

# 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

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