Some Remarks on Language Maintenance and the Implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This paper discusses the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in the Netherlands, especially in the domain of education. The Charter can be seen as one of the language policy instruments to increase the communicative potential of a regional language. The Netherlands have endorsed nine provisions from Article 8 of the European Charter. In cooperation with the provincial authorities of Fryslân, the central government focuses on the establishment and implementation of statutory measures and on the relevant preconditions, financial and otherwise. Especially in the domains of primary and secondary education the current situation is not in accordance with the undertakings entered into by the Netherlands. As a matter of fact, the central and provincial authorities are using two different interpretations of the text of the Charter, making possible a different appreciation of its implementation. Obviously, such a lack of agreement in problem definition does not contribute to progress in policy development. The implementation of the European Charter in the Netherlands can still be improved and developed.

Introduction

As Abram de Swaan said recently, one of the many amazing aspects of the European Union is that when the Union sings the praises of multilingualism, it always does so by using English\(^4\). The same observation can be made regarding many seminars and congresses on endangered languages or multilingualism. But apart from this, how amazing is De Swaan's observation? As a matter of fact it is quite simple, the numerical proportions enforce an onesided language use. It illustrates the difference between languages, between dominant and powerless languages, between majority and minority languages, or, in De Swaan's words, between languages with a different Q-value\(^1\). Q-value defines the communicative potential of a language. In the world language system, English has by far the highest Q-value, minority languages, endangered languages included, have a much lower Q-value. Q-values have a lot to do with numbers of speakers and the domains in which languages are used. Actually, a language defines the domains of communication that are being used\(^2\).

If I should use Frisian or Breton, Gaelic, Sorbian, or one of the other sixty minority languages in Europe, only few people should be able to understand this lecture. The Q-value of broken English, which, according to the great Dutch physicist Hendrik Casimir, is the 'world's most universal language used by waiters in Hawaii, prostitutes in Paris and ambassadors in Washington, by businessmen from Buenos Aires, by scientists at international meetings and by dirty-postcard peddlers in Greece — in short, by honorable people like myself all over the world'\(^5\), is remarkably higher than the Q-value of Frisian, Breton and all the other minority languages.

The Q-value of a language is not the only reason, but may well be the main reason for switching from one language to another. It is certainly the reason why, for instance, the two daily newspapers of Fryslân, the Leeuwarder Courant and the Friesch Dagblad, are being published in Dutch, though many notices of births, deaths and marriages are in Frisian. Also some articles, mostly on typical Frisian matters such as culture, language or history, are sometimes written in Frisian. For their publishers, a market share of only 64 per cent of Frisian readers is economically too small a basis to justify publishing their dailies in Frisian\(^6\). This is just one small illustration of the complex process that replaces minority languages by various politically, economically, or socio-culturally more dominant ones. Some languages vanish in an instant, at the death of the sole surviving speaker\(^6\). Every two weeks, the last fluent speaker of an endangered language

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1 Leeuwarder Courant, 25 januari 2008.
passes on and with him or her goes literally hundreds of generations of traditional knowledge encoded in these ancestral tongues. Other languages, such as for instance Frisian, are gradually disappearing in a bilingual culture wherein indigenous tongues are being overwhelmed by the dominant language at school, in the daily newspaper, in the marketplace and, last but not least, on television. Even the Frisian regional broadcaster Omrop Fryslân is actively participating in this process. In its long-term plan the Omrop is saying that it intends to adopt 'an effective form of creative bilinguality'. It is completely obscure what magic words such as 'effective forms of creative bilinguality' mean, but at the same time there should not be any doubt of the outcome of the Omrop's approach, even when the broadcaster gives priority to the use of the Frisian language. It is not only the assimilation into the majority culture of speakers of a minority language that plays an important role, the assimilation of the institutions of that minority language and culture is at least as important or relevant.

There are many instruments and policies for maintaining and promoting languages, but there is not one clear methodology or even therapy to prevent the diminishing of Q-values or the extinction of languages. How could we claim otherwise, when we do not even know how language change takes place or has taken place in the past?9

The implementation of the European Charter

Language policies are aimed at maintaining and promoting languages, but in most cases they are only slowing down the decline of languages. One of the instruments nowadays used by 23 European countries, among them the Netherlands, is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which came into effect now ten years ago, on 1 March 1998. The aim of this paper is to analyse and discuss the implementation of the Charter especially in the domain of Frisian education.

