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All dialects are equal, but some dialects are more equal than others

by

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For linguists all language varieties are equal in all respects, but we all know that some language varieties have more prestige than others. Because of inconsistent national and subnational policies on language variation, various language varieties are not treated equally.

The Netherlands and the northern part of Belgium are united in the *Nederlandse Taalunie* (NTU), the Dutch Language Union. Following the 1980 founding treaty (*Verdrag inzake de Nederlandse Taalunie*) the two countries form a single language area. Surinam joined the NTU in 2004. When it comes to the recognition of regional languages, a discrepancy exists between the language varieties spoken north and south of the border between Belgium and the Netherlands, because The Netherlands have ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), and Belgium has not ratified this treaty.

In the Netherlands Frisian, Low Saxon and Limburgish have been recognized under the ECRML. This was after successful lobbying by representatives of the speakers of these languages, following the German example where Low Saxon already was a recognized regional language. Frisian was treated as an official language in the province Fryslân (Friesland) before. Frisian is both the name of a standardized language and the name of a number of local varieties, the Frisian dialects (Frisian in that case is a collective noun). Frisian now is a regional language, recognized according to part III of the ECRML. Low Saxon and Limburgish are not standardized. These two regional languages actually consist of a large number of diverse dialects, collectively named Low Saxon and Limburgish. Low Saxon and Limburgish in the Netherlands now are recognized according to part II of the ECRML, which gives them fewer rights and less support than Frisian.

These regions were of course not the only ones that sought recognition for their dialects under ECRML. Many groups of dialect speakers in both the Netherlands and Belgium hoped to get the same enhanced status for their languages. However, in Belgium the NTU advised against recognizing Limburgish. Because of this attitude in Belgium, NTU also advised against giving more dialects in the Netherlands the status of regional language. Consequently the request of Zeeland to consider its dialects as a regional language, was not granted. In concordance with the opinion of NTU the Dutch government decided not to promote any more dialects by means of the ECRML (Belemans 2011).

The result is an inequality between the policies concerning the dialects of the Netherlands. For linguists all language varieties are equal in all respects, but here, due to policies, some dialects are now part of regional languages and thus are under protection, but others are not. The latter are considered to be dialects of the standard language. This linguistic criterion does not hold, since policy is bound by administrative borders instead of isoglosses.

The ECRML does not provide a procedure for demoting a regional language and denying its status of acknowledgement. Nor would the demotion of Low Saxon and Limburgish be a solution that can count on the support of the respective speaker communities.

Language Policy

The ECMRL, as well as the basic principles of language policy, are extensively discussed by François Grin (2003). Grin has come up with a flow-chart and criteria to assess the workings of language policy measures. This Policy-to-Outcome-path will be of assistance when evaluating the measures in our case study, where we want to explore the outcome of the different policies in the Netherlands and Belgium for the dialects on both sides of the frontier.

Grin (2003) gives the following definition of language policy: "Language policy is a systematic, rational, theory-based effort at the societal level to modify the linguistic environment with a view to increasing aggregate welfare. It is typically conducted by official bodies or their surrogates and aimed at part or all of the population living under their jurisdiction." (Grin: 2003, 30). Although Grin stresses the public policy character of language policy, language planning does not necessarily only comprise activities executed by a central authority. Active individual citizens or NGOs can also lobby for language rights for example.

The difference between language policy and language planning is that the first refers to the general linguistic, political and social goals underlying the planning process (Mesthrie et al. 2000). Language planning in turn is used to refer to the practice; it includes all conscious attempts at altering linguistic behaviour of a speech community (Mesthrie et al. 2000: 384). There are two basic forms of language planning. Corpus planning is concerned with the internal structure of the language, and status planning comprises all efforts undertaken to change the use and function of a language or language variety within a given society (Kloss 1997). Status is used here to refer to 'function' or 'domain'. It can comprise the entire spectrum of domains of language use; the legal, economic, social and political position of the language (Kloss 1997: 384-385).

These different forms of language planning are naturally linked. An example of this relationship between corpus and status planning is seen when there is the desire to use a language in more domains of language use, for instance the use of Frisian in the legal profession. This is considered a form of status planning, concerned with where and when a language is used. To achieve the goal of extending the use of a language to new domains, also corpus planning is involved, as new lexical items, and appropriate styles are required (Mesthrie et al.: 2000, 385).

An essential aspect of language planning is language standardization. This refers to the creation and establishment of a uniform linguistic norm. The degrees of standardization range from an unstandardized oral language to a mature modern standard language (Mesthrie et al. 2000: 385). For example, English is a 'mature modern standard language'. It is used in all areas of communication. Frisian could be considered a 'young standard language' on this scale. Apart from vernacular speech the language is used to some degree in education and in administration. However, the language is not used in all areas of communication. The language is not used in the field of science or technology for instance.

More recently scholars have distinguished two more dimensions in language planning; prestige planning and acquisition planning. The first, prestige planning, involves efforts to create a positive image of the language so the stimulation of the language will succeed in the long run. The latter, acquisition planning, stimulates people to learn the language in question.

In practice language planning should be applied on a case-by-case basis. Not every language has the same needs (Grin 2003: 13). So, the same instruments which prove to be useful in promoting the use of Sámi in Finland are not necessarily as successful when applied to Frisian in the Netherlands for instance, because the language communities are different.

Languages can obviously not exist without a community of speakers. A community needs a viable environment to live in, and people need the means to make a living. Take all that away and their language dies. Language death occurs when one language replaces another across all domains of language use, and when the parents no longer pass on the language to their children (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 4-7).

A guideline to measure the vitality of a language is Fishman's (2001) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). Apart from indicating risk the language faces of vanishing, the scale also offers targets and priorities which a regional or minority language can set to improve its position (Gorter 2008). It consists of eight stages on a scale of the 'threatenedness' of a language. At stage 8 the language is at its weakest, with hardly any native speakers left, and at stage 1 the language has successfully averted language shift. At stage 1 the language is not 'done' with language policy, but it has succeeded in creating an environment in which the use of the language is considered 'normal' and it thrives in a living language community able to reproduce itself (Grin 2003: 42). Reproduction, i.e. intergenerational native tongue transmission, is the key factor of Fishman's approach. Language acquisition is very important; however, solely teaching the language in schools as a second language will not save a language. Transmission from parents to children is crucial for natural sustenance of a language (Gorter 2008). There is a division between stages 8-5 and stages 5-1. The weakest languages in stages 8-5 are mainly concerned with promoting the language to increase public support (Fishman 2001: 454), and do not necessarily need approval of those in power. This is different for the stronger languages, where the language is ready to be used in administration and education.

The upheaval about the disappearance of the world's languages begs the question why this is such a loss, and why linguistic diversity should be preserved. Answers to these questions come from different angles, which can roughly be divided to fit in a 'biodiversity' perspective, an economic welfare perspective, and a human rights point of view. The first perspective compares linguistic diversity to biodiversity, each language being compared to another, perhaps exotic, species. Linguists should save (collect) the languages just as a museum collects rare pieces of art. On the one hand, studying the world's languages enables linguists to perfect their theories of language structure. On the other hand culture and language are intertwined. A culture can be preserved through language. The idea is that each language reflects a unique worldview; the different linguistic organizational structures reflect how humans organize their thoughts and experiences (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 10-14).

From a welfare perspective the protection of linguistic diversity should be assessed empirically. A just policy should deliver more welfare to society as a whole. To achieve this, resources should be properly allocated. A policy, as a way of allocating resources, always creates 'winners' – those who benefit from it – and 'losers' – those who do not benefit from it,

but still have to pay in a way. This can be explained with an example of a taxpayer who pays taxes which finance a public service that he/she does not use. A good policy in theory is one where the winners can compensate the losers and still be better off. In respect to language policy this is however very hard to assess, as linguistic rights are difficult to express in monetary terms. Also there is hardly any empirical data which prove that society will be better or worse off with or without the protection of regional or minority language rights (Grin 2003: 25-27).

Nevertheless, opponents of the protection of regional languages often claim that a mono-linguistic environment will be more efficient, with a linguistically unified economic and social system. Majority languages should be most 'useful' because they have greater 'social advancement'; something that the minority languages do not have. Following this line of reasoning these critics claim that language policies will only succeed when they correspond to labour-market considerations (Fishman 2001: 452-454). Fishman objects to this argument by stating that the problem is not access to the labour-market, but economic power in general. A mere linguistic solution is not enough to straighten out the differences in economic power. Also, Fishman opposes the materialistic attitude the welfare-argument expresses, and argues that human values, behaviours and identities are essentially non-materialistic in nature, e.g. family loyalty, aesthetics and the corpus of ethics that each culture expresses and continually develops. He calls on the 'mark of higher cultures' that should have other than material values.

Another objection Fishman makes is to the idea that language death is 'natural'; a normal consequence of minority-majority relations. Fishman states that speakers of the minority language are uninformed, and are unaware of other options such as bilingualism (Fishman 2001: 454). Another widespread public opinion is that language right activists cause conflict, and minority languages are inherently a cause for conflict. In other words, multilingualism is divisive and monolingualism is cohesive in nature. Nettle & Romaine (2000) oppose this statement with a few examples of monolinguistic areas that face civil wars such as Northern Ireland, and multilingual societies without major conflicts, e.g. Switzerland. They argue that this generalisation is made on the false assumption that it is the different language that causes the disruption, while the underlying factor of conflict are social and cultural inequalities (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 18). Furthermore, Fishman argues that languages in stages 8-5 of GIDS are not confrontational at all. During these stages they put their efforts in gaining public support, approval and recognition (Fishman 2001: 454).

A different argument in favour of the protection of regional or minority languages is the belief that every person should have the right to use his or her own language. In this opinion each individual is entitled to language rights. The extent of these rights is up for discussion. Kloss' work addresses the core of the discussion on what language rights consist of. He made the distinction between 'tolerance-oriented' and 'promotion-oriented' rights (Kloss 1997). Tolerance-oriented rights safeguard individuals from government interference in their private language choice. That way people are free to speak the language of their choice when they are at home or at work, for instance. Promotion-oriented rights on the other hand refer to rights people have in public institutions such as schools. As promotion rights are rather broadly formulated by Kloss, more recent discourse has come up with different approaches to language accommodations in public institutions (see e.g. Kymlicka & Patten 2003).

Furthermore, one can ask if active language policy is a successful field of politics: can languages flourish or wither as a result of language policy? Do, for instance, the Limburgian

dialects really benefit from the ECRML-status they acquired? According to Fishman "there is no language for which nothing at all can be done" (in Mesthrie et al. 2000: 275), meaning that when a language is endangered, action should be taken to strengthen the language. Three important conditions influence language use. These conditions are capacity, opportunity and desire. If these are not met people will not speak the language, therefore these conditions are crucial for a language to remain vital (Grin 2003: 43). Capacity simply refers to the fact that people are able to speak the language. The members of a language community should have sufficient competence of the language in order to pass it on to the next generations. In order to achieve the capacity to speak a language, people should have the opportunity to learn the language, and to speak it on a daily basis. Also the desire to speak a language is imperative. If no one has the desire to speak the language it will cease to exist. Logically, for language policy to be successful, the focus should be on these three requirements (Grin 2003: 43-44). Language policy should ensure that people have the capacity to speak the language and guarantee education so people are able to learn the language. It should provide people with the opportunity to use the language, ensuring the right linguistic climate and finally promote the language to encourage people's desire to use it.

Language Rights

According to Dónall Ó Riagáin, special adviser of the European Bureau for Lesser used Languages, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 already acknowledged that "no one should be denied certain basic rights on the grounds of language". Art. 2 declares that the rights mentioned in the Declaration are to be conferred "without distinction of any kind such as [...] language." The declaration cannot be conceived as an exact statement of the existence of language rights, but it could be interpreted as the basis of the development of language rights (Ó Riagáin 1999: 292).

The definition of regional or minority languages is given in Art. 1 (a) of the ECRML:

Article 1 – Definitions
a   "regional or minority languages" means languages that are:
     i   traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population; and
     ii   different from the official language(s) of that State; it does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants; (Council of Europe, 1992)

This definition has three important aspects. First, the languages concerned are traditionally used by nationals of a state, in effect ruling out any immigrant languages. Second, the language must be 'different' from the language or languages spoken by the majority of the state's population. The explanatory report accompanying the ECRML addresses the question whether a language variant is a separate language or a dialect briefly. It clarifies that this distinction should not be made on mere linguistic considerations, but also on psycho-sociological and political considerations. This implies that regional or minority languages are to be assessed on a case to case basis. Third, the definition specifies the need for a language to have a territorial base. According to the explanatory report this is largely a practical concern. Most of the measures proposed by the ECRML require a geographical field of application other then the whole state (Council of Europe, 1992).

