

## Bilingualism vs. multilingualism in the Netherlands

Marc van Oostendorp / Meertens Instituut and Leiden University

### Abstract

This paper discusses a consequence of the rise of English on the languages spoken in the Netherlands, a medium-sized EU Country in which most of the inhabitants speak a medium-sized language. It is shown that there are several indications that the Dutch are moving from being a traditionally multilingual population, priding itself on the knowledge of many foreign languages to rather being bilingual, priding itself on the knowledge of English. The rise of English as an international *lingua franca* does not seem to harm the position of Dutch in the Netherlands, but it may harm the position of other languages.

### 1. Introduction

Many travelers to the Netherlands have observed that the Dutch are to a large extent bilingual. «Just about everyone you meet in Amsterdam will be able to speak near-perfect English», the *Rough Guide* website claims,<sup>1</sup> and it is not very difficult to substantiate this informal observation with numbers. For instance, in a 2006 Special *Eurobarometer* report, researchers for the European Commission note that 87% of Dutch citizens speak English as a second language; the number is only slightly higher in Sweden (89%) and Malta (88%). The average in the European Union was 38% in 2006. (The numbers are based on self-reporting in a survey study, which in the Netherlands was conducted among 1,032 members of a phone panel.)

These numbers are in particularly strong contrast with those of the United Kingdom and Ireland, in which only 38% and 34% of the population, respectively, knows any language other than their native tongue (which is, of course, usually English). Within the Netherlands this number is 91%, in Europe it is 56%; the only country which comes as low as the UK and Ireland is the candidate EU member Turkey (at 33%), although Italy (41%) and Portugal (42%) come close.

It is intuitively clear what explains the low level of language knowledge in the UK and Ireland: these are English speaking countries, and most people will feel that they do not need other languages for their international communication.

In this article, I study what this bilingualism means both for Dutch and other languages spoken in the Netherlands, and how formal language policies, both at the state level and at the level of the provinces, has influenced bilingualism and how it has been influenced by it. A key hypothesis is that slowly the country is moving in the direction of becoming *bi*-lingual rather than *multi*-lingual. The rise of English does not seem to harm Dutch, but it does affect (the knowledge of) other languages. To some extent the same effect is to be seen as in the traditional English-speaking countries: knowledge of English makes the knowledge of other languages obsolete. In spite of this, the debate about language policy making is shifting to also having an exclusive focus on the protection of Dutch.

This finding is in line with the work of other scholars on other (Northern) European countries; see for instance Jørgensen (2010) and Kristiansen (2010) on comparable changes in Scandinavia. If this is true, a trend seems to be ongoing in which Northern Europeans tend to become more English-centered and thereby less responsive to the languages of their direct neighbours. These countries thus become more like English-speaking countries, except that they are bilingual rather than monolingual.

From the point of view of European language policies, the position of the Netherlands in Europe

---

<sup>1</sup> checked on 7 November 2011.

is interesting because the average level of proficiency in English is quite high among Dutch speakers, also in Flanders, the other European region in which Dutch plays an official role: the Eurobarometer just mentioned gives a percentage of 59% of Belgians who claim to speak English, but it is very likely that this number is substantially higher in Flanders than it is in the French-speaking part of Belgium (the level is 36% in France).

However, the most important way in which the Dutch stand out is the rather complicated relation between language and national identity (Barbour 2000, Oakes 2001). Extra (2011) points to what he calls «the Dutch lack of capacity in dealing with linguistic diversity»: Dutch tend to see using more than one language as being impractical, and in particular, they tend to give up their own language when this can reduce multilingualism. One of the data sets which Extra (2011) discusses is from the *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (1999) and concerns the use of the native language by immigrants. I copy only the data on immigrants from European countries:

<b>Native Country</b>	<b>First Generation (%)</b>	<b>Second Generation (%)</b>
The Netherlands	62.9	95.9
Germany	48.9	91.1
Malta	37.0	82.8
Spain	22,7	63.6
Poland	20,1	77.6
Italy	14,8	57.4
Croatia	13,9	41.7
Greece	6,4	27,9
Turkey	5,9	21,7

The Netherlands are at the top of the list of immigrants who start using the official language of their new home country (English, in this case), both in the first and the second generation: the former already in majority decides to use English at home, whereas in the second generation Dutch has all but disappeared.

Other data point in the same direction. Seebus (2008) mentions the *earshot norm* which Dutch immigrants in (again) Australia tend to observe: when English speakers are close enough, Dutch immigrants start speaking English to each other, even if the English speakers do not participate in the conversation. A historical piece of evidence comes from Groeneboer (2002) who points out that Dutch has never become a world language, in spite of the colonial history of the Netherlands and shows that this was at least partly due to an official policy to not teach Dutch to the local population in e.g. Indonesia, but install a local lingua franca instead, which was also often learned by Dutch officials, albeit at a very basic level (see also Frijhoff 2010 for an interesting discussion of Dutch language culture since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century).

There is no indication that the trend towards monolingualism at present leads Dutch speakers to abandon Dutch in favour of English. Couples of all-Dutch parents have not started raising their children in English, for instance, and Dutch families have not started using English at home, let alone that these numbers would in any way be comparable to those in Australia, shown above. However, it may lead to a situation in which the Dutch end up in the end in being more like the UK and Ireland: their only language of international communication will be English, while at home they speak Dutch.

In the next sections, I will describe the various different aspects which illuminate the central thesis. First, I briefly discuss the workings of the Dutch Language Union, and several other

political issues surrounding the standard language. In section 3, I give an overview of what is known about language attitudes among the Dutch. Section 4 discusses the rise of bilingual education and section 5 the political and administrative position of various linguistic minorities in the Netherlands. In section 6 I discuss the picture which emerges from these various sources of data and draw a conclusion.

