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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cmc/342>
DOI: 10.4000/cmc.342
ISSN: 2684-3080

Publisher

Fondation de la Mémoire Contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2016
Number of pages: 283-289
ISSN: 1377-1256

Electronic reference

Barbara Dickschen, « Linguistic Diversity within Antwerp's Jewish Community », *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire Contemporaine* [Online], 12 | 2016, Online since 05 November 2019, connection on 08 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cmc/342> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/cmc.342>

Linguistic Diversity within Antwerp's Jewish Community

Barbara Dickschen

Throughout most of their history, the Jews have been a multilingual people¹. Like so many other Jewish diasporas, Antwerp's Jewish community has been « marked by transnational conditions », shaped by different migration waves, essentially from Eastern Europe². Before and after the Holocaust, Antwerp's Jewish community forms a heterogeneous group, unified by a collective consciousness and strong sense of belonging.

Because of this cultural plurality, the Jewish community of Antwerp is not a unilingual social group. In this fairly small community of approximately 15,000 persons, a great diversity of languages is used in different situations. Within a dominant Dutch-unilingual context, the multilingual character of the Jewish community appears as particularly exotic.

Until recently, little attention has been devoted to the linguistic practice of this minority. We know for a fact the importance of language as the expression of identity : it expresses the way people perceive themselves and their relation to society. How Jewish schools in Antwerp reacted and adapted to the changing language policies in force is, in this case, quite revealing. Nowadays, one notices that, although this particular community is inextricably intertwined with Antwerp, the practice of Dutch by its members is actually restrained. Hence, one may wonder about the role given by Antwerp's Jews to

¹ This article is based on a lecture given at the Instituut voor Joodse Studies (Universiteit Antwerpen), 7th Contact Day Jewish Studies On the Low Countries (2014) and is an updated reprint of B. Dickschen, « Une communauté en transit : profil sociolinguistique de la communauté juive d'Anvers », in *FrancoFonie, Revue du Centre d'Étude des Francophones en Flandre, Identité(s)*, 3, 2011, pp. 64-74. We would like to thank Stefan Goltzberg for his insightful comments.

² E. Ben Rafael, Y. Sternberg (eds.), *Transnationalism. Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis)order*, Leiden-Boston, 2009.

Dutch and about how this determines their ties with the non-Jewish Dutch-speaking majority³.

Dutch in Jewish schools

Before the Second World War, there were just two subsidized Jewish schools in Antwerp: the moderate religious Zionist Tachkemoni, which opened in 1920, and the more orthodox Jesode Hatora, founded at the end of the 19th century⁴. In both schools, pupils follow a dual curriculum composed of religious and secular studies in accordance with the educational requirements of the Belgian State. In 1921, the municipal executive decided to “adopt” both schools, meaning the schools received public funding to a certain extent. The granting of such subsidies entailed the conformity to certain legal requirements. From the outset, it appears that the fact that those schools were what we may call mixed-languages schools, and that a vast majority of the pupils didn’t have Belgian nationality was considered a major obstacle to subsidization. More than once, the local authorities recommended them to use Dutch as the main language of instruction⁵.

What is the linguistic policy ?

The Act of 1914, which made primary education compulsory, states that a child’s maternal or usual language, determined on the declaration made by the head of the family, becomes the language of instruction. Thanks to fairly broad interpretation of the text, Dutch-speaking

³ For the sake of clarity, we have chosen to use the term Dutch throughout the article.

⁴ V. Vanden Daelen, « Over dagscholen, bijscholen, cheiders en jesjivot – Een historiek van Joods onderwijs in België », in *Torb, Tijdschrift voor onderwijsrecht en onderwijsbeleid, Recht, religie en onderwijs*, 1-2, 2010-2011, pp. 99-107.

