

Dutch linguistics and the general audience

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Skimming through old issues of Dutch newspapers may sometimes provide for surprises: linguistics seems to have been taken very serious as an academic discipline in the period before the Second World War. One of the precursors of the *Algemene Vereniging voor Taalwetenschap* (General Society of Linguistics), publisher of this volume, was the *Phonologische Werkgemeenschap* (Phonological Workshop), a group of Dutch linguists that was mostly active in the 1930s and met regularly to discuss topical issues in one of the hottest new subfields at the time, the pinnacle of European structuralism: phonology (Daalder 2010). The surprise is that in some of the larger newspapers seem to have paid attention to the meetings of the Workshop. For instance, 20 members met on 18 April 1940, and the prestigious newspaper *N.R.C.* devoted a report to this meeting nine days later (all translations are mine):

These days the Dutch Phonological Workshop met in Leiden. After the Chair, Prof. N. Van Wijk, made some comments on the phonological questionnaire, that was sent to the members, Mr. W. Dols of Sittard got permission to lecture on 'A phonological problem in Limburgian dialects'. The Limburgian dialects, which the speaker was referring to, and of which he paid particular attention to the dialect of Sittard, know two types of intonation in long syllables, the falling tone and the dragging tone.

The article goes on to explain how according to Dols the 'intonational contrast' of these dialects – about which he was writing a doctoral dissertation (Limpens 2011) – posited a problem for the theories of syllable structure put forward by Nikolaj Trubetzkoy (1939). It is not clear to what extent any reader of the newspaper who did not happen to be among the 20 members of the Workshop was able to follow this discussion, but *N.R.C.* was not alone in the prewar periode in sometimes paying attention to the exciting but also somewhat esoteric study of sound structure. For instance, in 1928, several newspapers reported about the International Conference of Linguists, taking place in The Hague. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, a major (business) newspaper, for instance gave the following report of one of the presentations (15.4.1928):

The Geneva school, which teaches that comparative phonology should formulate general laws that govern the relations within a given phonological system, has found followers in us, and we are prepared to admit that associative and syntagmatic relations are always interrelated very strongly.

I have the impression that the use of linguistic jargon was representative for reports of the field at the time. After the Second World War, this kind of faithful reporting of what scholars said in conferences has faded away from the newspapers. Still, findings of linguistic research continued to reach the general public in a more or less constant stream until this day, although the tone has definitely changed; I suppose it would be taboo now to suppose that the reader has any idea what a dragging tone or a syntagmatic relation is.

The Dutch general public and academic linguistics

It would be interesting to have a history of linguistics outreach, or, even better, on the relation between academic linguistics and the general audience, in the Netherlands. Although I do not really know how to draw the comparison, it seems clear to me that this connection is more intimate than it is in other countries. There is a lot to be wished for, and the average Dutch person clearly does not know enough about the results of the language sciences, but at least somebody who wishes to, would be *able* in principle to get up to date with the most important insights of linguistic research. And an important reason for this, it seems to me, is that the Dutch linguistic community has for a long time shown at least some interest in outreach activities. A central place in such a history would undoubtedly be played by the Society Our Language (Genootschap Onze Taal; Burger and De Jong 1991). Founded in 1931 by journalists and businessmen who were worried about the German influence on Dutch as a way to 'practice pure Dutch' among each other, the society started publishing a magazine. For this they asked an

advisory board, consisting of professors of Dutch linguistics of many universities. Under their influence, the magazine soon started publishing articles on more general aspects of language, first next to a list of German words that should be avoided, and after a number of years also instead of such lists. Members of the advisory board sometimes contributed to the magazine itself. *Onze Taal* still exists, and with its 23,000 members it is one of the largest associations of its kind in the world. Many practicing Dutch linguists have contributed to or been interviewed at least once in the magazine, which also features articles on language games, on usage, minority languages, language policy, and a variety of other topics that are on language but not necessarily linguistic.