## 2. The Dutch Language Union and other aspects of formal language policy

Dutch is a West-Germanic language which has an official status in three nation states worldwide: the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Kingdom of Belgium and the Republic of Suriname. Altogether, the number of speakers of Dutch approximates 22 million, according to the Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie*, NTU), the official body for all Dutch language policies, as well as all policy on literature written in the Dutch literature – such as subsidizing translators and a major literary prize. The NTU notes on its website that for this reason, Dutch counts as the 8th biggest language within the European Union, and the 37th biggest language in the world in terms of the number of native speakers.<sup>2</sup>

The NTU, officially established in 1980, is a common legal body working for the governments of the Netherlands and of Flanders (the position of Suriname is a little different, but that need not concern us here). All policies regarding the Dutch language and literature have been delegated to this particular body; as such, it is a unique body in international law: the countries have given up all autonomy on this particular area. Van Oostendorp (2007a) gives an overview of the activities and structure of the NTU around the change of the millennium (1995-2005). The structure described in that paper is still in shape.

Formally, the NTU is guided by the Ministers of Culture of the participating countries, who alternate chairmanship. The day-to-day administrative business is conducted by a Secretariat-General, which has its seat in The Hague, very close to – at about 1 km distance of – the seat of the Dutch Parliament. The Secretariat-General employs both Dutch and Flemish officers, and, although this is not an official policy, the position of Secretary General has always alternated between a Dutch and a Flemish high official in practice. Because of its international character, the policy of the NTU is not under direct control of either of the national Parliaments; rather there is an 'Inter-Parliamentarian Committee' in which representative members of both parliaments have taken their seats. A final organ of the NTU which is worth mentioning is the Council for the Dutch Language and Literature, which consists of a number of 'experts', such as scholars, literary authors and representatives of institutions of secondary education.

The fact that the Dutch language policies are codetermined by Belgian politicians is at first sight not completely harmless, since language is traditionally an important political topic in that trilingual country, in which in particular Dutch and French speakers are sometimes in fierce opposition. The wish protect Dutch against what is seen as the impression of a larger language is therefore probably much stronger among Flemish than among Dutch politicians. In actual practice, there is no discernible effect: NTU does not have the battle against English or any other language on its agenda, and restricts itself mostly to issues of corpus planning. In recent years, it has invested for instance in subsidies for various electronic dictionaries, in tools for machine translation and other computational methods, etc.

According to a recent English-language brochure,<sup>3</sup> «The aim of the Language Union is to support users of Dutch around the world so that the language can continue to be as dynamic and vigorous as it is today.» This may suggest a rather unwarranted optimism about the influence of state language policy, but this is not reflected in the way in which NTU works. What is clear, however,

---

<sup>2</sup><http://taalunieversum.org/taal/vragen/antwoord/4/>; checked on November 7, 2011

<sup>3</sup> De Nederlandse Taalunie. *How can we help you? The Nederlandse Taalunie in brief*. The Hague: NTU, 2009. [http://taalunieversum.org/taalunie/download/brochure\\_Engels.pdf](http://taalunieversum.org/taalunie/download/brochure_Engels.pdf). Checked November 10, 2011.

is that this motto is not defensive, or directed against other languages, but purely directed towards the use of Dutch. As an aside, it is interesting that there seem to be no NTU brochures in languages other than English (or Dutch): I have not been able to find anything in French, for instance, even though that is an official language in one of the two European countries participating in the Taalunie.

For the past few years, it also has been a goal of the NTU to become more 'visible' for the general audience among the Dutch speakers. One tool it uses for this is by adopting a 'theme' for every year; this concerns topics such as 'the use of English', 'the language of public officials', or 'dialects'. A commercial enterprise conducts an opinion poll about such a topic, and furthermore the NTU organizes a day in which people can listen to presentations about them and have discussions.

Although the Dutch state participates in the NTU for issues such as this, the legal position of Dutch itself is a matter of the Dutch government only. Dutch arguably is the most important language of Dutch public life: schools and school exams are generally in Dutch (see below), court cases are held in Dutch, the parliament meets in Dutch, all Dutch laws are written in Dutch, etc. Interestingly, this status of the Dutch language is not very strongly anchored in the Dutch law, and not in the Constitution at all, in spite of several initiatives of Christian Democratic politicians (in particular, members of the political party Christen Unie) in recent years to include it. So far, these have never received the required 2/3 majority, in spite of their rather non-obliging tone («The Dutch government promotes the use of the Dutch language»).

The most important law is probably the Law on Higher Education (Wet op het Hoger Onderwijs) which states (Art. 6a):<sup>4</sup>

Classes should be taught and exams should be offered in Dutch.

The law also mentions two possible (and important) exceptions:

- a. when the teaching concerns the language in question, or
- b. if the specific nature, the structure or the quality of the teaching, or otherwise the origin of the participants requires such, conforming a code of conduct which has been established by the authorities.<sup>5</sup>

The second clause makes the whole article all but vacuous, since one can always argue that 'the specific nature' of the education requires using a different language; a result of this is that at present about 80% van Master level education in the Netherlands is conducted in English (see section 4 for more on the implementation of language policies in Dutch schools).

It may also not be a coincidence that the most explicit law has been formulated exactly in the realm of higher education, one of the few areas of the public sphere where Dutch has suffered a considerable loss.

