Substandardization at school: Is language variation a friend or an enemy?

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In the Flemish linguistic literature of the past two decades, the substandard variety tussentaal has been subjected to heavy debate. Tussentaal (literally in-between-language) can be described as a 'mixed lect' that shares features with both standard Dutch and the Dutch dialects. The use of tussentaal has expanded - functionally as well as situationally – in such a way that there is no escape to it. This expansion can be explained by the fact that tussentaal caters for a specific need to fill the gap in the continuum between standard and dialect varieties: because of the constant interaction between several language varieties, the Flemish language situation has developed from a diglossic to a diaglossic language situation (cf. Auer 2005). Massive 'style shifting' occurs, in which non-standard language variants are being incorporated in more formal situations that normally require standard language use – a process we can call substandardization (Jaspers & Brisard 2006).

Those multifaceted language evolutions contrast sharply with the language policy carried out by the Flemish government with regards to education. In the official language policy document De lat hoog voor talen, standard Dutch is being called the only acceptable language variety in Flemish educational contexts, inside as well as outside the classroom. Other language varieties (tussentaal, dialect) are being denounced or not even mentioned in the policy document, in spite of being the Umgangssprache of most students. In this respect, the government policy serves as an example of what Irvine & Gal have called erasure: "Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away." (2000:38).

That the government seems blind to the apparent language variety, puts teachers in a difficult position: how to unite the monoglossic utopia of the government with the ever-expanding language diversity (indigenous as well as foreign) in Flanders and its schools? This issue does not only concern Flanders, but also many other language communities with a complex language situation. The here-reported research aims at bringing together the two diverging poles – language reality at school and the government’s language policy:

1. Linguistic reality at school. Is there, aside from the standard, also room for other language varieties, and in which situations? We observe 12-, 14- and 18-year-old pupils and their teachers, and register their language use and perception through observation and a questionnaire.
2. The governmental language policy. How can an efficient language pol-
icy be conceived, a policy which enables an education type that gives students opportunities, but at the same time faces day-to-day reality?

References

