United in Song. Creating Multilingual Religious Communities through Psalm Translations in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries

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In the second half of the sixteenth century, the Low Countries – considered as the whole of the Seventeen Provinces – were characterized by multilingualism, that is, the co-existence of multiple languages.[1] As far as the vernacular was concerned, both Dutch and French (each taken as the totality of their regional varieties) were used. From 1550 onwards, the form and role of a by many desired standard and purified Dutch language became a topic for debate. This so-called ‘language question’ was an expression of emerging attention for vernacular languages witnessed in several linguistic regions throughout Europe.[2] This phenomenon has been interpreted as the parallel rise of the individual vernaculars at the expense of the international Latin language. In a similar manner, the pursuit of a pure and standardized Dutch language has been explained as a reflection of a growing national consciousness, expressing itself in the expulsion of foreign influences.[3]

In 2013, I began a doctoral research project at the University of Groningen, titled *A Tale of Two Tongues: The Interplay of Dutch and French in the Literary Culture of the Low Countries, 1550-1600*. This project places the Netherlandish language question in the multilingual context in which these discussions arose in order to offer a new perspective on the increasing vernacular awareness.[4] that is, the growing sense of the particular position and form of the mother tongue in relation to other languages.[5] The research question central to the project is: To what extent and how was the striving for a single pure Dutch vernacular related to the multilingual situation in the Low Countries in the second half of the sixteenth century? The search for an answer to this question will take place within the local literary culture. In accordance with sixteenth-century practice, the project uses the term literary culture in a broad sense, comprising not just *les belles lettres* (poetry and drama), but also for example religious and educational texts and other fields of vernacular learning.[6]

Typical for the Low Countries was the status of Francophone literature as local, rather than foreign, and the existence of multilingual texts and authorial oeuvres. Until now, this Francophone and often multilingual literary corpus has been marginalized in the research tradition as it did not fit within the perceived movement towards a focus on the Dutch language as a unifier of the Dutch-speaking community. Because of the historical, cultural and geographical importance of the French language within the Low Countries, caused by its Burgundian past, the French tongue was an important player in both daily and literary life. It was a local language, as well as a foreign language through which many new ideas, among which theories attached to the Europe-wide language debates, entered the Low Countries. The relation between French and Dutch was often problematized in the discussions about language, because of the strong influence of this Romance language on the Germanic Dutch vernacular. For this reason, it is the complex relationship between French and Dutch that assumes a central position in this research project.[7]

This project proposes a ‘bottom up’ approach that takes the multilingual historical practice as its point of departure instead of the later primacy of the Dutch language. It identifies places, *lieux* or *loci* in the contemporary literary culture where the two local vernaculars, French and Dutch, encountered each other, clashed, or existed next to each other. These *loci* refer to physical spaces, particular (professional or social) activities or textual places of encounter (particular written genres) where people came together, united around a particular practice for which both languages were used.[8] For each of the selected *loci*, the multilingual community that existed around it will be mapped through a central individual, who will function as the starting point for exploring the discourses around language in general and the vernacular languages in particular that were used. Through the focus on these *loci*-based communities of interpretation, discussing the shared set of texts and ideas connected to the language question,[9] the link between the multilingual situation and the debates about the Dutch vernacular will be mapped.
In order to both build on and correct the existing scholarship on this topic, the choice of selected loci has been based on the research tradition focusing on the standardization of the Dutch language. Earlier researchers pointed out printing houses, chambers of rhetoric, schools and translations of the Bible as important areas of debates about the standardization and purification of the Dutch language. For each of these areas, the importance of multilingualism will be mapped, after which a corpus of works centered around the chosen central individuals will be the object of close reading in order to distinguish different attitudes towards language that existed.

So far, strong indications have been found that the Netherlandish language question needs to be studied as a part of a Europe-wide interest in language focusing on finding a suitable medium for communication rather than on solely forefronting the vernaculars as markers of regional identity. This interest was characterized by comparison and attention towards linguistic variety as well as towards single languages, which could explain the continuing presence of multilingual and francophone literature in the Dutch-speaking parts of the Low Countries. Furthermore, the attitudes expressed by printers, rhetoricians, schoolmasters and Bible translators from the Low Countries do not seem to limit themselves to the pursuit of a pure, standardized Dutch language but also aim at other ways of supporting this language and sometimes even other languages that were considered better media for communication.

