Standard language, linguistic variation, and foreign language pedagogy: the case of Dutch as a foreign language in Belgium

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Introduction

• Issue at stake:
  – Place of linguistic variation vs. standard language in foreign language pedagogy

• Issue investigated in various pluricentric languages:
  – Dutch, French, English, German

• This talk specifically deals with:
  – Linguistic situation in the (pluricentric) Dutch-speaking area, i.e. the Netherlands and Flanders (Belgium)
  – Standard language vs. variation discussion in L2 Dutch pedagogy
Structure of the talk

• Linguistic situation in the Dutch-speaking area
  – Standard language (ideology) and variation
  – Pluricentric languages

• What constitutes a suitable language variety for non-native speakers (i.e. L2 learners)?
  – Dutch as a foreign language in Belgium (French L1)
  – Official documents (programs), teaching materials, teachers’ beliefs and practices

• Conclusions
The Dutch-speaking area

The Netherlands: Official language: Dutch

Flemish community (« Flanders »): Official language: Dutch

French-speaking community: Official language: French

German-speaking community: Official language: German

Brussels: Official languages: Bilingual Dutch/French
Dutch-speaking area

• The linguistic situation in the Dutch-speaking area seems quite clear

• The Dutch-speaking area consists of ...
  
  – .... two geographic regions ...
    
      • The Netherlands
      • North-Western part of Belgium, i.e. Flemish community
  
  – .... which have the same official language
    
      • Dutch

• But when we look at actual language use, a more complex picture emerges (Geeraerts 2001, Geeraerts & De Sutter 2003)
Linguistic situation in the Dutch-speaking area

Official language

DUTCH

- The Netherlands
- Belgium / Flanders

Informal domain

Dialects
Netherlandic Dutch vs. Belgian Dutch

• Dutch spoken on both sides of the Belgian-Netherlandic border is not a totally homogeneous language
  – Differences in pronunciation, lexicon, grammar (morphology, syntax)

• Long lasting debate as to the status of both « Dutches »
  – Netherlandic Dutch: standard language
    • Normative status / point of reference
    • Prestige, codified, used in a wide range of (official/formal and private/informal) domains
  – Belgian Dutch: deviation / non-standard variety
    • Less prestigious, no specific grammars or dictionnaries, fewer functional domains
    • Lots of normative works trying to implement the Netherlandic standard language in teaching Dutch (L1/L2) in Belgium
Netherlandic Dutch vs. Belgian Dutch
Netherlandic Dutch vs. Belgian Dutch

• Implication for L2 pedagogy:
  – Belgian Dutch seen as unsuitable for L2 teaching
  – Official programs:
    • Focus on the standard language (« Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands »), i.e. Northern Dutch
    • No room for variation, i.e. Belgian Dutch
  – Teacher training:
    • Standard language, attention to Belgian Dutch as a deviation from the norm / standard language
  – Teaching materials:
    • Standard language
Netherlandic Dutch vs. Belgian Dutch

• Slow evolution from 1970-1980’s
  – Standard language: ideological construct, myth

• Milroy (2001: 543):
  – « [Standard languages] are not vernaculars, and no one speaks them exactly: the standard ideology decrees that the standard is an idea in the mind – it is a clearly delimited, perfectly uniform and perfectly stable variety – a variety that is never perfectly and consistently realized in spoken use »

• Belgian Dutch began to be seen as a full-fleshed variety of Dutch

• Dutch as a pluricentric language (Clyne 2004: 296; Kloss 1978)
  – « The term pluricentric was employed, fairly incidentally, by Kloss [...] to denote languages with several interacting centres, each providing a national variety with at least some of its own (codified) norms »
Linguistic situation in the pluricentric Dutch-speaking area

Official language

National varieties

The Netherlands
Belgium / Flanders
Suriname Dutch
Caribbean Dutch

Informal domain

Dialects

Dialects
Dutch as a pluricentric language

• Teaching materials: room for Belgian Dutch and variation
Dutch as a pluricentric language

• Netherlandic Dutch and Belgian Dutch version of the same text book
Dutch as a pluricentric language

• Official programs:
  – Notions of « general language » and « intelligibility »
  – Distinction between production / perception
    • Productive side = language variety of the community with which the learner will have the most contacts
    • Receptive side = other language varieties in the Dutch-speaking area

• Teachers:
  – Many teachers have conservative attitudes
    • Only focus on the standard language
    • Lack of self-confidence? Influence of their own experience as L2 learners (= teach as taught)? Scarcity of resources?
  – Little attention paid to variation, or only receptively
Linguistic situation in the pluricentric Dutch-speaking area: the whole picture

- Official language
- National varieties
- Spoken language
- Informal domain

DUTCH

- The Netherlands
- Belgium / Flanders
- Suriname Dutch
- Carribean Dutch

- Poldernederlands (« Polder Dutch »)
- Tussentaal (« Interlanguage »)

- Dialects
- Dialects
Variation within national varieties

• Both in Netherlandic Dutch and in Belgian Dutch, you have « in-between » varieties
  – Poldernederlands: special way of pronouncing specific sounds (e.g. *maar*, *mee*, *tijd*) in the Netherlands
  – Interlanguage (« tussentaal »): informal variety of Belgian Dutch which lies « in-between » the standard language and the dialects + specific grammatical, lexical, and phonological features (Absilis, Jasper & Van Hoof 2012)

• Other forms of variation: sms / chat language, youth language, a.s.o.
Variation within national varieties

- Poldernederlands appears in some text books (e.g. pronunciation courses) » Interlanguage (« tussentaal »)
  - Not well-documented yet, not yet used in written communication (only an oral medium)
  - Little teaching resources, e.g. Dutch++ (https://dutchplusplus.ned.univie.ac.at)

- Teachers are reluctant to exposing L2 learners to those varieties, especially Interlanguage
  - Used in a limited number of functional domains
  - Because of its use for in-group interaction, one may even wonder if native speakers would find interlanguage a suitable variety for non-native speakers
  - If teachers do expose L2 learners to Poldernederlands and/or Interlanguage, than only in receptive tasks (+ contrastive approach with advanced learners an/or in higher education)
Conclusion

• Overview of the linguistic situation in the Dutch-speaking area and its implications for L2 pedagogy

• Differences between language varieties in terms of
  – Status and use within the Dutch language community
  – Their prevalence in official documents and text books
    • Focus on prestige varieties, even if there is also a growing interest in varieties besides the standard language
    • Scarcity of resources paying attention to variation and non-standard varieties of Dutch
  – Their presence in the classroom
    • Reluctance of teachers to teach other varieties than the standard language
    • Distinction between production and perception
Thanks for your attention!

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