

Johan Van Hoorde

Collaboration makes all languages stronger

EFNIL under the presidency of Prof. Dr. Gerhard Stickel

1. Introduction

This book contains the proceedings of the EFNIL conference of October 2018 in Amsterdam. The conference was a historic one, as it was the last one organised under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Gerhard Stickel, who had led, inspired and animated EFNIL since the very beginning, way back in 2003. Gerhard brought people, countries and languages together and succeeded in the difficult task of making them exchange points of view and engage in joint endeavours, despite differences in language traditions, convictions and ideologies and across the divides which can separate bigger and smaller languages or those with an international status and those without. He made us focus on what we had in common, instead of concentrating on the things that divide. That EFNIL still exists after all these years, and is even more alive than ever before, shows that the fathers and mothers of EFNIL, with Gerhard at the head, saw things right.

This article will try to position Gerhard's merits in a wider context, by evaluating the past fifteen years of EFNIL, in a form of SWOT analysis that identifies strong points and weaknesses and can help us find ways to be even more successful in the future. *Tene quod bene*. Keep what is good, but at the same time: dare to change where necessary.

2. Birth of EFNIL

One day, the history of EFNIL will have to be written by historians, and they will doubtless have a difficult task in describing its prehistory, i.e. the steps that led to its birth. In this contribution we can only mention some of the milestones, without seeking for completeness. It is exactly twenty years since Gerhard's road and mine crossed for the very first time. In 1999, the Taalunie¹ – my institution – organised its first international conference and invited as many of our colleague institutions from the other European countries as we were able to identify. The theme of the conference was *Status and Use of National Languages in Europe* (de Bot et al. (eds.) 2001). The conference was held at the premises of the European Commission in Brussels and with the active support of its interpretation service.

¹ Its full name is *Nederlandse Taalunie*, i.e. the Union for the Dutch Language.



Fig. 1: Delegates of the member institutions at the EFNIL conference in Amsterdam

The initiative of organising the conference was a direct result of the goals and mission of our institution as mentioned in the Treaty of 1980 between the Netherlands and Belgium, which gave birth to the Taalunie, with its unique position as an intergovernmental policy body in the field of language and literature. One of the essential tasks assigned to this body was the definition of a common policy concerning the international position of Dutch, especially within the institutions of what was then called the European Community. We had tried to develop this task from the very beginning and had come to the conclusion that in order to be successful we would have to look for allies with which to approach the European institutions on aspects and issues of common interest.

Gerhard was one of our prominent guests in his capacity of Director of the Institut für Deutsche Sprache (IDS) in Mannheim. A year later, in December 2000, he invited partner organisations to meet in Mannheim. Some had been present in Brussels, others were newly involved, such as the Real Academia Española and the Italian Accademia della Crusca. The title of the conference was *Europäische Hochsprachen und mehrsprachiges Europa*, i.e. European standard languages and multilingual Europe (Stickel (ed.) 2002). The intention of the organisers was that a declaration would be approved at the end of the conference, which would be sent to the press and media of the countries of the participating institutions. We didn't succeed in this goal: it turned out that there were too many differences in opinion

and there was not enough time to discuss them thoroughly and find a common denominator. The main problem – the elephant in the room, so to speak – turned out to be the dominant position of English in Europe, as in Mannheim there was not yet a representative of the language of Shakespeare and Milton.

Delegates' attitudes towards English varied from explicitly critical (regarding English as a real threat to the status and position of one's own national language) towards less critical positions, which did not consider English automatically as in competition with the home language. My institution belonged to the second category. Even though we did not succeed in finding a common position, the exchange of opinion proved to be helpful. It showed that high ideals of peaceful co-existence would not be sufficient. On our way towards collaboration we should expect to encounter quite a number of obstacles and pitfalls!

It was during that conference in Mannheim that the idea of a structural, permanent body for collaboration between our institutions was mentioned for the very first time. Many participants were in favour of a structural form of collaboration and considered this a necessary condition. They feared that otherwise the chain of contacts would break down under the pressure of the daily businesses of the participating institutions. The Italian colleagues of Crusca and OVI announced that they would invite us for a new conference in 2001.

And indeed, in October 2001 – still impressed by the dramatic events of 9/11 – we were invited to meet with other European colleagues in the marvellous setting of the Villa Medicea, the seat of the Crusca, the oldest language academy in the world. This time English was represented for the first time. John Simpson, then Chief Editor of the “Oxford English Dictionary”, had been invited. He has been an active member of the Executive Committee ever since. Just like Gerhard, John decided not to run for a new term in the election of October 2018. His merits, like Gerhard's, can hardly be overestimated.

