

HANS VANACKER, STICHTING ONS ERFDEEL

“The Language is the Entire People” (sort of)

“The Language is the Entire People.” This verse, composed by the Fleming Prudens van Duyse, dates from the first half of the 19th century. It’s perfectly suited to the Romantic period, then in its glory, when language and people were seen as a single whole. Van Duyse wrote these words a few years after Belgium had broken away from the Netherlands. In the new country the Dutch language was completely supplanted by French, and only a few philologists, van Duyse among them, were seriously concerned about the fate of the national language. “The Language is the Entire People” became the motto of an important Flemish association and would be honoured as the ideal for decades by the Flemish Movement.

From the perspective of the year 2000, let us place a question mark after this statement. Is the language the entire people? In other words: is the identity of a people mainly determined by the language it speaks? There is a wide range of answers to this question, and they often depend on the approach or the sensitivities of those providing the answer. Naturally language is *an* important factor, but there are so many facts and developments that can influence the characteristics of a people or a language community. Some go far back into history and lay stress on the notion of a

“community of adversity,” the communal experience of great disasters such as war. When we turn our attention to Europe, we see right away that such a notion is not a very practical place to start. After centuries of conflicts, political intrigue and war, there are few regions left with a clear uniform community of destiny.

Indeed, one need not go back into history. What of ordinary daily life; isn’t that where we usually find a clear fault line? What are the eating habits in particular countries or language communities? Do the people in them spend a lot of time taking care of their homes? How do people behave in traffic? And on a somewhat higher level, what about political transparency and environmental planning? The dividing lines that can be detected in Europe only sporadically coincide with the state or language border ; they are determined by a tangle of factors that are difficult to unravel, factors that have to do with history, historical linguistics, socio-economic and general social conditions. We feel that an extremely important factor, if not the most important, is the religious-historical background. Large areas of Europe have become strongly secularized, of course, but even so the centuries of influence exercised by the local church community or by religious tradition continue to make themselves felt. Any non-

European travelling from Europe's high North to the deep South is astonished at the immense difference in religious perception, and I venture to claim that in virtually all of secularized Scandinavia, the impact of the Lutheran faith on daily life is at least as great as the influence of Catholicism in Spain or Italy, where religious life is still strong.

It may be clear that language is not the entire people, and hasn't been so for a long time. While we should not turn our backs completely on Prudens van Duyse, it might be useful to update his verse a little and say that a community should not be characterized exclusively by its language, but among other things by the way it treats its language. In this regard we may note a few interesting phenomena concerning the Dutch language region.

At the end of November 1995, several eminent authors and politicians who were present in the splendid Egmont Palace in Brussels were witness to a bizarre scene. The gifted Dutch prose writer Harry Mulisch had just received the Triennial Prize for Dutch Literature, one of the most prestigious literary honours in the Dutch-speaking world. During Mulisch's acceptance speech, many of the guests began squirming uncomfortably in their chairs. The laureate dared, in the presence of the King of Belgium and the Prime Ministers of Belgium and the Netherlands, to call Dutch an insignificant little language that would quickly disappear from the face of the earth. The future belonged to English, he said, or more precisely to American English. Dutch was no match for the staggering power of American English, so Dutch speakers need harbour no illusions: they would be far better off mastering

American English as quickly as possible.

Mulisch was not appreciated for making these remarks, but in fact this was the umpteenth time that such an ominous prediction had been uttered. Jo Ritzen, the former Dutch Minister of Education, had advocated a radical anglicization of the university system. Many professors at Dutch universities, including those in language faculties, openly admitted that they would greet such a development with great rejoicing. It's no longer a secret that the whole of Dutch society is suffering from “anglicization.” In the “power language” spoken by a large number of Dutch people, English appears with remarkable frequency. In itself that isn't so very regrettable. Through the centuries many languages have influenced and enriched Dutch vocabulary. With the passage of time, many words have become so well rooted that we no longer notice their foreign origin. But what happens when Dutch businesses decide to send invoices in English to their customers in the Netherlands and Flanders? Too bad for the customer who speaks better French, say, than English, or who had simply expected to be billed in his mother tongue.

