Beware of the weeds

Understanding Flemish linguistic purism as a utopian discourse

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Abstract: Research into linguistic purism often reflects a critical, if not contemptuous attitude towards its subject of inquiry. The reasons for this are purists’ prescriptive stance, as well as their frequent association with ethno-linguistic nationalism, an ideology in moral disrepute. We argue that this approach of purism produces blind spots. Following Pratt’s suggestion, we reconsider linguistic purism in this article as the effect of a utopian discourse and show how a desire for (linguistic) purity is at the very heart of the project of modernity. We apply our theoretical framework to the history of purism in modern Flanders (nineteenth to twenty-first century).

Keywords: linguistic purism, Utopian Studies, nationalism, modernity, language policy

1 Linguistics and utopia

In her contribution titled “Linguistic utopias”, Mary Louise Pratt almost 30 years ago criticized the insufficiently recognized utopian dimensions of linguistics. Linguists’ notion of the “speech community” tended to rely on a process of idealization strikingly similar to nationalists’ imagination of nations as discrete entities – the proverbial island – with its members as part of an egalitarian, comradely group (Pratt 1987: 50). Such communities moreover were mostly approached on the basis of a supposed “ideal (native) speaker” representing an unmarked, “pure” variant of the shared code. “This is the situation where the data are felt to be ‘purest’, where you can most clearly see the fundamentals of how language works, with minimal distortion, infelicity or ‘noise’”, Pratt argued while taking issue with De Saussure’s and Chomsky’s assumptions in this regard (1987: 50). “It makes sense”, she concluded, “to see a good deal of linguistic
description, of both critical and ‘uncritical’ kinds, as engaged in producing [an] imagined utopian entity.” (Pratt 1987: 50; cf. Rampton 2010).

In criticizing this approach as a “linguistics of community” Pratt called for a “linguistics of contact” that would break away from a focus on unified communities and purified speech. As her contribution progressively expounded on this alternative approach, Pratt’s analysis of the utopian dimension of linguistics eventually remained somewhat on the surface. The fact that much sociolinguistic research since then has taken Pratt’s argument to heart has in addition implied that utopian dimensions of language and linguistics have disappeared from the forefront of scholars’ interests. In this article, however, we intend to work out more systematically the relation between utopia as a literary and politico-philosophical genre and the ideology of the achievable language (later: standard language) that erupted in Western early modernity.

Thereby we focus on the phenomenon of linguistic purism (Section 3), which we understand as an effect of what, among others, Achterhuis (1998), Koselleck (2002) and Latour (1993) construe as the fundamentally utopian attitude characterizing Western aspirations to modernity. Typical for this attitude is a firm belief in achievability and the pursuit of a totalizing project that envisions a break with the past, basic patterns that systematically transpire in linguistic metadiscourses since the Renaissance (Burke 2004: 59, 89–110; Eco 1995: 209; Van der Horst 2008: 66–67). An advantage of such an approach is that it makes more apparent the similarities between types of linguistic purism that are rather indebted to Romanticism and those that ostensibly seem more “Enlightened” (cf. Bauman and Briggs 2003).

In the second part of this article (Sections 4 to 7) we test our theoretical framework on language purism discourses in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. More precisely we compare a corpus of late nineteenth-century texts with one composed of early twenty-first-century texts. We argue that despite the rejection of purist practices in contemporary linguistics, the utopian mindsets that are behind purist convictions have far from disappeared today. We begin however with a short state of affairs of research into linguistic purism and with explaining our departure points.

2 Purism: state of affairs

“Linguistic purism” has covered a range of different dimensions of language. Some linguists retain the term for the identification and attempted removal of unwanted elements in the lexicon and, to a lesser extent, in the domain of
grammar, morphology, orthography and pronunciation (Bex and Watts 1999; Langer and Davies 2005; Langer and Nesse 2012; Trask 1999). “Unwanted” in this regard may relate to all elements of foreign origin, to what are seen as corruptive features from low-status varieties or registers, linguistic innovations associated with new technologies, and to elements from a dominant language that is seen to encroach upon the prerogatives of a less dominant or endangered one (Horner 2005; Jaffe 1999). Others cast a wider net for purism and point out that entire indigenous dialects or sociolects (“slang”) can be found impure and undesirable (Thomas 1991). Such attributions have been described as occurring in literate societies but also by scholars concerned with languages that have no prior or only a recent history of literacy (see, among others, Brincat et al. [2003], Dorian [1994], Hill and Hill [1980]). There is often attention in this frame to the fact that purism leads to the invention of neologisms (so-called “purisms”) for unwanted elements, as well as to its unintended consequences if it discourages current and new speakers from using the language purists are so intent on keeping uncontaminated or hope to see revitalized.

Many scholars draw attention to the ideological grounding of purism as a practice bound up with the imagination of the social order and the identification of linguistic authority (Cameron 1995; Jaffe 1999; Thomas 1991). Identifying pure, that is, authoritative language (in the past, in particular groups, in texts) thus becomes a way of defining relationships between social groups which are differentially positioned according to their “pure” or “impure” type of speech (cf. Agha, 2015). When particular types of purism are subsequently canonized for whole societies through their uptake in the practices of schooling or state administration, purism can scarcely be separated from linguistic standardization and conscious language planning, phenomena of which the origin is usually situated in the Renaissance (Nahir 1977; Van der Horst 2008). In its institutional guise purism in this approach emerges at the national academies, such as the Accademia della Crusca (1582) and the Académie française (1635) (Edwards 2009; Nahir 1977; Thomas 1991).

