



# All Dialects Are Equal, but Some Dialects Are More Equal than Others: Fairness and Policies on Regional Languages

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**Abstract.** In Europe, languages may often function as communicative repertoires across state borders. This also applies to regional languages and dialects. Such language varieties are often considered substandard and then may have a lower status than the official standard languages have. Although Europe has an instrument for preserving language rights of regional and minority languages (the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages), the various member states of the European Union can have very different interpretations and applications of this instrument. Even the policies within a state may be very different since subnational authorities may be charged with the execution of language policies on regional languages. That is the topic of this paper, which will focus upon the situation of regional languages and dialects in the Netherlands.

**Keywords:** regional languages and dialects, language policies and language rights, transnational communication in Europe.

## Regional Languages as Transnational Languages<sup>1</sup>

As regional languages and dialects can serve as regional communicative repertoires across state borders, dialects may be considered a tool for transnational communication (Backus et al. 2013). Dialects form a specific mode of regional communication across state borders. This paper will place these regional languages and dialects in a perspective of policy on regional languages.

Situations where dialects serve as regional cross-border communicative repertoires are different from the ones where an established language is a lingua franca used for communication across borders because this lingua franca is used by people whose

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native tongues are mutually incomprehensible and to whom that *lingua franca* is usually a second language (definition by J. Fellmann et al. 1996). Dialects, on the other hand, are usually mother tongues which can be used for transnational communication in certain regions because they are mutually comprehensible.

The dialects of the border regions in the Netherlands, for instance, are closely related to the neighbouring dialects in Germany, resp. Flanders. The southern and mid-Limburgian dialects in the Netherlands are closely related to the Limburgian dialects in Flanders or the Ripuarian dialects in the Rhineland area of Germany. Most of the Brabantish dialects in the Netherlands are closely related to the dialects of the Antwerp province in Flanders and Lower Saxon in the Netherlands is obviously part of a continuum with Lower Saxon in Northern Germany. 'If we choose to say that people on one side of the border speak German [i.e. a German dialect] and those on the other Dutch [a Dutch dialect], our choice is [...] based on social rather than linguistic factors' (Trudgill 1974: 15). These dialects belong to the same dialect families and have been very important for the communication across the borders throughout history. There are no linguistic barriers for receptive multilingualism when dialects are used in these border areas. Especially in Germany, local inhabitants often have problems understanding Standard Dutch, but they can easily communicate with Dutch people in their mutual dialects.

Regional languages in border regions have in fact been used for transnational communication for many centuries. In some cases, these regions have a long tradition in bilingual literacy, for instance, in both Dutch and German on the German side of the state border in the Cleves area (Giesbers 2008: 4–5). Also, the regional language used to be applied in written domains. In fact, in the whole Meuse-Rhine triangle, Meuse-Rhenish (Rheinmaasländisch) was used in the written domains for many centuries. This regional language cannot be qualified as belonging to either Standard Dutch or High German and exists in many geographical varieties (dialects). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Meuse-Rhenish lost ground to High German because of the language policy of the Kingdom of Prussia that had gained power of this area. Since 1815, when the Dutch-German border split both standard languages, Standard Dutch has also gradually disappeared from the written domain in the German part of the Meuse-Rhenish language area. Furthermore, the state border caused a different levelling process of dialects in Germany and the Netherlands, leading to a breach in the Dutch-German dialect continuum (Hinskens 2005: 8–13). The result is that the two different standard languages on both sides of the border 'minimize internal differences and maximize external ones' (Haugen 1972: 244) through the convergence of dialects within the borders and divergence towards different standard languages on each side of the border.

Across the border between Flanders and the Netherlands, where we find Limburgian and Brabantish (and, in Zeeland, Flemish) dialect continua, dialects also converge within the borders and diverge towards different standards on each

side of the border. Although Dutch-speaking Belgium officially shares its standard language with the Netherlands, in practice, there are different standards on each side of the border because standard Dutch in Belgium and standard Dutch in the Netherlands themselves are diverging (Deprez 1984, Van de Velde 1996).