Of course, I will not deny the communicative and international value of a world language like English. Yet it grieves me that good old-fashioned Dutch business sense seems to have run amok. Many Dutch people seem to think that their English-speaking good will is very much appreciated abroad, but I have my doubts. Outside the Dutch-speaking region I've heard some fairly sharp criticism about this lack of respect for our own language. For example, at the Salon du livre in Paris, one of the most important book fairs in Western Europe, I met a professor from a French

university who had offered to help organize an exchange programme with a Dutch university. His objective was twofold: his students could study in the Netherlands in their own field, and they could learn a language which, with its twenty-one million speakers in the European Union, ranks as a “medium-sized” language. With great enthusiasm his students made their way through a course in Dutch. Imagine the professor’s surprise when, on their return, they told him they hadn’t really needed to learn Dutch, since all their classes had been taught in English. With that the man decided he would never again become involved in any exchange programme with a Dutch university: he would turn his attention to some other European country. And his respect for the Dutch language had been bruised as well. This incident is a good example of the counter-productive aspect of extreme social anglicization. Anyone with compassion for Dutch and for the spirit this language conveys should let this be known to his or her Dutch acquaintances.

Nevertheless, we shouldn’t overestimate the importance of one negative development. There are many positive facets to be found in the attitude that Dutch people have towards their mother tongue. The criticism that the Dutch are careless in their linguistic usage has seemed less and less warranted in recent years. It seems that for many people, concern for the language is no longer a social disease. How else can we explain the success of an association such as *Onze taal* (Our Language), which consistently devotes itself to the use of correct Dutch? Special editorial bureaus that proofread and correct government and commercial publications make a handsome profit in the Netherlands. Alas, in Flanders, the *Vereniging Algemeen Nederlands* (Society for Standard Dutch),

which has roughly the same objectives as *Onze Taal*, has trouble making ends meet. Editorial bureaus such as those in the Netherlands are few and far between, and the results are predictable. Most government publications in the Netherlands are linguistically flawless; in Flanders they’re often written in awkward official Dutch that’s exceedingly boring. What is the exact cause of the increasing concern for the language in the Netherlands? It’s hard to say. The Dutch educational system doesn’t seem to be playing a positive role. There are still many complaints that schools would sooner promote linguistic carelessness than fight it. Is it perhaps an indirect reaction to anglicization? Possibly, though that seems to me too hasty a conclusion.

In literature also there is a fascinating phenomenon to be observed north of the Flemish-Dutch border. Unlike English and French literature, to name but two, Dutch letters were devoid of any non-native input until quite recently, except for such Surinamese and Antillean writers as Tip Marugg and Frank Martinus Arion. These writers certainly make a great contribution in terms of both content and literary style, but they come from an area that once belonged, or still belongs, to the Netherlands, and they write in their mother tongue. Now, however, we have a new generation of writers in Dutch, who are children of economic immigrants, or themselves refugees who arrived in the Netherlands quite recently. They introduce not only a way of speaking that is typical of their own culture, but also specific themes such as their gradual alienation from their country of origin and the more or less dislocated situation in which they live.

Among the most prominent of Dutch writers

is the Iranian Kader Abdollah, who fled his fatherland for political reasons and learned Dutch with amazing speed. Living in a culture in which he can never feel completely at home and where he is torn by homesickness, he tries to process the pain that his land of origin has caused him. This produces an oppressive kind of literature. Abdelkader Benali has a different background: this son of Moroccan immigrants grew up in the Netherlands. His prose aptly describes the differences between Western Europe and the North African mentality, differences which can easily give rise to incomprehension. As a Moroccan Dutchman or a Dutch Moroccan, Benali feels at home neither in the Netherlands nor in Morocco. He has not yet been fully accepted in the land of his birth, but he feels alienated from the land of his origin. Mustafa Sitou is also of Moroccan origin. The ironic detachment often found in his poetry is a blend of basic elements from Arabic culture and Western cosmopolitanism. Abdollah, Benali and Sitou are only three of the many non-native writers who have rapidly made a name for themselves in the Dutch-speaking region.

