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Opening address on behalf of the Nederlandse Taalunie

Amsterdam is een erg geschikte plek voor een conferentie over taalvariatie. De stad zag in de loop van de geschiedenis heel wat nieuwkomers toestromen. De talen en taalvariëteiten van die nieuwkomers droegen bij tot het tot stand komen van het Standaardnederlands. Ook nu nog blijft de stad gekenmerkt worden door een grote mate van diversiteit. Als internationale organisatie voor het Nederlands is de Taalunie erg vertrouwd met (nationale) variatie binnen de standaardtaal, maar evenzeer met de emotionele geladenheid van dat gegeven. Dat geldt wellicht voor de meeste taalgebieden. De variatie binnen één taalgebied verdwijnt echter in het niets in vergelijking met de diversiteit binnen de Europese Unie. Het Europese ideaal van “eenheid in verscheidenheid” staat echter onder druk, onder meer door populistische stromingen. De maatschappelijke problemen die hieraan ten grondslag liggen, zijn vaak ook gerelateerd aan taal en taalbeleid. EFNIL en haar leden hebben daarom een rol om een bijdrage te leveren aan het debat hierover.

On behalf of the *Nederlandse Taalunie* (the Union for the Dutch Language), I welcome you all to EFNIL’s annual conference, the sixteenth edition since EFNIL was founded in 2003. Normally Hans Bennis, our secretary general, would have welcomed you but, unfortunately, he is ill and that is why he asked me to replace him. Unlike Hans, I am not an Amsterdammer and not even a Dutchman. As you probably know, the *Taalunie* is an international organisation in which the Netherlands, Flanders (Belgium) and Suriname work together in the interests of our common language. I am one of the Dutch-speaking Belgians, or Flemings, at our organisation. If you were a speaker of Dutch, you would already have noticed that after a few words.

Indeed, language variation, the main focus of this conference, and related topics, such as the relationship between standard Dutch and its dialects or the status of national varieties of Dutch, have been the subject of discussion within the *Taalunie* and society as a whole for many years. Dutch as spoken in the Netherlands, Belgium, Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean is not uniform: there are lexical differences as well as differences in pronunciation and intonation but also morphological and syntactic differences. For decades, this situation led to discussions about an appropriate standard for Dutch: should there be one single norm or can (and should) the “Dutches” spoken in the Netherlands, Belgium and Suriname (the situation in the Dutch Caribbean is quite complex due to the fact that the islands

have different *linguae francae* and Dutch is not widely spoken as a mother tongue) be considered equivalent, fully-fledged national varieties of standard Dutch? In other words: can Dutch be considered to be a “pluricentric language”, not unlike other languages that are spoken in different countries? The latter has been the position of the Committee of Ministers of the *Taalunie* since 2003, albeit not without controversy. As you all probably know, debates concerning language or language standards tend to become emotional really quickly. This only shows how important language and its varieties are for identification processes: they constitute benchmarks for how we see ourselves and how we want to be seen and recognised by others.

Talking about Dutch-Flemish relations: this conference is taking place in *De Brakke Grond*, the Flemish arts centre in Amsterdam. From the very beginning *De Brakke Grond* offered us its assistance in a lot of preparatory tasks. We are grateful for this help and we are confident that it will contribute to a pleasant and successful event. Since we are here in a centre that belongs to the Flemish Community, we can say that this conference is not only hosted by the Netherlands but also by Flanders. In a certain way, the choice of the location for the conference symbolises the *Taalunie* as such, as a common institution for both countries.

The *Taalunie* represents two EU member states within EFNIL: the Netherlands and the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. That explains why we already organised another EFNIL conference, in 2005, in Brussels, in cooperation with the French Community of Belgium (*Service de la langue française*). The current conference is also being organised jointly with another organisation, namely with our friends at the Dutch Language Institute (INT). This institution was created a few years ago when the scope of activities of the Institute for Dutch Lexicology was widened. Within the Dutch language area, the INT can be seen as the “treasurer” of the Dutch language, as a scientific centre for resources and infrastructure for Dutch, by developing, managing and providing corpora, lexica, grammars and a variety of technological resources for both linguists and the wider language industry.

Some 450 years ago, you would have also heard quite some varieties of Dutch and also other languages in the streets of Amsterdam, as refugees from the Southern Netherlands – current day Belgium – fled to the North to escape the war with the Spaniards, and other people did the same from other parts of Europe. On the other side of the small square facing this arts centre you can see a plaque commemorating Bredero, a Dutch writer who is well known for a play, *De Spaanse Brabander*, in which the main character is a refugee merchant from Antwerp. The Netherlands, and Amsterdam in particular, were a safe haven at that time for those who were persecuted in other European countries, mostly for religious reasons. Those refugees, and the experience and international contacts they brought with them, played an important role in what has come to be known as Holland’s “Golden Century”. Sephardic Jews fleeing Spain, like Baruch de Spinoza’s family, many

Huguenots escaping religious intolerance in France (in 1700 about 12,000 French Huguenots were living in Amsterdam, or 6% of the city's population), Germans leaving their war-torn territories, but also – and especially – a large number of people from the County of Flanders and Duchy of Brabant (including a huge number of refugees from Antwerp) made this city their new home. Amsterdam was a linguistic melting pot of varieties of Dutch – both the local speech of Holland and southern dialects – and other languages. In time, this would lead to the development of a new variety: standard Dutch. As you can see, already at that time the Netherlands were a diverse society, where different religions lived side by side and where immigration led to (linguistic) diversity. That is why this city is really well suited to host a conference on linguistic variation in all its aspects.

Relatively recent migration fluxes have similarly led to the presence of very diverse linguistic and cultural communities in almost all large European cities, including Amsterdam. This is also one of the aspects of language variety that will be dealt with at this conference. This hyperdiversity constitutes a challenge for our societies and the policy answers in reaction to it cover the whole political spectrum. As a forum for cooperation between language policy experts, EFNIL has a role to play in this matter. The exchange of knowledge and experience between its members is very useful to that end. Indeed, it is no coincidence that this is already the sixteenth EFNIL conference. This proves that there is a real need for dialogue and cooperation between the different institutions that are responsible for language policies and language planning in their countries. There are so many problems, challenges and developments that are not limited to one country but that occur in quite a similar way in almost all EU member states. Apart from the increase in linguistic diversity due to migration and international labour mobility, there are other issues, such as the impact of the increased use of English in higher education or the challenges and opportunities posed by digitalisation.

The European Union itself is, by definition, a multilingual and superdiverse polity, with 24 official languages. It is self-evident that multilingualism poses challenges to the Union and its institutions. This kind of diversity will also be discussed at this conference. Furthermore the EU has witnessed some dramatic developments recently. It is not an exaggeration to say that the European project is currently in a state of crisis. The British public decided to leave the Union in a referendum, and Euroscepticism is rising in other countries too, in particular amongst populist parties. What will be the future of our European continent? Will the EU hold strong? Will it be able to bring European citizens together again? Will it lead to more solidarity and unity or will national interests and short-term logic prevail? We will not answer these questions during this conference but they are questions that permeate society as a whole, including language policy and language attitudes. EFNIL and its member organisations can play a central role in forthcoming societal debates thanks to their recognised expertise. And this conference, as well as its published report, will contribute to further developing that expertise.

Bibliographical information

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