### **3. The language attitude of the Dutch**

Research into the general language attitude of the Dutch people is scarce; for instance, I have not been able to find a reliable recent scholarly study into what the general attitude is with respect to the dominance of English as a foreign language. We can look into discussions in the public domain, but this is a dangerous pursuit in the sense that only certain parties will raise their voice

<sup>4</sup> Wet op Hoger Onderwijs en Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek. Ratified on October 8, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> a. wanneer het onderwijs met betrekking tot die taal betreft, of

b. indien de specifieke aard, de inrichting of de kwaliteit van het onderwijs dan wel de herkomst van de deelnemers daartoe noodzaakt, overeenkomstig een door het bevoegd gezag vastgestelde gedragscode.

in this domain. In particular, people who are worried about issues such as these are more likely to raise their voice than those who do not have a strong opinion about them.

An interesting aspect of Dutch interest in language is that it is quite highly organized. This is true in particular for the mother tongue. The Netherlands hosts an association of 'language lovers', *Onze Taal* (Our Language) which has about 35,000 members and therefore may be the largest association of its kind in the world (Van Oostendorp 2007c). The association offers a number of services to its members, such as language advice by telephone, mail or e-mail; a website; a biannual conference attended by approximately 1,500 people; and, probably most importantly, a monthly magazine which is also called *Onze Taal*. Although the goals in the initial period – the association was founded in 1931 – were to use 'pure Dutch', and in particular to avoid all German influence, at present the goals of the magazine presently are to «write in an expert and readable way about all aspects of the [Dutch] language». It has a professional staff, and features articles by journalists, writers and professional linguists. Worries about the apparent deterioration of Dutch, the influence of English, etc., are regularly expressed, but the same is true for countervoices. The editors rarely express themselves directly, but they made an exception in the issue of January 2009, which was largely devoted to articles highlighting several points of view on the use of English. In the last article, the editors explained that the journal has as the only ambition to follow the debates about the topic and keep readers informed about different points of view. «Some might think that our attitude is not assertive enough, but it is the only realistic option for the editorial board of a language magazine that wants to be a platform for the entire Dutch-speaking community.» The title of the article was *To the barricades?*, with a suggestive question mark.

Overall, *Onze Taal* is an important private actor in matters of language policy, in particular in as far as issues of correctness are concerned. It publishes an influential spelling guide. Its language advisors correct the annual State of the Nation address (written by the Prime Minister) before it is spoken (by the Queen). Its employees have contributed considerably also to a database with language advice hosted by the Taalunie, but in line with the editorial statement just mentioned, it does not actively 'fight' the use of English in the public domain.

As I said before, it is not entirely clear whether the balanced view of the editorial staff of *Onze Taal* completely mirrors that of the membership. The website of *Onze Taal* hosts a page where members are invited to discuss language-related topics.<sup>6</sup> Now, almost regardless of the topic – e.g. should newsreaders speak more clearly, should we allow students to write in sms language –, the topic of English is brought up by visitors quite often.

Dissatisfaction with the 'lax' position of *Onze Taal* has furthermore led a few smaller groups to realize independent organizations. The two most prominent among those are *Stichting Nederlands* (Foundation Dutch) and *Taaverdediging* (Language Defense). Both of them have the use of English within the Netherlands public sphere as a very strong, and arguably the main, concern; the former fights it among other things by publishing a word list of English words that are used in Dutch text by sometimes madeup Dutch alternatives Koops *et al.* 2009); the second one seems to take as its main course of action writing letters to ministers, parliamentarians and companies protesting against individual occurrences of English, e.g. in the national airport.

Neither of them seems to have a support of more than about a few dozens of people. Arno Schrauwers, a journalist who has been the chairperson for *Stichting Nederlands* since 2003, stepped down in 2011 without being replaced. In a farewell letter he wrote: «I have come to the conclusion that I have failed to put the language as an important topic on the Dutch agenda. Dutch people individually claim that they value the possession of their own language highly, but I see very signs of it in everyday life. Dutch is under pressure. In more and more locations, Dutch has to give way to English. Sometimes this happens with consent of parliament, but even more often by just looking away. The people do not let themselves be heard.»

---

6 <http://www.onzetaal.nl/homofkruit/> (Checked Novemer 12, 2011)

All of this gives an indication that the Dutch people are not overly worried about the rise of English, to say the least. A similar picture emerges when we study the results from the NTU questionnaires. For instance, one of the questions in 2005 was whether people thought that Dutch would be replaced by English in schools, in big international companies, the government and universities. The people who answered that this would certainly or probably be the case numbered respectively 6%, 38%, 9% and 31%; the percentages of people who thought this would probably not be the case were respectively 74%, 17%, 73% and 35%. In other words, except for the big international companies and universities, the rise of English is seen two public spheres in which Dutch never played a dominant role to begin with, and people did not seem to be particularly worried by this (Nederlandse Taalunie 2005b).

Another indicator for the relatively low level of anxiety about the future of Dutch may be the book *Taal is zeg maar echt mijn ding* (henceforth *Tizmemd*; Cornelisse 2009), a title which is difficult to translate because it makes fun of at least two trends in spoken Dutch: the use of the discourse particle *zeg maar* («let's say», but used more or less in the way in which young Americans use the word *like*) and the tendency to say *dat is mijn ding* («that is my thing») to express happiness about something – the title thus means approximately *Language is, like, for sure my thing*. The book sold over 300,000 copies, which means it was one of the biggest overall non-fiction bestsellers in recent years, and definitely the most well-read book about language. It may therefore be taken to reflect something close to a common opinion about language. The author of *Tizmemd* is Paulien Cornelisse, a female comedian who studied General Linguistics for some time at the University of Amsterdam, and the book mostly expresses her playful observations regarding fashionable language. An interesting aspect of *Tizmemd* for the connoisseur of this genre of the popular book on language<sup>7</sup> – a genre that is often based on what Labov (1994) calls the Golden Age Principle: there has been some time in the past in which language was perfect, everything is going downhill since then – is that Cornelisse does not lament the deterioration of the language, and even sometimes points out that she likes certain developments, including the rising influence of English.

