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Bilingualism versus multilingualism in the Netherlands

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What are the consequences of the rise of English for the languages spoken in the Netherlands, a medium-sized EU Country in which most of the inhabitants speak a medium-sized language? There are several indications that the Dutch are moving from being a traditionally multilingual population, priding themselves on their knowledge of many foreign languages, to being bilingual, priding themselves on their knowledge of English. The rise of English as an international *lingua franca* does not seem to harm the position of Dutch in the Netherlands, but it may harm the position of other languages.

Keywords: bilingualism, multilingualism, government bodies, international organizations, monolingualism, language attitudes, higher education, English language

Many travelers to the Netherlands have observed that the Dutch are to a large extent bilingual. “Just about everyone you meet in Amsterdam will be able to speak near-perfect English,” the *Rough Guide* website claims,¹ and it is not very difficult to substantiate this informal observation with numbers. For instance, in a 2006 special *Eurobarometer* report, researchers for the European Commission note that 87% of Dutch citizens speak English as a second language. The number is slightly higher in Sweden (89%) and Malta (88%), but everywhere else it is lower. The average in the European Union was 38% in 2006.²

These numbers are in particularly strong contrast with those of the United Kingdom and Ireland, in which only 38% and 34% of the population, respectively, knows any language other than their native tongue — which is, of course, usually English. Within the Netherlands this number is 91%; in Europe as a whole it is 56%; the only country which comes as low as the UK and Ireland is the candidate EU member Turkey (at 33%), although Italy (41%) and Portugal (42%) come close.

It is intuitively clear that the low level of language knowledge in the UK and Ireland is attributable to the fact that these are English-speaking countries, where most people feel that they do not need other languages for their international communication.³

In this article, I examine what this bilingualism means both for Dutch and other languages spoken in the Netherlands, and how formal language policy, both at the state level and at the level of the provinces, has influenced bilingualism and been influenced by it. A key hypothesis is that the country is slowly moving in the direction of becoming *bi-* rather than *multi-*lingual. The rise of English does not seem to harm Dutch, but it does affect knowledge of other languages. To some extent the same effect is to be seen as in the traditional English-speaking countries: knowledge of English makes the knowledge of other languages obsolete. In spite of this, the debate about language policy making is shifting to an exclusive focus on the protection of Dutch.

It is not my intention to demonstrate that the Netherlands is special in this respect. My findings are in line with the work of other scholars on other Northern European countries; see for instance Jørgensen (2010) and Kristiansen (2010) on comparable changes in Scandinavia. If this is true, a trend seems to be ongoing in which (Northern) Europeans tend to become more English-centered and thereby less responsive to the languages of their direct neighbours. These countries thus become more like English-speaking countries in their language attitudes, except that they are bilingual rather than monolingual.

At the same time, we might suspect that the Netherlands is special in a number of respects. From the point of view of European language policies, the position of the Netherlands in Europe is interesting because the average level of proficiency in English is quite high among Dutch speakers, also in Flanders, the other European region in which Dutch is official: the Eurobarometer mentioned above gives a percentage of 59% of Belgians who claim to speak English, but it is very likely that this number is substantially higher in Flanders than it is in the French-speaking part of Belgium (the level is 36% in France).

However, the most important way in which the Dutch stand out is the rather complicated relationship between language and national identity (Barbour 2000, Oakes 2001). Extra (2011) discusses what he calls "the Dutch lack of capacity in dealing with linguistic diversity": the Dutch tend to see using more than one language as being impractical, and, in particular, they tend to give up their own language when this can reduce multilingualism. One of the data sets which Extra (2011) discusses is from the *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (1999) and concerns the use of English by immigrants. I copy only the data on immigrants from European countries:

Table 1. Use of English by Immigrants to Australia

Native Country	First Generation (%)	Second Generation (%)
The Netherlands	62.9	95.9
Germany	48.9	91.1
Malta	37.0	82.8
Spain	22.7	63.6
Poland	20.1	77.6
Italy	14.8	57.4
Croatia	13.9	41.7
Greece	6.4	27.9
Turkey	5.9	21.7

The Netherlands are at the top of the list of immigrants who start using the official language of their new home country (English, in this case), both in the first and the second generation: the former, already in a majority, decides to use English at home, whereas in the second generation Dutch has all but disappeared.

Other data point in the same direction. Seebus (2008) mentions the *earshot norm* which Dutch immigrants in (again) Australia tend to observe: when English speakers are close enough, Dutch immigrants start speaking English to each other, even if the English speakers do not participate in the conversation. A piece of historical evidence comes from Groeneboer (2002) who points out that Dutch has never become a world language, in spite of the colonial history of the Netherlands, and that this was at least partly due to an official policy not to teach Dutch to the local population in, for example, Indonesia, but to install a local lingua franca instead, which was also often learned by Dutch officials, albeit at a very basic level (see also Frijhoff 2010 for an interesting discussion of Dutch language culture since the seventeenth century).

