

## **Stereotypes and attitudes in a pluricentric language area. The case of Belgian Dutch**

### **Abstract (Nederlands)**

Tegenwoordig wordt het Nederlands algemeen beschouwd als een voorbeeld van een pluricentrische taal, met het Belgisch Nederlands, Nederlands Nederlands en Surinaams Nederlands als gelijkwaardige variëteiten. Dat was echter vroeger allerminst het geval: tot vrij recent werd Belgisch Nederlands beschouwd als het insignificante kleine broertje van het ‘echte’ Nederlands, zoals het in Nederland werd gesproken. In deze bijdrage bekijken we hoe de positie van het Belgisch Nederlands geëvolueerd is, en hoe daarmee ook de taalattitudes van Vlamingen ten opzichte van hun eigen (standaard)taalgebruik en dat van Nederlanders volop aan verandering onderhevig zijn.

### **Abstract (English)**

Nowadays Dutch is generally considered to be an example of a pluricentric language, with Belgian Dutch, Dutch Dutch and Surinamese Dutch as equal varieties. Formerly, this has not been the case at all; until quite recently, Belgian Dutch was considered a rather insignificant annex of ‘real’ Dutch as spoken in the Netherlands. In this contribution we discuss the position and evolution of Belgian Dutch, and how the attitudes of Flemings are changing towards their own (standard) language and towards the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands.

## **1. Introduction**

More often than not a language is spoken in more than one country or region; for example, world languages such as English, French or Spanish. The same goes for Dutch, which is the official language in the Netherlands, Belgium, Suriname, Aruba, Curacao and Sint-Maarten, and according to the *Taalunie* (‘Language Union’) is “een standaardtaal met drie poten”<sup>1</sup> (a standard language with three ‘legs’ or varieties) – Dutch Dutch, Belgian Dutch and Surinamese Dutch. The topic of this chapter is the position of Belgian Dutch compared to Dutch Dutch; we will elaborate on the evolution of Belgian Dutch from being a rather insignificant annex of Dutch Dutch to being an equal variety.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://taalunivesum.org/inhoud/feiten-en-cijfers> (last accessed 31/03/2017).

In section 2 we sketch the history of the standardisation of Dutch in Flanders.<sup>2</sup> Initially, Flanders took Dutch Dutch as its norm, and large-scale standardisation initiatives were taken to stimulate the spread of Dutch Dutch. In section 3 we describe the evolution from Dutch as a monocentric language to Dutch as a pluricentric language, and in section 4 the attitudes of Flemings towards people from the Netherlands and their language are discussed. This section shows that Flemings attribute high status to Dutch (standard) Dutch, but they do not particularly like the variety, and most of them do not want to speak like people from the Netherlands. We end with a conclusion and brief discussion in section 5.

## 2. Standardisation of Dutch in Flanders

### 2.1 Dutch Dutch as the model

Flanders is traditionally considered to be a country with a delayed standardisation process compared to the Netherlands. Dutch became a standard language in the Netherlands much earlier than in Flanders.

Standard Dutch was established in the Netherlands from the 16th century onwards, and mainly during the 17th and 18th centuries. The dialects from the province of Holland acted as a model in this standardisation process, but due to large-scale emigration from Flanders, many Flemings lived in the neighbourhood of Holland too, and their dialects also influenced the standardisation process. While standardisation proceeded in the Netherlands, Flanders was dominated by the Spanish, the Austrian and the French, holding back the development of Standard Dutch there. In 1830, when Belgium was founded, French became the dominant and most prestigious language. Alongside French, Dutch dialects were also spoken and written, but these dialects were considered mutually divergent: many different dialects of Dutch were spoken and written in Flanders at the time, which led to the perception of ‘normative chaos’ in Flanders (Willems 1819-1824; Wils 1956).<sup>3</sup>

From the 19th century onwards, the so-called ‘Flemish Movement’ (*Vlaamse Beweging*) fought against the supremacy of French and discrimination against the Dutch language in Belgium. This movement focused on the legal recognition of Dutch in Flanders and eventually played an essential part in the ‘Dutchification’

<sup>2</sup> In this contribution, *Flemish* and *Flanders* are used to refer to the political area of Flanders and not to the dialectological area of Flanders, which roughly contains the provinces of West Flanders, and East Flanders in Belgium as well as the northwestern corner of France, and Zeeland Flanders in the Netherlands.