In the Low Saxon language area, the state border already has a fixed state since 1648. Nowadays, the use of standard language in this area is more frequent than the use of dialect and much more frequent than the use of regional intermediate forms (Smits 2011). This trend is stronger for structural dialect loss on the German side of the border than on the Dutch side, and it is stronger for functional dialect loss on the Dutch side of the border. This contrast has evolved because of the larger linguistic distance between Low Saxon and High German, which hinders the emergence of intermediate forms through the convergence of dialects towards the standard language.

Through dialect levelling processes, language change may have influenced regional cross-border communicative repertoires, but regional dialects remain in use when, for instance, Germans visit Dutch market places, albeit mostly in oral communication by the older generations (Berns & Daller 1992). In language contact between Dutch people from Millingen and German people from Keeken (in the Rhine area between Nijmegen and Cleves), the Dutch informants prefer to use the German language or dialect and the Germans prefer to use dialect. 30.6% of the Dutch informants report to speak German to Germans, 27.8% reports to speak German and dialect, 19.4% reports to speak dialect only. Of the German informants, 66.7% speak dialect only and 8.3% reports to speak Standard Dutch and dialect.

These data show that reported language choice in cross-border contact often leads to dialect use, especially for Germans. Furthermore, it often leads to the use of German for the Dutch informants.

**Table 1.** *Language choice in cross-border contact (adapted from Berns & Daller 1992: 34)*

| Language choice       | Dutch informants | German informants | Total |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Standard language     |                  |                   |       |
| 1. Standard Dutch     | 1                | 1                 | 2     |
| 2. High German        | 11               | 1                 | 12    |
| 3. Both               | 1                | 1                 | 2     |
| Dialect and Standard  |                  |                   |       |
| 1. Dialect and Dutch  | 0                | 2                 | 2     |
| 2. Dialect and German | 10               | 1                 | 11    |
| 3. All three options  | 1                | 0                 | 1     |
| Dialect               | 7                | 16                | 23    |
| No contact            | 0                | 1                 | 1     |
| No data               | 5                | 1                 | 6     |
| Total                 | 36               | 24                | 60    |

Berns & Daller further analysed the language choice of the Dutch informants for age: the mean age of the 11 informants that reported to use High German is 30.45 years, the mean age of the 10 informants that use both High German and dialect is 47.9 and the mean age of 7 informants that speak dialect is 63.57. Older people tend to use dialect and younger people tend to use German. Berns & Daller (1992: 44–46) ascribe this trend to the dialect divergence towards different standard languages on each side of the border.

The domains of contact are primarily based on shopping, family ties and friendship networks, in that order (Giesbers 2008: 77–94). Since the Second World War, the number of cross-border marriages, jobs and memberships of associations has severely declined, but since the 1990s we have seen a new trend: because real estate is less expensive in Germany, more and more Dutchmen choose to buy houses across the border. The recent years have shown a strong revival of cross-border contacts (Giesbers 2008: 188).

## Europe and its Transnational Communication

Since the establishment of the European Union, the nation-state system with its monolingual cultures experiences pressure. In the multilevel governance of the EU, the role of the nation-state has been reduced and Europe's borders have become transparent (Zielonka 2007). European norms and values, including the one voiced by the Council of Europe on the desirability of multiculturalism and the protection of regional and minority languages, have spread over the whole continent (Breidbach 2003). In the resulting 'common European communicative sphere,' regional *linguae francae*, such as Hungarian and German, re-emerge. Communities that are located on different sides of a border but who use the same language may be reconnected due to the stimulation of cross-border, transnational co-operation. In these regionally restricted border areas, old communicative patterns have resurfaced within the EU regime. The emergence and re-emergence of transnational communication with the help of regional languages offers a possibility for overcoming linguistic diversities at the edges of neighbouring states, although due to its territorial restrictions it may be limited in scope (Backus et al. 2011). But, in language planning and policy, many of the regional languages seem to be neglected and many minority languages, regional languages and dialects are left unprotected.

