

*Annick Schramme*

---

## Language variation in the media of the Low Countries

Language policy is an essential part of national movements. This paper will demonstrate that the Flemish public broadcasting company has played an important role in the process of nation-building, through its use and dissemination of Standard Dutch. On the one hand, the public broadcaster wished to promote the Dutch language and culture. On the other, Standard Dutch was essentially imported from the Netherlands. The current flexibility in the media *vis-à-vis* the use of Standard Dutch reflects the changing role of the public broadcaster in general. In a competitive media context, entertainment has become more important, at the expense of the educational role of the public broadcaster. The analysis of this evolution is based on research into the personal archive of Johan Fleerackers, who for 12 years (1965-1977) was the chief advisor of several Flemish ministers of culture.

### Taalvariasie in die media van die Nederlande

Taalbeleid is 'n belangrike deel van nasionale bewegings. Die Vlaamse openbare uitsaaimaatskappy het 'n belangrike rol gespeel in die proses van nasiebou deur sy gebruik en disseminasie van Standaardnederlands. Aan die een kant was dit die wens van die openbare uitsaaiër om die Nederlandse taal en kultuur te versprei. Aan die ander kant het Standaardnederlands hoofsaaklik uit Nederland oorgekom. Die huidige buigsaamheid in die media *vis-à-vis* die gebruik van Standaardnederlands reflekteer die veranderende rol van die openbare uitsaaiër in die algemeen. In 'n mededingende mediakonteks het vermaak belangriker geword, maar ten koste van die opvoedingsrol van die openbare uitsaaiër. Die ontleding van hierdie ontwikkeling is gebaseer op die ondersoek van die persoonlike argief van Johan Fleerackers wat vir 12 jaar (1965-1977) die hoofadviseur was van verskeie Vlaamse ministers van kultuur.

*Prof Dr A Schramme, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, University of Antwerp, Campus Drie Eiken, Universiteitsplein 1, Wilrijk 2610, Belgium; E-mail: aschramme@skynet.be*

The history of language variation in the media of the Low Countries is essentially a history of the Flemish public broadcaster, as it is illustrative of the close relationship between language politics and nationalism. The story begins in 1960, when the national public broadcaster, NIR, was split into Dutch-language and French-language institutions. It was also the beginning of a decade during which the Flemish Movement, which had fought for recognition of Dutch-speaking culture in the nineteenth century against a Belgian state that was basically French-speaking, would struggle for cultural autonomy. Finally, in 1970 the Belgian constitution was reformed: from then onwards it recognised three communities based on language and culture — Flemish-, French- and Dutch-speaking — and also three regions — Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. In addition to the struggle for cultural autonomy, the Flemish-speaking part would also strive towards cultural integration with the Netherlands. This concept of integration between the Flemish part of Belgium and the Netherlands had been introduced by the Commission of the Belgian-Dutch Treaty of 1946 in a publication of 1962. In its so-called “Red Book” both governments were invited to attempt a cultural integration of Flanders and the Netherlands, in the sense of a common cultural policy — an idea that had been inspired by the European integration process that started in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome. By the late 1960s, broadcasters in the Netherlands were maintaining regular contact with Flemish public broadcasters. Although real collaborative structures were still lacking, the first co-productions were achieved during these years.

The task of the Flemish public broadcasting company was to enlighten its audience. Given this educational purpose or *Bildung* ideal, it was evident that the chosen language would be Standard “Educated” Dutch,<sup>1</sup> of which the Netherlands variety served as an example. In the 1970s, several ideas were mooted with the goal of cultural integration with the Netherlands, including the establishment of a joint radio and television station called *Canal Grande* and the conclusion of a media treaty. However, none of these ideas ever materialised. Then came the 1980s and the breakthrough of the commercial broadcasters, an evolution that coincided with a move towards greater political au-

1 Known as “Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands” or ABN.

tonomy for Flanders on the one hand, and closer European integration and globalisation on the other. It was not long before these evolutions began to have an impact on the language used in the media of the Netherlands and Flanders. Increasingly, the use of the standard language was abandoned — except for news bulletins — making way for greater language variation.

