

Different countries, one language - an integrated language policy: the case of the Dutch language.

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ABSTRACT

In more than one respect the language-political situation in Dutch and in the Dutch language area is special, and perhaps even unique.

(1) As is well known, Dutch is an official language in several different countries and regions, both within and outside Europe: in the Netherlands, the Flemish region of Belgium, the bilingual region of Brussels, the Republic of Surinam, and various islands in the Caribbean area. In 1980 the Netherlands and Belgium established a common institution responsible for establishing and maintaining an integrated policy with regard to Dutch language and literature. This institution is the Nederlandse Taalunie, i.e. the Union for the Dutch language. In 2004 the Republic of Surinam joined the Taalunie as an associate member, and quite recently the Caribbean islands have been involved in the work and activities of the Taalunie. As far as we know, this is a unique structure: Dutch seems to be the only language area where different states and regions have transferred their competence for language and literature policies to an international treaty organisation, thus giving up their national sovereignty in this field. Not long ago, a new organisation came under the Treaty of the Taalunie, namely the Institute for the Dutch Language (INT), which has recently applied to become a member of EFNIL.

(2) The areas of competence of the Taalunie cover the full domain of language planning, i.e. status, corpus and acquisition planning, but with distinctive levels of competence, running from exclusive competence by the Taalunie itself (e.g. orthography and grammar) to co-ordination between policy actors belonging to the various countries and regions. The domains of competence of the Taalunie are not limited to language planning in the strict sense of the term but also cover aspects such as the teaching of Dutch as a foreign language and the promotion of the Dutch language and Dutch culture abroad. In many other language areas these aspects are the prerogative of separate, non-linguistic institutions such as the British Council, the Instituto Cervantes or Camoës.

The Taalunie comprises four official bodies: (a) the Committee of Ministers, as the decision-making body, (b) the Inter-Parliamentary Commission, as the body representing parliamentary control, (c) the Council for the Dutch Language and Literature, as the advisory body of experts and representatives of civil society, and (d) (under my direct guidance) the Secretariat-General, as the policy-preparing and -executing body. The Secretariat and the newly established INT collaborate and co-ordinate their activities as much as possible. The Secretariat focuses mainly on the policy and political aspects of language planning, with INT as its main infrastructural and technical partner for corpus-planning activities and for the development of specific language devices and tools.

Our contribution will describe in more detail the infrastructural and institutional situation mentioned above, and will inform you of various aspects which are relevant to the main theme of this conference, such as:

- attitudes present within our societies towards language planning and language issues in general;
- current language-related issues in the public debate;
- tools for assessing the effectiveness of policies and measuring the empirical situation concerning Dutch, esp. the newly published research report *The State of Dutch*;
- new challenges for the Dutch language and for the European language landscape in general and our vision on collaboration between languages and language institutions within Europe.