For linguists, all language varieties are equal in all respects, but we all know that some language varieties have more prestige than others. Because of inconsistent national and subnational policies on language variation, various language varieties are not treated equally. The Netherlands and the northern part of Belgium are united in the *Nederlandse Taalunie* (NTU), the Dutch Language

Union. Following the 1980 founding treaty (*Verdrag inzake de Nederlandse Taalunie*), the two countries form a single language area. Surinam joined the NTU in 2004. When it comes to the recognition of regional languages, a discrepancy exists between the language varieties spoken north and south of the border between Belgium and the Netherlands because the Netherlands has ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, but Belgium has not.

In the Netherlands, three regional languages, Frisian, Low Saxon and Limburgian, have been recognized under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). This was after the successful lobbying by representatives of the speakers of these languages, following the German example where Low Saxon already was a recognized regional language. Frisian has been treated as an official language in the province of Fryslân (Friesland) before. Frisian is both the name of a standardized language and the name of a number of local varieties, the Frisian dialects (Frisian, in the latter case, is a collective noun). Frisian now is a regional language, recognized according to Part III of the ECRML. Low Saxon and Limburgian are not standardized. These two regional languages actually consist of a large number of diverse dialects, collectively named Low Saxon and Limburgian. Low Saxon and Limburgian in the Netherlands now are recognized according to Part II of the ECRML, which gives them fewer rights and less support than Frisian.

These regions were of course not the only ones that sought recognition for their dialects under ECRML. Many groups of dialect speakers in both the Netherlands and Belgium hoped to get the same enhanced status for their languages. However, in Belgium, the NTU advised against recognizing Limburgian. Because of this attitude in Belgium, NTU also advised against giving more dialects in the Netherlands the status of regional language. Consequently, the request of Zeeland to consider its dialects as a regional language was not granted. In concordance with the opinion of the NTU, the Dutch government decided not to promote any more dialects by means of the ECRML (Belemans 2011).

The result is an inequality between the policies concerning the dialects of the Netherlands. For linguists, all language varieties are equal in all respects, but here, due to policies, some dialects are now part of regional languages and thus are under protection, but others are not. The latter are considered to be dialects of the standard language. This linguistic criterion does not hold since policy is bound by administrative borders instead of isoglosses.

The ECRML does not provide a procedure for demoting a regional language and denying its status of acknowledgement. Nor would the demotion of Low Saxon and Limburgian be a solution that can count on the support of the respective speaker communities.

## Language Policy

The ECMRL, as well as the basic principles of language policy, are extensively discussed by François Grin (2003). Grin has come up with a flowchart and certain criteria to assess the workings of language policy measures. This Policy-to-Outcome-path will be of assistance when evaluating the measures in our case study, where we want to explore the outcome of the different policies in the Netherlands and Belgium for the dialects on both sides of the frontier.

Grin (2003) gives the following definition of language policy: 'Language policy is a systematic, rational, theory-based effort at the societal level to modify the linguistic environment with a view to increasing aggregate welfare. It is typically conducted by official bodies or their surrogates and aimed at part or all of the population living under their jurisdiction.' (Grin 2003: 30) Although Grin stresses the public policy character of language policy, language planning does not necessarily comprise only activities executed by a central authority. Active individual citizens or NGOs can also lobby for language rights, for example.

The difference between language policy and language planning is that the first refers to the general linguistic, political and social goals underlying the planning process (Mesthrie et al. 2000). Language planning, in turn, is used to refer to the practice; it includes all conscious attempts at altering linguistic behaviour of a speech community (Mesthrie et al. 2000: 384). There are two basic forms of language planning. Corpus planning is concerned with the internal structure of the language and status planning comprises all efforts undertaken to change the use and function of a language or language variety within a given society (Kloss 1997). Status is used here to refer to 'function' or 'domain'. It can comprise the entire spectrum of domains of language use; the legal, economic, social and political position of the language (Kloss 1997: 384–385).

These different forms of language planning are naturally linked. An example of this relationship between corpus and status planning is seen when there is the desire to use a language in more domains of language use, for instance, the use of Frisian in the legal profession. This is considered a form of status planning, concerned with where and when a language is used. To achieve the goal of extending the use of a language to new domains, corpus planning is also involved as new lexical items and appropriate styles are required (Mesthrie et al. 2000: 385).