Characteristic for most purism research today is a critical, if not pitying attitude towards its object of research. This attitude originates from the evolution of linguistics. As the apex of a prescriptivist approach to language, purism is rejected for being at odds with the descriptivist stance linguistics has come to insist on (see, e.g., Milroy & Milroy 1985). Cameron (1995) usefully argues that linguists in this way overlook that value-judgments are fundamental in the production of all language use, and gloss over their own efforts in language planning, revitalization and standardization. But while such efforts are still seen as relatively advantageous, purism is also considered to be futile since the idea of a “pure” language is deemed delusional: “[a]cademic linguists have a
problem with [purism] since no language is a precisely defined entity with a
unique history and a closed set of linguistic features. Hence any attempt to
purify a language must be ill-conceived since no language has ever been pure in
the first place”, Langer and Davies write (2005: 4). Any attempt to safeguard a
language from unwelcome elements thus resides in the unnecessary fear of
change occurring in all natural languages: “A language will always serve
‘perfectly’ those who communicate with it so there is no need to worry about
change, in fact no point in worrying about it, resisting it, or making suggestions
as to how to alter or improve a language” (Langer and Nesse 2012: 608). That
such expert views fail to spark enthusiasm in the wider public sphere requires
little explanation and is illustrated by the on-going concerns about “language

One of the prime reasons however why students of purism are intent on
purifying their own efforts from its malodorous qualities, it seems, is that purism
can be connected to forms of nationalism that promote the autochthonic lan-
guage as a crucial ingredient of an ethnic identity (Thomas 1991: 136). In this
context the main thrust of linguistic purism by definition (but not exclusively)
is the elimination of “foreign infiltration” and the cultivation of national linguistic
pride. This connection between (ethnolinguistic) nationalism and linguistic
purism, which is generally associated with the work of Herder, Fichte and
other German Romantics, has often served to reject linguistic purism on moral
grounds. It is seen as an emblem of xenophobia, racism, chauvinism, narrow-
mindedness and obscurantism (cf. Absillis and Jaspers 2016). Indeed, purism is
even considered symptomatic of aspirations which, in reference to genocide or
tribal warfare, are classed as downright dangerous (Lévy 1994; Sémelin 2005).
Some scholars nevertheless distinguish between “dangerous” and more inno-
cent or useful types of purism. Thomas for example contrasts Enlightenment
purism, presented as “rational, moderate” (1991: 143), with a xenophobic type of
purism he attributes to Romanticism. But in this way he reproduces the received
idea that Romanticism is a retrograde step in comparison to the Enlightenment,
and suggests that this manifests itself in its more intolerant take on language.

We concur with Bauman and Briggs (2003) that most explorations of lin-
guistic purism tend to neglect that language purification played a fundamental
role in the work of early Enlightenment thinkers such as Francis Bacon and John
Locke, long before Herder developed his ideas on language. While it is custom-
ary to understand modernity as the product of a series of historical changes in
Western Europe from the end of the Middle Ages onwards (the arrival of
capitalism, urbanization, state administrations, secularization, and so on),
Bauman and Briggs emphasize that modernity crucially depends on a narrative
project, that is, a cluster of discourses that represent these developments as
civilized and modern. This “ideological” modernity, firmly rooted in humanism and Enlightenment thinking, comprises three important intellectual shifts. The first of these is the view that rather than relying on divine authority or traditional custom, human beings must develop their individual autonomy on the basis of empirically verifiable knowledge which will allow them to explore, control, and conquer the world around them. Closely related to this, and secondly, is a new worldview in which humans see themselves evolve from “gamekeeper” to “gardener” (cf. Bauman 2007), that is, from mere caretakers of God’s creation to active interveners in nature with a view to taming and perfecting it. Finally, humans’ belief in their own capabilities to improve the world is accompanied by a prospect of Progress which replaces the Medieval, static temporal order with a dynamic and future-oriented one. This new temporal order consequently defines the standard of civilization at a universal scale, along which all societies are evaluated to the extent that they display developments portrayed as modern.

In linguistic terms this ideological modernity manifests itself in the conviction that language is perfectible; that it requires intervention so as to make it more amenable to rational and civil communication to the advantage of humans’ emancipation and general improvement; and that this intervention proceeds through a regime of purification which holds humans accountable for standardizing their language use, that is, purifying it from all that stands in the way of modern communication. This reform project sets out to strip language of all forms that are seen to contribute to inconsistency, confusion, or ambiguity, which in effect soon implies that the linguistic practices of those considered provincial, ignorant or uncivilized come to be identified as problematic. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century this was the fate of the poor, the rural, illiterates, non-Europeans, and women, in contrast with the discursive practices of an exclusive elite of learned gentlemen.

Bauman and Briggs consequently point out that Romanticism in the second half of the eighteenth century produces an, at first sight, nostalgic counter-melody. Herderians, after all, were captivated by emotion, mystery and poetry, believing that local traditions were a source of vitality and expressed a sense of collectivity that needed to be described, saved and politically cherished. Essentially, however, these oppositional philosophies stimulate a comparable intolerance for heteroglossia:

In addition to legitimating structures of inequality in the public sphere, the language ideologies of Locke and Herder converge in denying the legitimacy of multiple voices and multiple languages in public discourse. Their respective visions of political community and national interest have in common a principled insistence on linguistic and discursive standardization and regimes of purification: social and political cohesion demand one language, one metadiscursive order, one voice. (Bauman and Briggs 2003: 195)
This convergence is explained by the similar outcome of Enlightened thinkers’ suggestion to infuse public discourse with a transparent communication tool in support of a rational politics, and Herder’s wish that public discourse be carried out in a purified, modern version of the traditional variety still discernible among those least affected by the evils of industrialization and rationalist thinking. In both perspectives too, purification was not so much entrusted with ordinary speakers as with intellectuals who were to set the example through speaking and writing an impeccable version of the Enlightened or national language (Bauman and Briggs 2003: 184).