There is no indication that the trend towards monolingualism at present leads Dutch speakers to abandon Dutch in favour of English. All-Dutch couples have not started raising their children in English, for instance, and Dutch families have not started using English at home, let alone that these numbers would in any way be comparable to those in Australia, shown above. However, it may lead to a situation in which the Dutch end up in the end in being more like the UK and Ireland: their only language of international communication will be English, while at home they speak Dutch.

None of these factors means that Dutch society is the only one showing these tendencies. However, to the extent that Dutch society has progressed further along this path, the explanation might be found in factors such as these.

In the next sections, I will describe various aspects which illuminate the central thesis. First, I will briefly discuss the workings of the Dutch Language Union, and several other political issues surrounding the standard language. Subsequently, I give an overview of what is known about language attitudes among the Dutch. I then discuss the rise of bilingual education and the political and administrative position of various linguistic minorities in the Netherlands. I also discuss the picture which emerges from these various sources of data and draw a conclusion.

The Dutch Language Union and other aspects of formal language policy

Dutch is a West-Germanic language which has an official status in three nation states worldwide: the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Kingdom of Belgium and the Republic of Suriname. All together, the number of speakers of Dutch approximates 22 million, according to the Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie*, NTU), the official body for all Dutch language policies, as well as all policy on literature written in Dutch — such as subsidizing translators and a major literary prize. The NTU notes on its website that for this reason, Dutch counts as the eighth biggest language within the European Union, and the 37th biggest language in the world in terms of the number of native speakers.⁴

The NTU, officially established in 1980, is a common legal body working for the governments of the Netherlands and Flanders (the position of Suriname is a little different, but that need not concern us here). All policies regarding the Dutch language and literature have been delegated to this particular body; as such, it is a unique body in international law: the countries have given up all autonomy on this particular area. Oostendorp (2007a) gives an overview of the activities and structure of the NTU around the turn of the millennium (1995–2005). The structure described in that article is still operative.

Formally, the NTU is guided by the Ministers of Culture of the participating countries, who alternate chairmanship. The day-to-day administrative business is conducted by a Secretariat-General, which has its seat in The Hague, very close to — about a kilometre away from — the seat of the Dutch Parliament. The Secretariat-General employs both Dutch and Flemish officers, and, although this is not an official policy, in practice the position of Secretary General has always alternated between a Dutch and a Flemish high official. Because of its international character, the policy of the NTU is not under direct control of either of the national Parliaments; rather there is an ‘Inter-Parliamentary Committee’ in which representative members of both parliaments have seats. A final organ of the NTU which is worth mentioning is the Council for Dutch Language and Literature, which con-

sists of a number of ‘experts’, such as scholars, literary authors and representatives of institutions of secondary education.

The fact that Dutch language policies are codetermined by Belgian politicians is significant, since language is traditionally an important political topic in that trilingual country (Dutch, German and French), in which in particular Dutch and French speakers are sometimes in fierce opposition. The wish to protect Dutch against what is seen as the invasion of a larger language is therefore probably much stronger among Flemish than among Dutch politicians. In actual practice, there is no discernible effect: NTU does not have the battle against English or any other language on its agenda, and restricts itself mostly to issues of corpus planning. In recent years, for instance, it has invested in subsidies for various electronic dictionaries, in tools for machine translation and other computational methods, and so on.

According to a recent English-language brochure,⁵ ”The aim of the Language Union is to support users of Dutch around the world so that the language can continue to be as dynamic and vigorous as it is today.” This may suggest a rather unwarranted optimism about the influence of state language policy (there are few indications that government bodies are able to add to the dynamism of a language), but this is not reflected in the way in which NTU works. What is clear, however, is that this motto is not defensive, or directed against other languages, but purely directed towards the use of Dutch. As an aside, it is interesting that there seem to be no NTU brochures in languages other than English (or Dutch): I have not been able to find anything in French, for instance, even though that is an official language in one of the two European countries participating in the Taalunie.

For the past few years, it has also been a goal of the NTU to become more ‘visible’ for the general audience of Dutch speakers. One tool it uses for this is adopting a ‘theme’ every year, such as ‘the use of English’, ‘the language of public officials’, or ‘dialects’. A commercial enterprise conducts an opinion poll about a topic, and the NTU organizes a day in which people can discuss the topic and listen to presentations about it.

Although the Dutch state participates in the NTU for issues such as this, the legal position of Dutch itself is a matter for the Dutch government only. Dutch arguably is the most important language of Dutch public life: schools and school exams are generally in Dutch (see below), court cases are held in Dutch, the parliament meets in Dutch, all Dutch laws are written in Dutch, and so on. Interestingly, this status of the Dutch language is not very strongly anchored in Dutch law, and not in the Constitution at all, in spite of several initiatives by Christian Democratic politicians (in particular, members of the political party *Christen Unie*) in recent years to include it. So far, these have never received the required two-thirds majority, in spite of their rather non-binding tone (“The Dutch government promotes the use of the Dutch language”).