An essential aspect of language planning is language standardization. This refers to the creation and establishment of a uniform linguistic norm. The degrees of standardization range from an unstandardized oral language to a mature modern standard language (Mesthrie et al. 2000: 385). For example, English is a 'mature modern standard language'. It is used in all areas of communication. Frisian could be considered a 'young standard language' on this scale. Apart from vernacular speech, the language is used to some degree in education and in

administration. However, the language is not used in all areas of communication. The language is not used in the field of science or technology, for instance.

More recently, scholars have distinguished two more dimensions in language planning: prestige planning and acquisition planning. The first one, the prestige planning, involves efforts to create a positive image of the language so the stimulation of the language will succeed in the long run. The latter, acquisition planning, stimulates people to learn the language in question.

In practice, language planning should be applied on a case-by-case basis. Not every language has the same needs (Grin 2003: 13). So, the same instruments which prove to be useful in promoting the use of Sámi in Finland are not necessarily as successful when applied to Frisian in the Netherlands, for instance, because the language communities are different.

Languages can obviously not exist without a community of speakers. A community needs a viable environment to live in and people need the means to make a living. Take all that away and their language dies. Language death occurs when one language replaces another across all domains of language use and when the parents no longer pass the language on to their children (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 4–7).

A guideline to measure the vitality of a language is Fishman's (2001) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). Apart from indicating the risk of vanishing that the language faces, the scale also offers targets and priorities which a regional or minority language can set to improve its position (Gorter 2008). It consists of eight stages on a scale of the 'threatenedness' of a language. At Stage 8, the language is at its weakest, with hardly any native speakers left, and at Stage 1 the language has successfully averted language shift. At Stage 1, the language is not 'done' with language policy, but it has succeeded in creating an environment in which the use of the language is considered 'normal' and it thrives in a living language community able to reproduce itself (Grin 2003: 42). Reproduction, i.e. intergenerational native tongue transmission, is the key factor of Fishman's approach. Language acquisition is very important; however, solely teaching the language in schools as a second language will not save a language. Transmission from parents to children is crucial for natural the sustenance of a language (Gorter 2008). There is a division between stages 8-5 and stages 5-1. The weakest languages in stages 8-5 are mainly concerned with promoting the language to increase public support (Fishman 2001: 454) and do not necessarily need the approval of those in power. This is different for the stronger languages, where the language is ready to be used in administration and education.

The upheaval about the disappearance of the world's languages begs the question why this is such a loss and why linguistic diversity should be preserved. Answers to these questions come from different angles, which can roughly be divided to fit in a 'biodiversity' perspective, an economic welfare perspective and a human rights

point of view. The first perspective compares linguistic diversity to biodiversity, each language being compared to another, perhaps exotic, species. Linguists should save (collect) the languages just as a museum collects rare pieces of art. On the one hand, studying the world's languages enables linguists to perfect their theories of language structure. On the other hand, culture and language are intertwined. A culture can be preserved through language. The idea is that each language reflects a unique worldview; the different linguistic organizational structures reflect how humans organize their thoughts and experiences (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 10–14).

From a welfare perspective, the protection of linguistic diversity should be assessed empirically. A just policy should deliver more welfare to society as a whole. To achieve this, resources should be properly allocated. A policy, as a way of allocating resources, always creates 'winners' – those who benefit from it – and 'losers' – those who do not benefit from it, but still have to pay in a way. This can be explained with an example of a taxpayer who pays taxes which finance a public service that he/she does not use. A good policy in theory is one where the winners can compensate the losers and still be better off. In respect to language policy, this is however very hard to assess as linguistic rights are difficult to express in monetary terms. Also, there is hardly any empirical data which prove that society will be better or worse off with or without the protection of regional or minority language rights (Grin 2003: 25–27).

Nevertheless, opponents of the protection of regional languages often claim that a monolingual environment will be more efficient, with a linguistically unified economic and social system. Majority languages should be most 'useful' because they have greater 'social advancement,' something that the minority languages do not have. Following this line of reasoning, these critics claim that language policies will only succeed when they correspond to labour-market considerations (Fishman 2001: 452–454). Fishman objects to this argument by stating that the problem is not the access to labour-market, but economic power in general. A mere linguistic solution is not enough to straighten out the differences in economic power. Also, Fishman opposes the materialistic attitude the welfare-argument expresses and argues that human values, behaviours and identities are essentially non-materialistic in nature, e.g. family loyalty, aesthetics and the corpus of ethics that each culture expresses and continually develops. He calls on the 'mark of higher cultures' that should have other than material values.