In Florence, we succeeded in passing a common declaration. The document is known as the “Mannheim/Florence Recommendations for Promoting European Standard Languages” and can be truly considered as the base on which EFNIL was built.

The idea of a permanent structure for our collaboration had by then become generally accepted. The idea was further elaborated in a meeting between a smaller group of people who formed a preparatory committee, in Florence in spring 2002. The results were discussed with the larger group of interested institutions during a new preparatory conference at the premises of the European Commission in Brussels. This was the conference during which we agreed on a name for the body we had in mind: *the European Federation of National Institutions for Language*. This name was translated in all the languages of the participating institutions. We agreed not to use the English acronym EFNIL as our common name and even opted for ‘*eurfedling*’ as the central term on which to base the URL address of our website instead of ‘*efnil*’. Needless to say, this promise was not kept. The name

EFNIL was easy and could be pronounced without problems all over Europe. In order words: the acronym was too easy not to be used. The only alternative that has sometimes been used was FEILIN in the French language area.

The participants in Brussels agreed to hold their founding conference in Stockholm, which conference took place in October 2003. This was the first real, official, EFNIL conference. Fifteen other interesting conferences would follow and more are still to come. The Stockholm conference approved the text of the constitution and confirmed the members of the preparatory group as the new Executive Committee. Gerhard became President, while I agreed to act as General Secretary. My institution took up the task of acting as the Secretariat for the brand-new Federation. Six years later, in 2009, the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences would take over this role. With excellence, as we all know.

3. Goals and objectives

The goals and objectives of the Federation are described in EFNIL's constitution. EFNIL remained an organisation without legal status until the year 2016, when it became a legal entity as an *association sans but lucratif*, i.e. a non-profit association, under the law of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

Gerhard's decision to step down from the presidency creates an opportunity to look back at our work, check our initial goals and evaluate how the organisation has progressed.

The constitution mentions four main goals, which are, of course, closely interrelated:

- the collection and exchange of information about the officially recognised standard languages in the EU;
- the provision of expert advice about language policy in the EU;
- the preservation of linguistic diversity within Europe;
- the promotion of plurilingualism amongst the citizens of the EU states.

It is certainly useful to revisit these goals and to compare them with the actual results EFNIL has achieved. Where have we been particularly successful? In which domains and actions did we achieve less than we had hoped? Are there things we would have done differently with the knowledge and experience we have now? The answers to such questions can help to determine the federation's course for the next few years. This contribution is certainly not meant as a complete analysis. Neither is it our ambition to formulate concrete recommendations. Consider it as a first step in a longer process and, for the time being, as an occasion for reflection.

4. Retrospective: strong points

Back in 2003 most of us were very ambitious indeed. Although our start was modest, what we hoped was to become a privileged partner of the institutions of the European Union with regard to language and language policy, as a meeting point of the European and the national policy level. We dreamt of recognition by the EU and of financial support for our activities. Every now and then, we talked about the aspiration to have a staffed secretariat in Brussels. We all know that these dreams did not come to reality. The EU had no mechanism or regulation for the permanent, structural funding of NGOs, but only for project funding within temporary action programmes, such as the Life Long Learning Programme (LLL). We tried once to submit a project application within the LLLP, in spring 2007, though without success. Our experience was not positive, not only because of the final result, but also because the preparation of the project proposal had put our federation under serious time pressure and the work burden turned out to be immense, especially for Gerhard, who co-ordinated the process. The cost-benefit analysis was clearly negative. It led us to the conviction that it would be better to focus on ourselves and to dedicate our efforts to projects and activities that would produce real results, even if our financial means and work capacity would remain limited.

This is the course we have been following since then. It is my conviction that, given the circumstances, this line of conduct has been the right choice. It has allowed us to focus on our primary objectives and activities, with lasting results such as ELM. Many of the LLLP projects, with which we had been in competition and which – unlike ours – were considered interesting enough for funding, have produced less and almost no lasting results. The majority of them have been dead and buried for years now, while EFNIL has continued to develop. This conclusion, however, does not imply that we should never try to obtain external funding for our work. As a matter of fact, I think we should monitor the EU's funding opportunities better than we do now. What this means is that in spite of everything our EFNIL family can truly be pleased with its results and is even entitled to a modicum of pride. With modest means, we have produced quite a number of interesting and challenging results. It is certainly useful to bear this in mind, as we are not always aware of our own merits.