It seems to me logical to think that this magazine has set the tone in a lot of other media. There have been several radio programmes on public radio (with titles such as *Wat een taal!* 'What a language', *De taalshow* 'The language show', or, currently *De taalstaat* 'The state of the language'). None of these programmes is characterised with the fascination for correctness that we find in other language areas; all of them have regularly hosted interviews with professional linguists. Similarly, books on language tend to be rather light-hearted, and at least in some cases written with at least some basic understanding of linguistics. Most Dutch newspapers also have language columnists; most of them have at least some training as linguists, such as, in the current age, Ton den Boon, Peter-Arno Coppen, Paulien Cornelisse, Liesbeth Koenen and Ewoud Sanders. A language journalist that is known also internationally is Gaston Dorren, not originally trained as a linguist, but well-versed in many aspects of the field.

I think it is sometimes underestimated by Dutch linguists that this atmosphere is a blessing for the field. It is true that the average Dutch person will still believe that linguistics is about correcting spelling mistakes, and a lot of publications tend to be very superficial, but it is also true that very little outright nonsensical books appear here. Again, my evidence is only anecdotal, but my impression is that the situation in the Netherlands is relatively better than it is elsewhere.

Dutch linguists and outreach

Inversely, many Dutch professional linguists have shown an interest in outreach. An early figure in this respect was Jac. Van Ginneken (1877-1945), professor of Dutch linguistics at Nijmegen, member of the advisory board of *Onze Taal*, and many other things, among which the author of several very readable books on language and linguistic variation, among which even a children's book (*Het verhaal van een kleuter*, The story of a toddler, about language acquisition).

But there have been also many other eminent linguists contributing: Henk Schultink (1924-2017), for instance, was a linguistics correspondent for *N.R.C.* in the 1950s and 1960s before becoming a professor of general linguistics in Utrecht; one of his newspaper contributions was possibly the world's first review of Chomsky's (1957) *Syntactic Structures*. Hugo Brandt Corstius (1935-2014) was the first computational linguist in the Netherlands, but also a well-known author and columnist on political and literary subjects, who published several influential textbooks on mathematical and computational linguistics, but also a few books explaining linguistic concepts to a lay audience. Currently probably the best example is Nicoline van der Sijs, working as a historical linguist at Meertens Instituut and Radboud University. A large part of her work on the history of Dutch consists of scholarly books that have been sold in large quantities because of their readability.

Also many other well-known linguists, such as Hans Bennis, Pieter Muysken and Jacomine Nortier (1957), have published at least one more general book. Further, in our modern day and age, linguists have also discovered the internet. Peter-Arno Coppen, already mentioned as a newspaper columnist, but also a professor of linguistics at Nijmegen, was a pioneer in this, discussing grammatical issues since the 1990's, initially under his pseudonym *Taalprof* (Language prof). Nowadays, scholars like Marten van der Meulen and Sterre Leufkens have a popular blog. The National Research School for Linguistics LOT has been supporting 'popularizing' activities since 1996, with an annual prize and by paying the work of Mathilde Jansen, again a linguistics PhD, as a linguistics journalist on a popular science blog (*Kennislink*). The work of Maaïke Verrips, who has a PhD in language acquisition, deserves special mention. She currently owns a 'language bureau' that is unique in the world and among other things organises a yearly conference on language and multilingualism for a wider audience.

None of this should suggest, again, that things are ideal. There is probably a vast majority of Dutch linguists who have never shared any of their knowledge with a wider audience, and there

may be a group of people looking down on such activities. Yet my impression is that relatively speaking more scholars are involved in these activities than in most other countries.

Conclusion

Outreach is important for any scholarly discipline, but maybe even more so for linguistics. Language is a topic in which many people are curious, but which few people know about. But linguists themselves also have a lot to gain from reaching out, for instance because *speakers* are very often our informants: we need them for our research and getting them involved might also mean making them interested. Due to a number of historical accidents, the Netherlands as a country has become quite strong in linguistics, but also quite strong in outreach activities for linguistics. I hope one day somebody will write a history of these activities. Until that moment, we can enjoy the results of all these decades of work.

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