

The Difference Between Language and Dialect in the Netherlands and Flanders

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Perhaps the real puzzle is why there is so much variation. The small geographical area of the Netherlands and Flanders is home to hundreds of dialects according to some counts –some of them mutually unintelligible, all of them divided over two languages: Dutch and Frisian.

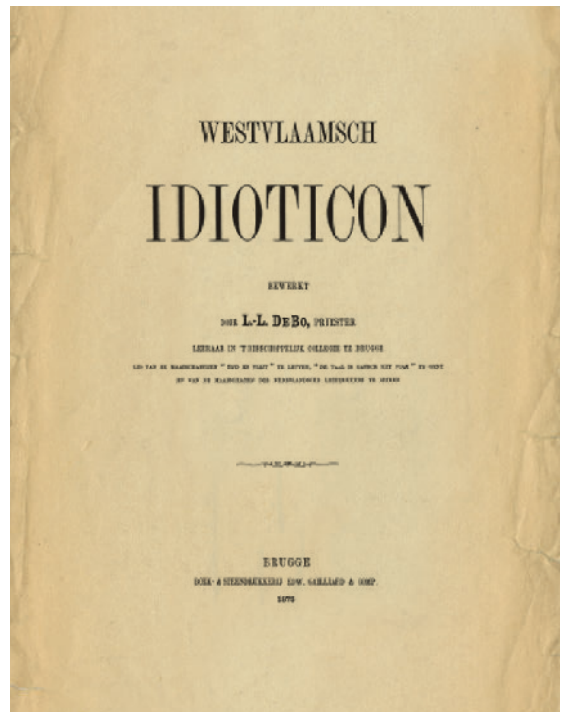
In this delta area in the northwest corner of Europe variation has been ingrained from time immemorial. Even in the wildest nationalistic fantasies of the nineteenth century, the inhabitants were descended not from one people, but from at least three Germanic tribes who settled here: the Franks, the Saxons and the Frisians. We also know that when these tribes set foot on it, the area was by no means uninhabited. Even if little is known about the previous inhabitants, there are traces of their language in present day Dutch.

So from the very beginning the linguistic landscape here was also a delta, with influxes from elsewhere mixing with local elements in continually changing combinations, gradually giving rise to all these varieties.

Add to that a variety of political developments. The fact that the Netherlands formed an autonomous nation in the seventeenth century set the linguistic border between Dutch and German. As such, the Dutch dialects do not differ that much more from High German than the original Northern German dialects when it comes to justifying a sharp boundary, but the political reality increasingly became a linguistic reality. The intermittently shifting borders in the south too, between the Northern and Southern Netherlands, and between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking areas, have left traces in the everyday language.

Only relatively recently has there been any semblance of unity. A written form of the standard language was created in the seventeenth century, a century in which Dutch culture flourished and Protestantism became very powerful. The result was the *Statenvertaling*, the 'States Translation', a translation of the Old and New Testaments put together by a special parliamentary commission (the 'States General', hence the name) to be comprehensible to readers throughout the region. In order to achieve this, choices were made: in Dutch dialects the word *himself* can be rendered as *z'n eigen*, *zijn* or *hem*. In the *Statenvertaling* *zichzelf* was chosen, which then became the standard Dutch form.

However, the mix was far from neutral. In the majority of cases the examples came from the dialects of Holland or those of the regions that are now Antwerp and



Flemish Brabant, the economic centres of the Southern Netherlands. In the seventeenth century a great many wealthy, industrious people also came to Holland from those areas, mainly to escape religious persecution. This substantially strengthened Holland's position and introduced elements of the Antwerp dialects and others into the dialects of Holland, making them look more like the standard language.

Standardisation of spoken Dutch took longer, and probably came about spontaneously in university cities such as Leiden, where the well-to-do youth from various regions lived together for several years, adhering to a common standard pronunciation, which they then spread when they returned as ministers or notaries to their home villages. Only in the course of the twentieth century, with the introduction of mass media such as radio, films, TV and particularly the telephone, did a standard spoken language become established.

In fact then the standard language has only existed for a short time in the history of the Dutch dialects. According to some (such as Professor Joop van der Horst from Leuven) it has already had its heyday. He believes people throughout Europe will pay less and less attention to the arbitrary state borders that are supposed to determine where one language differs from another.