A typical fragment of Cornelisse is the following – from a column which appeared during the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, in which Hillary Clinton was one of the Democratic candidates for presidential nomination, while John McCain was the uncontested Republican candidate:

Hillary must have been looking forward to this sentence in last Tuesday's speech: «No way, no how, no McCain.» [...] But this *no way* sounded funny, to my ears in any case, because the Dutch who have adapted *no way* already a while ago, aren't those who we take seriously. Serious Dutch politicians do not say *no way*. [...] *No way* in the Netherlands is the exclusive property of young people who get intense inspiration from American tv series. My mind's eye sees a student, a girl, with a happy ponytail. She would for instance state: «I am not going to take that test again, no way!» [...] But I should add: the girlie students who now say *no way* will dominate Dutch politics within about ten years of course, and by then we will also take *no way* seriously.

Cornelisse observes that there is a discrepancy between the social connotations of *no way* as used by an American politician and as it is interpreted by a Dutch listener. She gives a social stereotype of the type of Dutch person who would use this English expression, and although she creates some ironic distance from such people, she does not seem to suggest that the day which will come in ten years and in which 'we' will start taking the expression seriously will be a tragic day.

---

<sup>7</sup> E.g. as compared to the popular series *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod* by the German journalist Bastian Sick (Sick 2006).

It is important to note that the membership of *Onze Taal* is almost exclusively Netherlandic; Flemish members are in a very small minority. Similarly, books such as that by Cornelisse are written almost exclusively by authors from the Netherlands. There also is no Flemish counterpart to *Tismemd*. At the same time, a very popular belief among both the Netherlandic and the Flemish audience is that the Flemish speak a type of Dutch which is much more pure and correct. One could give a number of reasons for this; one could observe for instance that the Flemish still live in a more diglossic situation (Grondelaers and Van Hout 2011). Since the Dutch Standard language is based mostly on Netherlandic (Holland) dialects, this language is much closer to the Dutch everyday speech than to its Flemish counterpart. For this reason, the Standard Dutch of Dutch speakers tends to be very close to their everyday speech, and this usual self-confidence makes them less sensitive to the finer details of prescriptive grammar. Standard Dutch for Flemish speakers on the hand is almost like a foreign language and treated with a similar care. In turn this also leads Flemish speakers to pay closer attention to the the formal rules of orthography. The most important (yearly) tv show involving language is the annual *Groot Dictee der Nederlandse Taal* (Grand Spelling Bee of the Dutch Language) in which both Dutch and Flemish participants show their skills in a test which is extremely difficult – it has never happened that any one participant had all forms correct. Although, the actual difference is marginal (in 23 years, the Flemish won 13 times), it is a widespread popular belief that the Flemish 'always' win this contest.

These beliefs do not seem to lead to a Dutch inferiority complex, or a clear Dutch desire to emulate the Flemish successes. Apart from such incidental tv shows, the two worlds seem to be completely separated, and becoming so more and more. This reflects itself also in the developments of the standard languages, which start diverging at a rather high speed. Tv shows from the other country are nowadays routinely subtitled, at least when they contain anything like a colloquial (regionally coloured) language (Hendrickx 2008). I have at least anecdotal evidence that Flemish speakers are occasionally answered in English when they introduce themselves in Amsterdam. All of this can be seen as part of the same complex: the Netherlands (and presumably) become more and more bilingual, such that even the variety of Dutch which is spoken at the other side of the border becomes less interesting than what is happening in the 'international' (i.e. English-speaking) world.

#### **4. The rise of English-language education programmes**

The picture that emerges from the preceding discussion is of a rather relaxed attitude towards linguistic issues in the Netherlands. The advent of English is not necessarily seen as a problem; even though language enthusiasts are rather well-organized, the militants who want to 'take action' against English are in a very small minority.

As a matter of fact, the number of people who are actively promoting the use of English for specific purposes might be larger than those fighting it. The most important application, and the one with the widest societal and political consequences, is the use of English in primary and secondary schools, as well as institutes of higher education.

As I have stated above, higher education is one of the few domains for which there are concrete language laws in the Netherlands. Paradoxically, it might at the same time be the area in which the influence of English has become largest. As we saw in Section 2, the law states that Dutch is the default language, and that universities each should have a 'code of conduct' to govern the exceptions. It is interesting to study these codes of conduct. Here are two examples, one from Leiden University, an all-round university in the West of the Netherlands, and one from the Technical University Eindhoven, which only offers technical study programmes:

(1) *Code of Conduct Leiden University*

During the propedeutic stage [i.e. the first year of the BA programme], the official

language is Dutch by default. The official language can be English if the provenance of the students makes such necessary.

During the second and third year of the BA programme, the official language is Dutch by default. The official language can be English if the provenance of the students makes such necessary.

During the MA programme, the official language is English, if useful, or some other language.

(2) *Code of Conduct Technical University Eindhoven (TU/e)*

Within the TU/e, one can use the possibility to make an exception to the rule that Dutch is the official language in classes and during exams. Next to Dutch, the only acceptable language is English.

