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The Netherlands Urban Field Station

How language diversity promotes equality of opportunity

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Migration, urbanisation and (invisible) multilingualism

In the Netherlands, one person in seven was not born in the country. And the number of migrants will only grow, especially in cities.¹ Because the CBS (Statistics Netherlands) collects various kinds of data about migrant communities, we know a great deal about their backgrounds. Yet, there is one vital aspect we know very little about: Which and how many different languages do migrants speak? And are we doing enough to truly value this linguistic wealth?

A 2021 study of 7,500 participants revealed that (many?) more than 150 different languages are spoken in the Netherlands.² At the same time, according to the KNAW (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) report *Languages for the Netherlands* “there is insufficient consideration in the Netherlands for language choice and interculturality”.³ The publication states emphatically that multilingualism should be seen as an enrichment, but the focus here is primarily on the “big” languages (English, Turkish, Arabic, Chinese) and on the usefulness of

1. <https://www.vzinfo.nl/bevolking/regionaal/migratieachtergrond>. This essay cites information from websites and online reports through links in footnotes; further literature is available in the bibliography.

2. Schmeets and Cornips write: “Presumably, more languages would be revealed if more people were approached. In addition, the questionnaire was in Dutch so that those whose Dutch is not sufficiently advanced for the completion of an online questionnaire, a telephone interview or home visit frequently cannot or do not want to take part.” <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2021/talen-en-dialecten-in-nederland?onpage=true>

3. <https://www.knaw.nl/publicaties/talen-voor-nederland>

foreign languages for trade (higher profits!) or for diplomacy and defence (better risk management!) (p5,6). The many smaller minority languages and the social and societal role of multilingualism are not given sufficient attention.

In education, too, multilingualism is not adequately recognised and utilised (Smit 2022). This applies to primary education as well as to secondary and higher education (Duarte et al. 2022; Van Beuningen and Poliřenská 2019; Van Batenburg et al. 2022). It is true even in NT2 education (Dutch as a second language), where all learners are multilingual (Hoveijn et al., in preparation). Research shows that simultaneously developing Dutch and a mother tongue has beneficial effects on both languages as well as on non-linguistic skills (e.g. Dalderop and Andringa 2022; Cummins 2000).⁴ Still, however, various organisations, including UNESCO, indicate that monolingualism remains the norm on the path to social and economic success. In educational settings, the suppression of languages spoken at home is commonplace, and members of migrant communities are underrepresented in higher education, where they are on average less successful.⁵

Although the United Nations has declared 2022–2032 the *International Decade of Indigenous Languages*,⁶ the linguistic riches of Dutch cities remain for the most part invisible, inaudible and, consequently, their potential is entirely unrealised. We cannot even be sure of which speakers of which languages we are – or should be – talking about.

Language diversity and linguistics

This failure to consider linguistic diversity is all the more remarkable given that descriptive linguistics has undergone two parallel developments in recent years: First, a technical revolution that allows large quantities of high-quality primary language data to be collected, sustainably stored and made available for scientific investigation. Here, linguists pay particular attention to the increasing number of

4. See also Reljić et al. (2015) and Collier and Thomas (2017), who show that multilingual education programmes are more successful than the immersion approach.

5. <https://languagefriendlyschool.org/welcoming-all-languages/why-a-lfs/>
<https://www.rutufoundation.org/rutu-reports-to-un-race-committee-on-language-discrimination-in-dutch-schools/>
<https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2020/09/01/national-action-plan-for-greater-diversity-and-inclusion-in-higher-education-and-research>

This report also shows that teachers know too little about multilingualism. See, e.g., Pulinx et al. (2017); Cummins (2019); Elffers (2022).

6. <https://www.unesco.org/en/decades/indigenous-languages>

languages threatened with extinction. Second, there is growing awareness among linguists of their ethical responsibilities towards speaker communities: we do not conduct research *on* languages, but *with* speakers themselves, and expressly (also) *for* them. As such, community members receive training in order to assist with the recording, transcribing and translation of their languages. They are thus active contributors to the vitality – or, indeed, revitalisation – of the language.

The opportunities for such emancipatory forms of research into linguistic diversity are enormous in cities, home as they are to large groups of migrants and diaspora communities. In the literature, this is termed “ex-situ language documentation” (see Bowerman & Warner 2015: 63; Kaufman & Perlin 2018). An exemplary output of such research is provided by Kaufman and colleagues (2021) of the Endangered Languages Alliance in New York: their (digital) map of language diversity in the city led to hundreds of language communities being quite literally put on the map. They had previously flown under the radar because their languages, as in the Netherlands, are not recorded in census data. Similar projects are being carried out in Europe, for instance by Yaron Matras and colleagues in Manchester.⁷

More theoretically orientated and experimental research also benefits from taking language diversity into consideration. Many insights in psycho- and neurolinguistics and in the field of language acquisition are based on data from so-called WEIRD participants (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic; Henrich et al. 2010). To counter this bias and form a more complete picture, for instance of how language is optimally acquired, data and experiences must be collected from as many different speakers as possible. This context also provides a strong impetus for research into codeswitching and translanguaging. Such forms of language use are still too often and unjustly viewed as deficient mixtures of “legitimate” languages (e.g. Wei 2018, Bosma et al. 2023).⁸

How can we make language diversity in cities visible? Who benefits and how?