The remainder of this paper will focus on one of the loci central to the project. Through a case study focusing on three psalm translators active in the sixteenth-century Low Countries, a first example of the proposed research will be given. When reading overviews of the linguistic debates of the period, it is striking how often religious works are mentioned as important carriers of explicit and implicit linguistic reflection and innovation. Such discussions about language, which can often be found in the prefaces to Biblical translations, have been mainly studied for their linguistic importance in creating the standard form of Dutch that is used today. As mentioned above, this tendency to work towards a standard, pure vernacular has been attributed to growing feelings of nationalism, which would confront the mother tongue and exclude foreign (linguistic) influences. However, if these translations are considered in the historical and linguistic context of their creation, other possible explanations for their focus on language can be distinguished.

In the Low Countries, the fact that both French and Dutch were used as local languages, each further divided into different dialects, certainly did not help to create a sense of unity among the local population. The linguistic variety also caused practical problems in, for example, vernacularly bilingual bishoprics. The use of Latin as an authoritative and liturgical language could prevent many issues, but the vernacular remained an important factor. The leaders of the newly formed Calvinist community of the Low Countries had to make decisions on how to deal with this linguistic situation. They had to search for ways to maintain solidarity while facing the linguistic differences. These obtained a new dimension because of the hesitation and sometimes plain rejection of using Latin as a medium for interaction and textual transmission among the congregation. The Calvinists wished to keep their flock unified, despite the linguistic variation that existed between the French- or Dutch speaking peoples, of whom some remained in the Low Countries while others had fled to safe havens like London or Northern Germany.

This proved to be a difficult task. In 1571, Calvinist leader and polyglot Philips of Marnix of Saint Aldegonde wrote a letter on the problems with the French and Dutch churches in exile in London. He wrote of the ‘regrettable dispersal of the Netherlandish community of both tongues’. While the Francophone communities seemed to have found a practical way of cooperation, their Dutch counterparts were diffused and lacked a sense of belonging together. The cooperation between the French- and Dutch-speaking communities was far from perfect. In order to create and maintain harmony and solidarity, Marnix proposed a model of ‘unity and agreement’, ‘not just in the chapters of the pure doctrine, but also in the manners, ceremonies and government of the church’.

One of these manners and ceremonies was the popular practice of Psalm singing in the vernacular, which had increasingly become a part of Calvinist liturgical practices, although in an early stage it had also been popular in Catholic circles. In the sixteenth-century Low Countries, a large number of translations of the Book of Psalms in the vernacular appeared, set to tunes so they could be sung during religious gatherings. Many of these were adaptations of a set of French psalms by the poet Clément Marot and the theologian Théodore de Bèze. In the research tradition, these Dutch psalters have been studied often in order to determine the confessional identity of the author and the success of the translation or musicality of the works. However, in my research project, I wish to consider these psalm translations in the light of the multilingual situation and the problems it posed for the unity of the Calvinist community in the Low Countries. It is the contention of this paper that the linguistic and confessional value of these Psalters are strongly intertwined and that each of these values cannot be understood without considering the other.