The insightfulness and scope of this analysis cannot be overestimated. It argues that the ideological modernity was recycled and reinvigorated by Romanticists as they strove to construct nations anchored in the past but ambitious to transcend that past and become modern (hence: nation-states). It also makes clear that while purism is probably of all times and has developed in different cultural and historical contexts, as a metadiscursive practice it reverberates formidabley when assumptions about language and communication become an intrinsic part of the construction of modern society. This modernist type of purism has consequently become (and we argue below, may still be) the hegemonic metadiscursive regime. Less specifically addressed by Bauman and Briggs, however, is the classic utopian character of the metadiscursive regimes Locke and Herder proposed and the predominant discursive tropes with which these were made explicit.

In the following, therefore, we explain that linguistic purification regimes have much in common with earlier and simultaneously formulated utopian discourses that projected the exorcizing of widespread anxieties, and that at least some of the persuasiveness of linguistic purification regimes resides in their use of tropes that exploit the separation, domestication but ultimate idealization of nature by society.

3 Standard languages as utopian projects

It is difficult to ignore the extent to which linguistic standardization discourses share characteristics with the classic utopias written by Thomas More (Utopia, 1516) and Francis Bacon (The New Atlantis, 1624) in the wake of the terror, disease and chaos that had been haunting Western Europe from the fourteenth century onwards (Achterhuis 1998). One of the core characteristics of these utopias is their emphasis on achievability, that is, the idea that human intervention can diminish different sources of suffering such as diseases, warfare, and food scarcity.
Whether Thomas More himself was legitimizing the new world view we now call ‘modern’, or rather criticizing it, remains a matter of debate. For a more elaborate discussion: see Absillis 2016. Achterhuis only sporadically addresses the linguistic projects following from such ambitions (1998: 236–237; Achterhuis 2006: 16–18), but it is within the framework of this endeavor to reorganize the world and domesticate what causes suffering, that attempts to “make language safe for science and society” (Bauman and Briggs 2003: 19) can be better understood. Bacon, and later Locke, saw language in their time as an obstacle to a safer, less painful future, because words were confusing, persuasive, distorted knowledge, and created misunderstanding and conflict. For Bacon this meant that language-in-use was to be mistrusted (Bauman and Briggs 2003: 22–23). Locke decided that intervention was required and he projected as achievable the domestication of linguistic nature and the construction of a transparent, pure, and from the nineteenth century onwards “standard” language (Joseph 1987).

A second key characteristic of Utopias Achterhuis calls attention to is that they are totalizing projects: they involve a blueprint for the total (re)organization of a whole community. Dreams of a rational, transparent language were cultivated not only in view of the efficient exchange of empirically grounded knowledge among intellectuals-legislators, but also in light of this variety’s application in the public sphere where it was to prevent miscommunication, demagoguery and conflict – a view further developed in the work of Jürgen Habermas. The twentieth century has witnessed the evolution of standardization discourses in a totalitarian fashion, alongside similar non-linguistic developments of this kind, with nation-states propagating standard language use as the exclusive road to emancipation, leading to a generally increased accountability, for more and more community members, of deviant or non-standard language use (see, among others, Lippi-Green [1997]).

Thirdly, as societal experimenters, whether fictional or not, utopian engineers strive to bring about a radical change, often through a complete rupture with the past. They intend to construct society anew, starting from a blueprint and steadfastly holding on to that blueprint – hence Popper’s claim that utopian engineers are driven by aestheticism and purism, that is, by an urge to create a world free from ugliness and corruption: “not a crazy quilt, an old garment badly patched, but an entirely new gown, a really beautiful new world” (Popper 2002: 154). Such utopian sentiments were a crucial part of imaginings of a new social order predicated on scientific insight and rational thought. Linguistically, this striving for radical change transpired in “quixotic ideal[s] of an artificial, universal language” (Bauman and Briggs 2003: 29; Toulmin 1990: 104) and especially in Leibniz’s and Locke’s radical program for purifying language of ties to nature and society. Similar sentiments inspired the ambitions...
of French revolutionaries such as Abbé Grégoire’s “Report on the necessity of and the means for exterminating local vernaculars and universalizing the use of the French language” (1794; De Certeau et al. 1975; Higonnet 1980; Moore 2015).

A rupture with the past may seem difficult to reconcile with the cultural-nationalist take on standard languages, since the latter were meant to be founded on authentic traditions. But there is a utopian logic behind even the most conservative nationalist linguistic revitalization attempts: the nation’s blossoming needs to be realized by restoring its once perfect history so as to let it enrich the present nation’s ambitions. While this earlier grandiosity supposedly came about “organically”, its present restoration – in view of its imminent decay or last-minute salvation – needs to be exacted through experts’ archeological activity (collecting texts, studying dialects and local customs) to the benefit of the whole nation (Bauman and Briggs 2003: 184).

Taken together these core characteristics give way to a set of more specific features shared by many utopian projects. Their insistence on achievability, for example, usually results in a stringent work ethic, relying on self-discipline and systems of severe social control (e.g. panoptical constructions) to enforce norms and desired behavior, including the use of the only “appropriate” language for the entire community. Their totalizing character implies the radical subordination of individual interest to the public cause, resulting in outward uniformity: e.g. clothing, daily schedules or indeed linguistic conformity, implying the extermination of variation. Another specific feature is a widespread obsession with purity, which can manifest itself in moral Puritanism, far-reaching sanitary regulations, defense mechanisms (to prevent foreign influence) and, again, linguistic purification. Failure to comply to utopian standards almost always results in (symbolic) violence. Especially since the realization of the utopian ideal depends not on divine but human intervention, non-cooperation identifies Utopia’s direct enemies. To be sure, “having been presented with a [realistic] alternative, [people who fail to climb aboard] become willing and knowing promulgators of mayhem” (Bauman and Briggs 2003: 30). Hence, they “deserve” their degradation, exclusion from advantageous social positions and deportation – or worse, as a number of attempted Utopias in the twentieth century have had ample opportunity to illustrate.