One thing to notice is that both universities are in actual practice bilingual. Even though the Law only mentions Dutch and 'other languages', the latter category consists in practice only of English at these two universities (and this is not different elsewhere). In Eindhoven, the use of languages other than Dutch and English is even actively prohibited, while in Leiden (which prides itself on the largest number of foreign language programmes in the country), other languages may be used, but only English is mentioned. (Notice that the code of conduct would have the same content if English was not mentioned explicitly; mentioning just makes it more explicit what teaching in a foreign language will typically mean.)

It is hard to find reliable numbers of what these codes of conduct actually imply, because these data are not aggregated (by e.g. the Ministry of Education or any other party). I therefore collected data from the website Keuzegids Onderwijs, a guide pretending to inform prospective students about all the options they have. Higher education in the Netherlands, as elsewhere in the European Union, now consists of a bachelor (BA) and a master (MA) stage; the former is always three years and is supposed to follow secondary education. The latter takes one or two years and follows the BA. Another division, more specific to the Netherlands, is one between HBO (hoger beroepsonderwijs, higher professional education) and WO (wetenschappelijk onderwijs, scientific education). For each and every programme that was offered, I checked how many of them were offered in English:

	# of programmes	In English	Percentage
<b>HBO Bachelor</b>	269	65	24,00%
<b>WO Bachelor</b>	183	22	12,00%
<b>HBO Master</b>	152	40	26,00%
<b>WO Master</b>	687	405	59,00%

This table should be read as follows: there are currently 269 bachelor courses at the HBO level, of which 65 are in English only (we did not count the programmes which have only one or more courses in English), which is 24%. The majority of courses at the 'highest' level (WO Master) thus is already provided in English. At other levels, it is substantially lower.

It is somewhat surprising that WO Bachelor reaches only 12%, which is lower than HBO Bachelor. A possible reason for this is that a rather high number of Bachelor programmes at the WO level is on the humanities, which use Dutch or even other languages more often – the latter only in the case where the language is a topic of study (so French is only used in French language and literature programmes). In order to verify this, I did a check among the WO Master programmes; of those who advertise themselves as offering courses on 'technology', 91% are in English only; in those on 'language and communication' this number drops to 51%. Other

programmes which use Dutch relatively often are on other more national topics of specialization, such as law studies.

The use of English as a language of education is also no longer restricted to higher education. At the moment of writing (November 2011), there are 133 secondary schools which offer so-called bilingual education, which means that part of the classes on Mathematics, Geography, Chemistry, etc., are offered in some other language. This other language is English in 132 schools, and German in 1. (Classes are all in Dutch in the last two years of all schools, because students have to prepare for the final exams, which are centralized and in Dutch only. Students therefore have to get familiar with the relevant Dutch terminology.) A few dozen primary schools are nowadays also experimenting with teaching part of their classes in English.

The introduction of bilingual education does not meet any noticeable opposition. When bilingual education was introduced for lower forms of professional education, the vice-minister of Education Marja van Bijsterveldt stated: «In particular, welders, nurses and hotel employees can profit immensely from knowing a language such as English or German. Professionalism does not stop at the border. Bilingual education gives students a clear advantage.»<sup>8</sup>

Minister Van Bijsterveldt is not the only person who does not seem to be affected. In Taalpeil (2005), the NTU asked Dutch speakers whether they thought bilingual education in primary school would be harmful for the Dutch language. 56% of the respondents in the Netherlands said that they thought that this would not be the case (27% declared that they thought it would be harmful; for Belgium the numbers were 53% and 21% respectively). Several studies (e.g. Admiraal *et al.* 2006) have also shown that there is no negative effect of these bilingual programmes on the results in Dutch language tests for students in a bilingual school (Dutch language is a compulsory topic in all school types), or, as a matter of fact on any of the tests of topics taught in English, while the English language proficiency is higher. It should be born in mind, however, that these things are difficult to test, as some self selection is presumably going on: bilingual schools might simply attract better students to begin with.

## **5. The use of languages different from English and Dutch**

According to the European Commission, every European citizen should know at least two languages next to her native tongue (European Commission 2003). It is left unspecified what these other two languages should be. In the case of the Netherlands, these are usually German and French (in the NTU report Taalunie 2011, 76% and 39% of the Dutch claim to speak these languages respectively), which are important European languages, and furthermore languages spoken in important neighbouring countries, and which therefore have been taught in secondary schools for a long time, but obviously, the Netherlands is a multilingual country in many ways: it hosts a large number of minority languages, both 'indigenous' and brought to the country by immigration. In this section, I will give a survey of the position of these other languages in Dutch society and in particular in Dutch. I divided the discussion into two subsections, one on foreign languages, which are learnt by native Dutch speakers and one on minority languages, spoken natively by Dutch people. The distinction is to some extent of course artificial since some native speakers of Dutch will choose to learn a 'minority language' such as Turkish or Frisian, while, inversely, there is a rather substantial German(-speaking) minority living in the Netherlands. However, in practice it is not very difficult to distinguish the two types of language, and since their position is very different, it is also useful to do so.

---

<sup>8</sup>«Juist ook voor toekomstige lasser, verpleegkundigen of hotelmedewerkers is het van groot belang dat je een taal als Engels of Duits goed beheerst. Vakmanschap houdt echt niet op bij de landsgrenzen. Tweetalig onderwijs geeft leerlingen een streepje voor.» (Marja van Bijsterveldt ; June 2010)

## 5.1 Foreign languages

As we observed above, German and French are the traditional foreign languages in schools in the Netherlands. At least one of them is taught in all secondary schools, with a vast majority teaching both (Onderwijsraad 2008). This leads to a situation in which a majority of the Dutch claim to be able to speak German, and a large minority to speak French. (These data are all based on self reported behaviour; I am not aware of any reliable study on the level of fluency in these languages.)