Logically the internet should reduce the need for a uniform standard language. Traditional media, from print to television, from film to CD, had to achieve wide circulation. Production was expensive and the only way to earn back the costs was to serve as large a group as possible simultaneously, requiring a standard language. The spread of the internet removes that obstacle. A YouTube video or weblog allows people to reach a small, local group without incurring high costs. Somewhat ironically, the effect of the worldwide web in the Low Countries, as elsewhere, has been to breathe new life into the local community.



Language - dialect - accent: the difference is political

How many dialects are there precisely in the Dutch language region? It is impossible to give an exact figure. This is not down to lack of research: in the twentieth century language variation was mapped very precisely in a couple of big language atlases. Even now dozens of detailed studies are published every year; new database techniques are applied to make clearer maps with improved computer graphics.

The problem is also different: it is impossible to establish a scientific definition of dialect, to distinguish it once and for all from the concept of language on the one hand, and accent on the other. Two languages, for example, generally differ more from one another than two dialects of the same language, but exactly where the threshold lies varies from one country to another: the so-called dialects of Chinese differ more than Italian and Spanish, for instance, according to one particular method of analysis.

A similar effect applies to the boundary between dialect and accent. People use the latter when the difference is solely in pronunciation. Two dialects must therefore also differ in vocabulary and grammar, but what if the difference affects only a handful of words and one or two grammatical constructions?

In fact the terms language, dialect and accent are distinguished primarily socio-politically. It is power that determines that the varieties of Chinese are 'insufficiently' different from one another, and the fact that Italy and Spain (or the Netherlands and Germany) are different countries pushes the decision in the other direction.

Since the concept of 'dialect' is socio-political, one might expect different results in the Netherlands and Belgium. To a certain extent that is the case, although I believe this is more down to cultural differences between the two countries than conscious politics. In the Netherlands, particularly in the provinces of North and South Holland, where Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague are located, many people assume that they 'automatically' speak the standard language and 'therefore' automatically speak more or less 'correct'

Dutch, whereas in Flanders there is a greater awareness of distance between the dialects spoken by individuals and the standard language.

That difference is primarily a matter of time. In Flanders, too, the distance between dialect and standard language is shrinking – a variety known as *tussentaal* ('in-between language') or *Verkavelingsvlaams* ('housing estate Flemish') has developed, somewhere between the traditional dialects and the formal standard language. This makes the difference between standard language and dialect, as in the Netherlands, less of a sharp division (you speak one or the other) and more of a continuum, where people shift one way or the other, depending on who they're talking to.

It is even uncertain whether variation is decreasing. We do know that in the last 150 years the standard language has made great strides. Almost everyone in the Low Countries speaks a form of standard language, and everyone certainly understands it, but this knowledge certainly need not come at the expense of dialect – people can easily master a variation.

In some respects the dialects have even gained a new lease of life. They are now used in places one would not have found them fifty years ago, such as pop music and advertising. It is important to see such dialect use in context: it primarily serves to convey a feel, rather than to make the message of the text as clear as possible. All native Dutch and Flemish-speakers who can read and write can read and write standard Dutch. No one turns to dialect to make a message clear; in fact, many people in Limburg probably read Dutch more fluently than Limburgish, simply because they are more used to it. It seems that this dialect use has increased over the last decade or so (although we cannot be certain of this).

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

There has been a long-standing discussion on the question of precisely which varieties should be called language, and which dialect. A good example is the discussion around *The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. About twenty years ago, in 1992, the Netherlands became one of the first countries to sign this document produced by the Council of Europe, which primarily served to protect regional vernaculars. The Charter sets out a wide range of measures governments can take to protect these languages. In signing the Charter, a country commits to applying a proportion of those measures, to be decided by the individual country, for instance in education, broadcasting and the language used in government. (There is a minimum, but each country decides for itself where the measures are desirable and feasible).

When the Netherlands signed the Charter, everyone thought it would only apply to Frisian. Historically the Frisian dialect group is relatively distant from the dialects that form the basis of standard Dutch and since the 17th century there has been a battle in the Frisian region for recognition of that dialect group as a language in itself. This would formalise and reinforce the measures for the protection of Frisian.

Belgium, on the other hand, has never signed the Charter, for a number of reasons relating to its already complicated political linguistic situation, with three standard languages, Dutch, French, and German. There were fears that the French-speaking minority in Flanders would apply for the status of a minor-

ity language. (In Switzerland this happened with speakers of Rhaeto-Romance outside the cantons where it is the official language.)