<sup>3</sup> At least, that is what is traditionally assumed about Dutch in 19th century Flanders. Recent research has questioned the ‘normative chaos’, and the alleged corruption and regional fragmentation of the language of the Flemings. According to Vosters et al. (2010) Dutch in Flanders was no less uniform than Dutch in the Netherlands.

of Flanders. On an ideological level, a dichotomy existed within this movement between ‘particularists’ and ‘integrationists’. The first argued for an autonomous Flemish standardisation process, based on the supraregional Dutch spoken in Flanders at that time (and elements of regional dialects). The integrationists, on the other hand, wanted to introduce Dutch Standard Dutch as the official language of Dutch-speaking Belgium. Eventually, in the 19th century the integrationist agenda was decided upon and in 1898, with the ‘Law of Equality’ (*de Gelijheidswet*), Dutch Dutch was recognised as an official language alongside French.<sup>4</sup> Briefly, the choice of Dutch Dutch was based on the following principles. Firstly, the integrationists believed that the spoken language in Flanders was no more than a mishmash of dialects, which were too affected by French to serve as the basis for a standard language. The Dutch Dutch standard language, on the other hand, was a modern language, with enough prestige to compete with French. The choice of Dutch Dutch was also seen by the integrationists as a choice for their own language, because their Flemish ancestors had influenced the northern standard language. Flanders would thus connect with its past (cf. Van Hoof 2015, 40).

## 2.2 Standardisation initiatives

The average Fleming was unfamiliar with Dutch Dutch, so to disseminate the variety in Flanders, a programme of language purification arose in the 19th century, growing in intensity during the 20th century and reaching its peak in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. From 1950 until 1980 Flanders went through a period of hyperstandardisation, involving ‘a fiercely propagandistic, large-scale, extensively broadcasted, scientifically supported and enduring ideologisation of language use in all corners of Flemish society’ (Jaspers/Van Hoof 2013, 332). During that period of extreme linguistic purification, an almost complete assimilation to the northern standard norm was pursued – except for pronunciation, where deviations from Dutch Dutch pronunciation were allowed. The Flemish media contributed actively to this massive propaganda exercise by giving linguists the opportunity to address their audience and spread their views. Radio and television channels broadcast language-related programmes, and almost every newspaper in Flanders had a daily column to help Flemings gain proficiency in the northern standard language.

Following the title of one of the newspaper columns, the umbrella term for all of these activities was ‘language gardening’, the gardeners mostly being established linguists and university professors. With ‘Standard Dutch’ being part of the mission of the Dutch-speaking public broadcasting channel VRT (*Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie*, ‘Flemish Radio and Television Broad-

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<sup>4</sup> Only the vocabulary and morphosyntax were taken over from the Netherlands; the pronunciation of Flemings could differ to some extent from Dutch in the Netherlands.

casting Organisation'), linguists kept close control over the language used by presenters of radio and television programmes, and programmes dedicated specifically to Standard Dutch were broadcast in prime time (Van Hoof 2015). In schools Standard Dutch was heavily propagated as well, by the means of so-called 'ABN kernen' (*ABN clubs*),<sup>5</sup> youth clubs where the main objective was to fanatically propagate the use of ABN, while simultaneously suppressing the dialects. As Willemyns (2013, 147) indicates, these young people, after becoming parents, started to socialise their children in Standard Dutch and paved the way for the massive wave of dialect loss that was soon noticed. The Flemish media and schools were thus the two main public institutions through which Standard Dutch was enforced and reproduced.

### 3. Dutch as a pluricentric language

Until 1970 the aim of Flemish language policy was the adoption of Dutch Dutch. Dutch was a monocentric language, with one authoritative centre: Dutch as it is spoken in the Netherlands. From 1970 onwards though, linguists and language advisors no longer considered the language situation in Flanders to be exclusively derived from the language situation in the Netherlands (cf. Geeraerts 2002). In the second half of the 20th century, Flanders became the dominant economic and political region in Belgium, and Flemings gained more self-awareness, including linguistic self-awareness. The language variety used on the Flemish public-service broadcasting station VRT – often referred to as VRT-Dutch – gradually took over the position of Dutch Dutch. With Belgian Dutch following its own course, Dutch is now considered to be a pluricentric language, in the sense defined by Clyne of a language 'with several interacting centres, each providing a national variety with at least some of its own (codified) norms' (Clyne 1992, 1); one national variety is spoken in the Netherlands, while the other is spoken in Flanders.<sup>6</sup>