Seen in this light, linguistic purism is an effect of a utopian attitude towards language. Or in more general terms, the idea(l) of a pure standard language can be defined as the product of the modernist spirit that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: it presents a realistically achievable, totalizing project that is hoped to create a radical new order to the benefit of all, with all the dark sides of violence that this entails. So while it has become bon ton to criticize “ethnically” inspired forms of linguistic purism as narrow-minded, ridiculous
and dangerous, many observers appear to overlook that an enlightened form of linguistic purism today is a crucial motor of standard language ideologies. Indeed, the latter form of purism can have effects that are comparable to those associated with its abhorred “ethnic” counterpart. In the next paragraphs, we demonstrate that it is essential to appreciate purism’s utopian logic in order to understand the image-ridden discourse through which it has been made explicit. We will focus in particular on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century purist schools in Flanders, before attending to contemporary purist discourses.

4 Utopian patterns of imagery: linguistic gardening in nineteenth century Flanders

Purism in Flanders was strongly implicated in the struggle for Dutch linguistic rights in Belgium, also called the Flemish Movement. In the nineteenth century it was motivated by two opposing views as to how linguistic tradition was to influence the project of making Flemings speak a modern, standard language: (1) “particularists” hoped to infuse this variety with Flemish (thus, “particular”) lexemes and orthography; while (2) “integrationists” feared that any concession to using the purer – since uninfluenced by French – Netherlandic Dutch would compromise linguistic emancipation altogether. These different opinions invited decades of altercations which were eventually won by integrationists (Vosters 2009). Ever since the latter have been represented as more sensible than their adversaries (Willemyns 2013) because of their supposed opposition to “excessive purism” and “less[er] detach[ment] from social reality” than particularists (Vandenbussche et al. 2005: 51, 53). Despite these differences, we illustrate below that attending to the typically utopian imagery used by integrationists and particularists shows that they have more in common than they are different. Moreover, we suggest that in spite of these schools’ nationalist inspiration, their project is testament to a distinctly modern logic that turns the perfectibility of society into a civic duty – though one that is to be supervised by language experts or “constant gardeners” (Bauman 1987; see also Absillis 2012).

4.1 Weeds in the standard language garden

Purists across Europe have a long tradition in self-presenting as gardeners (Thomas 1991: 20), connected to the equally common way of imagining the standard language as a garden or a (corn) field, and whatever linguistic elements
deemed unwanted in that territory as “weeds” or “tares”. In the 1890s, for example, integrationist Hippoliet Meert was awarded a prize for his Onkruid onder de tarwe [The tares among the wheat] (1899), an inventory of unwanted gallicist traces in the Dutch as it was written in Flanders at the time. The author hoped that his efforts would help “to purify our field, which is choked with weeds and was in urgent need of weeding” (Meert 1941 [1899]: 17).

Meanwhile Meert’s particularist adversaries made use of the same imagery. Take Jaak Muyldermans (1855–1929), who in his Collection of most frequent difficulties, gallicisms and germanisms in our language (1893), warned young writers of linguistic weeds:

In the garden of our mother tongue beautiful flowers flourish; but unfortunately the hedge around it is not luxuriant […] to prevent the stranger from throwing the seed of weeds between the roses and the jasmines. And you know that weeds often root and sprout branches easily. Such weeds are the Gallicisms and the Germanisms that teem in our spoken and written language; its unnatural twists and words that disfigure and defile our literary products. […] We […] speak today as the concerned gardener: “Young writers, beware of these words and of such expressions, it is weeds in the language, these are poisonous plants”. (Muyldermans 1893: v–vi)

Note that this particularist does not cultivate a nostalgia for a state of lost purity. Rather he projects a pure language (beautiful flowers in a garden) in the future, as the outcome of a fight against the lethal potential of unsolicited plants. Similar tropes abound in much other particularist advice of that era. Here is part of the introduction to a booklet of Désiré Claes (1836–1910), listing barbarisms and gallicisms that Flemings are to avoid using:

This booklet is in particular intended for students and young writers; may it be useful to many and help purify our linguistic and literary field of weeds! (Claes 1891: 7)

Claes admits that there are more mistakes than one effort can wipe out because “weeds thrive easily, are hard to exterminate and even escape the sharpest eye of the cleverest gardeners, just so that, as soon as their care diminishes, they can spread again vigorously and at an incredible speed to outshine and choke all valuable plants” (Claes 1891: 116).

A similar trope is developed by integrationist purist Jan Broeckaert (1837–1911), in a collection of “verbal weeds”, significantly titled Dictionary of bastard words: “so many weeds sprout and proliferate on our language’s
acre, that one spud, no matter how skilfully it is used, will be insufficient for ripping them out to the last bit of them” (Broeckaert 1895: xxiii).

Thus, in spite of their disagreements, integrationists and particularists draw on a fairly similar imagery that presents linguistic beauty and health as the future product of laborious gardening on a turf that needs protection through deliberate intervention. Comparable convergences can be found in these purist schools’ conditional love for dialects.