## 1. Language and nation-building

Language is a key component of any nation-building process. In fact, since the appearance of the writings of such authors as Anderson, Gellner and Hobsbawm, it has become generally accepted that the concepts of nation-building, national territory and language are closely intertwined. Language policy has been an integral part of every nation-building process that has occurred in the Western world, including Flanders. The Flemish Movement, in its struggle for regional empowerment, has managed to transform a language with a low-status profile into one with a high-status profile, which is not only the best possible tool for uniting a region, but also for the projection of that region's image abroad. Once a low-status language is used as an official means of communication, and indeed as a language of culture, standardisation quickly follows.

After the struggle for a number of language laws had been won, it was possible to pay more attention to popularising the standard language. Education, cultural and scientific production, and — perhaps most important of all — the media were to play a crucial role in its dissemination; and maintaining contact with a country with the same spoken language, *i.e.* the Netherlands, would further reinforce this process.

## 2. Flemish cultural autonomy in the 1960s

In the struggle for Flemish emancipation, the foundation of an exclusively Dutch-language public broadcasting company (BRT) in 1960 — ten years before the first constitutional reform — was a decisive event. Even though the BRT was rooted in the unitary broadcasting structure of the NIR, it soon assumed the role of a mouthpiece in the struggle for Flemish emancipation. It even aspired to participate actively in the creation and representation of the Flemish cultural community.

In the strategic planning of Flemish television, the Netherlands had always played an important role, largely because of the Flemish desire for closer cultural ties between north and south. Indeed, from the 1960s on, increasingly insistent calls for cultural autonomy coincided with a striving towards cultural integration with the Netherlands. On the one hand, the Flemish intellectual elite wanted to safeguard the Flemish people from narrow-minded nationalism. On the other hand, they also emphasised their linguistic and cultural proximity to the Netherlands. As early as 1962, the commission responsible for the implementation of the Belgo-Dutch cultural treaty of 1946 had suggested to the respective governments that a joint radio station might be an excellent instrument for promoting cultural unity and that, in any case, co-operation between broadcasters within the Dutch-language area was necessary. Unfortunately, this argument was greeted with a certain amount of incomprehension and resistance on the part of the Dutch.

Jan Boon, the first Director General of the BRT, considered the linguistic unity of Flanders to be a necessary component in the “spiritual unification, the social wellbeing and the cultural ‘elevation’ of the Flemish people” (Boon 1962: 94-5). Within the medium of television, language would represent a central element of self-identification. Initially, the Flemish community had perceived its identity as being centred on its position *vis-à-vis* its French-speaking counterpart. The Flemish presence in bilingual Brussels, for example, was considered to be crucially important.

From the 1960s on, however, television started to play a defining role for the Flemish community, and there was greater collaboration with the northern neighbour, the Netherlands. Television was increasingly perceived as a means to promote Dutch, as both a standard language and a cultural language. After all, since television is aimed at a very broad, diverse audience, it must use a language variety that can bridge regional differences. The choice of Standard Dutch as a broadcasting language therefore seemed self-evident.

In addition, the use of Standard Dutch was also regarded as part of the cultural-educational mission of the BRT: uplifting the people also meant providing them with linguistic education. In the 1950s, many people in Flanders lacked a command of Standard Dutch. Television broadcasters saw it as their responsibility to set an example in

this respect. Furthermore, since language is an important component of culture, Standard Dutch was also promoted as essential in attaining respectability.

At that time, the concept of a single, unified culture and the notion of a “Groot Nederland” inspired a number of initiatives, aimed at promoting integration and co-operation between north and south. From 1964, the BRT had a permanent representative in Hilversum, the seat of public broadcasting in the Netherlands. The task of this representative was to supervise the co-operation between the Dutch and the Flemish broadcasting institutions.