One example of this evolution towards a pluricentric language is evident from the way Belgian Dutch and Dutch Dutch words are treated in dictionaries. Before 2005, words also (or only) used in the Netherlands were considered to be the norm, while Belgian Dutch words were deviations from that norm. Words only occurring in Flanders were often labelled as non-Standard Belgian Dutch, while words only used by people in the Netherlands were considered Standard Dutch

<sup>5</sup> ABN stands for *Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands*, which can be rendered in English as 'General Cultivated Dutch', although others speak of 'General Civilised Dutch' or 'General Educated Dutch' (see Willemyns 2013, 143).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Belgian Dutch and Dutch Dutch, the *Taalunie* also recognises a Surinamese Dutch variety. Dutch is the only official language in Suriname and is the mother tongue of 60% of its inhabitants. Dutch Dutch was the norm for a very long time there, but since 2004 Suriname is an associated member of the *Taalunie*, and a separate variety is recognised.

(and were not labelled ‘Dutch Dutch’). Nowadays, we see a more equal treatment of Belgian and Dutch Dutch words.

- 1) Firstly, words only occurring in Belgium are less often labelled as non-standard. Many Belgian Dutch words (or certain meanings of these words) used to be labelled as non-standard Dutch, but nowadays they are labelled as Belgian Standard Dutch (sometimes in combination with a register label such as ‘formal’, ‘spoken language’, etc.). Examples are *op punt stellen* (make perfect, finalise), *zich verwachten aan* (expect), *weerhouden* in the meaning of ‘take into consideration’ and *quasi* in the meaning of ‘nearly, almost’.
- 2) Secondly, dictionaries apply the same procedure for words which only occur in the Netherlands as for words which only occur in Flanders: all standard Dutch words which are limited to either Flanders or the Netherlands are labelled respectively as Belgian Dutch or Dutch Dutch.

*Prisma handwoordenboek Nederlands* was the first to apply this equal treatment (Martin/Smedts 2009), but nowadays *Van Dale* applies the same policy (Grote Van Dale 2015). This evolution towards more Flemish individuality is also clearly visible in the policy of the *Taalunie*. In the 1980s policy documents mainly focused on the spread of Dutch Dutch in Flanders, and (northern) Standard Dutch was considered to be the vehicle for Dutch and Flemish unity, but recent years have brought more scope for geographical variation, and the standard language is considered to be an instrument, rather than an untouchable, fixed norm (De Vries 2000).<sup>7</sup>

This evolution did not occur without resistance, however. ‘Early’ sociolinguists like Kas Deprez and Koen Jaspaert, who suggested in the 1980s that Flemings should focus on their own norm (cf. Deprez 1981; Jaspaert 1986), received considerable criticism from old-fashioned linguists and language professionals who wanted to preserve linguistic unity between Flanders and the Netherlands.

Even today, the acceptability of Flemish words continues to provoke controversy, especially when they are used by language role models. In November 2014, the newspaper *De Standaard* published the results of a large-scale language study of over 3,000 Flemish language professionals such as actors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, and linguists, called *Hoe Vlaams is uw Nederlands?* (‘How Flemish is your Dutch?’) (De Schryver 2015). In the study, participants were asked to assess the standardness of sentences containing a few typical Flemish words or constructions (as opposed to words that are used and accepted as Standard Dutch in both the Netherlands and Flanders), by answering the question, “Do you think the following sentence is acceptable as standard in, for example, a newspaper or the news?” The results showed that 58% of the language professionals did not object to the presence of such Flemish words or constructions in genres typically

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<sup>7</sup> See also <http://taaladvies.net/taal/advies/tekst/85> (last accessed 14/03/2017).

reserved for Standard Dutch. The results led to a steady stream of newspaper headlines and opinion pieces: “More ‘Flemish’ Dutch no longer a taboo” (standaard.be, November 3, 2014), “*Mutualiteit, vuilbak* and *autostrade*? Should be possible!”<sup>8</sup> (deredactie.be, November 3, 2014), “Language test: Standard Dutch is considerably Flemish” (deredactie.be, November 7, 2014), and “Stop cooing about Flemish!” (*De Standaard*, November 8, 2014).<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Opinions about people from the Netherlands and their language

