

English in the Low Countries today

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About ten years ago Tom MacArthur, author of *The English Languages* (1998), carried out a simple test in the streets of Amsterdam. Walking from the central railway station into town, after every hundred yards he stopped a Dutch person and, without any introduction, asked them a question in English. And for about three kilometres, without fail or hesitation, they all answered straight back in good English.

What this test demonstrated was that in Amsterdam English is no longer a foreign tongue, but a completely natural second language. Recently, this finding has been confirmed in a study by Loulou Edelman of the linguistic landscape in Amsterdam. In the Kalverstraat shopping area in the centre of town she found that public signs and advertisements in Dutch and in English are present in nearly equal measure – visual evidence of the almost equal social status of the two languages.

In today's Amsterdam the English language is firmly established. International tourism, business and migration bring in very many people from all over the world, and the international English-speaking expat community is today the largest foreign presence in the Dutch capital. So, in a very Dutch show of linguistic accommodation, the D'66 political party recently proposed to regularise this state of affairs and turn Amsterdam into an officially bilingual town like Montreal (French-English), Brussels (Dutch-French) or Helsinki (Swedish-Finnish).

As it turned out, the proposal was unsuccessful. But shouldn't one think twice here? After all, in recent years South Korea and Chile have given English official status as their second language. So why not the Netherlands? As a small country dependent on global trade, international exports and world markets, the Netherlands is only too familiar with the increasing competition, in every market and in all sectors of the economy, of emerging powers such as India, China, Russia and Latin America.

The economic and political imperative of globalisation is that it requires English. India, for example, may be a multilingual country with 18 official languages, but at the same time it has some 300 English-speaking universities, and this massive investment is paying off. That is, India appears to be well positioned today for mass production in the digital world of the knowledge economy,



since it has an almost endless supply of skilled and highly qualified English-speaking IT workers who can do the same jobs as people in the first world - but a lot cheaper.

Attractive, available, useful

English today, as David Crystal has observed, is the first truly global language, with special status in almost every country in the world, either as an everyday second language or as a widely-known foreign language. This is the outcome of a linguistic revolution over the past half century that is linked with the rise of the United States to superpower predominance and driven by US media, entertainment and popular culture, the international scientific community (more than half the world's science journals are in English), the internet and communication technology, global trade and international finance, transport (the airline industry), tourism and mass consumption.

Today, it is estimated that some 2 billion people in the world know some form of English, and it is predicted that by 2050 half the world's population will be competent in English. English is already the language most widely learned by speakers of other languages, and also the most commonly taught foreign

language all over the world. This business of teaching English as a foreign language is worth an estimated \$ 7.8 billion a year, more than three times the comparable figure for German, and almost four times that for Spanish.

It is also a very attractive language, easily available everywhere, and offering people all over the world access to a wide range of highly desirable cultural goods: news, ideas, information, publications, films, music, entertainment, innovation and discoveries, social networking and job opportunities – all in English. English is also immensely useful, as it enables people from many very different linguistic backgrounds to enter into direct discussion with each other about common ideas, values, principles and policies.

So how do these global English developments affect the position and role of the Dutch language in the Netherlands? With its 21 million speakers the Dutch language ranks in the top forty of the world's approximately 6000 languages. Dutch has official status as a national language in the Netherlands, Belgium and Surinam, while the Afrikaans spoken in South Africa is a close relative. Dutch is an official language of the European Union (EU), and an official working language of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Maintenance and professional support are provided by the Dutch Language Union, which was established jointly by the Netherlands and Belgium in 1980.

It is interesting to see what is happening in the Dutch education sector as it is going through a rapid and wide-ranging process of anglicisation. Dutch universities have by and large gone over to English as the international language of science and scholarship: PhD theses are now normally in English, and the scholarly output of Dutch academics is rated more highly if it is published in English. But despite a number of recent reports expressing concern about the quality and proficiency in English of both teachers and students, the Dutch Language Union has nothing to say about this development. Its main duty is restricted to supporting the Dutch language, while English remains the prerogative of more powerful government agencies such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Education Department.

Secondary schools are now following suit, and it is expected that within the next few years some 1500 schools will be offering the entire curriculum in Dutch and English. In primary schools, where English has been an obligatory subject in the upper two levels for almost 25 years, this will now be extended to level one. In playgroups English is starting up everywhere, with more and more kids taking half an hour or so of English per week.

'Everybody speaks English'

Education here provides a very strong stimulus, but the main reason why the Dutch are so good at English is not education but – according to the Groningen linguist Kees de Bot – the fact that the English language is so highly valued in mainstream Dutch culture. English is a pervasive part of Dutch life. Dutch TV offers very many English-language programmes, and these are not dubbed but subtitled. Hence, their near immersion in this huge daily supply of news, ads, shows, movies, quizzes, music, popsongs, soap operas – all in English - continuously reinforces and enhances what pupils learn in school. An interesting effect of this is that Dutch pupils acquire a lot of confidence as they go out and practise, and so all the time they are becoming better and better at English.

That is - and this is in line with David Graddol's prediction of 2006 - they are no longer learning English as a foreign language spoken in a faraway country, but rather as a second language, in everyday use in their own country.

This strong trend towards English within the Dutch education system has a clear link to developments in the international education market. A good example is the work of NUFFIC, the Netherlands organisation for international cooperation in higher education in The Hague. NUFFIC offers foreign students from all over the world information on the very many international study programmes and courses in Dutch universities, of which no fewer than 1543 are taught completely in English, ranging from agriculture, art and architecture through the humanities, engineering and social sciences all the way to mathematics and medicine. The Netherlands was the first country to offer such courses, and is still the front runner in this international market, as the continent's largest provider of good quality international English-language university education at Bachelors and Masters level.