From 1960, co-productions between Dutch broadcasters and the BRT — often in the areas of music, cabaret and, most of all, theatre — became a reality. Flemish film policy was likewise based on the Dutch example. The Royal Decree of 14 August 1964, concerning the provision of support to Flemish film production, was clearly inspired by the Dutch system. The first successful Flemish-Dutch co-production was a film called *Mira*, by the Dutch director Fons Rademakers. It was released in 1971.

### 3. Cultural integration in the seventies

After the constitutional amendment of 1970 and the acquisition of cultural autonomy in 1971, the time seemed ripe for cultural integration with the Netherlands. Cultural autonomy implied that broadcasting policy, with the exception of statements by the government and public information films, fell under the competency of the first Flemish Parliament. In 1973, Dutch was officially recognised as the language of the Flemish community.

The new institutional framework comprised an important legitimisation of the use of Standard Dutch as a broadcasting language. Cultural autonomy increased the symbolic role of television as the mouthpiece of the nation. The fact that television is a mass medium proved to be an important argument in the choice of a non-regional language variety. Furthermore, this linguistic policy was justified by the ambition to achieve cultural integration with the Netherlands. The BRT's collaboration with television producers from the Netherlands — the community that provided the linguistic standard — required

a total command and generalised use of Standard Dutch within the Flemish broadcasting structure. Flemish television broadcasters and the Flemish audience had to master the language. Thus, the BRT promoted Standard Dutch as much as possible. More than ever before, the use of dialect in television programmes was banned. Even entertainment programmes were used to convey the message that popular culture and Standard Dutch could go hand in hand. In 1969, for instance, the Board of Governors decided to post-synchronise one episode of the popular TV series, *De heren van Zichem*, into Standard Dutch.

The educational objectives of the Flemish public broadcaster remained unchanged. It provided language instruction, school television and other forms of permanent education. The objective was not just to provide information, but at the same time to promote the use of Standard Dutch. Some programme makers adopted a rather pedantic approach (“Don’t say this, say that”).

Co-operation between the Dutch and the Flemish broadcasting companies increased during the 1970s. This was partly the result of Flemish cultural autonomy, and partly of political goodwill, especially on the part of the Dutch, who wanted to institutionalise the collaboration. A joint training programme for employees was designed and a wavelength for the joint radio station was obtained at the International Wavelength Conference of Geneva in 1975. From 1975 onwards, an NOS representative was appointed at the BRT. The administrations of the two broadcasters began to hold annual meetings. From 1976 on, bi-annual meetings were held by the so-called Advisory Board, consisting of the respective chairpersons of BRT and NOS and the executives in charge of programming and technology. Clearly, thus, at the administrative level co-operation was a reality.

During a meeting of the Ministers of Culture and Education on 4 February 1975, it was decided that a number of very concrete initiatives should be taken to effect the cultural integration of Flanders and the Netherlands.

A workgroup was set up to study the joint radio project, also referred to as Radio Delta. The increasing influence of the media on society and technological developments meant that radio and television were now perceived as crucial instruments for realising the cultural integration of the two countries and for promoting Dutch culture abroad.

In 1975 the establishment of a joint radio station was regarded as an excellent opportunity to achieve this. Moreover, a radio programme designed to fulfil the information needs of both communities would implicitly enhance a sense of cultural solidarity.

The Language Union Treaty of 1980, in terms of which both governments transferred their competence in language matters to a supranational body, also reaffirmed the media's key role in achieving cultural integration.

Eventually, and primarily for financial reasons, the idea of Radio Delta was abandoned. A possible alternative was for BRT3 and Hilversum 4 to collaborate, but this turned out to be impractical, mainly because of the complex structure of the Dutch broadcasting system.