What is striking is that the non-native Dutch writers all live in the Netherlands and not in Flanders. We shouldn't try to attach any great significance to this; we just have the impression that in this regard Flanders is limping behind. A large number of immigrants live in Flanders, including people of Italian, Greek, North African and Turkish origin. Many of them initially chose to speak French instead of Dutch. Now that more and more concrete integration projects, including Dutch lessons, are being set up for them in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, a kind of breakthrough in literature cannot be far off. The first university

diplomas have been awarded to immigrant children in Flanders in recent years. Why shouldn't we be seeing the first literary productions by non-natives in Flanders one of these days? I'm especially curious to find out how they describe their sometimes complex relations with the Flemish, and what concrete problems they have to deal with. It will be enlightening to see the various facets of the immigrants' problems described from their point of view.

*

In discussing Flanders, let us begin with the Belgian “language conflict.” Actually that is a term I would rather not use. It has an overly negative connotation, certainly outside Belgium. The picture of bickering Dutch- and French-speakers barely resisting the urge to take a pickaxe or a club to each other is never far off. Often we're simply amazed by the image created in the foreign media. The days when Time magazine reported on what it called the “Tribal Wars” may seem part of the distant past, but the lack of knowledge on the part of foreign journalists is still all too often grating.

The decades of friction between Dutch- and French-speakers in Belgium were not the consequence of mere “language problems.” True enough, the Flemings, who constitute a clear majority in Belgium with 60% of the population, had to work long and hard for their own language to be recognized, but there were social, economic and political aspects at work as well. After the Second World War, and certainly after the language border was definitively drawn in 1963, it became the rule that for every major economic project in Flanders, a proportionate investment was required in Wallonia, and vice versa. Whether the

investments were financially sound, or whether they would serve the common good, was a secondary consideration. This pernicious policy would go down in history as "waffle iron politics." A model had to be designed that would grant sufficient individual political resources and responsibilities to the language communities; the Dutch, the French, and the often forgotten German-speakers in eastern Belgium. From 1970 to 1993 Belgium was converted from a centralized state based on the French model to one of the most federalized countries in the world. That change went hand in hand with a considerable transfer of power from the national to the regional level. At first glance the results looked quite complex, with a national level, three communities (the Dutch-speaking, the French-speaking and the German-speaking), and three economic regions (Flanders, Brussels, and the Walloon provinces). Not only the national parliament but also the parliaments of each federal state were chosen by direct elections. To those who protest that the new Belgian state structure is too complex, I reply that complicated problems inevitably require complex solutions.

I would argue that the "Belgian project" has already proven its soundness, although there are still a few areas of overlapping authority here and there, and there is still discussion of a further slimming down of the national state. For instance, it was recently decided to delegate to the regions the departments of agriculture and foreign trade. In each case, the federalization of Belgium, which came about in a totally democratic fashion, bears witness to political courage. It must give great pleasure to the political circles that designed this new structure to note that people outside Belgium are beginning to

point to it as an example of effective federalism. Most Romance Germanic-speakers (the Flemings) and most Germanic Romance-speakers (the Walloons) have jerked and jolted their way to a shaky but workable social model. There are other, larger states in Europe which have different cultural communities but which anxiously avoid any realistic form of decentralization, or get into a lengthy civil war and fall to pieces!

Has the federalization of Belgium also influenced the way the Flemings feel about their mother tongue, the Dutch language? Yes, but oddly enough the effects are not all that favourable. During the '60s, '70s and early '80s, the movement to advance *Algemeen beschaafd Nederlands* - literally Standard Cultured Dutch, or Received Standard Dutch - was at its peak. (Incidentally it is now more usual to speak of *Algemeen Nederlands* or *Standaardnederlands*, both terms being roughly equivalent to "Standard Dutch.") During that hopeful period, there was a growing conviction that Flanders needed - more than ever before - a standard language, one that transcended the dialect forms and that naturally qualified as Dutch. But recently support for Standard Dutch has been crumbling. Even worse, a tendency seems to be developing to recognize a kind of Standard Flemish, a language between the dialects and Standard Dutch. This in-between language is based on the Brabant-flavoured usage common to the economically strong Antwerp-Brussels axis. The Flemish linguist Jan Goossens, who described and commented on this development in a fascinating article published in a recent issue of the general cultural journal *Ons Erfdeel*, talks of "Pure Flemish." Others are less polite, and speak

of “subdivision Flemish,” referring to Flanders’ disorderly urban planning, or “soap Flemish,” in reference to the artificially coarse usage with which Flemish commercial TV broadcasters try to score cheap successes.