4.2 Conditional love for dialects

Ideally, from a nationalist perspective, the endeavour for linguistic purism is not in principle one that erases dialect. Rather it traditionalizes dialect as a remnant of the past that needs to be preserved as well as cherished for its authenticity against which, and on the basis of which, it is possible to pit a modern standard infused with carefully selected authentic dialect forms. It takes the expert’s know-how to finds such forms. When this idea is expressed, we frequently find the metaphor of the mine, as the following examples illustrate. Julius Obrie (1849–1929), an integrationist purist, holds:

> The popular language certainly offers a rich mine for maintaining and enriching the general literary language. One ought not to forget, however, that the diamonds thus dug up often still are in a very rough condition, and that in there more worthless rocks can be found than precious stones. One often attempts to sell for popular language that which is actually crooked and foul language. (Obrie 1890: 13)

Hence the need for expertise and craftsmanship to polish the national language and separate the wheat from the chaff. The same idea emerges with another integrationist purist, Willem De Vreese (1869–1938):

> The striving for a general language does not include, and does not arise from disdain or contempt for dialects [...]. The younger linguists in particular [...] appreciate dialects much more for what they are worth, study them with much more accuracy and love [...]. (De Vreese 1909: 47)

But although particularist purists advocated a Standard Dutch that included home grown Flemish vocabulary, spelling conventions or other peculiarities, they often produced the same conditional affection for dialects. Here is particularist Alfons Prayon-van Zuylen (1848–1916):

> I consider our age-old dialects to be a rich mine from where one can draw many words and expressions [...] on the condition namely that one does so with insight and cautiousness and not confuse rubble with diamonds. (Prayon-van Zuylen 1903: 46)
The abovementioned Muyldermans likewise complained that southern elements were consistently excluded from Standard Dutch, “as if it would no longer be literary or civilized if the polished lumps of gold of our region’s language were to be included” (quoted in Willeyns and Haeseryn [1998: 2935]). Lesser polished lumps or inferior metals by implication seemed to deserve their forsaking. Note, too, the various references to the expertise required for distinguishing diamonds from rocks: one needs “insight and cautiousness” to “study” with “accuracy and love” as well as “profoundly and methodically” before one can start thinking of polishing verbal diamonds in the service of creating a language for all. This conditional love for dialects is different from the aversion to hybrid verbal entities that both purist schools develop.

4.3 Total aversion to hybrid entities

In biological terms, hybridization refers to the blending of traits from different categories, the result of which by definition is heterogeneous (Stross 1999: 254). The Gallicisms that Flemish language gardeners so despised are good examples of hybrids in a metaphorical sense, hence the use of popular expressions like “bastard word”. In a broader sense hybridity can be understood to cover all elements that defy categorization by displaying characteristics of different categories. The abovementioned “weeds” image yields more fundamental meanings in this light. Where nature roams freely as a “pure” wilderness (untouched by [wo]men), the concept of weeds is unthinkable; weeds only materialize in the context of a garden or other planned spaces. They defy the pure distinction between nature and culture, a crucial taxonomic divide in modernist thinking (Latour 1993: 13), including language ideological discourses where nature can often be found put on a par with “dialect” and the “standard language” with culture.

But language planners’ aversion to hybrids is not necessarily dressed up in imagery. Jozef Vercoullie (1857–1937), professor at Ghent University, argued for instance that:

[In Flanders] one writes all too often in a language sui generis, which is neither the author’s dialect, nor the current Dutch language, but a compromise between both with archaisms and Gallicisms that looks like Dutch from an older period with mistakes in it. (Vercoullie 1906: v)

In similar vein, his student De Vreese deplored that many Flemish Movement advocates (the “civil Flamingants”) tend not to live up themselves to the ideal language they believe will make the Flemish nation revive:
Among the civil Flamingants and more particularly those who write, most have always spoken and most still speak, on certain occasions [...] a mixture of dialect and civilized Dutch that did not rest nor rests on an accurate observation of the Northern Dutch colloquial, but on the written language. [...] [If any progress can be made, then it is among this class, thanks to secondary education. (De Vreese 1909: 52)

De Vreese thus associates literate Flamingants’ attempts to reconcile an imported written standard with the exigencies of spoken interaction as the product of inaccurate observation, a lack of progress and education, and in this way actually questions these Flamingants’ hard-fought civility. An intolerance of hybrids was also developed by integrationist August Gitté (1858–1909), who observed that it occurs not within Dutch, but between Dutch and French:

 [...] the better half of the Flemings more or less possesses both national languages, but their knowledge is highly superficial: their French is defective, their Dutch is bad. Thus, due to the impurity of the middle in which he lives, the Fleming can have no opinion in matters of language, or at least not one that should be taken into account. (Gitté 1894: 326)

So whereas purists sought to distinguish their efforts from a disdain for dialects, we find no apologies in the quotes above, and an absence of positive qualifications for the “impurity of the middle”. Instead purists project hybrids as “mistakes”, “inaccuracies”, “inconsistencies” and the product of “superficial knowledge”, which bolsters the need for purification and calls for greater obedience to linguistic expertise (cf. Bauman and Briggs 2003: 184).

Particularist purists shared this aversion to hybrids, but contrary to the integrationists also pointed out impurities resulting from crossbreeding in Netherlandic Dutch. Omer Wattez, for instance, admitted frankly that “many Northern Dutchmen write well [...] on average better than the Flemings, but there are some who write so abominably that their language barely resembles Dutch anymore – so degenerate does it look!” (Wattez 1895: 92). Flemish newspapers and city administrations were equally identified as the breeding ground for linguistic hybrids, leading to qualifications, among others from particularist Muyldermans, as “ridiculous newspaper-flemish” and the “gibberish” or “broken Flemish” of civil servants (1893: 4, 38; compare Broeckaert 1895: xviii). While purists’ attention long remained focused on the written language, their imagery for warning for the hybridization of the spoken language was barely different. In 1912 the poet and folklorist Pol de Mont urged Flemings to “speak pure Dutch in all circumstances”:

A great number of Flemings speak argot. Prick up your ears and listen. You can hear it anywhere. On the street, in the train, at the stock market. Bonjour, Charles, how are you? Très bien, merci! Rather chilly hein, today! I put on my pardessus. [...] It is disgusting. (De Mont 1912)
Significantly, De Mont described this mixture of Dutch and French as “semi-Flemish”, and its users as “semi-Flemings”.