One of the major challenges which we had to confront was the issue of representativeness. How could we make sure that EFNIL would raise its voice in the name of the language situation of Europe as a whole, of all countries and language areas? How could we involve all relevant institutions in our federation? It was precisely during the early years of our existence that a vast extension to the EU took shape. Eight new member states joined the European Union in 2004 and a number of other countries followed a few years later, in 2007. Our conference in Paris offered the language institutions of all these states the opportunity to

present themselves, their language and the language situation within their country. What we hoped for became true: the newly approached institutions became members of EFNIL.

In the years that immediately preceded the financial and economic crises of 2008-9 EFNIL could pride itself on its representativeness, as we could rightly claim to speak on behalf of all countries and of all official languages of the EU. This representativeness is a merit in its own right, which gives EFNIL as no other platform the credibility to present itself as a meeting point between the national and the European policy levels and, as such, to interact with the European institutions. No other European network can claim to have such a complete view of the language reality in Europe as we do. We unite all big language families, have partners from east to west and from north to south, big languages and smaller ones. This makes us unique, even if we are not always aware of that. In doing this, we are engaged in the kind of endeavour which is at the very base of the dream of the founders of the European Union: not to look at things from the exclusive perspective of our national interest but to go beyond this egocentric perspective and look for common ground where every country and every language area has the same dignity, small or big as it may be.

The serious and extremely long financial and economic crisis has had its consequences for EFNIL too. Some of our institutions expressed difficulty in paying their membership fee (which has remained unaltered since the very beginning). The Executive Committee always responded with empathy and has always tried to offer the institutions in difficulty flexible solutions to overcome their temporary problems. In most cases with success. Still, a number of countries felt obliged to leave our Federation: Cyprus, Spain and the Czech Republic. Until recently the name of Romania had to be added to this list, but we are glad that the Romanian Academy, its A. Philippide Institute of Romanian Philology to be more precise, has decided to join us and will present its candidature during the next General Assembly. It remains our firm ambition to get all member states and all official languages involved in EFNIL, since it is our representativeness that gives us the credibility to speak on behalf of Europe as a whole.

Besides this goal of representativeness, EFNIL has been particularly successful in the collection of information regarding the language situation in Europe and in its exchange of information between the member institutions. Data collection is crucial, as it has always been the conviction of EFNIL and its board that policies should be based on a sound knowledge of the language facts. In other words: our federation has always advocated an evidence-based approach towards language policy, in line with our perspective and position as a platform of experts in language planning rather than as an ideologically biased pressure group.

The most important projects in this regard are, of course, our database on *Language Legislation (in) Europe* (LLE) and our *European Language Monitor* (ELM). The first project describes the situation concerning language-related legis-

lation in the various countries: whether the official language has been anchored in the country's constitution, whether there are provisions in the law that require the use of a particular language or allows for the use of other languages than the official one in certain cases, for instance by public administration or in the courts of law. ELM is even more ambitious: it seeks to register and monitor the state of health of our languages by means of measurement of a relatively large number of variables that can be considered as indicative for the status and actual use of a language in important domains and situations within society. From the very start of the project it was our intention and ambition to renew the data every three years or so, thus creating a longitudinal dimension which would allow us to identify evolutions, positive as well as negative ones. Last year we had already proceeded to the fourth cycle, which means that we have now four points of measurement over a period of almost 16 years.

The project has produced a treasure trove of information. I will just mention one example. When in 2014 I was preparing a national report on the position of Dutch in tertiary education in the Netherlands and the Flemish part of Belgium, I consulted our ELM, which made me aware of the particular position of the Netherlands. The ELM showed without any possibility of doubt that no other European country uses English so often as the language of instruction in tertiary education, with the single exception of the English-speaking countries Ireland, Malta and the UK. Within the Netherlands, it is the common conviction of the public and amongst policy makers that the Dutch situation is more or less comparable to the Scandinavian countries and that, if there is a difference, it is because the Netherlands are still lagging behind. ELM showed that this perception is wrong: it is the Netherlands that is in the vanguard, way ahead of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. This example clearly shows how important it is to have up-to-date and comparable data and to actually use this data in a comparative analysis between countries and language areas.