Frisian language policy

Frisian language policy started much earlier than ten years ago. The beginning of the effort of the Frisian advocacy coalition to further the position of the Frisian language can be found in the first decades of the 19th century, with the foundation of the Frisian Society for History and Antiquity and Language in 1827, and the Frisian Language and Literature Society in 1844. These two organisations, both still at work today, are at the beginning of the campaign for the emancipation of the Frisian language through attempts to increase the Q-value of that language. Not until 1907 was a first result obtained. Seventeen primary schools then introduced Frisian in their programme, to be sure outside the regular classes and curriculum. In 1937 the Primary Education Act was changed in a very modest way, facilitating instruction in Frisian in the primary school. During the 1950s, the position of Frisian in various language domains was strengthened even further. In administrative matters, in 1953 the government adopted the position that the use of Frisian in oral communications was allowed in principle, while the choice of language in written documents, provided they did not concern matters involving a statutory obligation to submit them for inspection, was left to the lower levels of government. Legislation followed in the fields of education (1955) and legal matters (1956).11

In 1980, Frisian became a compulsory subject in primary education in the province of Friesland. From 1 August 1993 Frisian was also made a compulsory subject in basic secondary education in all secondary schools in Friesland. During the 1980s, particular attention was devoted to the position of Frisian in official matters. After a lengthy process of policy preparation, four covenants on Frisian language and culture between government and provincial authorities have been concluded, in 1989, 1993, 2001 and 2005 respectively. And on 1 January 1996, the General Administrative Law Act came into force, regulating the use of language in administrative matters. This legal/administrative progress in Frisian matters illustrates the rather fertile soil wherein the seed of the European Charter was sown. I say 'rather fertile', because, as a matter of fact, the Netherlands had and have nearly no policy on languages. But in the 1990s the central government became, under the influence of the European unification process, more aware of the threats facing smaller languages and cultures.

On 2 May 1996, the central Dutch government officially notified the Council of Europe that the Netherlands had accepted the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, following the adoption of a bill to this effect by the House of Representatives and the Senate of the States General, on 19 October 1995 and 23 January 1996 respectively. By doing so, the Netherlands became the fourth member state of the Council of Europe to accept or ratify the Charter. The Netherlands decided to apply the provisions contained in Part II of the Charter to Frisian, the Lower Saxon, Yiddish and Roma languages. One year later, the Netherlands submitted an additional declaration to the Council of Europe concerning the official recognition of Limburgs as a regional language and the application of the principles of Part II of the Charter in relation to that language.14

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10 Piet Hemminga, Het beleid inzake unieke regionale talen, Frysk Akademy, Ljouwert/Leeuwarden, 2000, 173.
11 Ibidem, 181.
12 Ibidem, 200-222.
13 Ibidem, 164.
Undertakings
In respect of the Frisian language, the Netherlands have also undertaken to apply a minimum of thirty-five paragraphs or sub-paragraphs chosen from among the provisions of Part III of the Charter, including at least three chosen from each of the articles 8 (education) and 12 (cultural activities and facilities), and at least one from each of the articles 9 (judicial authorities), 10 (administrative authorities and public services), 11 (media) and 13 (economic and social life), in accordance with article 2(2) of the Charter15.

Nine provisions from article 8 (education) were chosen, i.e. on pre-school-, primary-, secondary, university and other higher- and adult and continuing education, further on teaching of Frisian history and culture, basic and further training of teachers, supervisory body under article 8 and last but not least educational arrangements outside the province of Friesland.

A striking omission here is article 8.1.d.i on making available technical and vocational education in the relevant regional language, and 8.1.d.iiii providing, within technical and vocational education, for the teaching of the relevant regional language as an integral part of the curriculum. In the course of the deliberation on the bill the representatives of the Christian-Democrats, Socialists and Progressive Liberals in the Second Chamber respectively invited the State Secretary to adopt also article 8.1.d.iii, but the State Secretary did reject this proposal, pointing out that in vocational education there are no statutorily prescribed subjects or examination subjects, and institutions for vocational education can therefore not be placed under any obligations in this area16.