One of the first Psalm books in Dutch was written by Jan Utenhove, who had to flee his native country because of his beliefs. In exile, he wrote a Bible translation and various versions of his Book of Psalms, based on the original Hebrew. Utenhove’s works did not become a huge success, which has been blamed on his peculiar language. His ultimate goal was to use a standardized version of Dutch. Utenhove combined elements of all different dialects so that every speaker of the language, from Flanders to the Baltic Sea, could understand it: ‘we have formed our writing thusly, that it will be of use and benefit for all of the Netherlandish people’. Besides unifying the Dutch dialects, Utenhove also removed foreign words from his writings. Utenhove’s effort thus perfectly fits the traditional conception of the language question in the Low Countries as directed towards binding the nation through a single, standardized language while rejecting all foreign influences. Nevertheless, Utenhove’s Psalm and Bible translation have been described as a failed first attempt. In his striving for a Dutch language understandable to all of its speakers, he ended up not being understandable to anyone.
However, there is more to Utenhove’s efforts than meets the eye. His language was not just meant to be understandable for all, it was also very clear. He did not ban loanwords out of xenophobia, but because they created doubles in the Dutch language, which eventually led to ambiguity: ‘To ensure that the meaning of the Holy Spirit is not obscured through negligent writing.’ His expulsion of loanwords should thus not simply be considered as an expression of nationalistic feelings; it had a religious use. Furthermore, Utenhove imposed a clear, inflexive system, using cases so the meaning of each sentence would be unambiguous. By giving a translation of the original Hebrew text in a Dutch language that was clear and pure, his psalm translation could limit the amount of different meanings people could attach to these texts through unstable translations. The more interpretations, the more religious conceptions, and the larger the confessional diversity. Utenhove tried to create a final translation that all, on a linguistic, textual level, could agree on and use as a basis for further reflection. When Utenhove’s work is contrasted with other psalm translations of this period, similar motives can be distinguished.

The translation that swiftly replaced Utenhove’s linguistically complex construct was produced by Petrus Datheen. Its focus was not on writing a universal Dutch language. In fact, Datheen seemed to pay very little attention to language, and the linguistic and melodious quality of his translation became a major point of critique. What Datheen did strive for was to follow his French example as closely as possible. It was a literal translation of the Psalter by Marot and De Bèze, using all of its melodies and even following the same rhyme schemes and the same number of stanzas per psalm. Although his method differed greatly from Utenhove’s, I would like to argue that his motives were very similar. Datheen reused the French psalter, he wrote in his preface, because:

Since were are unified with the Evangelical Church in France concerning doctrine and ceremony; therefore I have wished, that we in the singing of the Psalms could also be identical to them …

What he wished was that the French-speaking Calvinists and the Dutch-speaking community could use the same psalm book. Where Utenhove tried to unite the Dutch-speaking Calvinist community by using a common Dutch language, Datheen wished to provide a song book which, as a one-on-one translation, could serve to create the unity in ‘ceremony’ across communities using different languages.

Marnix also wrote a Psalm translation. He greatly disapproved of Datheen’s translation, because of its disrespect for the original Hebrew text and its sloppy use of the Dutch language. He did, however, maintain the use of the melodies and the overall form of the French psalter also used by Datheen. Marnix combined the efforts of Utenhove and Datheen, trying to respect the original Hebrew text, writing a Dutch language that was clean, pure, and standardized and forming a counterpart to the French psalter. Like Utenhove, Marnix also wished to ‘bring back into use the old Netherlandish vernacular mother tongue in order to make use of clear words.’

Marnix’s psalter was meant to be used by Dutch-speaking Calvinist communities all over the Low Countries and in the exile communities, providing this religious group with a shared book of worship, regardless of dialect or location. Marnix’s work formed a diptych together with the Psalter by Marot and De Bèze used in Francophone Calvinist communities in France, but also in the Francophone communities in the Low Countries and in the exile territories. He thus presented this linguistically dispersed community with a tool that united the Dutch dialects and made a shared use possible across the linguistic divide within the country. These must have been the shared ‘manners’ and ‘ceremonies’ that he hoped would create a sense of unity among the Netherlandish Calvinists, regardless of their language. Marnix provided his multilingual community with a book of psalms that could be sung in the exact same way, sharing melodies and number of stanzas, while also conveying the exact same content in each of the languages. They could share one text in multiple tongues, but they could also share the entire set of actions, ceremonies and conventions connected to that text.

Language thus did not only function as a marker of a nation that was trying to discover itself – it had very specific contextual connotations. On a religious level, linguistic impurity was not (just) an infringement of the foreign, it could be dangerous and cause religious misconceptions because of the ambiguity to which it could lead. But these psalm authors were not just focusing on the Dutch speaking community and their pure and standard language. They not only looked inward, but also outward, to the Francophone congregations. Translations could bring communities with different languages closer together, but before this outward movement could take place, inward inspection of the own language was imperative. The language question did not always end in purification and standardization, though it could very well begin there.

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Pioneering work has been done by Leonard Forster, Willem Frijhoff and Peter Burke. See, for example, Forster 1970; Frijhoff 2010a; Burke 2004.