Both of these languages are also considered of vital importance for the policies of the Netherlands, for example from an economic point of view. Studies like Van Els (1990), Westhoff (2001), Liemberg (2001), Edelenbos & De Jong (2004) show that organizations of entrepreneurs tend to think that German is of equal importance as English for Dutch companies, with French coming third, and Spanish fourth. Other languages, including for instance Chinese and Hindi are not considered to be very important. In spite of this, approximately a dozen Dutch secondary schools offer Chinese, just like some schools also offer programmes on Spanish, Russian, Turkish, Arabic, and Frisian, and it is possible to take state exams in any of these languages (Onderwijsraad 2007). The ambitions are also quite high. At the end of the sixth year of the (most academic type of) secondary school, Dutch students are supposed to be able to operate at level B1/B2 according to the European reference scale, which roughly means they should be able to operate independently in everyday contexts in the language in question (Meijer and Fasoglio 2007).

People do not just learn languages in formal schools. A recent study (ITS 2008) found that there are approximately 750 language-related organizations active in the Netherlands. This number includes a large variation of kinds of groups, including commercial enterprises offering trips to Barcelona and Rome where one can learn the local language up until groups of e.g. Greek immigrants who offer Sunday schools for their own offspring. (But this did not include informal groups or individuals offering courses.) ITS (2008) notes that very little is known about the quality of these programmes, or their results.

Finally, foreign languages can obviously also be a subject at the level of university studies. The picture here is quite stable over the years as Vermeulen and Yildiz (2009) show, based on numbers from Leiden University, the Dutch university with the largest number of linguistic programmes (the numbers indicate the number of new BA students in a given year; I have omitted several programmes such as Egyptian, Korean, Slavic, etc., because they do not add much to the general picture.):

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>Arabic</b>	23	25	25	25	28	29	24	32	44	30
<b>Dutch</b>	59	58	55	53	41	49	62	48	60	60
<b>German</b>	10	5	10	9	12	18	17	12	13	9
<b>English</b>	103	97	110	92	95	110	98	118	120	137
<b>French</b>	34	26	39	39	38	32	34	31	42	29
<b>Greek &amp; Latin</b>	26	32	32	24	32	31	35	29	33	26
<b>Hebrew &amp; Aramaic</b>	6	7	11	4	7	9	3	3	5	3
<b>Italian</b>	15	13	22	11	20	28	26	19	25	19
<b>Chinese</b>	39	32	34	32	47	44	78	106	117	76
<b>Japanese</b>	23	34	39	33	33	57	77	106	125	114

<b>Indonesian</b>	17	12	8	11	8	9	8	8	6	11
-------------------	----	----	---	----	---	---	---	---	---	----

For many programmes, the number stays more or less constant, but two things are striking. The first is the rather sharp rise of interest for Chinese and Japanese (but not for other Asian languages, like Indonesian) in the course of this period, starting at around 2003. Another interesting point is that the number of students of English is typically larger than the number of students of Dutch, French, and German combined; especially in the last years. English has become the most attractive language for students to study. In particular, the number of students is extremely low in comparison, in particular given what we have just seen about the economic importance of this language for the Netherlands.

Altogether, the picture that arises is therefore rather mixed. There is a continuous interest in languages other than English, and in a few cases (Chinese and Japanese), these are on the rise. But altogether, the importance of languages like German and French for cultural and economic life is not at all reflected in the percentage of students at any level which choose to study those languages: English is dominant at all educational levels.

## 5.2 Minority languages

Among all minority languages spoken in the Netherlands, one stands out: Frisian (West Germanic), the official 'second language' of the Netherlands. Frisian has been recognized as a regional language by the Dutch government when signing the European Charter for Regional Languages or Languages of Minorities. The Dutch government guarantees education in Frisian at all possible levels (and it is actually a compulsory subject in primary schools in Fryslân), the right to use Frisian when addressing oneself to the authorities of the province of Fryslân, etc.<sup>9</sup>

However, also in this case the adoption of all these laws can be seen as a sign of the relative difficult state in which Frisian currently as compared to its much larger sister.

At the same time, it is fair to say that concerns about Frisian are often seen with some irony by the Dutch intellectual community. Well known was a 2000 column by the influential columnist Ronald Plasterk in the equally influential political tv show *Buitenhof* ('External court', a pun on the name of the Dutch parliament), in which he stated: "Why does everyone in Holland believe that Frisian is a separate language, while there are more speakers of Turkish in Amsterdam than speakers of Frisian in Leeuwarden [the Dutch name of the capital city of the province of Fryslân]? Is that racism? . . . I am not opposed to Frisian, but everybody should understand that this language is a myth."<sup>10</sup> In spite of this ironic attitude, the status quo of Frisian goes uncontested. Interestingly, Plasterk became the minister of Culture and Education in 2007, and as such responsible for the Dutch policies with respect to Frisian. One of his first official acts was to give a speech in Frisian which he claimed that "his heart beat warmly" for the language.<sup>11</sup>

The fate of other minority languages is less secured. Two other regional minority languages - Low Saxon and Limburgian - have received some level of recognition, as well as two non-regionally defined languages - Yiddish and Roma-Sinti. From a financial point of view, these recognitions are completely insignificant, and also otherwise it is easy to demonstrate that the recognition is symbolic in each of these cases. The number of speakers of Yiddish is very small, and mostly consists of Americans and Israelis who live as expatriates in Amsterdam; furthermore, these people speak eastern dialects of Yiddish, rather than the 'autochthonous' western Yiddish spoken in the Netherlands, when the language succumbed to a Dutch state policy directed towards making all Jews speak Dutch in all circumstances, even at home and in the synagogue

<sup>9</sup> From the list of undertakings in Part III of the Charter, 48 have been signed, including undertakings in the realms of Education, Judicial Authorities, Administrative Authorities, Media and Cultural Activities.