The most important law is probably the Law on Higher Education (Wet op het Hoger Onderwijs) which states (Art. 6a):⁶ “Classes should be taught and exams should be offered in Dutch.” The law also mentions two possible (and important) exceptions:

- a. when the teaching concerns the language in question, or
- b. if the specific nature, the structure or the quality of the teaching, or otherwise the origin of the participants requires such, conforming to a code of conduct which has been established by the authorities.⁷

The second clause makes the whole article all but vacuous, since one can always argue that ‘the specific nature’ of the education requires using a different language (the books are only in English, or there is a foreigner in the audience); a result of this is that at present about 80% of Master’s level education in the Netherlands is conducted in English (see Section 4 for more on the implementation of language policies in Dutch schools).

It may also not be a coincidence that the most explicit law has been formulated precisely in the realm of higher education, one of the few areas of the public sphere where Dutch has suffered a considerable loss (see Section 4).

Language attitudes of the Dutch

Research into general language attitudes of the Dutch people is scarce; for instance, I have not been able to find a reliable recent scholarly study of the general attitude regarding the dominance of English as a foreign language. We can look into discussions in the public domain, but this is a dangerous pursuit in the sense that only certain parties will raise their voice in this domain. In particular, people who are worried about issues such as these are more likely to raise their voice than those who do not have a strong opinion about them.

An interesting aspect of Dutch interest in language is that it is highly organized. This is true in particular for the mother tongue. The Netherlands hosts an association of ‘language lovers’, *Onze Taal* (Our Language) which has about 35,000 members and therefore may be the largest association of its kind in the world (Oostendorp 2007c). During the past few years, the association has made heavy use of the web, Facebook, Twitter and e-mail newsletters as means of communication, but the main outlet is still a monthly magazine which is also called *Onze Taal*. Although the goals in the initial period — the association was founded in 1931 — were to use ‘pure Dutch’, and in particular to avoid all German influence, at present the goals of the magazine are to “write in an expert and readable way about all aspects of the [Dutch] language.” It has a professional staff, and features articles

by journalists, writers and professional linguists. Worries about the influence of English are regularly expressed, but the same is true for counter-voices. The editors rarely express themselves directly, but they made an exception in the issue of January 2009, which was largely devoted to articles highlighting several points of view on the use of English. In the final article, the editors explained that the journal had as its only ambition to follow the debates about the topic and keep readers informed about different points of view. “Some might think that our attitude is not assertive enough, but it is the only realistic option for the editorial board of a language magazine that wants to be a platform for the entire Dutch-speaking community.” The title of the article was *To the barricades?*, with a suggestive question mark.

Overall, *Onze Taal* is an important private actor in matters of language policy, particularly on issues of correctness. It publishes an influential spelling guide. Its language advisors correct the annual State of the Nation address (written by the Prime Minister) before it is spoken (by the Queen). Its employees have contributed extensively to a database with language advice hosted by the Taalunie, but, in line with the editorial statement just mentioned, it does not actively ‘fight’ the use of English in the public domain.

As already mentioned, it is not entirely clear whether the balanced view of the editorial staff of *Onze Taal* completely mirrors that of the membership. The *Onze Taal* website hosts a page where members are invited to discuss language-related topics.⁸ Now, almost regardless of the topic — e.g. should news readers speak more clearly, should we allow students to write in SMS language (‘textese’) —, the topic of English is brought up by visitors quite often.

Dissatisfaction with the ‘lax’ position of *Onze Taal* has led a few smaller groups to establish independent organizations. The two most prominent among these are *Stichting Nederlands* (Foundation Dutch) and *Taaverdediging* (Language Defense). Both of them have the use of English within the Netherlands public sphere as a very strong, and arguably the main, concern; the former fights it among other things by publishing a word list of English words that are used in Dutch text, with sometimes made-up Dutch alternatives (Koops and others 2009); the second one seems to take as its main course of action writing letters to ministers, parliamentarians and companies protesting against individual occurrences of English, for example in the national airport. Neither of them seems to have support of more than a handful of people. Arno Schrauwers, a journalist who has been the chairperson for *Stichting Nederlands* since 2003, stepped down in 2011 without being replaced. In a farewell letter he wrote, “I have come to the conclusion that I have failed to put the language on the Dutch agenda as an important topic. Dutch people individually claim that they value the possession of their own language highly, but I see very few signs of it in everyday life.”

All of this evidence indicates that the Dutch people are not overly worried about the rise of English, to say the least. A similar picture emerges when we study the results from the NTU questionnaires. For instance, one of the questions in 2005 was whether people thought that Dutch would be replaced by English in schools, in big international companies, the government and universities. The people who answered that this would certainly or probably be the case numbered respectively 6%, 38%, 9% and 31%; the percentages of people who thought this would probably not be the case were respectively 74%, 17%, 73% and 35%. In other words, except for the big international companies and universities — two public spheres in which Dutch never played a dominant role to begin with — the threat to Dutch by the rise of English is seen as insignificant, and people do not seem to be particularly worried about it (Nederlandse Taalunie 2005b).