In sum, in spite of their belonging to opposing camps, all nineteenth and early twentieth-century Flemish purists:
1. firmly believe in the perfectibility of language;
2. find linguistic intervention in Flanders indispensable and urgent;
3. believe that only gardeners, metallurgists or qualified miners like themselves possess the know-how and skills to intervene successfully;
4. associate impure elements with hybridity: rather than dialectal features, it is those elements that are seen to corrupt either the civilized standard language or the authentic dialect that deserve eradication. These corruptive elements are called the “weeds”, or, more powerful in Dutch, onkruid ‘un-herb’, which literally denies these weeds’ category-belonging.

That integrationist and particularist purist schools share similarities has been noted before (Vandenbussche et al. 2005: 53; Vosters 2009). The examples above however hint that the similarities between both schools have to be taken as systematic rather than accidental, in that both schools generally share the same quintessentially modern, utopian view on language in line with the philosophical history we have summarized above.

5 Purism 2.0 and its tropes

Having discussed how linguistic purism blossomed in Flanders in the late 19th and early twentieth century, it would not be contentious to claim that it has now lost most of its feathers. Vandenbussche et al. argue that purism “has gradually become a footnote in the recent history of Dutch” (2005: 59). The increase of what purists have from the end of the nineteenth century been calling undignified language use would be another indication: contemporary public discourse is distinctly marked by the use of a nonstandard speech style dubbed tussentaal (literally ‘in-between language’) because it mixes Standard Dutch with dialect features (Jaspers and Van Hoof 2015). Tussentaal has become so popular that most Flemish linguists are now convinced that the standard variety of Belgian Dutch is losing ground to it (Grondelaers and van Hout 2011: 221). Other authors posit that Flanders is in a process of destandardization (Willems 2013) or even experiencing the end of standardization (van der Horst 2008), in line with suggestions that linguistic standardization is in consistent decline across Europe (Coupland and Kristiansen 2011).
Although there are signs that (public) language use in Flanders is undergoing significant changes, we want to suggest that predictions of the “end of purism” are precipitous. One reason for this is that the reception of *tussentaal* shows many trademarks of a purist attitude. Its name alone illustrates that we are dealing with a hybrid entity, which to the annoyance of language planners defies strict categorization. One popular name for *tussentaal* is *Verkavelingsvlaams* [Allotment Flemish], a name invented by a public intellectual and former newsanchor:

> There is something new, something foul attacking the language in the southern Nederlands. A lame usurper in bare clothes, but with the arrogance and impertinence of the *arriviste*. Its name is *Verkavelingsvlaams*. It is the language that is spoken in the posher villas on the allotted grounds of our mutilated villages. (Van Istendael 1989: 108–109)

Van Istendael further calls Allotment Flemish “muck” and a “half language”, because it “threatens Dutch and tramples her breeding ground, the dialect” (Van Istendael 1989: 108–109). As Absillis (2012) argues, this typification is indebted to nineteenth-century Flemish purism. For one thing, one of the least appreciated characteristics of this *Verkavelingsvlaams* is related to illegitimate French influence – Van Istendael annoys himself with the Flemish phrase *Wat uur is het?* ‘What time is it?’, a direct translation from the French *Quelle heure est-il?* (proper Dutch is *Hoe laat is het*?). More importantly still, *Verkavelingsvlaams* would seem to update the trope of wilderness, garden and weeds. Dialects are now connected with an “authentic” village culture that is disappearing under the steady allotment of farmlands around it for those seeking to live in detached houses outside town. As these allotments are seen to corrupt the ideal opposition between town-garden versus countryside-wilderness, so are the linguistic fruits that are taken to prosper in this twilight zone represented as weeds, or as uninvited usurpers: occupying the cordon sanitaire between dialect and standard language, they are seen to threaten these varieties’ sanitary conditions on either side of the tradition vs. modernity divide.

Other indications that linguistic purism is reinventing itself can be found in recent attempts in Flanders to negotiate internal fragmentation and a globalizing world. Politically and economically, nation-states have come under pressure from the globalizing new economy and the establishment of supranational organizations (see, among others, Bauman [1998], Castells [2000], Heller and Duchêne [2012]). Linguistically speaking, they have seen their territory become much more multilingual in the wake of the global culture industry, migration processes, and communication technologies. They also notice that supranational bodies (such as the EU) develop linguistic policies of their own that rub against nationalist agendas. While in principle such evolutions are not entirely new...
(apart from their current scale or speed), a more powerful challenge is that on a
discursive level, nation-states experience that “the mission civilatrice no longer
convinces” (Heller and Duchêne 2007: 6). It has become difficult to argue the
need for a pure, national language as a sign of progress, rational thought and
cultural refinement.

In response to this, nation-states have been argued to reposition themselves
through progressively trading in their political raison d’être for an economic one.
Thus, nation-states often reconceptualize their discourse on language through
(1) approaching language less as a symbol of national pride than as a commodity
for obtaining access to goods, services and jobs, and (2) through developing an
appreciation for multilingualism. Paradoxically however, this does not stand in the
way of a continuing valorization of monolingualism (Heller and Duchêne 2007;
Pujolar 2007): nation-states usually locate multilingualism in the individual (as
“skills”) or in international communication, while they zone off the national terri-
tory as purely monolingual (Hambye and Richards 2012: 166). In this respect, clearly,
they are still thinking in terms of what Pratt dubbed “linguistic utopias”.