Negotiations also took place concerning forms of collaboration between Flemish and Dutch television. The idea of establishing a joint television channel, called *Canal Grande*, was mooted. As neither Flanders nor the Netherlands had sufficient funds to launch an extra channel — which would have been the second channel for Flanders and the third for the Netherlands — it was suggested that perhaps a joint initiative would be the most viable option. However, as a result of divergent views on management, as well as marked differences between the respective broadcasting systems, this project did not materialise either.

Similar obstacles stood in the way of collaboration in the field of educational TV, where matters were further complicated by social and cultural differences, the divergent school systems and varying degrees of susceptibility regarding linguistic competence.

By this stage, many Flemish viewers were watching Dutch television. The proportion increased from 10% in 1969 to 20% in 1972, and to 25% in 1976. This market share would remain more or less stable until the late 1980s. In other words, the Flemish television audience spent a quarter of its viewing time watching Dutch television channels — not so much for news bulletins or educational programmes, but for entertainment, an aspect which somehow seemed to be lacking in BRT's programming. Owing to this great interest in Dutch television, the 1970s and 80s would become a golden age for Standard Dutch in Flanders.

With the constitutional reform of 1980, more powers were transferred to the regions. In this period of economic crisis, the Flemish

part of Belgium was performing better economically than francophone Wallonia. Flemish self-confidence was increasing visibly, as was apparent from such projects as the Flanders Technology Fair.

From the end of the 1970s, technological innovations presented new challenges to the Flemish and Dutch public broadcasters. The introduction of cable and satellite television, the success of video technology and the increasing commercialisation of the media imposed new pressures on the legal frameworks of these broadcasting companies. At the same time, they were involved in a struggle for survival with other media, including newspapers. Furthermore, the public broadcasters' monopoly was increasingly threatened by the growing number of local "free radio stations". Some governors of the BRT and the NOS believed that the two bodies should join forces in responding to all these fresh challenges. Back in the 1970s, the underlying motivation for cultural co-operation with the Netherlands had been the romantic notion of cultural integration. In the 1980s, co-operation was increasingly believed to be a practical necessity.

From 1982 onwards, after the failure of the Radio Delta project and the withdrawal of the BRT representative, a number of individuals who continued to believe in the Greater Dutch ideal, such as Johan Fleerackers, were in favour of a media treaty, based on the same principles as the successful Language Union Treaty of 1980. While, on the Flemish side, the idea of cultural integration was still very much alive, the Dutch were much more sensitive to practical arguments (co-operation could save money) and to the European perspective (the protection of Dutch culture within the EU). However, the proposal for a media treaty was rejected by the politicians.

#### 4. The breakthrough of commercial broadcasting since the 1980s

In the 1980s, a new threat emerged for the public broadcasters: commercial television. While the decree of 28 December 1979 was intended to preserve the broadcasting monopoly of the public broadcaster, the new government (a coalition of Christian Democrats and Liberals) decided on 14 December 1981 that the existing broadcasting system should be replaced by a system of free competition.



Before the end of the decade, on 1 February 1989, Flanders' first commercial television station, VTM, went on the air. This spelled disaster for the public broadcaster. The subsequent launch of VT4 and *Kanaal 2* further reduced its market share to 22%. The market share of the Dutch stations plunged from 25% in 1988 to less than 5% in 1998. When it came to entertainment, the viewing public opted unequivocally for VTM. This development undoubtedly caused some alienation between the Flemish and the Dutch. It also resulted in many Flemings giving up the Standard Dutch of the north. It is no coincidence that, around that time, both Van Dale (the most authoritative Dutch dictionary) and the BRT's language advisor introduced the concept of "Belgium's variation of the Dutch language".

## 5. Cumbersome co-production

It was not until the early 1980s that Flanders and the Netherlands purposefully set aside money for co-productions. The funds were generated by broadcasting Flemish programmes on Dutch cable television, and vice versa. In the Netherlands, the money was placed in a fund (the so-called COBO Fund), one-third of which was intended for television, with two-thirds being channelled to film and theatre.