What are the origins of this unexpected evolution? I hesitate to say this, but some of the advocates of Standard Dutch should take note of the beam in their own eye. They have promoted Standard Dutch in much too pedantic a way, without pointing out its many advantages, and this approach has been counterproductive. But it would be too easy to lay all the blame on the language purists.

It seems to me that a much more important factor is the altered political and social context. Because of Belgian federalization and increased prosperity north of the language border, a feeling of complacency has settled over Flanders. As early as the 1980s, Jozef Deleu, the general editor of *Ons erfdeel* and several other general cultural publications, rose up in furious opposition to the increasing arrogance in Flanders. And things have definitely not improved since then. That complacency is implied in the attitude of some Flemings towards Standard Dutch. The argument in favour of a Standard Flemish, whatever that may be, as an alternative to Standard Dutch has become fashionable in some circles. It’s a way to get back at those “know-it-all Hollanders.” This tendency is indirectly reinforced by certain linguists, especially dialectologists and sociolinguists, who can’t bear the thought of a standard or norm but instead insist on several “variants.” Whether these linguists allow themselves to be led by scientific and linguistic-historical criteria, or rather by a strongly pronounced impulse to

stress distinctive features, is a question beyond the scope of this paper.

Yet I don’t want to be too pessimistic about the future of Standard Dutch in Flanders. For it cannot be denied that the stylistic and grammatical level of Dutch in the better newspapers has vastly improved in recent decades. Many Flemish journalists employ a fluent and correct style that would not be ill-suited even to the better Dutch papers. Anyone who compares a Flemish newspaper published in the year 2000 with the prose from the same publication twenty or thirty years earlier, will be pleasantly surprised. The Dutch that is spoken in the news on public radio and TV reports in Flanders is also highly praised north of the Flemish-Dutch border. These are but a few indications that the Dutch language in Flanders is moving in the right direction. That’s why arguing for a Flemish in-between language is needlessly moving the clock a few decades backward. What’s more, the advocates of “Pure Flemish” have no understanding of the pragmatic and political side of the issue. A language community numbering twenty-one million speakers - which is about average for the European Union - is simply much stronger than two language regions acting separately, of which one possesses a genuine cultural language and the other uses an artificially derived form that has to serve as a cultural language. This is a simple but important fact.

In order to strengthen the status of the Dutch language outside its own region, where is the best place to start? Promoting well-thought-out and well-founded co-operation between the Netherlands and Flanders is far and away the primary consideration. The fact that the Netherlands and Flanders have

shared a common co-operative body in the area of Dutch language and literature is naturally a great triumph. Just to mention one advantage: the two countries can use the same "unified grammar," which was compiled under the auspices of the *Taalunie* (Dutch Language Association). A great deal of useful work is also being done by various authorities besides the *Taalunie*, such as the *Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek* (International Society for Dutch Studies). And the carefully prepared joint performances held during major cultural events around the world have also proven their usefulness. In 1993, for example, the entire Dutch-speaking region formed the central theme of the Frankfurt international book fair. The solid interest in literature in Dutch, that already existed in German-speaking countries, has skyrocketed; in recent years it has been hard to keep pace with the number of German translations of Dutch and Flemish authors. In the Anglo-Saxon world, however, there is less "openness" to the Dutch language. Perhaps a well-mounted major Flemish-Dutch charm offensive, such as the one launched in Frankfurt, would bring about some change in this regard. The joint appearance at the London book fair in 1999 was certainly a courageous initiative. A positive development has also occurred in the French-speaking countries, where the most important Dutch-language authors are no longer among the noble unknown. As a matter of fact, Dutch is now enjoying increasing popularity among speakers of French, particularly in northeastern France and in the Walloon provinces of Belgium. This has to do with the rising status of Dutch in these areas. Many young French speakers have come to understand that a thorough knowledge of Dutch will increase their opportunities in the labour market.