⁵ FelixArchief (FA), MA, 79.522, Letter signed Verschueren, 16th May 1922 ; *Ibid.*, *Overeenkomst van aanneming - afschriften van het Raadsbesluit d.d. 30 januari 1939* ; *Ibid.*, *Zitting van de Commissie van Onderwijs op maandag 30 januari 1939 in de collegezaal ten Stadhuize* ; Cfr. B. Dickschen, *L’école en sursis. La scolarisation des enfants juifs pendant la guerre*, Brussels, 2006, pp. 35-41 ; *Ead.*, « De verplichte segregatie van joodse leerlingen in België (1941-1943) », in *Torb, Tijdschrift voor onderwijsrecht en onderwijsbeleid, Recht, religie en onderwijs*, 1-2, 2010-2011, pp. 108-114.

parents still had the opportunity to choose French as the instruction language for their children. In some parts of Flanders there were, in addition to Dutch language primary schools, State and private French language primary schools. While secondary education was provided sometimes in French and sometimes half in French and half in Dutch. A fundamental change was made to this system by the linguistic laws of 1932, which introduced the concept of territoriality : in the Dutch-speaking region, the language of education had to be Dutch. In fact, families of linguistic minorities in each region still had a certain freedom of choice. Children whose maternal or usual language was not that of the region were entitled to receive their primary education in their own language. The competent authorities remained the judges of the “reality of this need” and decided to set up what was called “transmutation” classes : pupils enrolled in these classes were instructed mainly in French but were obliged to learn the language of the region. The overall idea was that the maternal language merits the same respect as religious or philosophical convictions. In Jewish schools where the mother tongue of the pupils wasn’t one of the national languages, parents could choose between Dutch or French. Most Jewish parents preferred French⁶.

In 1939, both schools were overwhelmingly French-speaking with most primary classes being strictly in French. To give an idea of the situation : in Jesode Hatora, only 10 pupils had Dutch as their mother tongue. 139 of the children had French as their maternal language, 6 children had German, 1 pupil was English-speaking and 15 were Yiddish-speaking. Because of this particular situation, it was decided that children of “German or Slave ascendant” should be taught in Dutch. Still, the French classes were overcrowded in comparison with the Dutch classes. More than once, the municipal executive threatened to withhold grants if the schools did not comply more eagerly with the linguistic provisions set out in the legislation.

The population of those schools reflects the cultural and thus linguistic plurality of this minority but it must be said that, despite the existence of two Jewish educational establishments, before the Second World War, the bulk of Antwerp’s Jewish youth attended public

⁶ *100 jaar Jesode-Hatora – Beth Jacob 1895-1995*, Antwerp, 1995, p. 74.

school. By sending their children to public schools, Jewish parents contributed to the growing laicization of Jewish populations. Public schools turn out to be a vehicle for intense socialization and an essential instrument of integration. It is therefore not surprising to find amongst Jewish pupils attending the Antwerp secondary schools, enthusiastic activists of the Flemish cause. In spite of a cultural, political and religious specificity, the perpetuation of constraining Jewish traditions is not obvious anymore for new generations. The Second World War constitutes a breaking point in this process of assimilation.

After Second World War

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Jewish community licked its wounds and the process of slow healing started. Jewish schools reopened, despite the disappearance of a large part of their population. It is then, shortly after the war, that Hasidic communities establish in Antwerp, therefore changing drastically the profile of Antwerp's Jewish community. Throughout the following decades different – mainly orthodox to ultra-orthodox – Jewish schools were founded. Most of the ultra-orthodox (Belz, Satmar...) schools were and still are totally private and do not receive any public funding.

In those years, as we said before, in Tachkemoni and in Jesode Hatora, the language of instruction was nearly exclusively French. That situation lingered until stricter linguistic regulations concerning education in 1963 abolished the so-called transmutation classes and special language classes. Only the language of the region was now to be the instruction language, and certificates relating to schooling not in conformity with the language requirements in education were not homologated anymore.

Nowadays, in Jewish state-funded schools, profane subject matters are taught in Dutch, as required by law. Despite strict language regulations, one can however still notice a feeble mastering of Dutch by the pupils of those schools. Even if the necessary competence is acquired on the grammatical level, the use of Dutch is not as fluent as one could expect.

Though Flanders has become an economical strong unilingual region, within the familiar context (family, friends), French is still spo-

ken by a large part of the Jewish community. This is mostly the case among the more secular members, even if the *lingua franca*, the non-native trade language, for interaction outside the community is Dutch. Antwerp being one of the major centers of contemporary Hasidism, the degree of motivation to speak Dutch is for the more orthodox sub-groups within this community even more limited.