In the 1980s, co-productions really were co-productions, meaning that Flemish and Dutch programme makers would actually unite to produce a show. These were never particularly easy meetings; quite often, diplomacy and rhetorical skill were required to ensure continued co-operation. Examples of programmes produced in this fashion are *Willem van Oranje*, *God in Vlaanderen* and *God in Nederland*, from which it was quite apparent that Dutch prejudices against Flanders and Belgium ran very deep. While collaboration at the administrative level with Nederlandse Omroep Stichting (NOS), Interkerkelijke Omroep Nederland (IKON) and Katholieke Radio Omroep (KRO) proceeded quite smoothly, co-production rarely went beyond educational projects.

In Flanders, the money generated from cable television was used in the television war against the new competitor: commercial television (VTM). In the 1990s, much of the co-production fund, some 25 million Belgian francs, was diverted from co-production to local independent film and documentary makers. The COBO Fund still existed, but the willingness to collaborate seemed to be at a lower ebb than ever, as

co-productions increasingly took on an either distinctly Flemish or distinctly Dutch character.

## 6. The 1990s: one language, two cultures!

In the early 1990s, the Dutch Minister of Culture, Hedy d'Ancona, caused an outrage when she asserted that Flanders and the Netherlands shared a language but had distinct cultures. Today, the idea is generally accepted. The advent of commercial television has undoubtedly resulted in a degree of alienation between Flemish and Dutch people since the 1980s, which in itself provides a further indication of the strong impact of the media on cultural behaviour. This development has coincided with the further political devolution of the Belgian state. Belgium has been a fully-fledged federal state since the approval of devolution (in terms of the St Michael's Agreements of 1991) and the subsequent election of regional parliaments in 1995. The process of nation-building has been completed. The growing self-confidence of the Flemish people is also reflected in the language of the media: increasingly, Standard Dutch has been abandoned and language variation is more widely accepted.

In 1998, when the language advisor of the public broadcaster, Ruud Hendrickx, published his Language Charter, in which reference is made to the "Belgian variant of the Dutch language" and an argument is put forward in favour of the use of different language registers according to the television format involved, there was great indignation. However, this charter, too, has subsequently gained wide acceptance.

## 7. Different language and culture?

The growing language variation in the media has reinforced the cultural separation of Flanders and the Netherlands. The language used by the Dutch is often difficult for Flemish people to understand, and vice versa. While this may not be immediately noticeable, there is a psychological "threshold" that prevents the Dutch and the Flemish from watching each other's television programmes. The two nations have grown so far apart that, to an increasing degree, Dutch-language programmes from Flanders are being subtitled in Dutch! This, again, has met with fierce criticism, as it emphasises not only the linguistic difference, but also a cultural one.

This brings us to the significance of co-productions between countries that share the same language — in this case Flanders and the Netherlands — in an era of cross-border television broadcasts. With the shrinking role of government, and the fact that society has become less structured along ideological or religious lines (known as the “pillarisation” of society), the ideal conditions for co-productions perhaps no longer exist. Even the notion of an inclusive “Great Dutch nation” no longer seems feasible. There are still practical reasons for co-producing: it can provide a way of obtaining the necessary funding; it can enhance the development of new artistic and technical talent, and it can provide opportunities for shooting on location in another country. However, co-production also has less appealing aspects: rising costs as a result of higher duties and fees; friction between co-production partners who each have their own ideas and wishes, and so on. Sometimes, the result is a compromise that satisfies nobody. The use of the standard language in a regional drama, for example, can be irritating. Moreover, the translation of some words into another dialect can produce hilarious or even insulting results.

Nevertheless, there have been a few successful co-productions, especially children’s TV programmes and documentaries. Both genres deal with universal themes, which renders the significance of language less pronounced.