This specific history of standardisation has led to a distinct mutual relationship between Flanders and the Netherlands, and more specifically to distinct stereotypical ideas and attitudes between the two. These attitudes go beyond language alone, and are linked to issues of identity. According to Geert Hofstede, a social psychologist well known for his model of cultural dimensions, “no two countries [...] with a common border and a common language were so far apart culturally [...] as Belgium and the Netherlands” (2001, 61). These cultural differences are reflected in quotes such as *We verstaan Belgen, maar begrijpen ze niet* (‘We understand the language of the Flemings, but we don’t get them’) (NRC Handelsblad, 8/04/2011). There are indications that cooperation between Flemings and people from the Netherlands does not always pass off smoothly. For example, there are several organisations dedicated to stimulating cooperation between Flanders and the Netherlands:

Het Algemeen-Nederlands Verbond brengt Nederlanders en Vlamingen samen om elkaar beter te leren kennen, de belangstelling voor elkaar te vergroten en de samenwerking te verbeteren. De *Orde van den Prince* zet zich in voor de taal en cultuur van de Nederlanden, dat wil zeggen Vlaanderen en Nederland. De *Belgisch Nederlandse Vereniging* heeft tot doel de samenwerking tussen Vlaanderen en Nederland en het begrip voor elkaar te bevorderen. (Gerritsen 2014, 26)

(*Het Algemeen-Nederlands Verbond* brings people from the Netherlands and Flanders together to get to know each other better, increase mutual interest and enhance cooperation. *De Orde van den Prince* dedicates itself to language and culture in Flanders and the Netherlands. *De Belgisch Nederlandse Vereniging* aims to improve cooperation and understanding between Flanders and the Netherlands [our translation]).

<sup>8</sup> *Mutualiteit* ‘health service, health insurance’, *vuilbak* ‘garbage can’, and *autostrade* ‘motorway, highway’ are three examples of Flemish lexical items that were often judged as Standard Dutch in this study. The “correct” Standard Dutch equivalents are *ziekenfonds*, *vuilnisbak*, and *autosnelweg*, respectively.

<sup>9</sup> The original Dutch headlines were “*Vlaamser’ Nederlands geen taboe meer*”, “*Mutualiteit, vuilbak en autostrade? Moet kunnen!*”, “*Taalttest: Standaardnederlands is behoorlijk Vlaams gekleurd*” and “*Hou op met dat gekir over Vlaams*”.

Furthermore, for both people from the Netherlands and Flemings who want to work across the border, courses are available to learn certain rules of conduct (Gerritsen 2014).

Flemings also generally tend to have stereotypical ideas about the Netherlands and its inhabitants, stereotypes which might not be all that different from the way people from other countries feel about the Netherlands. A quick browse through the internet yields the following stereotypes:

- People from the Netherlands are verbally brutal and unmannered; while Flemings are afraid to say how they actually feel about something or someone, people from the Netherlands are said to be very direct and open in their communication;
- People from the Netherlands are very noisy, and Flemings often get annoyed by them if they meet them abroad, for example in a hotel;
- People from the Netherlands are mean with money.

In our view the stereotypes focus on the Dutch population rather than the country as such. However Flemings do seem to have a rather stereotypical view of the country and its landscape as dull and uninteresting, with lots of tulips and windmills.

Flanders also seems to differ significantly from the Netherlands when it comes to the dominant language ideologies. Flanders' perspective on language is strongly norm-oriented and essentialist, comparable to France for example, widely known for the *Académie Française* and its centralistic language policy. On the other hand, the Netherlands have a more instrumentalist take on language, and therefore a far less vigorous obsession with the Standard Dutch norm. Initiatives to unite the (Standard) Dutch used in Flanders and the Netherlands are far stronger in Flanders, whereas people from the Netherlands are generally not that involved in the 'Flemish' used by their Belgian neighbours. However, ordinary, non-linguistically educated Flemings do not generally feel the need to speak like people from the Netherlands either. By asking questions about a TV quiz show with both Flemish and Dutch participants, Geerts et. al. (1977) studied the attitudes of Flemings towards Dutch Dutch compared to Dutch as it is spoken in Flanders. They asked their Flemish respondents if they preferred to speak like the Flemish or the Dutch participants of the quiz, and which variety they liked the most. 64% wanted to speak like the Flemish participants. Deprez (1981) observed similar results in his study: most Flemings did not want to speak Dutch Dutch, but wanted to express their own Flemish identity.