Another objection Fishman makes is to the idea that language death is 'natural'; a normal consequence of minority–majority relations. Fishman states that speakers of the minority language are uninformed and are unaware of other options such as bilingualism (Fishman 2001: 454). Another widespread public opinion is that language rights activists cause conflict, and minority languages are inherently a cause for conflict. In other words, multilingualism is divisive and monolingualism is cohesive in nature. Nettle & Romaine (2000) oppose



this statement with a few examples of monolingual areas that face civil wars, such as Northern Ireland, and multilingual societies without major conflicts, e.g. Switzerland. They argue that this generalization is made on the false assumption that it is the different language that causes the disruption, while the underlying factors of conflict are social and cultural inequalities (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 18). Furthermore, Fishman argues that languages in stages 8-5 of GIDS are not confrontational at all. During these stages, they put their efforts in gaining public support, approval and recognition (Fishman 2001: 454).

A different argument in favour of the protection of regional or minority languages is the belief that every person should have the right to use his or her own language. In this opinion, each individual is entitled to language rights. The extent of these rights is up for discussion. Kloss's work addresses the core of the discussion on what language rights consist of. He made the distinction between 'tolerance-oriented' and 'promotion-oriented' rights (Kloss 1997). Tolerance-oriented rights safeguard individuals from government interference in their private language choice. That way, people are free to speak the language of their choice when they are at home or at work, for instance. Promotion-oriented rights, on the other hand, refer to rights people have in public institutions such as schools. As promotion rights are rather broadly formulated by Kloss, more recent discourse has come up with different approaches to language accommodations in public institutions (see e.g. Kymlicka & Patten 2003).

Furthermore, one can ask if active language policy is a successful field of politics: can languages flourish or wither as a result of language policy? Do, for instance, the Limburgian dialects really benefit from the ECRML-status they acquired? According to Fishman, 'there is no language for which nothing at all can be done' (in: Mesthrie et al. 2000: 275), meaning that when a language is endangered action should be taken to strengthen the language. Three important conditions influence language use. These conditions are capacity, opportunity and desire. If these are not met, people will not speak the language; therefore, these conditions are crucial for a language to remain vital (Grin 2003: 43). Capacity simply refers to the fact that people are able to speak the language. The members of a language community should have sufficient competence of the language in order to pass it on to the next generations. In order to achieve the capacity to speak a language, people should have the opportunity to learn the language and to speak it on a daily basis. Also, the desire to speak a language is imperative. If no one has the desire to speak the language, it will cease to exist. Logically, for language policy to be successful, the focus should be on these three requirements (Grin 2003: 43–44). Language policy should ensure that people have the capacity to speak the language and guarantee education so that people are able to learn the language. It should provide people with the opportunity to use the language, ensuring the right linguistic climate and finally promote the language to encourage people's desire to use it.

## Language Rights

According to Dónall Ó Riagáin, special adviser of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 already acknowledged that ‘no one should be denied certain basic rights on the grounds of language’. Art. 2 declares that the rights mentioned in the Declaration are to be conferred ‘without distinction of any kind such as [...] language’. The declaration cannot be conceived as an exact statement of the existence of language rights, but it could be interpreted as the basis of the development of language rights (Ó Riagáin 1999: 292).

The definition of regional or minority languages is given in Art. 1 (a) of the ECRML:

Article 1 – Definitions:

- 1) ‘regional or minority languages’ means languages that are:
  - i) traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population  
and
  - ii) different from the official language(s) of that State; it does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants; (Council of Europe, 1992)

This definition has three important aspects. First, the languages concerned are traditionally used by nationals of a state, in effect ruling out any immigrant languages. Second, the language must be ‘different’ from the language or languages spoken by the majority of the state’s population. The explanatory report accompanying the ECRML addresses the question briefly whether a language variant is a separate language or a dialect. It clarifies that this distinction should not be made on mere linguistic considerations, but also on psycho-sociological and political considerations. This implies that regional or minority languages are to be assessed on a case-to-case basis. Third, the definition specifies the need for a language to have a territorial base. According to the explanatory report, this is largely a practical concern. Most of the measures proposed by the ECRML require a geographical field of application other than the whole state (Council of Europe, 1992).