Notions of a pure standard are moreover recycled in both locations: multi-
lingualism is marketed as a set of standard rather than vernacular varieties; the
acquisition, teaching and use of languages is typically designed to orient lear-
ners to forms of “parallel monolingualism” or “sequential bilingualism”
(Hornberger and Baker 2001; Moore 2015). Meanwhile the notion of the national
standard language survives via discursive tropes that represent it as a precondi-
tion for equal access to jobs, social cohesion and efficient communication. These
utopian tropes consequently legitimize the representation of other languages
and varieties on national territory as contemporary “weeds”, that is as econom-
ically unproductive and unwelcome.

Education, traditionally a salient site for crafting nation-state agendas, is one
of the key domains for the application of these tropes. This activity runs parallel
with anxieties Western governments have been cultivating for any signs that their
education system, in spite of its democratization, may contribute to failing those
who could benefit most from its credentialing power. In utopian fashion, this has
increased calls for more practical intervention, such as stimulating children’s
entrance to school from as early an age as possible or developing truancy plans,
besides a growing preoccupation with quality management, testing and ranking.
And certainly in Flanders, this has led to an intense preoccupation with language
education policy. “Equal opportunities lead to three clear priorities”, the former
Flemish Labor Education Minister Frank Vandenbroucke proposed, namely “lan-
guage, language and language” (Vandenbroucke 2007b). These priorities have
inspired a linguistic intervention plan that we will now briefly attend to before
concluding.
6 Linguistic purism in Flemish education policy and public debate

Education has come under regional, Flemish jurisdiction since 1988. It was not until less than ten years ago, however, that two relatively similar linguistic policies were formulated in 2007 and 2011 by successive Labor Ministers of Education (see Delarue and De Caluwe 2015). In line with the above, the basic argument of both policy documents is that multilingual skills are crucial in the global economy, but ought to be anchored in Standard Dutch. The 2007 policy brief reads: “a rich knowledge of Dutch as a standard language [...] is prerequisite for [...] a rich multilingualism” (Vandenbroucke 2007a: 6). In the 2011 document this becomes: “[i]n an increasingly multilingual environment, multilingualism is an added value. But without a communal language, which in Flanders is Standard Dutch, communication is impossible” (Smet 2011: 3). Both documents dismiss linguistic resources other than Standard Dutch or European foreign language skills consequently as obstacles for efficient communication or as inexpedient complexities in the face of beating social inequality.

Among the several tropes that are recruited in Flemish education policy effective communication is one of the most persistent. The way this trope pertains to intralinguistic variation is reminiscent of the earlier distrust of unsafe, confusing language use and the intervention that this requires. Guiding each pupil to a correct and rich skill in Standard Dutch, the 2007 policy text holds:

[...] is not an easy task in a society where linguistic communication appears to suffer from a process of disintegration. The rise of crooked and regional language use, the changes in language use as a result of new communication technologies and all kinds of subcultural varieties, all make linguistic communication in our society very complex. This leads to confusion, also in schools, and among some, this even leads to resignation. [...] I will not accept increasing linguistic complexity [...] as a pedagogical excuse. (Vandenbroucke 2007a: 4)

A concern for equal opportunities is another recurrent trope. Both policy documents therefore suggest a smooth acquisition of Standard Dutch and renounce sociolinguists’ insistence on linguistic complexity or “relativism”, which is said to “conflict with equal opportunities”:

Only by guiding each pupil to a correct and rich skill in the standard language, will education be able to guarantee that opportunities in society do not depend on social origin, but on the extent to which somebody’s talents have been developed. Setting the bar high requires discipline [...]. (Vandenbroucke 2007a: 6)
In 2011 “a rich knowledge of Standard Dutch” is not only presented as “a prerequisite” for a successful school career, access to various zones of socio-economic and cultural life and other forms of “social empowerment and integration”. It is held to be equally indispensable for “an increase of social cohesion, personal development, and for stimulating each individual’s sense of civic duty” (Smet 2011: 4). Apart from disregarding the widespread use of other (nonstandard, non-Dutch) languages on the labor market, then, both quotes clearly promote a concern for a “rich” – read: pure – Standard Dutch through more contemporary, common-sense values than those associated with earlier ideas of civilization (such as rational behavior or cultural refinement).

The trope of integration is recruited in a comparable way. When the 2011 text notices that 15 percent of children in primary education and 10 percent of pupils in secondary education do not speak Dutch at home, it continues:

Nevertheless, a rich knowledge of Standard Dutch is the condition for those who wish to learn, reside, work, live in Flanders. Those who come from elsewhere and fail to learn Standard Dutch, continue to live in the privacy of the family or community and so live – in Flanders – outside of Flanders. [...] the knowledge of a rich Standard Dutch must take precedence, as instruction language, as communal language, and as language for one communal identity. (Smet 2011: 3, emphasis in original)

The noticing of other home languages than Dutch thus raises the specter of fragmentation and lack of affiliation to a national identity that an investment in Standard Dutch is assumed to remedy. Taken together, these quotes illustrate that “[t]o the extent that communal life is itself drastically undermined, community grows in importance as a moral value and as a utopian point of critical purchase” (Rampton 2010: 297). Standard Dutch at the same time becomes a “potent, condensed and multivalent symbol” (Harris et al. 2001: 9) as it stands for national unity and homogeneity, effective communication, equal opportunities, civic duty, and greater social and economic mobility.

