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## Opening address on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

Mr Chairman,  
Delegates from the almost 30 EFNIL member states,  
Esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen,

on behalf of the Netherlands, I would like to welcome you all to this conference. I hope you will have a productive meeting and a pleasant stay in Amsterdam, our beautiful capital, a city with an international outlook and an illustrious history.

We are at the Flemish Arts Centre De Brakke Grond. I have the advantage of speaking ahead of the Flemish delegate so there is a chance I'll end up saying something that he had intended to say himself. Centuries ago, this neighbourhood was home to Joost van den Vondel and Gerbrand Bredero, two of the leading writers of the Dutch Golden Age. Both men had their roots in the Southern Netherlands – present-day Belgium – but their families were driven north by the violence of the Eighty Years' War. At that time, the towns of Holland were experiencing a period of rapid growth, fed by the arrival of refugees from the South. The Dutch would certainly have noticed the varied dialects of the merchants, craftsmen and other newcomers from Brabant and Flanders. But they could understand one another without too much difficulty. Even back then, the streets of Amsterdam must have been marked by linguistic variety – the very topic of this conference. Besides southern Dutch dialects, you would have also heard the French of Walloons and Huguenots, the German of refugees from the east, and the languages of the Jewish community, such as Yiddish, Ladino and Portuguese. All that linguistic diversity left its mark on modern Standard Dutch, the language shared by the Netherlands and Flanders and which is also spoken in Suriname and on the Caribbean islands that belong to the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The *Nederlandse Taalunie* (the Union for the Dutch Language, abbreviated *Taalunie*) and the *INT* (the Dutch Language Institute) work for all those Dutch speakers. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is closely involved with the *Taalunie* as the official body on the Dutch side responsible for implementing the Treaty concerning the *Taalunie*. The *Taalunie* can rightly be called an example of cross-border cooperation on language and linguistic culture. The *Taalunie* was established by treaty in September 1980 as an institution with the help of which the Netherlands and Flanders would pursue a joint policy on Dutch

language and literature, the language and linguistic culture we share. In 2003 Suriname joined the Union as an associate member. More recently, the Caribbean islands of Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, St. Eustatius, Saba and St. Maarten have become involved in the Union in various ways. The *Taalunie* is a cooperative body powered by the input of a diverse range of countries. And it should also be noted that Dutch is not the only language spoken in the countries I've just mentioned: for example, there is Frisian in the Netherlands, French in Belgium, Sranan in Suriname and Papiamentu and English on the Caribbean islands. So even within the Dutch-speaking region, we find a diverse linguistic landscape with scope for variation in numerous areas.

The Union's language policy values unity while respecting diversity:

- one of the milestones was the **spelling reform** of 1995, which applied to all countries where Dutch is spoken. Never before has spelling been as uniform across the different varieties of Dutch. If you have any experience with spelling reform in your own language, you know what a monumental task this is.
- The Union was also instrumental in contributing to the creation of a general reference grammar of Dutch: the *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst* (ANS). Although it takes a descriptive approach, it also serves to lay down the ground rules for the usage of standard Dutch.
- Another milestone for the *Taalunie* is the website **Taaladvies.net**, an online service for people with questions about correct Dutch. The site, which contains answers to linguistic queries, gets over five million visits a year and 12 million page views. Huge numbers for a language community of just 22 million speakers. It shows how many people feel strongly about the proper use of our common language. It's my understanding that several other EFNIL member organisations offer similar advisory services to their own language communities. This means there is scope for learning from each other.
- This unquestionably also applies to the use of our languages as instruments of legislation, public administration and a means of communication between the government and the general public. In both the Netherlands and Flanders, campaigns are currently underway on the importance of communicating with the public in plain language. The *Taalunie* is involved in these campaigns. Many of you are active in this area as well – in some cases for many years and with an excellent track record to show for it. Let's see what we can learn from one another on this front.

As I said earlier: unity is a key value for the *Taalunie*. Among the countries that make up the Union, there is a broad consensus that we share a single language. But it is a unity that springs from diversity. The Netherlands, Flanders, Suriname and the Caribbean have different traditions and political cultures. Since 2003 the Committee of Ministers – the Union's highest decision-making body – has been mindful of the indispensable value of 'unity in diversity'. The ministers then

officially recognised that the varieties of Dutch in the Netherlands, Belgium and Suriname are fully fledged, equivalent national varieties of Standard Dutch. This creates scope for national and regional differences and multi-layered identities.