Globalisation and European unification are other developments that present new challenges to the media in the Low Countries. First, they have led to growing cultural self-awareness in the Netherlands and increasing concern about the position of its “own language” and “own culture” in the world. In 1998 this resulted in the launch of a joint television station called BVN (which stands for “the best of Flanders and the Netherlands”). It offers a selection of the best television programmes by Flemish and Dutch broadcasters, and can be viewed all over the world, from Europe to North America and Africa.

Another consequence of globalisation is the increasing use of English in the media. If English were to replace Dutch in programmes such as the news, the consequences could be far-reaching. First and foremost, this might involve a loss of status for the Dutch language, and could even jeopardise its survival. Because of the great impact of the media in general, it has to be borne in mind that such a development is possible.

On the other hand, the introduction of the internet and the possibility of online chatting have already resulted in a new youth slang, though it is uncertain what long-term consequences this may have for the standard language. More sociolinguistic research is required in this regard.

Last but not least, the interaction of the public broadcasting company with cultural minorities should be mentioned. Awareness of cultural minorities is relatively new and calls for a specific response. In the Netherlands, cultural minorities used to be granted broadcasting time, but this approach has been abandoned. The reality is that immigrants listen to their own radio stations and/or watch their own television channels. This is not an ideal situation, as it could lead to parallel worlds of information, which in turn could feed social tension.

The public broadcasting companies have a duty to act against the rise of the extreme right, and to counteract negative or even racist responses to ethnic and cultural diversity in society, as the Council of Europe laid down in the resolutions of Prague (1994) and Krakau (2000). They should support the values of democracy, respect for human rights, and cultural and political pluralism by means of their programming. Any form of discrimination or social segregation must be rejected. These resolutions have been implemented in most European countries in the form of deontological codes for journalists and/or public broadcasting companies. In the 2001 management agreement with the Flemish public broadcaster, it is stipulated that the VRT must act as a “developer of pluralistic, innovative, varied and original productions for a broad public, taking into account minority groups”. This implies that it should not provide a platform for extreme parties or movements that pose a threat to a pluralistic, democratic society.

The problem remains that multiculturalism is not reflected in prime-time programming: ethnic minority members rarely appear in game shows; in informative programmes, ethnic-minority experts are rarely seen; in the media in general, there are few professionals from ethnic minority backgrounds. In brief, much work remains to be done.

## 8. Conclusion

Language policy is an essential part of national movements. The Flemish public broadcasting company has played an important role in the process of nation-building through its use and dissemination of Standard Dutch. On the one hand, the public broadcaster wished to spread the Dutch language and culture. On the other, Standard Dutch was essentially imported from the Netherlands. The current flexibility in the media *vis-à-vis* the use of Standard Dutch reflects the changing role of the public broadcaster in general. In a free information society, the educational role of the public broadcaster has become irrelevant. Moreover, the devolutionary reform of the Belgian state has led to greater self-confidence on the part of the Flemish people. This, too, is reflected by the use of their language variant in the media.

## Bibliography

BOON J

1962. *Zo sprak Jan Boon. Toespraken tot een gemengd geboor*. Hasselt: Heide-land.

BURGELMAN J C, D BILTEREYST & C PAUWELS (reds)

1995. *Audiovisuele media in Vlaanderen. Analyse en beleid*. Brussel: VUBPRESS.

DE CALUWÉ J, D GEERAERTS &

J KROON (reds)

2002. *Taalvariatie en taalbeleid. Bijdragen aan het taalbeleid in Nederland en Vlaanderen*. Apeldoorn en Antwerpen: Garant.

SCHRAMME A

1999. *Vlaanderen en zijn grote buitenland. De opbouw van een internationaal cultureel beleid*. Tielt: Lannoo.

VAN DE VOORDE M (red), H VAN DEN BULCK, E DURNEZ, J HEMELS, E HENAU, M HOOGHE, E DE MAESSCHALCK & H VAN PELT

2004. *Media en cultuur: tweelingbroers*. Leuven: Davidsfonds.

WITTE E

2002. *Media en politiek*. Brussel: VUBPRESS.