A couple of decades later, those attitudes have not really changed. Impe (2010) studied the attitudes of Dutch-speaking subjects from Flanders and the Netherlands towards several regionally coloured colloquial varieties of Dutch and towards Belgian and Dutch Standard Dutch on four dimensions: beauty, friendliness, usefulness and value. Generally speaking, the attitudes towards Belgian Standard

Dutch and Dutch Standard Dutch are quite positive, especially when compared to the colloquial varieties (cf. numerous other studies, e.g. Heijmer/Vonk 2002; Smakman/Van Bezooijen 2002; Van Bezooijen 2004). If we break the results down into respondents from Flanders and the Netherlands though, the respondents judge their own national standard variety to be more beautiful than the other national standard variety: on the ‘beauty’ axis, respondents from the Netherlands are all much more positive towards Dutch Standard Dutch, while Flemings are more positive towards Belgian Standard Dutch. Both Flemings and people from the Netherlands seem to prefer their own variety. To Belgian subjects, Dutch Standard Dutch does have high status though: Belgian subjects appreciate Dutch Standard Dutch better for usefulness and value, than for beauty and friendliness (see also Heijmer/Vonk 2002).

In previous research, the first author of this contribution mapped the attitudes of Flemings towards intralingual variation in Flanders, as they were expressed during in-depth interviews (Lybaert 2014a). During the interviews, the respondents sometimes expressed their attitudes towards Dutch Dutch too, even though this was not the focus of the study. For instance, the idea that northerners speak a more perfect kind of Dutch was expressed on a couple of occasions. After listening to a Belgian Standard Dutch fragment, one of the respondents said: ‘als ’t zo Hollands begint te klinken maar geen Hollands is dan is ’t zo ’t perfecter Nederlands’ (‘When it starts to sound like Dutch Dutch, but it’s not really Dutch Dutch, then it is more perfect Dutch’). Where does this idea come from? Flemings sometimes feel inferior to Dutch Dutch and its speakers. They envy people from the Netherlands because they have a more thorough command of the standard variety of Dutch and can speak it spontaneously and naturally, whereas to Flemings Standard Dutch feels like a variety which requires a lot of effort (Lybaert 2014b) and to some it is even felt to be a foreign language (Delarue 2016). However, Flemings do not really want to speak Dutch Dutch. They simply want to be fluent in their own national variety of Standard Dutch, just like people from the Netherlands.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

At first sight, the case of Dutch as a common language, with Belgian and Dutch Dutch as the two most notable national varieties, seems to be a textbook example of how language pluricentricity works – no different from, for example, the German or English contexts. However, despite an officially common language and, to some extent, a common language policy (with the *Taalunie*), the dominant language ideologies in Flanders seem to differ significantly from those present in the Netherlands. In an attempt to explain this different perspective on language, Van Splunder (2015) points out that “the Dutch *pragmatic* or *instrumentalist* attitude to language resembles the Anglo-Saxon attitude, while the Flemish *essentialist*

attitude is indebted to the German romantics, but ironically also ties in with French language beliefs” (2015, 102, our translation and italics). Although this strict dichotomy seems a bit exaggerated, there appears to be an element of truth in it: for instance, the Dutch stance on the use of English in higher education differs from the Flemish opinion on the subject, which is rather mixed (cf. Bollen/Baten 2010, 429).

The fact that Flemings still attach a strong importance to the Standard Dutch norm, more so than their northern counterparts, can be explained by this different perspective on language. As mentioned earlier, initiatives to unite the (Standard) Dutch used in Flanders and the Netherlands are (or were) far stronger in Flanders, and Flemings still attach a substantial level of status to Dutch Standard Dutch – even though they do not really like the variety on an aesthetic level.

At the same time, however, Flanders seems to increasingly choose its own path towards an endogenous language norm, with a tendency to codify the typical Belgian Dutch vocabulary (see §3) and the functional elaboration of non-standard varieties and variants, usually dubbed *tussentaal* (‘in-between-language’). In doing so, language focus in Flanders appears to be shifting gradually from aspects of correctness, status and prestige to notions of identity, dynamism and (fluent) communication, for which the narrow Standard Dutch norm is no longer the only or even the most appropriate choice. It should therefore be expected that Flemings will grow more supportive of their own ‘typically Flemish’ language use – with an ensuing debate on which features and words are part of the Belgian Standard Dutch norm and which are not – and this emancipation will undoubtedly influence the way Flemings perceive the language use of people from the Netherlands. As such, the Dutch language area will remain an interesting playground for (socio) linguists, as it is far from clear how these processes of pluricentricity, a strong (yet weakening) standard language ideology and a growing focus on identity will play out in Flanders, and how they will affect the linguistic ties between Flanders and the Netherlands.

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