<sup>10</sup> Buitenhof, 11.VI.2000. The text of the column is still online at <http://www.vpro.nl/buitenhof/> (Checked November 12, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Speech Ronald Plasterk, 10.V.2005. The text of the speech is online at <http://www.minocw.nl/> (checked November 12, 2011).

(Van Oostendorp 2007).

A weaker version of a similar policy has become more popular in the 2000s for the larger minority languages such as Turkish and Moroccan Arabic (or Berber). Until the mid 2000s, various policies had been in place which offered at least part of the school education for children of ethnic descent in their native language. The last version of this policy, called *Onderwijs in Allochtone Levende Talen*, was abolished in 2004, and not replaced by any similar policy (see Nortier 2009 for a critical overview of the way in which the Dutch authorities have been dealing with multilingualism).<sup>12</sup>

A problematic issue which so far has not been resolved at all is that of the languages of the former Netherlands Antilles, i.e. the Caribbean islands Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao, St. Eustachius, Saba and St. Maarten. Until 2010, the last five islands formed a country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands: the Netherlands Antilles, while Aruba was a separate country. On October 10, 2010, the Netherlands Antilles was dissolved as a country: Curacao and Sint Maarten became separate countries, and the other islands became 'public bodies' of the Netherlands.

The latter has implications which, as far as I can see, has simply not been discussed, is that there are now parts of the Netherlands where Papiamentu (on Bonaire) and English (on Saba) play an important role in official discourse. The roles of these languages has not been formalized in any way, which is somewhat curious from the point of view of linguistic rights, since there is a much larger portion of the population on these islands which has marginal knowledge of Dutch at best than there is in Fryslân, in which the regional language can be used freely and receives protection. We will return to this issue in section 5 below.

As the last minority language, we should mention Sign Language, which similarly has suffered from neglect. A state committee, led by Anne Baker, a professor of linguistics at the University of Amsterdam, advised formal recognition of the Sign Language of the Netherlands as early as 1997. After this, almost nothing happened, except that a few measures have been taken to grant Deaf people the right for sign language interpreting in some cases.

## 6. Towards bilingualism

Dutch society is arguably on its way towards a state of all but universal bilingualism. Already for a long time, the percentage of second language speakers of English in the Netherlands is very high, matched in Europe only by the Scandinavian countries. As we have seen above, the Dutch are not overly worried that these developments threaten their language, and they may very well be right in this.

There are also many ways in which this development could be evaluated as a positive one. The status of English as an international, or at least European, *lingua franca* is uncontested, and the widespread bilingualism of the Dutch population means that many people have access to the many resources of the international culture in the English language, without having to give up their own cultural heritage in return.

However, at the same time, this bilingualism comes at a certain price, which may be considered by some as regrettable and which is probably also unnecessary: a loss of strength for foreign languages which are not English.

There are several signs for this. In the first place, the traditional 'modern foreign languages' which Dutch schoolchildren would learn were French, German and English. The interest in the former two has been constantly diminishing for the past few decades (see also Nortier 2009). Something similar is happening to the classical languages, Latin and Greek. The so-called 'gymnasium', which includes training in both of these languages and which is not distinguished in any other way from the 'atheneum' is considered to be the intellectually most challenging type of secondary school available in the Netherlands. In the course of time, however, the gymnasium seems to also

---

<sup>12</sup> Change of Law on Primary Education, 22.VII.2004.

become a preferred school for parents we are well to do, among other things because the schools are almost only visited by middle- and higher class children (and maybe also because they are usually 'white', i.e. not visited by immigrant children). The result of this now is that apparently there are many pupils who enter the gymnasium without any motivation for learning Latin or Greek. Although at the time of writing this essay, the last word had not been said about this issue yet, a state committee has proposed to loosen the restrictions on those languages, and instead establish a subject Greek and Latin Language and Culture, where texts would be read mostly in translated or heavily annotated versions.<sup>13</sup> Something similar goes for university education; relatively speaking, studying foreign languages seems to become less and less attractive for students. Furthermore, texts in French or German seem no longer acceptable in the university curriculum for other topics.

The disappearance of these non-English languages is nicely illustrated in the following anecdote. The correspondence of two of the most prominent Dutch-language novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Willem Frederik Hermans and Gerard Reve, was recently published (Hermans and Reve 2008). At some point in the 1950s, Reve decided that the Dutch audience was not paying proper due to his works, so that he would only publish in English. In order to practice his English language skills, which were actually rather poor, he wrote many letters to his colleague in that language. Hermans got so annoyed with this behaviour that he wrote back a letter in fluent, highly literary French. It is interesting to see, first, that apparently at the time the skills to write English were not so highly developed even among the literate. But from our present point of view, the decisions of the 2008 editors were even more interesting; while Reve's English letters go untranslated and unannotated, Herman's letter in French receives a full translation into Dutch. Similar developments seem to be going on in other European countries, and the result is a rather paradoxical form of internationalisation. More and more we cannot look at our neighbours (in the Dutch case, either the Germans or even the Flemish) directly. We can only see them through an Anglo-Saxon prism.