Research with diaspora communities in the Netherlands already exists, but rarely concerns language.⁹ The same goes for organisations such as Wereldhuis: this

7. <http://mlm.humanities.manchester.ac.uk>

8. See also an episode of the Kletsheads podcast: <https://kletsheadspodcast.org/2021/02/05/language-mixing/>

9. See, e.g.,: <https://www.eur.nl/nieuws/het-bereik-van-diaspora-gemeenschappen-van-land-van-herkomst-naar-land-van-verblijf>

foundation provides activities and support for migrants during their asylum applications, but is not orientated specifically towards language.¹⁰ And, while various initiatives exist to encourage language development in speakers of other languages,¹¹ these are exclusively focused on (“grammatically correct”!) Dutch, with no consideration for different mother tongues.

To form a sustainable link and coordinate between current and future projects connected with language diversity and multilingualism in Dutch cities, a central organisation is required, both physically and online: *The Netherlands Urban Field Station*. Recognising and utilising the available wealth of linguistic resources means a step towards solving a fundamental problem: inequality of opportunity. In addition, it will be of untold value in bridging the divide between (linguistic and interdisciplinary) research and education, society in the wider sense, and government. How would something like this look?

Initial contact with speakers of other languages and diaspora communities can be made via institutions such as the Wereldhuis and the Stichting voor Vluchteling-Studenten (Foundation for Refugee Students), asylum centres, centres for citizenship courses and Dutch-language exams, and local authorities. The Netherlands Urban Field Station will then serve as a hub to bring researchers and speakers together. Students and school pupils will also be welcomed as (research) interns.

There are countless ways in which researchers and speakers of minority languages can together conduct mutually beneficial research. Depending on the status of the language, the speaker community and the needs and interests of each, possibilities include:¹²

- documentation projects (making recordings, transcriptions and translations);
- developing material for community use and in education, such as:
 - knowledge and information clips for social media and other websites, for instance concerning healthcare
 - dissemination of cultural heritage, for example to preserve oral culture (Gurung et al. 2018);
 - rich texts and interactive/multimedia material for children, such as word games and podcasts;

10. <https://www.wereldhuis.org>; <https://www.uaf.nl/>

11. See a recent article in the Amsterdam local authority newspaper: <https://www.amsterdam.nl/nieuws/volg-de-gemeente/krant-amsterdam-2023/krant-amsterdam-februari-2023-taal/#:~:text=Wie%20de%20taal%20spreekt%2C%20leest,tot%20oud%20er%20mee%20bezi>

12. Current initiatives include: <https://www.uu.nl/organisatie/verdieping/een-thuis-vol-taal>; <https://multistem.net/nl/>

- multilingual (specialist) dictionaries;
- participating in/conducting experimental research into multilingualism;
- participating in/conducting research into (Dutch as a second language) education practice;
- conducting (small-scale) projects by means of “citizen science”¹³

Such activities can make an important contribution towards increasing the visibility and emancipation of minority groups and thus towards combatting discrimination. Additionally, diaspora community groups can facilitate contact with speakers in the country of origin in order to conduct further research and/or to support the position of those speakers. Members from different language groups and from different age-groups and generations within a language group will also have the opportunity to connect. At the same time, the active involvement of these groups in scientific research contributes towards increasing diversity and equality in Dutch universities.

Alongside cooperation between linguists and speakers of minority languages, The Netherlands Urban Field Station will facilitate interdisciplinary projects, together with anthropologists, psychologists, education and pedagogy researchers, sociologists, geographers and (art) historians. In turn, these researchers will connect with artists (such as filmmakers, photographers, musicians) and professionals from cultural, educational and care institutions. Thus, for instance, we can create a database with speakers willing to volunteer as interpreters/translators during healthcare appointments, or work together with the Taalmuseum.¹⁴ While this is a competition for linguists, it seems to us that the opportunities for cross-fertilisation are endless.

Conclusion

Cities have been compared to language graveyards: places where minority language die a silent death (Kaufman & Perlin 2018: 414). The time is ripe to instead make our cities into language greenhouses, with all the cultural, social and scientific benefits this brings with it.

13. https://www.nemokennislink.nl/publicaties/iedereen-kan-aan-wetenschap-doen/?gclid=CjwKCAjwoN6hBhAUEiwAXab-Td3sMssmgIuyO8X93kMjKSetpomVKiFZw4-CIoS3hG82SmkB27o9ZR0ClfIQAvD_BwE

14. <https://www.taalmuseum.nl/>







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