A highly relevant reason to learning a language or using it is the motivation to interact or just understand members of another speech community. More than any other minority in this country, the Jewish community of Antwerp is shaped by strong religious and cultural codes and their own institutional structures (on a social, cultural or educational level). This reduces dramatically the possible interaction with people outside the community and thus, the degree of motivation to master the Dutch language. Therefore, if Dutch is spoken, it is limited to a merely practical reason : making oneself comprehensible.

In the interwar period, in a by far more class-conscious society where the choice of language reflected the social allegiance, French was the language used to gain prestige, to emphasize a certain social standing. Besides being an instrument of social advancement, it was also the language for trading. Therefore, Jewish migrants tended to chose the “language of power”, which for decades was French. Moreover, Flemish Dutch is marked by a variety of dialects differing with the standard form and generally used in informal contexts, which makes it even more difficult for newcomers. For many years, Dutch was therefore negatively prejudiced and failed in competing with French as the national language for those migrants. Still now, Dutch is considered as a “minor language”, not of great use abroad, making it less attractive. And these last few years, with the diamond trade economy declining, rising poverty and a growing feeling of insecurity due to an increase in anti-Semitic incidents, the younger generations more and more plan their future abroad.

Preserving Jewish identity

The traumatic events of the Holocaust probably reinforced this negative perception of Dutch. For numerous Jews, the Flemish movement (*Vlaamse Beweging*), and as a consequence the Dutch lan-

guage, is associated with the idea of collaboration with the Nazis. After the Holocaust, in this hostile context, the urge of preserving Jewish identity is reaffirmed vigorously. Education has always played a specific role in this attempt to perpetuate ethnic and religious heritage. A recent survey brought to light that, nowadays, about 85 percent of Jewish children in Antwerp attend Jewish schools and that Antwerp has 14 (fully or partially) subsidized Jewish schools, as well as a number of non-subsidized private schools⁷. This of course restricts social interactions with the non-Jewish population. And most of these Jewish schools, private or public, are not always into conformity with national educational standards. Their pupils, when leaving school, are not prepared to integrate into Belgian society : beyond the practical problems related to the obligation of observing restrictive religious prescriptions, rarely compatible with modern life, their poor mastering of Dutch and lack of professional skills often constitute an insurmountable obstacle.

As we said at the outset of this article, the Jewish community of Antwerp is multilingual with several languages spoken on a regular basis by a large part of this community. These are mainly the non-Jewish languages : French, English and Dutch, and the Jewish languages : Yiddish and Hebrew. Within this range of languages, there is however a hierarchy of use. They all have different social and communicative functions, covering different domains. This is a general tendency, which doesn't mean that all members of the community master all those languages. Yiddish for example, is spoken by the most orthodox Jews, making Antwerp one of the few Yiddish-speaking centers in the world. For years, Yiddish was the language used in the diamond trade. However, this changed since the power shift in the city's diamond exchange with the diamond trade being taken over by the Indian community. The youngest generation of more secular Jews does not master this language anymore. As for Hebrew, it is of course the language of the Scriptures. In a Zionist inspired school as Tachkemoni, Hebrew is not just the holy language but also the spoken language in teaching Jewish matters. Therefore, Hebrew, if not always a spoken

⁷ V. Vanden Daelen, *op. cit.*, p. 101. We are of course aware of the fundamental methodological problem these kind of surveys are confronted with : mainly, the criteria used to determine a person's Jewishness.

language, is a language in which a large part of the members of this fairly religious community is competent in.

The source of this linguistic complexity is the geographical mobility of the Jewish population. In this multilingual context, one chooses a language according to circumstances. The direct result of this active multilingualism, and constant language-switching, is that the different languages sometimes may get mixed up with each other. Especially when two languages overlap when covering the same domain. It is not that unusual to see different languages spoken within one family. Parents can have different mother-tongues and talk to their children in their native language. But the daily used language isn't always the parent's mother-tongues. The boundaries between the use of these languages are blurred.

Even if there is not one specific linguistic link between the members of Antwerp's Jewish community, they do all share strong common characteristics in the way that they emerge as a distinct community. The relatively restricted use of Dutch, and their reticence towards it, is significant of the way Jews identify themselves and their lack of rootedness in Flemish society. The traditional, rather negative pattern of exile seems still to exist within Antwerp's Jewish community. Few in numbers, making tremendous efforts to preserve their heritage and having their own religious and cultural codes, Antwerp Jews are in a certain way staying at a distance from the non-Jewish world and living as outsiders within the Flemish population.