Equal rights

In society multilingualism often leads to a situation where the dominant language and the other languages are functionally complementary, e.g. in formal situations speakers will use the standard language and in informal situations they will use a minority language, a regional language or dialect. Languages being complementary mirrors the different social status of these languages: the standard language is supposed to be 'better' than the languages we use in informal situations. Important factors are the domination of national media by the standard language and its monopoly-position as a language of instruction in educational institutions.

As said above, linguists consider all language varieties equal in all respects. One language is not better than another; every language consists of a full grammatical system and a full vocabulary. The difference between dominant languages and oppressed languages solely has to do with social and political issues.

Language policy has brought about that some minority languages and dialects or regional languages are now recognized as official languages. They are valuable and need to be protected if they are under pressure. But language policy has also resulted in inequality: some dialects in the Netherlands now belong to a regional language and others do not, although they may be very similar. Dialects even may be treated differently in two adjacent countries.

For Limburg both situations are reality: the dialects of northern Limburg in the Netherlands are Kleverlandish (not Limburgish) and closely related to the dialects of northeastern Brabant. If these dialects in Brabant are considered dialects of the official language (ECMRL, article A, 1, ii), this also should count for the dialects in northern Limburg. Still those Kleverlandish dialects in Limburg are considered a part of the regional language Limburgish, simply because they are spoken within the administrative borders of the province. Secondly, the dialects of eastern Limburg in Belgium are closely related to the dialects of the southwest of Limburg in the Netherlands. The latter are again part of the regional language Limburgish, the first group is not because Belgium did not ratify the ECRML.

If policy is bound by administrative borders instead of isoglosses and social status prevails over linguistic criteria, policy treats languages and language varieties unequally. This discriminative behavior can be regarded as linguicism (cf. e.g. Kontra 2006). Ideologies which are used to legitimate and effectuate an unequal division of power and resources between groups, that are defined on the basis of language (their mother tongues), can be defined as linguicism. Speakers who are made ashamed of their mother tongue can be traumatized. To make anyone, especially children in school, so ashamed is as indefensible as to make him/her ashamed of the color of his/her skin.

Reker (2002) makes a strong plea against this treatment of regional varieties in Belgium and the Netherlands. The lower status of dialects in comparison to the standard language is a social phenomenon: dialects are simply languages with bad luck ("dialect is een taal die pech heeft gehad", Reker 2002: 18). The unequal treatment of dialects finds its origin in the way policy is organized: national politics will decide on which dialects become official regional languages but wait for regional authorities to make claims for this status. And what's more, national politics also leave the enforcement of ECRML to these regional authorities (Reker 2002: 22; Van Hout et al. 2009: 12-13). NTU should take the initiative in a language policy

that treats all dialects equally, e.g. via a treatment *de facto* of all dialects as regional languages under ECRML. Now there is no transnational uniform policy on languages, although NTU claims it provides such a policy.

The ECRML is not the only way that leads to language protection. In the last decennium various other procedures of language protection have started, leading to a mosaic of regional language policies. Especially the treatment of dialects as a valuable important part of cultural heritage has been fruitful, in Flanders but also in several provinces in the Netherlands (North Brabant, Zeeland) outside of the area of ECRML-languages. Belemans (2009) has proposed a solution to the deadlock of the ECRML in the Low Countries. They should shift the debate from language and cultural rights to the domain of cultural heritage. The ideal means for this paradigm shift would be, according to Belemans in 2009, for the Netherlands to ratify the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (CICH).

Belgium ratified this international treaty in 2006, the Netherlands ratified the Convention in 2012 (April). The government however also announced huge cutbacks in the field of culture. It is unclear if the ratification will be very fruitful in the near future.