A third data collection project has been added a couple of years ago, namely ELIPS or more fully *European Languages In the Public Space*. This project collects data concerning regulations and policy measures on the use of the various languages as instruments for legislation, government and public administration. It covers types of information such as the use of plain language, gender-neutral communication and other types of non-discriminatory, inclusive communication and, last but not least, the infrastructure for legislative and governmental terminology.

EFNIL must and will continue on its path of data collection. And I think it should use the collected data much more actively in its own work and activities. EFNIL should engage in the analysis and comparison of the data and in their dissemination. It should use its data as the empirical basis on which to build its political lobby work, because the evidence-based approach is what defines the unique selling position of our federation as a platform that operates not as a pressure or action group driven by an ideological interest, but as a platform of

language and language policy experts, many of which have an explicit role and position within the language policy in their own country and work closely together with the various governments and other political bodies.

Another strong point, which also belongs to the broader category of exchange of information and opinion, is the organisation of our annual conferences. Each conference is dedicated to a theme or set of themes relevant to all member institutions and allows us to learn from each other's insights and experiences. Each year our conference reminds that most, if not all, of the issues and challenges for our own language area – which in many cases are the object of lively debate within the public sphere at least in the countries of interest to the Taalunie – are common to all of us and are the object of reflection, difference of opinion and sometimes of ideological and political struggle in other countries as well.

Almost all language communities are concerned about the possible loss of functional domains as a result of the increasing dominance of English as the international lingua franca, and this concern is often combined with a fear of or even resistance to the increasing lexical influence of English on other national vocabularies. This same dominance of English also seems to work at the disadvantage of the motivation of citizens to learn other foreign languages besides English. The European continent is increasingly becoming a geopolitical area with a bilingual rather than a plurilingual habitus.

Another issue of common interest of most if not all our member countries concerns the growing presence of other, non-dominating languages within our own language area, especially in many large, super-diverse urban areas. In the Netherlands and Belgium these languages can be Turkish, Berber, Arabic and many languages of the sub-Saharan area of Africa, but also the languages of countries of eastern Europe, especially Polish, Czech and Bulgarian. This super-diversity is certainly a challenge to the (apparently) monolingual tradition of our nations and alters the position of the traditionally dominant language, i.e. Dutch in the case of the Netherlands and the Flemish part of Belgium, which can less and less claim the status of being the exclusive mother tongue of the large majority of its citizens, but is increasingly becoming only one of the home languages of a person or even the intercultural contact language of non-natives – i.e. the lingua franca – for the public space. These are only two examples of crucial language issues that concern all of us. For EFNIL and its members such common issues create excellent opportunities to build on each other's experience, thus preventing us from *reinventing the wheel* – as we say in Dutch – in every single country. I would even add one more element: most of the issues transcend our national borders and have a clear international dimension, because they are closely interrelated with international phenomena such as the digitalisation and globalisation of our societies and the changed patterns of online and offline interaction and the changing mobility needs they produce. If this is true, it means that exclusively national solutions will not be effective, in a way comparable with the environmental chal-

lenges such as global warming. Of course, the national member states will have to take action, but this will always have to be complemented by cross-language actions on an international, or at least European, level.

5. Retrospective: weaker points

In assessing the strong and weak points of EFNIL during the past 15 years the final verdict will certainly prove to be positive. This does not mean that there are no weaknesses or ambitions that have not been achieved. Reading back the goals and activities as described in our constitution we have to draw the conclusion that EFNIL has not been particularly successful in its political ambitions. We had hoped to become a privileged interlocutor and partner for policy makers, both at the EU and at the national level. We thought that at least for the medium term we could have a staffed secretariat in Brussels that would collaborate with the European Commission and the various Directorates-General under its umbrella.

These objectives turned out to be unrealistic. Not that we have not tried. I remember that a delegation of our Executive Committee had a meeting with EU commissioner Leonard Orban, who was responsible for multilingualism policies. He even promised to support us, but then nothing happened. It must have been 2007 or so. He was new within the EU and probably not aware that the EU has no regulation for structural financial support to external organisations.

A few years later, in 2009, the European Commission established a European Civil Society Platform to Promote Multilingualism (ECSPM). This platform would have an advisory function and would be composed of European network organisations, thus creating a network of networks. EFNIL immediately applied for membership and was indeed accepted. The platform produced a report with recommendations that ended up almost immediately in the waste-basket. These examples show that the main reasons for not obtaining the results we had in mind were political and had nothing to do with EFNIL as such. A few years later the Commission decided that the platform was no longer useful and withdrew its support for it.