Another indicator of the relatively low level of anxiety about the future of Dutch may be the book *Taal is zeg maar echt mijn ding* (henceforth *Tizmemd*; Cornelisse 2009), a title which is difficult to translate because it makes fun of at least two trends in spoken Dutch: the use of the discourse particle *zeg maar* (“let’s say”, but used more or less in the way in which young Americans use the word *like*) and the tendency to say *dat is mijn ding* (“that is my thing”) to express happiness about something; the title thus means approximately *Language is, like, for sure my thing*. The book sold over 300,000 copies, which means it was one of the biggest overall non-fiction bestsellers in recent years, and definitely the most well-read book about language. It may therefore be taken to reflect something close to a common opinion about language.

The author of *Tizmemd* is Paulien Cornelisse, a comedian who studied general linguistics for some time at the University of Amsterdam, and the book mostly expresses her playful observations regarding fashionable language. An interesting aspect of *Tizmemd* for the connoisseur of this genre of popular books on language⁹ — a genre that is often based on what Labov (1994) calls the Golden Age Principle: at some time in the past language was perfect, now everything is going downhill — is that Cornelisse does not lament the deterioration of the language, and even sometimes points out that she likes certain developments, including the rising influence of English. A typical fragment of Cornelisse is the following — from a column which appeared during the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, in which Hillary Clinton was one of the Democratic candidates for presidential nomination, while John McCain was the uncontested Republican candidate:

Hillary must have been looking forward to this sentence in last Tuesday’s speech: “No way, no how, no McCain.” [...] But this *no way* sounded funny, to my ears in any case, because the Dutch who have adopted *no way* already a while ago, aren’t those whom we take seriously. Serious Dutch politicians do not say *no way*. [...] *No way* in the Netherlands is the exclusive property of young people who get

intense inspiration from American TV series. My mind's eye sees a student, a girl, with a happy ponytail. She would for instance state: "I am not going to take that test again, no way!" [...] But I should add: the girlie students who now say *no way* will dominate Dutch politics within about ten years of course, and by then we will also take *no way* seriously.

Cornelisse observes that there is a discrepancy between the social connotations of *no way* as used by an American politician and as it is interpreted by a Dutch listener. She gives a social stereotype of the type of Dutch person who would use this English expression, and although she creates some ironic distance from such people, she does not seem to suggest that the day coming in ten years in which 'we' will start taking the expression seriously will be a tragic day.

It is important to note that the membership of *Onze Taal* is almost exclusively from the Netherlands; Flemish members are in a very small minority. Although this is not the focus of the present article, it seems that language attitudes in Flanders are rather different. One reason for this difference may be that Flemish people live in a state of diglossia (Grondelaers & Van Hout 2011). Whatever the reason, the two language worlds seem increasingly separated, in spite of the existence of a common governmental body, the Taalunie. This separation is reflected in developments in the standard languages, which are beginning to diverge rather rapidly. TV shows from the other country are nowadays routinely subtitled, at least when they contain anything like a colloquial (regionally coloured) language (Hendrickx 2008). I have at least anecdotal evidence that Flemish speakers are occasionally answered in English when they introduce themselves in Amsterdam. All of this can be seen as part of the same complex: the Netherlands is becoming more and more bilingual, such that even the variety of Dutch spoken on the other side of the border becomes less interesting than what is happening in the 'international' (i.e. English-speaking) world.

The rise of English-language education programmes

The picture that emerges from the preceding discussion is of a rather relaxed attitude towards linguistic issues in the Netherlands. The advent of English is not necessarily seen as a problem; even though language enthusiasts are well-organized, the militants who want to 'take action' against English are in a very small minority.

As a matter of fact, the number of people who are actively promoting the use of English for specific purposes might be larger than those fighting it. The most important application, and the one with the widest societal and political consequences, is the use of English in primary and secondary schools, as well as institutions of higher education.

As we have noted, higher education is one of the few domains for which there are concrete language laws in the Netherlands. Paradoxically, it might at the same time be the area in which the influence of English has become largest. As we have noted, the law states that Dutch is the default language, and that universities each should have a 'code of conduct' to govern the exceptions. It is interesting to study these codes of conduct. Here are two examples, one from Leiden University, a comprehensive university in the West of the Netherlands, and one from the Eindhoven Technical University, which only offers technical study programmes:

(1) *Code of Conduct Leiden University*

During the propedeutic stage [i.e. the first year of the BA programme], the official language is Dutch by default. The official language can be English if the provenance of the students makes such necessary.

During the second and third year of the BA programme, the official language is Dutch by default. The official language can be English if the provenance of the students makes such necessary.

During the MA programme, the official language is English, if useful, or some other language.