Together with the international NUFFIC network of student recruitment offices in Brazil, India, Russia, China and Indonesia, this means that the Netherlands is well positioned for the increasingly competitive higher-education market for international students. Here NUFFIC's success is evident from recent figures: there are about 74,000 international students (including 17,000 from outside the EU) currently following courses at Dutch universities. New markets are being targeted and developed, also in Europe. In August 2010, for example, when British school exam results came out, it became apparent that thousands of British students were not going to find a place at British universities. So out came the Universities of Groningen and Maastricht with a massive PR campaign in the British media: If you can't find a university place in Britain, the message was, come to the Netherlands, where everybody speaks English, where the quality of higher education is very good, where the curriculum is taught entirely in English, and where you get far more teaching contact hours than in a British university. Add to this - as further selling points - that having studied abroad will in future look good on one's CV, and that it is a lot cheaper both to study and to live in the Netherlands than it is in Great Britain. The whole thing was spiced up with individual success stories of British students currently studying, for example, International Relations or Biomedical Sciences at Dutch universities.

Flanders - for reasons to do with the history of Belgium as an officially trilingual country - used to be far more restrictive in language matters and held on to the use of Dutch in education much more strongly than the Netherlands. But despite its proud tradition of strict legal and constitutional safeguards for the Dutch language, Flanders too is now going through a process of 'liberalisation' and from 2014 onwards will allow English to be much more widely used in its universities, especially at Masters level. Recently, the Education Minister Pascal Smet proposed the wholesale introduction across the national school system of English as the first foreign language instead of French. He was immediately censured. Going further, the historian Bruno de Wever has even suggested using English as the new national lingua franca, as this might help the Belgians to overcome their traditional linguistic-political conflicts and rivalries, and perhaps even to neutralise their long-standing tension over Brussels as the capital city of both Flanders and Belgium as well as the European Union.

Thus we are witnessing a rapid anglicisation in all sectors of society within the Low Countries. For many citizens, however, this is a cause of growing

concern. Dutch language activists are taking Prime Minister Rutte to task for mixing too much English into his speeches. And in Flanders leading academic Wim Vandebussche has pointed to the poor quality of English used in higher education, the concomitant loss of academic quality in the universities, and the consequent erosion in the position and function of Dutch as the language of education, knowledge and culture. It is interesting in this respect to note that student numbers in Dutch language and literature at universities in the Netherlands are in serious decline. At the same time, ironically, in the world outside the Low Countries there are today more than 180 universities in over forty countries where a total of more than 15,000 people are studying Dutch. At universities in Germany alone one can find more students of Dutch than in all the Dutch universities taken together.

This strong trend towards English does not, of course, only occur in Flanders and the Netherlands. What we see here are Europe-wide developments. Within the European Union (EU) English today comes top in the language hierarchy in their Brussels headquarters. The rise of English is overwhelming: more than 40% of the EU's population can now speak English in addition to their mother tongue, and ninety percent of European schoolchildren are learning English today. Of all EU texts, 45% are now drafted in English and no more than 30% in French, while working documents are seldom available in all the official languages.

At the same time, however, we witness the strong assertion in the various member states of national language policies aimed at monolingualism. In the Netherlands for example, proficiency in Dutch is a strict admission requirement for non-Western immigrants, and the teaching of immigrant native languages has been abolished. In fact, things really aren't all that rosy for other languages in the Netherlands. Teaching minority languages such as Turkish and Arabic is no longer allowed during school hours, and the teaching of foreign languages such as French and German, and even English, is in serious decline at university level - just as in the UK.

Within the various member states of the European Union, these and other such language issues give rise to wide-ranging debates, cultural and political differences and divergent trends in policy-making. As a result, the European language situation has become a sensitive political issue, as Phillipson has noted. Official EU language policy, under the motto of 'Unity in Diversity', recognises the value of the linguistic diversity as one of the cornerstones of European culture. But in actual fact, as the Amsterdam sociologist Bram de Swaan has argued, the more languages are officially recognised in the EU, the more this will work to the advantage of English.

Everything seems geared to a massive language shift towards English. The airline KLM and other Dutch multinational companies are leading the way here, and many policy-makers in the Netherlands appear to expect a monolingual future, with the EU using English as the single, common lingua franca for the whole of Europe. Some people may even think that since we now have this global lingua franca, there is no need for other languages any more. But in a world that is marked by an all-pervasive multilingualism, we will always need other languages besides English, and people who know two or more languages will always be in demand as go-betweens and intermediaries between the very many different languages, peoples and cultures.

English will never be enough

The Internet points the way here. English has been the medium of the Internet revolution, and this has given a very strong boost to the English language. India, China and other massive populations may have been slow to come on to the Internet, but usage is growing rapidly today, and Chinese is set to become the dominant language on the web before long, while English – as Nick Ostler predicts – may already have peaked. The fact of the matter is that the future of the Internet will be multilingual.

My point here is that English is a dominant, pervasive and growing presence all around the world today; it is necessary, useful and beneficial as a global lingua franca; but there is and will always be linguistic diversity and multilingualism, with many other lingua francas used throughout the world language system; so English will never be enough, and it makes no sense to lock oneself into just this particular language, however widespread it may be. This is as true for the Low Countries as it is for Europe with its very many different languages, and here I quote the Paris-based French-Lebanese European writer Amin Maalouf, who states in his essay *On identity* (2000) that ‘... whatever the future of Europe, whatever form the Union adopts and whatever countries are included among its members, one question presents itself now and will still present itself to future generations: how are all the scores of human languages to be managed?’ ■

Photos by Klaas Koppe.



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Marcel Broodthaers,
Miroir d'époque regency, 1973.
Convex mirror in frame
(gilded wood), 142 x 77.3 cm.
Collection S.M.A.K., Ghent.
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