## Equal Rights

In society, multilingualism often leads to a situation where the dominant language and the other languages are functionally complementary, e.g. in formal situations speakers will use the standard language and in informal situations they will use a minority language, a regional language or dialect. Languages

being complementary mirrors the different social status of these languages: the standard language is supposed to be ‘better’ than the languages we use in informal situations. Important factors are the domination of national media by the standard language and its monopoly position as a language of instruction in educational institutions.

As said above, linguists consider all language varieties equal in all respects. One language is not better than another; every language consists of a full grammatical system and a full vocabulary. The difference between dominant languages and oppressed languages has to do solely with social and political issues.

Language policy has brought about that some minority languages and dialects or regional languages are now recognized as official languages. They are valuable and need to be protected if they are under pressure. But language policy has also resulted in inequality: some dialects in the Netherlands now belong to a regional language and others do not although they may be very similar. Dialects even may be treated differently in two adjacent countries.

For Limburg, both situations are reality: the dialects of northern Limburg in the Netherlands are Kleverlandish (not Limburgian) and closely related to the dialects of north-eastern Brabant. If these dialects in Brabant are considered dialects of the official language (ECMRL, Article A, 1, ii.), this also should count for the dialects in northern Limburg. Still, those Kleverlandish dialects in Limburg are considered a part of the regional language Limburgian simply because they are spoken within the administrative borders of the province. Secondly, the dialects of eastern Limburg in Belgium are closely related to the dialects of the southwest of Limburg in the Netherlands. The latter are again part of the regional language Limburgian, whereas the first group is not because Belgium did not ratify the ECRML.

If policy is bound by administrative borders instead of isoglosses and social status prevails over linguistic criteria, policy treats languages and language varieties unequally. This discriminative behaviour can be regarded as linguisticism (cf. e.g. Kontra 2006). Ideologies which are used to legitimate and effectuate an unequal division of power and resources between groups that are defined on the basis of language (their mother tongues) can be defined as linguisticism. Speakers who are made ashamed of their mother tongue can be traumatized. To make anyone, especially children in school, so ashamed is as indefensible as to make him/her ashamed of the colour of his/her skin.

Reker (2002) makes a strong plea against this treatment of regional varieties in Belgium and the Netherlands. The lower status of dialects in comparison to the standard language is a social phenomenon: dialects are simply languages with bad luck (‘dialect is een taal die pech heeft gehad,’ Reker 2002: 18). The unequal treatment of dialects finds its origin in the way policy is organized: national politics will decide on which dialects become official regional languages but wait for regional authorities to make claims for this status. And what is more, national

politics also leave the enforcement of ECRML to these regional authorities. NTU should take the initiative in a language policy that treats all dialects equally, e.g. via a treatment *de facto* of all dialects as regional languages under ECRML (Reker 2002: 22; Van Hout et al. 2009: 12–13). At the moment, there is no transnational uniform policy on languages although NTU claims it provides such a policy.

The ECRML is not the only way that leads to language protection. In the last decennium, various other procedures of language protection have started, leading to a mosaic of regional language policies. Especially the treatment of dialects as a valuable important part of cultural heritage has been fruitful in Flanders but also in several provinces in the Netherlands (North Brabant, Zeeland) outside of the area of ECRML-languages. Belemans (2009) proposed a solution to the deadlock of the ECRML in the Low Countries. They should shift the debate from language and cultural rights to the domain of cultural heritage. The ideal means for this paradigm shift would be, according to Belemans in 2009, for the Netherlands to ratify the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (CICH).

Belgium ratified this international treaty in 2006 and the Netherlands ratified the Convention in 2012 (April). The government, however, also announced huge cutbacks in the field of culture. It is unclear if the ratification will be very fruitful in the near future.