Both policies can be argued to echo utopian ambitions and project corresponding inflated expectations. The focus on Standard Dutch as a tool for socio-economic mobility certainly recalls the abovementioned utopian belief in achievability. It comes as no surprise that competence in this variety is projected as the result of hard work and constraint (“setting the bar high requires discipline”, “I will not accept linguistic complexity as a pedagogical excuse”). Clearly though, both policies overstretch the importance of standard language in emancipation processes which are never solely dependent on individual skills. And in utopian fashion, this belief

2 “[…] While limited proficiency dramatically limits access to employment, increased fluency of non-native speakers in the local language does not automatically lead to access to careers
in achievability and the necessity of (self-)discipline likewise raise the individual accountability of those seeking to grasp their opportunities to climb the social ladder.

Both policies, too, reproduce the utopian concern with outward uniformity: equal opportunities are projected as depending on the invisibility of pupils’ (linguistic) backgrounds. Both policies pay lip service to pupils’ home languages but ignore them otherwise, insisting instead that pupils replace their first language with Standard Dutch before adding economically viable foreign languages to their linguistic repertoire. And in associating Standard Dutch with a range of common-sense values both policies subordinate individual interest to public goals such as effective communication, social cohesion and labor market access.

It goes without saying that such goals are in themselves not without merit. Our point rather is to show that the radical pursuit of them produces types of symbolic violence which may very well impede rather than encourage emancipation. A genuine attempt to construct a linguistically homogenous pupil populace problematizes the occurrence of linguistic variation, for example. In the same way, projecting those who fail to master Standard Dutch as de facto “living – in Flanders – outside of Flanders”, prefigures the results of non-compliance or already seems to legitimize those speakers’ current or future disadvantageous social position. Both policies’ emphasis on a “rich” knowledge of languages similarly does not bode well for those types of linguistic knowledge singled out as “poor”. The first example above accordingly showed that nonstandard varieties are dismissed as “confusing” (or: inefficient), “crooked” (that is, impure) and “regional” (read: weakening national coherence and unfit for a global economy).

The policy texts quoted above are not the only breeding ground for resistance to what is still commonly observed as “impure” language use in Flanders. Many secondary school books approvingly recycle Van Istendael’s characterization of Allotment Flemish. They teach pupils to object to this “poor”, “miserable tussentaal”, also called a “rotten Dutch, grubby and bad” (see De Schryver 2012: 145–146). One school book explicitly admits that it wants “to show pupils that their own language can hardly be called dialectal, but is an annoying tussentaal that violates Dutch and waters down dialects” (Bulckaert et al. [2002: 45], quoted in De Schryver [2012: 145]). Meanwhile journalists insist that “Allotment Flemish is not a pure [but] a contaminated language” (Van de Voorde 2012). And while literature professors define “Gallicist Allotment Flemish” as “a sign of complacency and provincialism” (Vandevoorde 2015), popular authors explain that Flemings are consistent with qualifications and experience as such access tends to be mediated by a range of factors including accent and race” (Piller and Takahashi 2011: 592; cf. Lippi-Green 1997).
“too miserable to learn decent Dutch” (Barnard 2014) and “afraid of putting the bar too high” (Verhulst 2012). The utopian visions inherent to most purist tendencies are sometimes very outspoken. Recently, for instance, a leading opinion maker bluntly claimed that “[command of the standard language] contributes to a more peaceful society”. In an astonishing reversal of roles she explained: “When the linguistically refined are feeling offended or hurt, they can express their emotions and arguments more thoughtfully, in a general, intelligible language. The linguistically deprived, however, are likely to feel inferior or humiliated quicker, and, hence, can resort to violence” (Doornaert 2015).

Notwithstanding their descriptive stance, Flemish linguists too have (long) endorsed this discourse, describing tussentaal as a “decoction”, a “non-language”, and as a disease by defining its spread as “endemic, epidemic” (in Absillis 2012; cf. Jaspers 2001). One dialectologist sneered that tussentaal’s “only testament to culture, and a doubtful one at that, is that it opposes itself to nature, i.e. the dialects. And even in that it does not succeed” (Goossens 2000: 11–12).

In short, a brief look at recent educational policy and public debate in Flanders shows how the idea of a national language is given an update to inscribe it into a now globalized economy. By (re)problematizing nonstandard language use, this inscription process continues the condemnation of deviant variants’ supposed filthiness and hybridity (cf. Jaspers and Van Hoof 2013). Ultimately it reinvigorates utopian visions of a peaceful, cohesive society through standardization, decontamination and enforced discipline, all the while distinguishing itself from a nationalism that is assumed to be out of touch with globalization. In this way, we think linguistic purism is given new purposes, is finding a new impetus without cutting its umbilical cord with its modernist, utopian origins.

7 Conclusion

Purists’ ambitions are rooted in discursive tropes that define Western modernity and lie at the heart of its most prototypical narrative articulation: the prospect of utopia. In spite of the often reported demise of utopian energy in our age of post, late or even liquid modernity (e.g. Bauman 2007; Lyotard 1979; cf. Absillis 2016), we argue that purism continues to play a role as nation-states are repositioning themselves in a globalizing, post-Fordist economy, even if in this economy nation-states can be said to have lost some of their disciplinary power (Rampton 2015). In fact, as it is being revamped in commodifying tropes, linguistic purism promises to combine an agenda of nationalism with one of cultural commodification (cf. Pérez-Milans 2013: 162). As such it can be expected to offer a
renewed path to modernization, a project which despite all predictions of its collapse has kept a surprisingly good deal of its older appeal in public discourse. Rather than traditionalizing purism as a provincial practice of yesteryear, as is customary in (socio)linguistics, the challenge is to investigate: (a) how older regimes of linguistic purification run parallel with or rub against newer purification regimes, (b) how both regimes measure individuals and whole populations against the ideals and blueprints they put forth, and (c) finding out which “experts” get to do the evaluation and how they are adapting to societies that are swapping their collective-minded “gardening” ambitions for the lifestyle of the self-absorbed “hunter” (Bauman 2007).

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