(2) *Code of Conduct Eindhoven Technical University (TU/e)*

Within the TU/e, one can use the possibility to make an exception to the rule that Dutch is the official language in classes and during exams. Next to Dutch, the only acceptable language is English.

One thing to notice is that both universities are in actual practice bilingual. Even though the Law only mentions Dutch and 'other languages', the latter category consists in practice only of English at these two universities (and this is not different elsewhere). In Eindhoven, the use of languages other than Dutch and English is even actively prohibited, while in Leiden (which prides itself on offering courses in the largest number of foreign language programmes in the country), other languages may be used, but only English is mentioned. (Notice that the code of conduct would have the same legal content if English was not mentioned explicitly; mentioning just makes more explicit what teaching in a foreign language will typically mean.)

It is hard to find reliable numbers revealing what these codes of conduct actually imply, because these data are not aggregated (by, for example, the Ministry of Education or any other party). I therefore collected data from the website Keuzegids Onderwijs, a guide claiming to inform prospective students about all the options they have. Higher education in the Netherlands, as elsewhere in the European Union, now consists of a bachelor's (BA) and a master's (MA) stage; the former is always three years and is supposed to follow secondary education. The latter takes one or two years and follows the BA. Another division, more specific to the Netherlands, is one between HBO (hoger beroepsonderwijs, higher

Table 2. Higher Education in the Netherlands: Programmes Offered in English

	# of programmes	In English	Percentage
HBO Bachelor	269	65	24%
WO Bachelor	183	22	12%
HBO Master	152	40	26%
WO Master	687	405	59%

professional education) and WO (wetenschappelijk onderwijs, scientific education). I checked how many of the programmes were offered in English:

The programmes which have only a few courses in English were counted as Dutch. The majority of courses at the ‘highest’ level (WO Master) thus are already provided in English. At other levels, the number is substantially lower.

It is somewhat surprising that WO Bachelor reaches only 12%, which is lower than HBO Bachelor. A possible reason for this is that a rather high number of Bachelor’s programmes at the WO level are in the humanities, which use Dutch or even other languages more often.¹⁰ In order to verify this assumption, I did a check among the WO Master’s programmes. Of those which advertise themselves as offering courses in ‘technology’, 91% are in English only; in those in ‘language and communication’ this number drops to 51%. Other programmes which use Dutch relatively often are on other more national topics of specialization, such as law.

The use of English as a language of education is also no longer restricted to higher education. At the moment of writing (November 2011), there are 133 secondary schools which offer so-called bilingual education, which means that part of the classes in mathematics, geography, chemistry, and so on, are offered in some other language.¹¹ This other language is English in 132 schools, and German in one. (Classes are all in Dutch in the last two years of all schools, because students have to prepare for the final exams, which are centralized and in Dutch only. Students therefore have to get familiar with the relevant Dutch terminology.) A few dozen primary schools are nowadays also experimenting with teaching part of their classes in English.

The introduction of bilingual education has met no noticeable opposition. When bilingual education was introduced for lower forms of professional education, the vice-minister of education Marja van Bijsterveldt stated, “In particular, welders, nurses and hotel employees can profit immensely from knowing a language such as English or German. Professionalism does not stop at the border. Bilingual education gives students a clear advantage.”¹²

Minister Van Bijsterveldt is not the only person who seems not to be affected. In their report *Taalpeil* (‘Language Level’, 2005), the Nederlandse Taalunie (NTU) asked Dutch speakers whether they thought bilingual education in primary school

would be harmful for the Dutch language. A total of 56% of the respondents in the Netherlands said that they thought this would not be the case (27% declared that they thought it would be harmful; for Belgium the numbers were 53% and 21% respectively). Several studies (e.g. Admiraal, Westhoff & Bot 2006) have also shown that these bilingual programmes have no negative effect on the results in Dutch language tests for students in a bilingual school (Dutch language is a compulsory topic in all types of school), or, indeed, on any of the tests of topics taught in English, while the English language proficiency of students in these schools is higher. It should be borne in mind, however, that these things are difficult to test, as some self-selection is presumably going on: bilingual schools might simply attract better students to begin with.

The use of languages other than English and Dutch

According to the European Commission, every European citizen should know at least two languages besides her native tongue (European Commission 2003). It is left unspecified what these other two languages should be. In the case of the Netherlands, they are usually German and French: in the NTU report Taalunie 2011, 76% and 39% of the Dutch claim to speak these languages, respectively.¹³ German and French are important European languages, and furthermore languages spoken in important neighbouring countries; accordingly, they have been taught in secondary schools for a long time. Obviously, the Netherlands is a multilingual country in many ways: it hosts a large number of minority languages, both 'indigenous' and brought to the country by immigration. In this section, I will give a survey of the position of these other languages in Dutch society and in particular in Dutch. I have divided the discussion into two subsections, one on foreign languages learned by native Dutch speakers and one on minority languages spoken natively by Dutch people. The distinction is of course to some extent artificial since some native speakers of Dutch will choose to learn a 'minority language' such as Turkish or Frisian, while, inversely, there is a rather substantial German-speaking minority living in the Netherlands. However, in practice it is not very difficult to distinguish the two types of language, and since their position is very different, it is also useful to do so.

