the essential characteristic of diglossia, there really is no reason whatsoever to avoid the term. Yet I may agree with Geerts that the type of diglossia we're confronted with is an „unstable" one (Geerts 1974) in that it is changing rapidly.

I should like to conclude this section on diglossia with the remark that the distinguishing of two language varieties, L and H is in fact insufficient for describing most of the West-European language situations and certainly the Flemish one. To cope with varying degrees of formality there are indeed several intermediate language levels — codes if you like — between dialect and standard.

This field should be regarded as a continuum of which dialect and standard are the extreme poles and on which everyone's language use in a specific situation, depending on setting, topic, role relation and locale, can be situated. The individual's ability to use the whole extent of the continuum according to communicative needs can be called communicative competence (Hymes 1971). It may vary with social class, level of education, environment etc. Moreover one should realize that, since a choice from different codes is determined by the social class one belongs to, it is obvious that the functional alternation which characterizes diglossia, may appear to be different for each social class.

The main point, however, is that specific situations require specific language usage, according to varying pressure of power and solidarity and that therefore every code has a specific function and, consequently, a specific value, known by both the speaker(s) and the listener(s). The question as to whether one wants to label such a situation a diglossic one, according to this definition or another, may indeed be rather irrelevant. But since we are confronted with a specific form of the dialect-standard-situation anyway, diglossia is as good a term as any to be used here!

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I come to my third topic now. In his *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* David Crystal says that :

„Language planning is a term used in sociolinguistics to refer to a systematic attempt to solve the communication problem of a community by studying the various languages or dialects it uses and developing a realistic policy concerning the selection and use of different languages" (Crystal 1980 : 203).

Flanders and Holland do form a language community but, due to historical and political events mentioned previously, there certainly is a communication problem on the dialect level as well as on the standard language level.

Language planning might therefore involve everything to be arranged between Holland and Flanders as far as their common language is concerned both internally and externally, i.e. regarding their common interests abroad.

Since time will not permit a consideration of the entire problem I shall concentrate on one single issue which is not only up-to-date but also extremely interesting and rare. I am referring to the *Treaty of Linguistic Union (Taalunieoverdrag)*.

Sharing the same language often draws people together so that we can witness at different stages and places not only individual but also official attempts to secure cultural solidarity. The latter mostly takes the shape of a bi- or multicultural treaty, a so-called cultural agreement aiming at establishing a coordinated cultural and linguistic policy. The Treaty of Linguistic Union (*Taalunieoverdrag*) meets the aim just mentioned.

The Treaty was signed in 1980 by the King of the Belgians and the Queen of the Netherlands but only fully implemented at the end of 1983 with the installation of the *Council for the Dutch Language and Literature* (Willemyns 1983 and 1984b) and is a unique experiment in international linguistic relations, with implications beyond the sole interest of the two countries involved, and therefore to be considered a source of inspiration, perhaps even a model for other language communities spread over several countries.

Although the Treaty has been signed by the King and the national government it only affects part of the Belgian population, viz. the Dutch speaking inhabitants. It is therefore the Flemish state-government and not the national Belgian government which is officially charged with and responsible for the further development of Treaty-matters. In Holland on the other hand the whole of the population is concerned and the national government is the responsible party.

By far the most remarkable thing about the Treaty is the legal status of the so-called *Taalunie*, i.e. the whole of political, administrative and scientific institutions created by the Treaty. The *Taal-*

unie is an international body, to which both governments have delegated what are usually considered to be their own prerogatives, i.e. to decide autonomously on linguistic and cultural affairs. Consequently both governments are no longer responsible for the matters which are now under the jurisdiction of the supranational *Taalunie*.

In the field of international law the status of the *Taalunie* is very much similar to the one of e.g. the European Community meaning that although representatives of the different countries are involved, the decision-making is the prerogative of the international body itself and its decrees are compulsory for every member-state. To my knowledge this is the only incidence of such an international body in the field of language, literature and culture*

To be able to assume the responsibilities attributed to it, the *Taalunie* consists of the following institutions:

- on a political level:

- a committee of ministers, comprising ministers of both countries, which holds the executive power of the *Taalunie*
- and a parliamentary commission, comprising MP's of both countries, acting as the legislative component

- on an administrative level:

- a Secretary General which is the bureaucracy of the *Taalunie* entrusted with the implementation of the decisions of the executive, legislative and scientific bodies

- on a scientific level:

- a „Council for Dutch Language and Literature” comprising 45 members competent in at least one of the following disciplines: linguistics, normative language use, literature, translation, education, editing, libraries, theatre, cinema, press, radio, television. The Council is supposed to advise the Committee of Ministers whenever asked for, but is also entitled to make suggestions of its own whenever it chooses to do so.

The important thing now is to know in which matters the *Taalunie* has taken over the authority of both governments and which practical means it has been granted to carry out its responsibilities!

The commission that was given the task of preparing the Treaty acknowledges that „intellectual maturity in both countries and recent development in Belgian legislation” made the conclusion of the Treaty at all possible. According to the following quotation of the Treaty, both governments aim at:

* A comparable institution as the *Majlis Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesia* (Kuo 1980) has a different status in that it does not assume the legislative rights of the governments involved.

„favouring and reinforcing, both with reference to cooperation between their countries and to their mutual relations with foreign countries, this unity of language and literature which had for so long been endangered by political separation”.

They account for the unique form the Treaty has taken by stating that, since „unilateral decisions can only be prejudicial”... „not only should there be a common policy in the field of Dutch language and literature but, more important still, this policy should be mutually agreed upon as the only possible one”.

The Treaty, art. 2 says, aims at „integrating as far as possible the Netherlands and the Dutch speaking community of Belgium in the field of the Dutch language and literature in the broadest sense”. Since in an official, legal text there should be no doubt about the meaning of „the broadest sense” it is stated that :

„to this field belong : language and literature as objects of science, literature as art, language as a vehicle of science, language as a medium of literature, the teaching of language and literature, language as a tool of communication”

The concluding parties moreover :

- „wish to promote the Dutch language and literature and to stress the necessity that by doing so the unity of the language should be taken into particular consideration
- aim at a responsible use of the Dutch language, especially in education and in official communications”.

This constitutes a considerable shift of responsibilities from both governments to the newly created international body, which moreover is given the task of „determining a uniform terminology for legislation and official publications”. This is a very rare and delicate thing to do. Rare because it seldom occurs that two countries agree to change their terminology which has been fixed in the course of centuries ; delicate because judicial terminology is rather often related to institutions and customs peculiar to a given country. Frequently a change in terminology would cause a change in these institutions themselves. Consequently the responsibility of the *Taalunie* is an enormous one since it can legislate autonomously in these matters and since both countries have agreed beforehand to accept its decisions.

In art. 4 it is decided to create and maintain joint institutions and to jointly fix the orthography and the official grammar of the language (a project to the latter effect, the *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst (ANS)* is already in progress and should be brought to a conclusion by the end of 1984.

Finally the Treaty stresses that „the notion of the unity of the Dutch language and literature is to be diffused”. In my view this means that more efforts still are to be made to level language differences on both sides of the border. From a general impression it should be stressed that the discrepancy between northern and southern realizations of Standard Dutch is by no means larger than in similar cases of one language being spoken in several countries and that, quite on the contrary, I don't know of any language community where more efforts are made in order to draw variants as closely together as possible (Willemys 1981a).

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Apart from the formal uniqueness of the Treaty, the most important question seems to be whether and to what extent it is going to influence daily language practice on both sides of the border. The Treaty is obviously the consecration of a need for integration existing for centuries and felt to be ever more urgent as time passes. The explanatory statement emphasises indeed the necessity „to achieve recognition and acceptance of this unity in all classes of the population in the North and in the South as well as beyond the frontiers of the Dutch language area”. It is therefore more than likely that the possibilities offered by the Treaty will be fully seized upon by the administrations of both countries and by the *Taalunie* itself, thereby intensifying linguistic and cultural cooperation. This should not only influence daily language practice in the south but hopefully even increase tolerance for so-called deviating language usage in the North. Both should support and intensify the ever-developing unification.

Unlike the situation in many other language communities, there is daily contact between citizens of both countries in the Dutch language community. Thanks to cable television all Flemings and the great majority of the Dutch are able to switch to the programs of their neighbours. This audiovisual contact is likely to be more important than any treaty. In other basic fields, too, Dutch and Flemings have come to know each other rather well and to meet on different levels, formal as well as informal. Increasing formal and institutional contact is bound to influence language evolution more considerable still.

A question remaining open for the time being concerns what the repercussions of the Treaty will be on the psychological level. It is common knowledge that, between Flemings and Dutch, there tends of old to be some mutual irritation, and that feelings are not

always as fraternal as one might perhaps expect them to be. Although this is frequently the case between neighbours it is a feeling that should be considered since it influences linguistic attitudes which in their turn are known to be of considerable influence on linguistic behaviour. One of the main issues in discussions about the „norm” of „proper” Dutch is very often the frequently expressed constraint against assimilating too much with the language of the northern neighbour, due to mutual prejudices. Yet these emotional discussions are purely academical since practically this assimilation is proceeding steadily and (to most people) unconsciously. The rebuffing of „Holland flavoured” Dutch usually doesn't exceed the level of pronunciation (particularly intonation and rhythm) and the refusal to use some highly marked elements of vocabulary.

Yet in spite of this, it is plain that not only is there a large amount of conformity but that moreover this conformity has always been energetically striven for by the Flemings because of one consideration which is political.

During its struggle for linguistic and cultural equivalence Flanders was desperately in need of some proof that its language was a language of culture and civilization to the same extent as French. Most of the time the Dutch didn't seem very cooperative because many of them regarded „Flemish” mostly the same way French-speaking Belgians did, i.e. as a conglomerate of dialects unfit for the higher aspirations of cultural and spiritual life (this incidently also accounts for the Flemings not always being too fond of the Dutch). It was therefore important to the Flemings to prove that they were capable of using a standard language, first to the Dutch and afterwards (more or less with their approval) to their French-speaking countrymen. It was quite rightly felt from the start that the only possibility of successfully repelling the competition of French was the elaboration of a language that could be accepted as being the same as the one used in Holland.

Anyway, as things developed and the Flemish Movement gradually succeeded in realizing its goals, the need for integration with the neighbour grew less compulsory: as war comes to an end, the need for weapons is felt to be less urgent and that is exactly what has happened during recent years in Flanders. Viewed in this light the Treaty has come 20 or 30 years too late, since it is meant to meet a situation which is slowly fading away. The official acknowledgement of the unity of Dutch is, of course, a good thing but as a support for domestical and cultural accomplishments, it might prove to be outdated since, as a matter of fact, the unity of the Dutch language is no longer challenged on the home front.

There is, however, another area in which the Treaty, in the eyes of its advocates, is supposed to do some good. Art. 5 says that the concluding parties will commonly „further or organize the teaching of the Dutch language, literature and culture *abroad*” and that they will „encourage *abroad* the diffusion of Dutch literary products”. The explanatory statement also mentions the necessity of getting the Dutch language situation better known abroad and spends a whole chapter summing up efforts already made on that behalf. This is an important hint at what the Treaty is really meant for: recognition *abroad*. This is also clearly stated in an article written by the first Secretary General of the *Taalunie*, B. de Hoog, that opens as follows: „Nobody denies that the inhabitants of Liège, Genève and Québec speak French although their language usage differs from that of the French as far as pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax are concerned. Likewise everybody agrees that Austrians speak German and that Australians speak English. But the opinion that the Dutch and the Flemings speak two different, though related, languages is still very commonly held” (De Hoog 1983, 1). This is what bothers many Dutchspeakers and this is one of the important things the *Taalunie* is aimed at.

It is a matter of fact that this erroneous opinion is very commonly held even in highly learned and intellectual circles abroad and even respectable encyclopaedias seem to be badly informed as to the real situation of the Dutch language community. There can be no doubt that the promotion of the Dutch language and literature abroad has suffered very much from this persistent misunderstanding. Even the most sceptical observers agree that if the Treaty is to be advantageous somewhere it should be in the field of international relations. I am sure that nobody is better aware of this than the Dutch language departments at foreign universities and I truly wish that the Treaty will indeed help to at last establish a better knowledge of the situation.

Let me conclude that this Treaty, though belated, will certainly harm no one, is, on the contrary, likely to improve Dutch-Flemish relationships and should even support the promotion of the language and the culture shared by the Dutch and the Flemings. On a domestic level it will certainly not work miracles, but on the foreign level, the Treaty could at last start an expanding movement for a language and a culture surely deserving to be better known.

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