## References

- Admiraal, W., Westhoff, G., & Bot, K. de (2006). Evaluation of bilingual secondary education in the Netherlands: Students' language proficiency. *English. Educational Research and Evaluation*, 12(1), 75-9
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (1999). *Australian Social Trends 1999. Population Composition: Languages Spoken in Australia*. Canberra: ABS
- Barbour, S. (2000). Nationalism, language, Europe. In: S. Barbour & C. Carmichael (eds.) *Language and nationalism in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- European Commission. 2006. The Europeans and their Languages. Special European Barometer. [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_243\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf)
- Cornelisse, Pauline. 2009. *Taal is zeg maar echt mijn ding*. Amsterdam: Contact.
- Edelenbos, P. & Jong, J.H.A.L. de (eds.) (2004). *Werkplaats talen. Vreemdetalenonderwijs in Nederland, een situatieschets*. Enschede: NaB-MVT.
- European Commission. 2003. *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006*. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52003DC0449:EN:HTML>
- Extra, Guus. 2011. *De omgang met taaldiversiteit in de multiculturele samenleving. Nederland in internationaal vergelijkend perspectief*. Tilburg: Tilburg University.
- Frijhoff, Willem. 2010. Meertaligheid in de Gouden Eeuw. Een verkenning. *Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen. Mededelingen van de Afdeling Letterkunde*,

---

<sup>13</sup> Tussenrapport van de Verkenningcommissie Klassieke Talen, 3.XI.2009. Available at <http://www.slo.nl/> (Checked January 12, 2010).

- Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 73*, 2 1-68 KNAW Press: Amsterdam.
- Genootschap Onze Taal. 2006. *Witte Boekje. Spellinggids van het Nederlands*. Utrecht: Spectrum.
- Groeneboer, Kees. 2002. Waarom het Nederlands geen wereldtaal geworden is. *Ons Erfdeel* 25: 17-34.
- Grondelaers, Stefan, and Roeland van Hout. 2011. The Standard Language Situation in the Low Countries: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Variations on a Diaglossic Theme. *Journal of Germanic Linguistics* 23.3:199-243.
- Hendrickx, Ruud. 2008. Nederlandstalige tv-programma's ondertitelen? Soms kan je niet anders! *Taalschrift* <http://taalschrift.org/discussie/001830.html>.
- Hermans, Willem Frederik, and Gerard Reve. 2008. *Verscheur deze brief! Ik heb al teveel gezegd*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.
- ITS (2008). *Onderwijs in vreemde talen in Nederland*. Studie in opdracht van de Onderwijsraad. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.
- Jørgensen, J. Normann. 2010. Challenges facing Danish as a medium-sized language. Ms., University of Copenhagen.
- Koops, Bert-Jaap Koops, Pim Slop, Paul Uljé, Kees Vermeij and Dick van Zijderveld. *Funshoppen in het Nederlands. Woordenlijst onnodig Engels*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.
- Kristiansen, Tore. 2010. Conscious and subconscious attitudes towards English influence in the Nordic Countries. Evidence for two levels of language ideology. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 204:59–95
- Laar, Felix van de, and Wim Daniels. 1996. *Spellingchaos. Een buitenparlementair onderzoek naar de nieuwe spelling*. Utrecht: Scheffers.
- Liemberg, E. (2001a). Een Europees impuls voor de talen in het beroepsonderwijs. *Levende Talen*, 3, 27-33.
- Meijer, D. & Fasoglio, D. (2007). *Handreiking schoolexamen MVT havo/vwo*. Enschede: SLO.
- Nortier, Jacomine. 2009. *Nederland Meertalenland*. Amsterdam: Aksant.
- Oakes, L. (2001). *Language and National Identity. Comparing France and Sweden*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Onderwijsraad. 2008. *Vreemde talen in het onderwijs*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.
- Onze Taal, Redactie. 2009. Op de barricaden? *Onze Taal* 200.1:18-21. <http://www.onzetaal.nl/uploads/editor/EngelsOnzeTaal.pdf>
- Oostendorp, Marc van. 2007a. Language Planning in the Low Countries (1996-2005). The Dutch Language Union. *Sociolinguistica* 21: 78-99.
- Oostendorp, Marc van. 2007b. Zullen we maar weer Hebreeuws praten? De wankel positie van het Jiddisch. *Onze Taal* 75.1: 2-13.
- Oostendorp, Marc van. 2007c. *Doe er wat aan! Portret van het Genootschap Onze Taal*. Den Haag: Onze Taal.
- Seebus, I. (2008). «Dinkum Dutch Aussies.» *Languaeg and Identy among Elderly Dutch-Australians*. PhD Dissertation University of Melbourne.
- Sick, Bastian. 2006. *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod*. Berlin: Kiepenheuer und Witsch.
- Swaan, Abram de. (2002) *Woorden van de wereld*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.
- Taalunie, De Nederlandse. 2005a. *Het Groene Boekje. Woordenlijst Nederlandse Taal*. Den Haag: Sdu. The NTU also publishes an online edition on its website: <http://woordenlijst.org/>
- Taalunie, De Nederlandse. 2005b. *Taalpeil 2005*. Den Haag: NTU.
- Taalunie, De Nederlandse. 2011. *Taalpeil 2011*. Den Haag: NTU.
- Vermeulen, R.A., and M. Yildiz. 2009. *Onderwijs in cijfers 2009*. Leiden: Universiteit Leiden.
- Westhoff, G.J. (2001). Hoe meer internationalisering, des te minder Engels. Utrecht: Nationaal Bureau Moderne Vreemde Talen. <http://www.nabmvt.nl/publicaties/00007/>.