Foreign languages

As we observed above, German and French are the traditional foreign languages in schools in the Netherlands. At least one of them is taught in all secondary schools, with a vast majority teaching both (Onderwijsraad 2008). This leads to a situation

in which a majority of the Dutch claim to be able to speak German, and a large minority to speak French. (These data are all based on self-reported behaviour; I am not aware of any reliable study on the level of fluency in these languages.)

Both of these languages are also considered of vital importance for the policies of the Netherlands, for example economic policy. Studies (Els 1990, Westhoff 2001, Liemberg 2001, Edelenbos & De Jong 2004, for example) show that organizations of entrepreneurs tend to think that German is of equal importance with English for Dutch companies, with French coming third, and Spanish fourth. Other languages, including for instance Chinese and Hindi, are not considered to be very important. In spite of this view, approximately a dozen Dutch secondary schools offer Chinese, just as some schools also offer programmes in Spanish, Russian, Turkish, Arabic, and Frisian, and it is possible to take state exams in any of these languages (Onderwijsraad 2007). Ambitions are also quite high. At the end of the sixth year of the most academic type of secondary school, Dutch students are supposed to be able to operate at level B1/B2 on the Common European Reference Scale, which roughly means that they should be able to operate independently in everyday contexts in the language in question (Meijer & Fasoglio 2007).

People do not learn languages only in formal schools. A recent study (ITS 2008) found that there are approximately 750 language-related organizations active in the Netherlands. This number includes a large variety of groups, including everything from commercial enterprises offering trips to Barcelona and Rome where one can learn the local language, to groups of, for example, Greek immigrants who offer Sunday schools for their own offspring. (Excluded from the ITS study were a further collection of informal groups and individuals offering courses.) ITS (2008) notes that very little is known about the quality of these programmes, or their results.

Finally, foreign languages can obviously also be a subject at the university level. The picture here is quite stable over the years, as Vermeulen and Yildiz (2009) show in their review of numbers from Leiden University, the Dutch university with the largest number of language programmes. The statistics indicate the number of new BA students in a given year; I have omitted several programmes such as Egyptian, Korean, Slavic languages, etc., because they do not add much to the general picture.

For many programmes, the number stays more or less constant, but two things are striking. The first is the rather sharp rise of interest in Chinese and Japanese (but not in other Asian languages, like Indonesian) in the course of this period, starting at around 2003. Another interesting point is that the number of students of English is typically larger than the number of students of Dutch, French, and German combined; especially in recent years. English has become the most attractive language for students to study. In particular, the number of students of Dutch,

Table 3. New BA Students in Languages, Leiden University

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Arabic	23	25	25	25	28	29	24	32	44	30
Dutch	59	58	55	53	41	49	62	48	60	60
German	10	5	10	9	12	18	17	12	13	9
English	103	97	110	92	95	110	98	118	120	137
French	34	26	39	39	38	32	34	31	42	29
Greek & Latin	26	32	32	24	32	31	35	29	33	26
Hebrew & Aramaic	6	7	11	4	7	9	3	3	5	3
Italian	15	13	22	11	20	28	26	19	25	19
Chinese	39	32	34	32	47	44	78	106	117	76
Japanese	23	34	39	33	33	57	77	106	125	114
Indonesian	17	12	8	11	8	9	8	8	6	11

French and German is extremely low in comparison, given what we have just observed regarding the economic importance of these languages for the Netherlands.

Taken together, the picture that arises is therefore rather mixed. There is a continuous interest in languages other than English, and in a few cases (Chinese and Japanese), these are on the rise. But, all told, the importance of languages like German and French for cultural and economic life is not at all reflected in the percentage of students at any level who choose to study those languages: English is dominant at all educational levels.

Minority languages

Among all minority languages spoken in the Netherlands, one stands out: Frisian (West Germanic), the official ‘second language’ of the Netherlands. Frisian was recognized as a regional language by the Dutch government through its signature on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Dutch government guarantees education in Frisian at all possible levels (and it is actually a compulsory subject in primary schools in Fryslân), the right to use Frisian when petitioning the authorities of the province of Fryslân, and so on.¹⁴ However, the adoption of these laws can itself be seen as a sign of the relatively difficult state in which Frisian currently finds itself as compared to its much larger sister.