A joint presentation by the Netherlands and Flanders of their joint culture is also one of the aims of the *Stichting Ons Erfdeel*, the organization I work for. I would like to conclude by describing the aims and publications of this foundation.

The "master publication" of the foundation is the bimonthly general journal *Ons Erfdeel* (Our Heritage), which was established in 1957 and has evolved from a young persons' magazine to the largest general cultural journal in the Dutch-speaking region. The journal offers a wide range of information on the most divergent subjects. Besides articles on literature, the visual arts, theatre, film, music and ballet, it also contains many contributions on topics of general social interest, notably on co-operative efforts among Dutch-speakers. Information about the Dutch language and the culture of Flanders and the Netherlands is given in the regular section "Het buitenland en wij" (Foreign countries and us), a collection of brief reports and reviews relating to Dutch studies abroad.

The founder and driving force behind *Ons Erfdeel* is the Fleming Jozef Deleu, whom we mentioned above. At the end of the '60s, when the journal's great success increased the urgency of adopting a more professional approach, the decision was made to set up a foundation that would continue publishing *Ons Erfdeel* and would draw up plans for further publications. The financial management of the foundation, which was established in 1970, would remain totally separate from the editorial activities. Jozef Deleu would function as the delegate director and general editor of all publications, thus becoming a link between the board of the foundation and the various editorial boards.

Shortly after that, a new publication was launched, the French-language journal *Septentrion, Arts, lettres et culture de Flandre et des Pays-Bas*. This is a completely French-language magazine, whose aim is to present the culture of Flanders and the Netherlands to the French-speaking public. A great deal of attention is also focused on the interplay between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking cultures. Like *Ons Erfdeel*, the magazine covers a wide range of interests. All the articles are chosen and edited with the French-speaking public in mind. Subscribers to *Septentrion* live not only in the French-speaking part of Belgium and in France, but also in numerous other countries and regions such as Quebec.

While *Septentrion* is aimed at the French-speaking region, the yearbook *The Low Countries, Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands* is meant for the Anglo-Saxon world. This publication, of which there have been seven issues so far, is a relatively new initiative of the foundation, yet it has already made quite a name for itself. For those living anywhere in the English-speaking world who would like to become well informed about Flanders and the Netherlands, *The Low Countries* offers an abundance of information. We receive orders for this yearbook from all over the world, including Canada.

For many readers, *Ons Erfdeel*, *Septentrion* and *The Low Countries* are probably the most familiar publications of the *Stichting Ons Erfdeel*, but there are others. The bilingual yearbook *De Franse Nederlanden - Les Pays-Bas français* focuses attention on French Flanders, the region in northeastern France that has close historical, cultural, artistic and social ties with the Dutch-

speaking region. Finally, the foundation publishes a series of booklets, anthologies and art books in various languages, including English and French. Among these are publications on the history of the Dutch language, the history of the Low Countries, and contemporary prose writers, poets, painters and sculptors in the Netherlands and Flanders. At the moment we are preparing for the publication of a richly illustrated book on *Contemporary Architects in the Netherlands and Flanders*. These publications can be useful gifts for English- or French-speaking people who have come into contact with the Dutch-speaking culture for the first time.

*

“A people or a language community reveals itself in the way it treats its language, including how it represents it to foreign countries.” If Prudens van Duyse would accept this freely modernized and expanded version of his line, then he would surely identify the recent initiative and publications of the *Stichting Ons Erfdeel* as a welcome break with the past. The Dutch-speaking region has never been much given to proclaiming its language and culture abroad, but that is what the foundation is trying to do. Not because we think more highly of our own language and culture than that of other language communities, but because we are convinced that making such a contribution will lead to better understanding between the various language and cultural communities. And we do not intend to allow language borders, state borders or oceans to form an insurmountable barrier to our efforts.