Pre-school education
Regarding the implementation of the Charter in pre-school education, clear progress has been made17. The number of Frisian playgroups and day-care centres has increased from 10 in 2002 to 54 on 1 January 2007. Ten play groups and day care centres have been certified, the others are preparing themselves for certification. The same positive observations can be made about the development of supporting materials and the provincial intention to support the increase in number of these institutions. The provincial goal is to have one hundred of these centres for children operating in 2010. By now, nearly 10,000 Frisian pre-school kids receive Frisian language lessons. A special teaching method, the 'Sângles-rige' is being used in 170 of the 250 playgroups in the province of Frysln. In addition to to this method, the 'Tomke-project', with special booklets, dvd and television-programmes, has been used intensively since 1996. The conclusion must be that since the adoption of the European Charter, Fryslân has made real progress in the field of pre-school education.

Primary school education
Much less progress has been made in the domain of primary school education. Only 94 per cent of the Frisian primary schools meet the statutory obligation to teach Frisian. The last published research report of the Education Inspectorate notes that 93 per cent of the schools have not even developed a language policy, whereas their teaching of Frisian can only to a very limited extent meet the demands of the new attainment targets. Few primary schools teach in Frisian and if they do, it is only one lesson a week, which cannot be fairly interpreted as a 'substantial part of primary education'. As a matter of fact there is only one ray of hope, and that is the provincial government, which in spite of its very restricted competence and authority, is developing an education policy, initiating research projects and the development of education materials.

Secondary school education
The domain of secondary education does not give any reason to be more positive than in the case of primary education. The remarks, made in 2004 by the 'Committee of Experts' of the Council of Europe do still apply18. Only a very restricted amount of time is available for Frisian language teaching, and in addition, there is a lack of competent teachers. Besides, only a very small number of pupils choose to learn Frisian, despite the efforts of the provincial government to increase these numbers. Research on these provincial efforts does make clear how difficult the situation is and what insufficient quality these efforts have19. Meanwhile, some earlier recommendations of the 'Committee of Experts' have been realized20. Attainment targets have been determined and the authority to exempt schools from the requirement to teach Frisian has been transferred from the Education Inspectorate to the Provincial Government. But the difficulties and bottlenecks are still numerous. A recent report of the Education Inspectorate states that of the 58 institutes for secondary education, eight institutes are exempted from the requirement to teach Frisian. Surprisingly, three institutions assume they are exempted, but in reality they are not.21 One in four of all educational establishments does not offer Frisian as a subject. There is only one institute that has developed a school policy on language. And only 63 percent of the teachers are competent to teach Frisian as a subject. But there is little progress, five years ago this figure was still 53 per cent. Teachers have, in fact, since 1996.

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15 Ibidem, 8-9.
17 Based on the 'Derde Rapportage betreffende het Europese Handvest voor regionale van minderheidstalen', Ljouwert/Leeuwarden, 2007, prepared by the Fryiske Akademy and advised to the Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties.
19 Jacob van der Bij/Rene W. Valk, Fries in het voorzegte onderwijs, een Echterneachse processie, Fryskse Akademy, Ljouwert/ Leeuwarden, 2005.
21 Inspectie van het Onderwijs, De kwaliteit van het vak Fries in het basisonderwijs en het voorzegte onderwijs in de provincie Fryslân, [Utrecht], 2006, 76.
become a little more positive about the position of Frisian in schools. Nevertheless, the conclusion must be that the implementation of article 8.1.b.ii of the Charter is still quite insufficient. Because of the weak position of the subject Frisian within the educational institutes, and the weak motivation of pupils to choose the subject Frisian, prospects in this domain of the European Charter are not very encouraging.

**University, higher and adult education**

The Netherlands have accepted article 8.1.e.ii of the Charter to provide facilities for the study of the Frisian language as a university and higher education subject. Though the number of students is very small, the conclusion can be that the Netherlands do fulfill the undertaking it entered into under the European Charter to provide facilities for the study of the Frisian language as a subject in university and other higher education.