At the same time, it is fair to say that concerns about Frisian are often regarded with some irony by the Dutch intellectual community. Well known is a 2000 column by the influential columnist Ronald Plasterk in the equally influential political TV show *Buitenhof* (‘External court’, a pun on the name of the Dutch parliament),

in which Plasterk stated: “Why does everyone in Holland believe that Frisian is a separate language, while there are more speakers of Turkish in Amsterdam than speakers of Frisian in Leeuwarden [the Dutch name of the capital city of the province of Fryslân]? Is that racism? ... I am not opposed to Frisian, but everybody should understand that this language is a myth.”¹⁵

In spite of this ironic attitude, the status quo of Frisian goes uncontested. Interestingly, Plasterk became the minister of culture and education in 2007, and as such was responsible for Dutch policies with respect to Frisian. One of his first official acts was to give a speech in Frisian in which he claimed that “his heart beat warmly” for the language.¹⁶

The fate of other minority languages is less secure. Two other regional minority languages — Low Saxon and Limburgian — have received some level of recognition, as well as two non-regionally defined languages — Yiddish and Roma-Sinti. From a financial point of view, these recognitions are completely insignificant; it is easy to demonstrate that the recognition is merely symbolic in each of these cases. The number of speakers of Yiddish is very small, and mostly consists of Americans and Israelis who live as expatriates in Amsterdam; furthermore, these people speak eastern dialects of Yiddish, rather than the ‘autochthonous’ western Yiddish spoken in the Netherlands, when the language succumbed to a Dutch state policy directed towards making all Jews speak Dutch in all circumstances, even at home and in the synagogue (Oostendorp 2007b).

A weaker version of a similar policy has become more popular in the 2000s for the larger minority languages such as Turkish and Moroccan Arabic (or Berber). Until the mid-2000s, various policies had been in place offering at least part of in-school education for children of ethnic descent in their native language. The last version of this policy, called *Onderwijs in Allochtone Levende Talen*, was abolished in 2004, and not replaced by any similar policy (see Nortier 2009 for a critical overview of the way in which the Dutch authorities have been dealing with multilingualism).¹⁷

A problematic issue which has so far not been resolved at all is that of the languages of the former Netherlands Antilles, namely the Caribbean islands Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Sint Eustachius, Saba and Sint Maarten. Until 2010, the last five islands formed a country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands (the Netherlands Antilles), while Aruba was a separate country. On October 10, 2010, the Netherlands Antilles was dissolved as a country: Curaçao and Sint Maarten became separate countries, and the other islands became ‘public bodies’ of the Netherlands.

The latter has implications which, as far as I can see, have simply not been discussed. In particular, there are now parts of the Netherlands where Papiamentu (on Bonaire) and English (on Saba and Sint Maarten) play an important role in official discourse. The roles of these languages has not been formalized in any way, which is somewhat curious from the point of view of linguistic rights, since there

is a much larger portion of the population on these islands with marginal knowledge of Dutch at best than there is in Fryslân, in which the regional language can be used freely and receives protection.

As the last minority language, we should mention Dutch Sign Language, which similarly has suffered from neglect. A state committee, led by Anne Baker, a professor of linguistics at the University of Amsterdam, advised formal recognition of the Sign Language of the Netherlands as early as 1997. After this, almost nothing happened, except that a few measures have been taken to grant Deaf people the right to sign language interpreting in some cases.

Towards bilingualism

Dutch society is arguably on its way to a state of all but universal bilingualism. For a long time, the percentage of second language speakers of English in the Netherlands has been very high, matched in Europe only by the Scandinavian countries. As we have seen above, the Dutch are not overly worried that these developments threaten their language, and they may very well be right in this belief.

There are also many ways in which this development could be evaluated as positive. The status of English as an international, or at least European, lingua franca is uncontested, and the widespread bilingualism of the Dutch population means that many people have access to the many resources of international culture in the English language, without having to give up their own cultural heritage in return.

However, at the same time, this bilingualism comes at a certain price, which may be considered by some as regrettable and which is probably also unnecessary: a loss of strength in foreign languages other than English.

There are several signs of this loss of strength. In the first place, the traditional 'modern foreign languages' which Dutch schoolchildren used to learn were French, German and English. The interest in the former two has been constantly diminishing for the past few decades (see also Nortier 2009). Something similar is happening to the classical languages, Latin and Greek. The so-called 'gymnasium', which includes training in both of these languages and which is not distinguished in any other way from the 'atheneum', is considered to be the intellectually most challenging type of secondary school available in the Netherlands. In the course of time, however, the gymnasium has also become a preferred school for the children of well-to-do parents, so that these schools are frequented almost exclusively by middle- and upper-class children (the schools are usually 'white', because they are not attended by immigrant children). The result of this trend is apparently that many pupils enter the gymnasium without any motivation for learning Latin or Greek. Although at the time of writing the last word had not been said about this issue, a

state committee has proposed loosening the restrictions on these languages, and instead establishing Greek and Latin Language and Culture as a subject, in which texts would be read mostly in translated or heavily annotated versions.¹⁸ Something similar goes for university education, where, relatively speaking, studying foreign languages seems less and less attractive to students. Furthermore, texts in French or German seem no longer acceptable in the university curriculum for other topics.