A couple of years after the Netherlands signed, further eventualities emerged. Germany had also signed the Charter and one of the languages to be recognised was Low German, the large northern dialect group stretching from Berlin deep into the west. How deep? There is really no good reason for excluding the north-eastern Dutch dialects: people do not speak any differently on either side of the border. Well, Germany could hardly go granting recognition to languages in another country, but this led local politicians on our side of the border – such as the liberal members of parliament Johan Remkes and Henk Kamp, who both later became ministers and who were already reasonably influential in their party at the time – to hope that the Netherlands might grant recognition.

A power struggle developed based on these scholarly arguments. The State Secretary of the Interior initially did not want to know, arguing that the Charter was only intended for languages, not dialects, and ignoring the fact that there are no watertight criteria for the difference between language and dialect, as mentioned above. In a couple of months it became clear to the State Secretary that he could not prevent recognition of 'Nedersaksisch' (Low Saxon) – the collective name for the dialects of Groningen, Drenthe, Overijssel and parts of Gelderland and Friesland – on scientific grounds. Well-known dialect researchers began to show an interest and added that the eastern dialects had contributed very little to standard Dutch, and consequently really could not be called dialects of Dutch, a dubious argument in itself, as there are no scientific criteria for determining how little is 'too little'. In the end, however, the State Secretary conceded that Nedersaksisch was also a language and required recognition, which was indeed forthcoming, albeit with a peculiar twist. A clever civil servant noted that there were three parts to the Charter: parts 1 and 2 set out general provisions and definitions, whereas the actual measures are described in part 3. Frisian was recognised 'in accordance with part 3', Nedersaksisch 'in accordance with part 2': the Kingdom of the Netherlands recognises it as a language but won't put a single penny towards it.

Small as the significance of such recognition may be, it appears it was desirable enough. Soon the province of Limburg approached the government for recognition of Limburgish – which was also forthcoming, again in accordance with part 2 – but the story took another twist. Limburg is also spoken across the border – this time in Belgium. The Belgian Limburgers wanted their language recognised now too and approached their own government. Unfortunately neither Belgium nor Flanders had signed the Charter. The Flemish government directed the Limburgers to the Nederlandse Taalunie, the Dutch Language Union. Although the Dutch and Flemish governments officially outsource their Dutch language policy to the Taalunie, the union had never been asked for advice on this subject.

One people, one country, one language?

The Nederlandse Taalunie was founded in defence of standard Dutch, so perhaps it was not surprising that it now sided against recognition. Moreover the General Secretary of the Nederlandse Taalunie declared that it would have been better not to have granted Nedersaksisch and Limburgish recognition in

the first place. According to the Charter previous decisions could not be revoked: languages once recognised cannot be unrecognised. Johan Remkes, who had meanwhile been appointed minister of Interior Affairs, promised that he would always consult the Taalunie on future applications, thereby blocking for other varieties what he had achieved as a cabinet minister for his own regional language, Nedersaksisch.

This emerged a few years later, in 2002, when the province of Zeeland requested recognition for Zeelandic. The Taalunie said no, so recognition was refused. The province of North Brabant, which was already preparing an application for Brabantian, took it as read that they had no chance and abandoned their application.

Most Dutch provinces have proceeded with their efforts to achieve official recognition despite past refusals, and most now have a regional language official – someone who is paid directly or indirectly by the provincial government to promote the interests of the province's 'own' language. They help local dialect groups draw up dictionaries and grammars, organise concerts for dialect singers, and give lectures here and there in the province.

It would be cynical to suspect an underhand power struggle behind such amiable activities. All the same, those provinces are unlikely to undertake such work without reason, or simply because there is a Member of the Provincial Council who has such warm feelings for the regional mother tongue. The Dutch provinces have long been under pressure at an administrative level; the turnout is never lower than for provincial elections, with the possible exception of the water boards. It is clear enough why you would vote for your local authority or national government, but the province has yet to prove its worth. Having one single language is a sign of unity. Since the nineteenth century, the slogan 'One people, one country, one language' has taken root, inspiring the European states to consider their own languages important, and the idea that a serious administrative unit should have its own language has remained a driving force for many administrators. ■