The Netherlands have also agreed to provide courses in the domain of adult and continuing education. But the Adult and Vocational Education Act does not contain any references to the Frisian language and its integration into adult education, nor does it contain specific provisions with regard to Frisian courses in adult education in Frysland. However, the Act does leave room for the regional training centres and the local authorities to give priority to Frisian in the range of courses offered. But as a matter of fact the two regional training centres in Frysland do not provide courses Frisian, though one of the centres, 'Friesland College' is developing a language policy, intended to promote the use of the Frisian language. Next to these two centres the 'Afûk' organises Frisian courses for Frisian-speaking and non-Frisian-speaking adults and develops teaching and course materials. Some of the courses offered by the 'Afûk' are aimed at specific professional groups, including employees of the courts in Frysland and provincial civil servants. Every year, approximately 1,000 students take Afûk's language courses.

**Teaching history and culture**

The Netherlands have also agreed to make arrangements to ensure the teaching of the history and the culture which is reflected by the Frisian language. But again, there is no statutory regulation to ensure that the Frisian language is reflected in the teaching of history and culture in schools in the province of Frysland. And again the 'Afûk' looks after some teaching materials to be used in groups 7 and 8 of primary schools, co-ordinates project-weeks as 'Fokus Frysland' and organizes special courses on Frisian literature and history. To strengthen the efforts in this domain, the provincial government has made it possible for the regional historical centre 'Bresoar' to establish a support centre for patrimony education, but therein, how extraordinary, the Frisian language has not been given any priority.

**Training of teachers**

Article 8.1.h. on basic and further training of teachers has also been adopted by the Netherlands. But in daily practice, this obligation is only partly fulfilled. In the Covenant on Frisian language and culture of 2001, the central government and the province of Frysland agreed, with regard to the initial training of teaching assistants in primary education, to encourage the regional training centres to integrate active Frisian language skills required to teach bilingual and multilingual children into their initial training courses for these professional groups, or to make them a compulsory part of the examination syllabus. Unfortunately, until now nothing has been realised, there is only a working group of teachers which is preparing an examination programme for Frisian language.

The two Frisian colleges which offer teacher training courses also include the Frisian language in their curricula, because of the fact that Frisian is a compulsory subject in primary education in Frysland. At the 'Northern College of Higher Professional Education', students are obliged to study Frisian during the first two years of their four year study programme, after which it becomes an optional subject. At the 'Stenden College of Higher Professional Education', Frisian is an optional subject throughout the teacher training course. Both colleges give students an endorsement for Frisian on their diplomas when they successfully complete their examinations, including the Frisian examination. At 'Stenden College' the number of students obtaining these endorsement is significantly higher than at the 'Northern College'. This is explained by the fact that students of 'Stenden College' can obtain the endorsement by including Frisian as an optional subject in their examination packages. At the 'Northern College' students wishing to obtain the endorsement for Frisian must take an extra Frisian course on top of their regular study programme. Furthermore, the 'Northern College' differentiates between Frisian-speaking and non-Frisian-speaking students: the latter are obliged to take an extra module in order to reach the same level as the Frisian-speaking students by the end of their third year of studies. In summary, it is clear that the requirements set by the 'Northern College' for obtaining the endorsement for Frisian are much higher than those of the 'Stenden College'. At 'Stenden College', approximately 65 per cent of the students obtain the endorsement for Frisian, and at the 'Northern College' only 12 per cent of the students obtain the same endorsement. As a matter of fact, the two courses and therewith the competences of their alumni are quite different. Meanwhile, the two colleges are speaking with each other about harmonizing the two competence profiles. It remains to be seen what this will do for the quality of the courses.