Advances of CICH are:

- the safeguarding of dynamic and diverse heritage, whereas ECRML aims at the standardization of regional languages. Dialects are inherently dynamic and diverse; language variation and change should be the core business of safeguarding programmes.
- the request should come from the community (bottom up) and should be for safeguarding, whereas requests for ECRML come from authorities (top down) and aim for language policing and standardization.

A disadvantage would be the self-assignment of the language community; objectivity might be lost then. Still, CICH would lead to safeguarding processes instead of the preservation of a language.

CICH does not protect languages as such but as vehicles or vectors of intangible heritage (Art. 2.2), for instance, in oral traditions. CICH wants to safeguard language solely as a cultural practice of transfer. There are, however, examples that contradict these guidelines, e.g. the whistled speech of La Gomera (one of the Canary Islands); in this case, a language system and a language community are the subject of safeguarding, but not exclusively the tradition that is transferred by that language.

Even without a treaty emphasizing the importance of intangible cultural heritage, there are practices of language policy in the Netherlands which could fit well in a ‘cultural heritage approach,’ for instance in Zeeland and North Brabant.

Choosing a different approach to regional languages might lead to a more equal situation between different language regions. Possibly UNESCO's CICH might lead to a new set of guidelines for the safeguarding of regional languages. In fact, the different language policies in the Netherlands sometimes resulted in similar outcomes: policies have led to professional language consultancy in Limburg and the Low Saxon region (ECMRL) but also in North Brabant and Zeeland (non-ECMRL); Limburg, Groningen and North Brabant all have an endowed chair for regional language variation at the universities of Maastricht, Groningen and Tilburg respectively. Still, the similarities are few in comparison to the differences. If we simply compare the financial efforts provincial authorities have done, the ECMRL-languages get far more support than the others (Leijen 2011: 53).

**Table 2.** *Financial support for regional languages/dialects by provincial authorities in the period of 1999–2010.*

|                                   |             |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| Overijssel (Low Saxon)            | € 3,692,871 |
| Groningen (Low Saxon)             | € 3,437,870 |
| Drenthe (Low Saxon)               | € 2,915,999 |
| Limburg (Limburgian)              | € 2,697,177 |
| Gelderland (Low Saxon and others) | € 2,057,000 |
| North Brabant (Brabantish)        | € 950,000   |
| Zeeland (Zeelandic)               | € 211,478   |

Frisian was already treated as an official language in the province of Fryslân (Friesland) before the ECMRL and has known a long period of protection and promotion. Therefore, the situation of Frisian is not comparable to those in the other provinces, and the province of Fryslân is not in this table. The provincial authorities in Utrecht, Flevoland, North Holland and South Holland do not have any policy on the dialects that are spoken in their province. Dialects in Utrecht, North Holland and South Holland have a weaker position than dialects in the east of the Netherlands (Goeman & Jongenburger 2009), but they get hardly any attention from authorities. Typical for a policy that is based on ECMRL is that the stronger a regional language is and the more regional populations fight for their language rights, the better the language policy is. However, it is also typical, therefore, that many of the languages or language varieties that are severely endangered do not get any attention.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the non-ECMRL dialects get less or even no support at all from provincial authorities in the Netherlands. These distinctions lead to interregional linguisticism. Furthermore, ECMRL has raised an undesirable competition between the standard language and the regional languages since the latter now have to be expanded to domains (such as language education) that used to be standard language domains solely.

Because of inconsistent national and subnational policies on language variation, various languages are not treated equally, European legislation is held up and chances for transnational communication in Europe are ignored. The dialects of the border regions in the Netherlands are closely related to the dialects in Germany, resp. Flanders. These dialects belong to the same dialect families and were historically very important for the communication across the borders. However, we seem to forget the regional languages and we leave many dialects unprotected.

We are in need of new communication strategies within and between regions of the European Union: the European Commission states that in the context of an ever closer European Union and a globalized economy the European Union needs to preserve its linguistic diversity and take full advantage of the potentials of multilingualism in order to create and maintain work for its citizens, facilitate cross-border activities, deliver social and territorial cohesion etc. (European Commission 2012). The question, therefore, is why we do not invest in the revitalization of (all) regional languages.

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