The disappearance of these non-English languages is nicely illustrated in the following anecdote. The correspondence of two of the most prominent Dutch-language novelists of the twentieth century, Willem Frederik Hermans and Gerard Reve, was recently published (Hermans & Reve 2008). At some point in the 1950s, Reve decided that the Dutch audience was not paying the proper attention due to his works, so he decided to write only in English. In order to practice his English language skills, which were actually rather poor from a modern perspective, he wrote many letters to his colleague Hermans in that language. Hermans became so upset about this behaviour that he replied with a letter in fluent, highly literary French. It is interesting to see, first, that apparently at the time the skills needed to write English were not so highly developed even among the literate. But from our present point of view, the decisions of the 2008 editors were even more interesting: while Reve's English letters go untranslated and unannotated, Hermans's letter in French receives a full translation into Dutch.

Similar developments seem to be going on in other European countries, and the result is a rather paradoxical form of internationalisation. More and more we cannot look at our neighbours (in the Dutch case, either the Germans or even the Flemish) directly. We can only see them through an Anglo-Saxon prism.

Notes

1. Checked 7 November 2011.
2. The numbers are based on self-reporting in a survey study, which in the Netherlands was conducted among 1,032 members of a phone panel.
3. See De Swaan 2002, Mühleisen 2003, Van Parijs 2011 for some more general discussion on the rise of English.
4. <http://taalunieversum.org/taal/vragen/antwoord/4/>; checked 7 November 2011.
5. De Nederlandse Taalunie. *How can we help you? The Nederlandse Taalunie in brief*. The Hague: NTU, 2009. http://taalunieversum.org/taalunie/download/brochure_Engels.pdf. Checked 10 November 2011.
6. Wet op Hoger Onderwijs en Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek. Ratified 8 October 1992.

7. (a) wanneer het onderwijs met betrekking tot die taal betreft, of (b) indien de specifieke aard, de inrichting of de kwaliteit van het onderwijs dan wel de herkomst van de deelnemers daartoe noodzaakt, overeenkomstig een door het bevoegd gezag vastgestelde gedragscode.
8. <http://www.onzetaal.nl/homofkuit/> (Checked November 12, 2011).
9. E.g. as compared to the popular series *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod* by the German journalist Bastian Sick (Sick 2006).
10. Other languages are used only in the case where the language is a topic of study (so French is only used in French language and literature programmes).
11. See also Els and Tuin 2010 for a thorough overview of foreign languages in Dutch secondary education.
12. “Juist ook voor toekomstige lissers, verpleegkundigen of hotelmedewerkers is het van groot belang dat je een taal als Engels of Duits goed beheerst. Vakmanschap houdt echt niet op bij de landsgrenzen. Tweetalig onderwijs geeft leerlingen een streepje voor” (Marja van Bijsterveldt, June 2010).
13. It is difficult to interpret these numbers, which seem unusually high. However, it should be emphasized that they are based on people reporting about their own behaviour rather than on actually observed behaviour. Since most people have learned some French and German in school, these numbers might reflect the pride that people have in having had a proper education rather than anything else.
14. Of the undertakings in Part III of the Charter, 48 have been signed, including undertakings in the realms of Education, Judicial Authorities, Administrative Authorities, Media and Cultural Activities.
15. Buitenhof, 11 June 2000. The text of the column is still on line at <http://www.vpro.nl/buitenhof/> (Checked 12 November 2011).
16. Speech of Ronald Plasterk, 10 May 2005. The text of the speech is online at <http://www.minocw.nl/> (Checked November 12, 2011).
17. Change of Law on Primary Education, 22 July 2004.
18. Tussenrapport van de Verkenningcommissie Klassieke Talen, 3.XI.2009. Available at <http://www.slo.nl/> (Checked 12 January 2010).

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Abstract

Twee- versus meertaligheid in Nederland

Wat voor gevolgen heeft de opkomst van het Engels op de talen die in Nederland gesproken worden — een middelgroot lid van de EU waarvan de meeste inwoners een middelgrote taal spreken? Er zijn aanwijzingen dat de Nederlanders van een traditioneel meertalig volk, die trots zijn op hun kennis van meerdere vreemde talen, juist tweetalig worden, en trots op hun kennis van het Engels. De opkomst van het Engels als internationale *lingua franca* lijkt de positie van het Nederlands in Nederland niet aan te tasten, maar kan een gevaar vormen voor de positie van andere talen.

Resumo

Dulingvismo kontraŭ multlingvismo en Nederlando

Kiaj estas la konsekvencoj de la plifortiĝo de la angla por la lingvoj parolataj en Nederlando — mezgranda membro de la EU kies loĝantoj plejparte parolas mezgrandan lingvon? Pluraj faktoroj indikas ke la nederlandanoj ŝanĝiĝas de tradicie multlingva popolo, kiu fieris pri sia kono de pluraj fremdaj lingvoj, al specife dulingva socio, fiera pri sia kono de la angla. La kresko de la angla kiel internacia pontolingvo ne endanĝerigas la pozicion de la nederlanda en Nederlando sed eble jes tiun de aliaj lingvoj.

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