**Arrangements outside Frysland**

Finally, something can be said about the educational arrangements outside the province of Frysland. Article 8.2 stipulates that, if the number of Frisian language speakers justifies it, the educational authorities may allow, encourage or provide teaching in or of that language at all the appropriate stages of education outside the terri-
tories in which the Frisian language is traditionally used. Outside the province of Frijsland, Frisian is traditionally spoken along the border of the provinces of Frijsland and Groningen, in the municipalities of Grooteegast and Marum. Schools in this area are permitted to use Frisian as one of their languages of instruction. In practice only a very restricted use is made of this possibility. More relevant is the opportunity offered by the training course for primary school teachers of the Groningen branch of ‘Steden College’, where Frisian is taught as an optional subject, although it is not possible to take a formal certificate of competence in Frisian. Next to this, the Frisian courses at universities in Amsterdam, Groningen and Leiden can be mentioned, and especially the Frisian courses for adults, which are organised, if there is sufficient interest, under the supervision of the ‘Aflak’. Nowadays, the ‘Aflak’ even offers distance learning courses in Frisian. This does mean that the Netherlands is fulfilling its undertaking with regard to the teaching of Frisian outside the province of Frijsland.

Observations

It is clear that education is a complex and wide-ranging domain, in respect of which the Netherlands has endorsed nine provisions from Article 8 of the European Charter. The central government focuses, in cooperation with the provincial authorities of Frijsland, on the establishment and implementation of statutory measures and on the relevant preconditions, financial and otherwise. Especially in the domains of primary and secondary education the current situation is not in accordance with the undertakings entered into by the Netherlands. Especially the provincial authorities are convinced of the fact that a lot still remains to be done. As a matter of fact, the central government and the provincial authorities are using two different interpretations of the text of the Charter, making possible a different appreciation of the implementation. If the Charter is speaking about ‘a substantial part’, the province’s interpretation is that a considerable part of the fully available school time should be used for Frisian as a language of instruction and as a subject, whereas the central authorities assume that schools basically have the opportunity to use Frisian as a language of instruction and as a subject. Obviously, such a lack of agreement in problem definition does not contribute to progress in policy development.

The implementation of policy does in most cases require funds, people and legislation. How many funds the central government is allocating to the domain of Frisian language and culture is fairly unclear, since specific funds have been transferred to the Provincial Fund. Provincial and central authorities both think that an amount between 15 and 20 million euro is involved. But the two authorities do not agree on the question of how much money the Frisian language does need. The relevance of Frisian language matters in the Hague, the Dutch centre of political power, can further be illustrated by concluding that the Department of the Interior, until now the leading department in the domain of Frisian matters, has only 0.1 public servant available to co-ordinate Frisian language matters, that is: only four hours a week, probably on Friday afternoon.

The Provincial and central authorities did arrange to report annually to the Provincial States and the Second Chamber about the implementation of the Covenant on Frisian language and culture, but its implementation is still pending. The central authorities trivialize this state of affairs by saying that nobody is asking for it. The sense of reality of the public official concerned is further illustrated by his saying that the implementation of the European Charter is dependent on personal capacity and political priorities. And political priority is out of the question in these matters. The central authorities have always seen the European Charter as a confirmation of existing policies, whereas Frijsland has always seen the European Charter as a programme and a challenge. The central authorities have neither a common opinion on the development and maintenance of the Frisian language, nor a common vision on the implementation of policy and legislation. Apart from that, there is a continuing problem of communication. It is unclear to central authorities what provincial authorities intend, and the other way round provincial authorities have no feeling for Dutch policy notions. The conclusion must be that the implementation of the European Charter in the Netherlands can still be improved and developed.

I started with an observation by Bram de Swaan when he said that it is amazing that when the European Union sings the praises of multilingualism, it is always does so by using English. Amitai Etzioni, a still more famous colleague, recently made it clear that the use of English is a lot less peculiar than De Swaan is thinking. Etzioni argued — and given his communitarian outlook, this is rather remarkable — that we should introduce English at least as second language. In his vision, the national language is the first language, while regional languages are not mentioned. But in actual fact, Frisian policy has already been on this track for some time. An increasing number of (nowadays fifteen) Frisian primary schools are trilingual: Frisian, Dutch and English, in a project that has been running since 1997. The aim of this new approach is to attain a satisfactory position for the Frisian language in multilingual Frijsland.

23 Ibidem, 77.
24 Ibidem, 81.
25 Ibidem, 72.
26 Ibidem, 75-76.
27 Ibidem, 8.