Advantages of CICH are:
- the safeguarding of dynamic and diverse heritage, whereas ECRML aims at standardisation of regional languages. Dialects are inherently dynamic and diverse; language variation and change should be the core business of safeguarding programs
- the request should come from the community (bottom up) and should be for safeguarding, whereas requests for ECRML come from authorities (top down) and aim for language policing and standardisation.
A disadvantage would be the self-assignment of the language community; objectivity might be lost then. Still, CICH would lead to safeguarding processes instead of the preservation of a language.

CICH does not protect languages as such but language as a vehicle or vector of intangible heritage (art. 2.2) for instance in oral traditions. CICH wants to safeguard language solely as a cultural practise of transfer. There are however examples that contradict these guidelines, e.g. the whistled speech of La Gomera (one of the Canary Islands); in this case a language system and a language community are the subject of safeguarding, but not exclusively the tradition that is transferred by that language.

Even without a treaty emphasizing the importance of intangible cultural heritage, there are practices of language policy in the Netherlands which could fit well in a 'cultural heritage-approach', for instance in Zeeland and North Brabant. Choosing a different approach to regional languages might lead to a more equal situation between different language regions. Possibly UNESCO's CICH might lead to a new set of guidelines for the safeguarding of regional languages. In fact, the different language policies in the Netherlands sometimes resulted in similar outcomes: policies have led to professional language consultancy in Limburg and the Low Saxon region (ECMRL) but also in North Brabant and Zeeland (non-ECMRL); Limburg, Groningen and North Brabant all have an endowed chair for regional language variation, at the universities of Maastricht, Groningen and Tilburg, respectively. Still, the similarities are few in comparison to the differences. If we simply compare the financial efforts provincial authorities have done, the ECRML-languages get far more support than the others (Leijen 2011: 53).

Table 1. *Financial support for regional languages/dialects by provincial authorities in 1999-2010.*

Overijssel (Low Saxon)	€ 3.692.871
Groningen (Low Saxon)	€ 3.437.870
Drenthe (Low Saxon)	€ 2.915.999
Limburg (Limburgish)	€ 2.697.177
Gelderland (Low Saxon and others)	€ 2.057.000
North Brabant (Brabantish)	€ 950.000
Zeeland (Zeelandic)	€ 211.478

Frisian was already treated as an official language in the province Fryslân (Friesland) before the ECMRL and has known a long period of protection and promotion. The provincial authorities in Utrecht, Flevoland, North Holland and South Holland do not have any policy on the dialects that are spoken in their province. Dialects in Utrecht, North Holland and South Holland have a weaker position than dialects in the east of the Netherlands (Goeman & Jongenburger 2009), but they get hardly any attention from authorities.

It is clear that the non-ECMRL dialects get less or even no support at all from provincial authorities in the Netherlands. These distinctions lead to interregional linguicism. Furthermore ECRML has raised an undesirable competition between the standard language and the regional languages, since the latter now have to be expanded to domains (such as language education) that used to be standard language domains solely.

Because of inconsistent national and subnational policies on language variation, various languages are not treated equally, European legislation is held up and chances for transnational communication in Europe are ignored. The dialects of the border regions in the Netherlands are closely related to the dialects in Germany resp. Flanders. Most of the Limburgian dialects in the Netherlands are closely related to the Limburgian dialects in Flanders or the Ripuarian dialects in the Rhineland area of Germany. Most of the Brabantish dialects in the Netherlands are closely related to the dialects of the Antwerp province in Flanders and Lower Saxon in the Netherlands obviously forms a continuum with Lower Saxon in Northern Germany. These dialects belong to the same dialect families and were historically very important for the communication across the borders. Especially in Germany local inhabitants would not be able to understand Standard Dutch but they could easily communicate with Dutch people in their mutual dialects. Regional languages in border regions have in fact been used as 'regional linguae francae' for many centuries. In some cases these regions even have a long tradition in literacy (Giesbers 2008: 4-5), and the regional language also used to be applied in written domains. However, we seem to forget the regional languages and we leave many dialects unprotected. We are in need of new communication strategies within and between regions of the European Union: the European Commission states that in the context of an ever closer European Union and a globalised economy, the European Union needs to preserve its linguistic diversity and take full advantage of the potentials of multilingualism in order to create and maintain work for its citizens, facilitate cross-border activities, deliver social and territorial cohesion etc. (European Commission 2012). Shouldn't we then invest in the revitalization of (all) regional languages?

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