The situation has not improved since then. On the contrary, we have witnessed a permanent decrease in importance of language issues and language related policies. Multi- and plurilingualism are no longer defined as a dimension and condition within the ambitious European integration process, which aims at bringing nations and citizens together, make them collaborate and in this way give birth to a common, pan-European ethos. Probably as a result of the financial and economic crisis, this broader socio-cultural perspective seems abandoned and has had to make way for a strictly utilitarian, purely economic and even narrow-minded economic perspective, which considers language skills and foreign language knowledge exclusively in relation to employment and employability of the work force.

The same economic crisis has led to a crisis of the political project of European integration itself. It goes beyond the scope of this article to go into detail or to identify the causes for this crisis. I limit myself to the observation that during the past decade or so the level of prejudice and other negative feelings of European nations and peoples towards one another has increased instead of decreased: between north and south, stronger and weaker economies, between net contributors to the EU finances and net receivers of funding, between member states with an immigration surplus from other member states and the states with an emigration status. In almost all countries the positive attitudes towards Europe have been replaced by feelings of distrust and even hostility, not only amongst the oldest member states, some of which have had a tradition of pure Europhilia for decades, like Italy, but also amongst newer member states such as Hungary and Poland. The result of the Brexit referendum in the UK – which surprised many observers – was not an isolated case that could be defined as typically British and be situated within its tradition of splendid isolation. On the contrary, it uncovered a painful nerve that is general all over Europe, particularly amongst those categories in our society that during the past decades have experienced no benefits from this European scale-up, but, on the contrary, have suffered the numerous disadvantages of neo-liberal Europe and of globalisation as a whole, instanced by the increase of unsteady flex jobs, the decrease of levels of social protection, competition with low-wage workers from countries of the east in sectors such as construction or transport, all in the name of the competitiveness of our economy.

Again, it is beyond the scope of this article to go into detail. However, there is an English proverb that says ‘Every cloud has a silver lining’. This crisis in the European project might well be an opportunity or at least a challenge for a platform such as EFNIL. The idea of Europe needs to be re-invented, so to speak. It is clear that without a broad social basis within civil society, without sufficient public support in the member states, the European project as we know it is bound to die. And if it does, what is the alternative? Can this continent go back to the era before 1958 and before the world wars? Can we go back to a continent with a multitude of nations that operate from the single perspective of egocentric national interest, comparable to the America First motto of Donald Trump in the US? I think that we all agree that this is not a good scenario, that it would weaken the social, economic and political impact of the old continent and even open the door to a return to the most dark and frightening episodes this continent has experienced.

EFNIL is an example that shows that the return to the nation-state as the one and only perspective is wrong, that we need to continue on our path of cross-language and cross-national collaboration. The first and foremost condition for this is equal dignity between the partners, no matter how big or small they may be.

6. Conclusion: continue and enhance

The analysis in the previous paragraphs leads us now to a prudent, provisional conclusion, which could be the basis for further exchange of opinion and discussion among EFNIL members. This conclusion is that we do not have to adjust our ambitions, or to water them down, in order to make them more realistic and feasible. We have to re-invent our ambitions and perhaps look for new operational ways to be more successful in achieving our aims. In other words, we will have to adjust some aspects of our approach, not our ambitions themselves. One of the things that we will not have to change, because they are and will remain a constant factor for success, is our interest in and common knowledge of language facts, our knowledge of the sociolinguistic realities within Europe and our expertise in language planning. The goals and intended activities as described in our constitution have lost nothing of their relevance. Gerhard and the other founders of EFNIL can look back at what has been achieved with the conviction that they have laid a steady foundation on which to build our future. Let us climb on their shoulders and make their ambitions come true.

References

- de Bot, C. et al. (eds.) (2001): *Institutional status and use of national languages in Europe*. (= Plurilingua 23). Sankt Augustin: Asgard Verlag.
- Stickel, G. (ed.) (2002): *Europäische Hochsprachen und mehrsprachiges Europa*. Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache.

Bibliographical information

This text was first published in the book:

Tanneke Schoonheim/Johan Van Hoorde (eds.) (2019): Language variation. A factor of increasing complexity and a challenge for language policy within Europe. Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2018 in Amsterdam. Budapest: Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [250 pages.]

The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>