Within the *Taalunie*, linguistic variation is not up for debate. Since 2003 diversity has only increased. While local dialects may be on the decline, we are now seeing the rise of non-standard colloquial forms, sometimes referred to as neo-standards. These varieties are sometimes dismissed as ‘Polder Dutch’ (in the Netherlands) or as an ‘in-between language’ (in Flanders). These new developments have sparked public debate about linguistic norms. They confront us with new challenges, for example in primary and secondary education. Other new phenomena also contribute to the growing complexity of the linguistic landscape. Consider, for example, the influx of newcomers from other language areas. The arrival of new languages and cultures has given rise to some highly diverse neighbourhoods, especially in Europe’s largest cities. These urban areas are facing major new challenges as a result. How is it possible to cultivate and maintain a sense of community amid all that diversity? How can language and languages play a role in that respect: this question is an important one for each of your organisations, and for EFNIL as an overarching forum. In my country we see that in this new context, Dutch – and no other language – serves as the lingua franca for all forms of communication between these individual communities.

Another significant change is the ever-growing level of internationalisation. More and more people find that they need to speak more than one language. Consider all the students and researchers who have to use English for much of their communication. Nowadays, it is no longer an option to keep our citizens confined to a monolingual ‘box’. More and more people need a more varied linguistic repertoire. They use different languages and different varieties of the same language: oral vs. written communication, formal vs. informal registers, and standard language vs. in-group varieties like youth slang.

The European Union is also part of that increased international dimension. The objective of European cooperation is to foster European integration, not only to form a single market, but also to create a space of social and cultural understanding among the people of Europe. And cultural exchange as a guarantee for cooperation, understanding and peace. In the past few years the European idea seems to have been in a state of crisis. Throughout the continent, scepticism about the EU is growing, and not just in the UK, with its Brexit referendum. More and more countries are acting on a national reflex to emphasise domestic concerns and national sovereignty, which the EU must not be allowed to restrict or threaten. Do we have a duty to breathe new life into the European idea? After all, the wish to establish a European partnership began as a peace project, a response to the horrors of two world wars which had been fuelled by strong nationalist sentiments. We can only reinvigorate the EU if we manage to strike a good balance between the national and the local, on one hand, and the need for broader European and

international cooperation, on the other. The linguistic diversity of Europe will play a major role in achieving such a balance. We must cherish and uphold that diversity, as it is key to reinforcing equality between the nations of Europe, big and small. Without that equality, the European project does not have a chance.

That spirit of cooperation, rooted in a realisation of the fundamental equality between the languages of Europe, is a unique characteristic of EFNIL. EFNIL is composed of organisations and institutions that are responsible, in the countries and language areas concerned, for the development of their own national language(s). Yet, EFNIL and its members are not blind to the need for active multilingualism among the people of Europe. Inspired by that sense of cooperation and equality, EFNIL can undoubtedly contribute to the project of European integration, for example, in closing the gap between European institutions and ordinary citizens, and reducing the democratic deficit.

I'm pleased that the language institutions of the various European countries know one another, confer regularly and work together when they have shared interests. Many language-related problems and challenges facing the countries of Europe are not limited to a single country. Multiple countries are dealing with challenges resulting from, for example, increasing internationalisation, European integration, the digitalisation of society, the influx of people from different cultural backgrounds, the dominant position of English in academia, higher education and international commerce, and doubtless many other issues. It's good to reflect on these issues on a supranational scale and learn from one another's experiences. EFNIL unquestionably meets that need. EFNIL should engage not only with European institutions but also with individual member states. In this connection it is to EFNIL's great advantage that, as an association of language experts and professional language planners, it does not have to act as a pressure group. Instead it is an organisation of professionals that works closely with governments and public administrations in their own countries and language areas.

I wish you, as representatives of the official languages of Europe, a productive and enjoyable conference. And I hope, despite your busy schedules, that you will find some time to get to know Amsterdam and its rich history.

Thank you.

**Bibliographical information**

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