Ramakers 2012.

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This concept is based on the terms ‘lieu de savoir’, coined by Christian Jacob, and ‘laboratoire linguistique’, developed within the international EUROLAB project. Jacob 2014; Kammerer & Müller forthcoming.

Fish 1980, 171.

Vanderheyden 1965; Van der Wal 1995, 19; Grafton 2001, 141-155. For the printing press itself (and not the printers, who will be central to this study) as an important factor, see the seminal and much debated works of Benedict Anderson, Lucien Febvre, Marshall MacLuhan and Elisabeth Eisenstein: Febvre 1958, 277-296; Eisenstein 1979; Anderson 1991; MacLuhan 2005.

Mak 1944, 136-138; Spies 1993.

Brengelman 1980; Frijhoff & Spies 1999, 220.


For this Europe-wide phenomenon, see Demonet 1992; Burke 2004; Cohen 2003; Cohen 2005; Van Hal 2010; Simon 2011.


Frijhoff 2010b; Lusingnan 2012, 193.

Nowicki 2011; Pahta & Nurmi 2011.


Smit 1939; Overdiep 1944; Lenselink 1959; De Gier 1987.

For an overview of his life, see the dated but still unrivalled biography by Frederik Pijper: Pijper 1883.

The first edition of his psalter was published in London in 1551. Various versions appeared between 1551 and 1565, which marks the year in which he finished his project. Slenk 1969, 156-157.

‘zo hebben wy onze schrijuen alzo ghematight, dat het allen den Nederlanderen zal moghe n nut enddienstigh zijn.’ Utenhove 1556, π5v–n5v.

Utenhove 1556, π4v–n5v.


‘Op dat door het onachtzaem schrijuend de meyning des heylighe n Gheęstes niet verduystert wurde.’ Utenhove 1556, π4v–π5r.


Burke 2005, 18; Cummings 2007.

Datheen 1566.

Rasch 2008.

Knetsch 1991, 102. It is striking that the consecutive versions of Utenhove’s Psalter also increasingly resembled the Genevan Psalter in form. Slenk 1965, 66.


Marnix of Saint-Aldegonde 1580. Adapted editions appeared in 1591 and 1617.

Den Besten 1983, 75-78; De Gier 1987, 116-118.


Rudelsheim 1898.

De Keyser 1940, 154.

‘haer oude duytsche landt ende moeder spraecke wederomme int ghebruyck te breghen om sick te behelpen met duydelijcke woorde n’. Marnix of Saint-Aldegonde 1580, fol. A4v.

However, it was not accepted as a replacement for Datheen’s psalter by the National Synod. Rudelsheim 1898, 134; Todd 1992; De Smet 2006, 94-96.

For other examples of such ‘polyglot harmony’ see Demonet 1992, 28; Erben 2012. I am grateful to Joanne van der Woude for her suggestions on this topic.
Spanish-Flemish trade networks in the distribution of religious texts during the 16th century

The political and religious construction of the “maternal body” in the Renaissance and the impact of the Reformation: norms, rules and literary models in the French-vernacular books for women, 1488-1589.

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From the 16th century, humanists began to promote translation into the vernacular for an expanding readership who did not have direct access to classical sources, the tendency widely maintained throughout the Enlightenment period. The 10th century gave the world the first manuscript Latin-English glossary by Abbot Aelfric. The first bilingual glossary to find its way into print was a French-English vocabulary for the use of travelers, printed in England by William Caxton in 1480. His reasoning was that it is impossible to convey all the harmony of poetry through another language. In the 19th century translation was mostly concerned with fiction, a unilateral means of communication among educated people. When analyzing translation in the United States. The term is actually one. Venuti borrowed from Lecercle (The Violence of Language, 1990: 182) During the nineteenth century, translation played a mixed role in the. development of the young country; expansion continued to the West, and explorers such as Lewis and Clark relied heavily upon translators and. the sixteenth century. Again, most of it takes place out of sight, less in the. metropolitan areas such as New York, Chicago, and New Orleans, and. monolingualism and assimilation have continued through the twentieth. century. Even today, despite efforts of Cajun activists and the creation of. the state agency The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana.