

Evaluation of the Meertens Institute

October/November, 2006

1. INTRODUCTION

Once every six years, each KNAW institute is assessed in accordance with the *Standard Evaluation Protocol 2003-2009*. The specific aims of this system, as well as the aspects on the basis of which an evaluation takes place and the ratings that can be given, are thoroughly described in this protocol and are therefore not repeated here.

The review of the Meertens Institute was commissioned by the board of management of the KNAW. The review committee was appointed in May 2006 and consisted of:

- Prof. Dr. Paul Schnabel (chair) – Social and Cultural Planning Office of The Netherlands, Utrecht University
- Prof. Dr. Peter Auer – Albert-Ludwigs University Freiburg
- Prof. Dr. Christine Burckhardt-Seebass – University of Basel
- Josje S. Calff MA – Library of Leiden University

Dr. Bertram Mourits was appointed secretary of the review committee.

The assessment dealt with all aspects of the work done in the institute, which entails research on Dutch Ethnology and Variation Linguistics on the one hand, and documentation of material pertaining to Dutch language and culture on the other. The period of assessment was 2000-2006. The review committee had received a detailed self-evaluation as well as several other documents – see the appendix for an overview. Information available in the self-evaluation is usually not repeated in great detail in this report. The interviews took place during a site visit on October 31 and November 1, 2006. The program of the site visit is included in the appendix.

2. REVIEW OF THE INSTITUTE

2.1 Mission, policy and strategy

The Meertens Institute is a combination of three previous KNAW committees: the Dialect Committee, the Onomastics Committee and the Folklore Committee. These were combined and became one KNAW institute in 1952.

The work of the Meertens Institute takes place in three groups: Variation Linguistics, Dutch Ethnology and the library/documentation (as part of General Affairs).

Variation Linguistics has its main theoretical basis in formal and sociolinguistic theories of syntax, morphology and phonology. There is an onomastics section within this group.

The research group Dutch Ethnology focuses on categories of heritage, visual culture and performance of cultural and religious practices in The Netherlands throughout history, but with a clear emphasis on the present.

The documentation department collects material pertaining to linguistic as well as ethnological subjects, increasingly from a research-based perspective. To combine research and documentation in specific areas, DOCs (centres for documentation and research) have recently been introduced.

The Meertens Institute aims to produce high quality research in the area of ethnology and linguistics. It also tries to contribute to contemporary political and social issues, 'such as Dutch identity, effects of migration, bilingualism and multiculturalism, Dutch cultural heritage and the increasing importance of the European context' (*Self Evaluation*, p.5). Therefore, researchers often contribute to non-scholarly media. Judging from the number of general books and appearances in newspaper articles, these efforts are often quite successful.

In general, language and culture in The Netherlands are the central objects of research. The research focus of the institute is summarized in the *Self Evaluation* as 'the complex properties of language variation and day-to-day culture in a dynamic society' (p. 4). The mission statement indicates how this could be a starting point for the interrelations between the linguistics and the ethnology groups in the institute: 'the theoretical relevance of language variation in the Dutch speaking language area and of ethnological issues within The Netherlands is being considered in relation to more general theoretical conceptions of language and culture'.

The committee notes that this is a commendable project, which is endorsed by the director and the scientific advisory board, but that practice is stubborn. The combination of the two groups into one institute may be historically grounded, but it is not a natural given. Both research groups are productive and successful, but cooperation is largely restricted to the field of language and

culture of immigrant groups. Splitting the institute though, is not an immediate option: while the research groups may be able to function independently, the documentation department functions in support of both research groups.

However, the feasibility of combined research programs should become apparent in the current five year period. If the two research groups remain as separate as they are now, a new evaluation to assess the situation will be indispensable. At the moment it is not entirely clear whether the links between the two groups are strong enough to warrant a common future. There should be better reasons than tradition or the convenience of sharing services and resources. Is it a matter of size within the KNAW? In the longer run it might be relevant to consider the possibility of separate research units operating in a federative organization with other research groups in adjacent (language, history or cultural) subject fields (as suggested in the five year plan *Dynamische tradities* [Dynamic Traditions], p. 17). That might be another way to provide opportunities for multidisciplinary cooperation and the combination of facilities, among others for documentation purposes.

Cooperation with other academic institutes has increased, and this is reflected in fruitful exchange programs with several universities. The committee was pleased to see that the Meertens Institute is firmly embedded in the academic landscape of The Netherlands.

Strategy and policy of the institute are reflected in five year plans, of which the Meertens Institute has published two: the first one, *Het oog op de toekomst* [Looking at the future] described the plans of the last five year, the new one, *Dynamische tradities* sets out the course for the next five years.

The committee noted that these plans are broad and not strictly defined. They are not specific enough to make thorough evaluation possible. Since researchers have a high degree of freedom to choose their subjects, it might be advisable to supplement the abstract five year plans by annual evaluations and more specific annual programmes as part of a more explicit planning and control cycle.

2.2 Leadership

The leadership of the Meertens Institute is largely in the hands of one person: Hans Bennis, the director. He is responsible for everyday management as well as the scientific production and quality. He is also the leader of the Management Team, two of whose three other members are replaced on a three year basis. Both research groups send a representative to this team to act as temporary member (a *primus inter pares* for a period of three years). Only the manager of General Affairs has a permanent position in the Management Team and also functions as the Deputy

Director.

The Management Team is supported by an external Scientific Advisory Board as well as an internal Committee for Strategy and Policy.

This structure has worked remarkably well for the past eight years. The previous evaluation report already noted the huge progress the institute had made, and this has not changed in the period that this committee is assessing. Because scientists are contributing to the management team, management never loses research out of sight.

But while the review committee acknowledges that the flat structure of the management may have had its function in a period of change for the Meertens Institute, in the longer run we recommend altering the structure. The committee feels that the day to day management of the institute, the Human Resources-management and the financial management may need a more professional and experienced approach than is now available. The institute is not big, but with more than 50 employees and a turnover of several million euros, it is no longer small either.

2.3 Resources and funding policies

For the larger part, the Meertens Institute is funded by the KNAW. A part of the budget also comes from contract research or other research funds. The linguistic group has a high number of NWO and EU funded researchers, particularly PhD's.

The total amount of funding is more or less stable, which on the one hand means that the institute did not have to deal with serious cutbacks, but on the other hand also implies that growth is difficult to sustain.

The division of staff among the three groups (Dutch Ethnology, Variation Linguistics, General Affairs) is roughly equal. For General Affairs, 'this appears to be high,' the *Self Evaluation* states, but this group takes care of a lot of supporting activities, including documentation, and the evaluation committee did not feel this situation to be out of balance.

The financial situation does need addressing for a different reason: the period of growth and increasing quality, which the Meertens Institute has experienced in the period of assessment, will be difficult to sustain unless further resources become available, particularly to provide matching funds for external money, and to compensate for rising salaries and general costs. As a temporary solution, the institute decided to cut all new PhD-projects. This is not a healthy decision from the perspective of scientific quality and productivity. The review committee is aware that both research groups regret the decision taken in this matter. Both were quite adamant in their opinion that scientific renewal and progression, so obvious in the last five years, might decrease if young scientists no longer have the opportunity to participate actively in the

research programs.

Because there are no reserves in the budget for matching funds, it is possible that, even when a research plan has been agreed upon, there is no guarantee it can be carried out. There is always an investment to be made when matching the amount that NWO invests.

2.4 Facilities

In 1998, the Meertens Institute moved from a building in downtown Amsterdam to its current premises. Until last year, the building was shared with NIWI, but since this institute left, half of the premises are not in use. Housing is paid for by the KNAW and therefore not visible on the budget.

The building functions very well for the Meertens Institute; it has good facilities for research and it is also conveniently located. There is enough space for the library, although the quality of air and climate in the stacks are not suitable for some of the rarer and more valuable books that can be found there. To the extent that these valuable items are not heavily used by the researchers of the institute, a more adequate accommodation should be found.

As noted in paragraph 2.3, General Affairs is largely responsible for documentation, the library, and the website.

The website as the committee saw it during the site visit, is not entirely up to standard. Not all of the databases are accessible online and search functions are limited. English versions of many web pages, including the home page, were not available. This is only partially a criticism, because a website committee has been founded and during the visit, we saw some of the results. The website in development definitely looks promising.

The societal relevance of the Meertens Institute consists to a considerable degree in the availability of their materials for researchers from other institutes, for a growing number of amateur ethnologists and local historians and finally, for the general public. The availability of documentation material as well as the accessibility of catalogues need to be a constant matter of attention (see also 2.1, with regard to the DOCS).

2.5 Academic reputation in general

When assessing the academic reputation of the Meertens Institute, there are several factors that have to be taken into account. Most important, the two groups in the institute (Variation Linguistics and Dutch Ethnology) cannot in all respects be assessed in the same way. Moreover, research only became the focal point during the past decade. Before then, the institute was to a large extent occupied with documentation in the fields of dialects and folklore. The changing

mission statement and policy/leadership have resulted in rapid developments. The director of the Meertens Institute is therefore right when he thinks of its current incarnation as a ‘new institute’ which has only existed for eight years.

The previous evaluation report, written less than two years after the ‘new’ institute came into being, mentions these quick developments with admiration, and it came to the conclusion that the institute, ‘has the potential to reach the category α (*international player, national leader*).’ This report will look in greater detail into the academic reputation of the institute in chapter 3, but in general the committee came to the conclusion that the Meertens Institute fulfilled this promise and can now be rated as belonging to the former category α (in current terms: ‘very good’).

The high academic reputation of the institute is also evident from the fact that the Meertens Institute cooperates successfully with several universities and is sought after as a partner by museums and other institutions, and it is additionally reflected in a growing number of PhD-grants in the framework research projects initiated from the Meertens Institute and financed by the NWO. This pertains in particular to the linguistics group, which has been very successful in this respect. The institute also often attracts international speakers and visiting scholars, and researchers from the Meertens Institute regularly publish and present papers in an international context. All in all, the status and reputation of the Meertens Institute appear to be very good: it occupies a solid position in the Dutch academic world.

2.6 Societal relevance

Again, it makes sense to distinguish between the two groups: whereas Variation Linguistics is most prominently present in the field of international scientific publications, Dutch Ethnology often makes its work visible to the wider public. However, the publication of large dialect atlases (MAND; SAND) by the linguistic group has also played an important role.

The committee was impressed by the way in which the institute manages to disseminate the results of its research to a wider audience through a stream of books and articles, on different levels but without exception in respected magazines, journals and with good publishing houses. This is especially important because the topics of the Meertens Institute have a growing relevance for Dutch society.

The TCULT-project (Languages and Cultures in Utrecht neighbourhoods Lombok and Transvaal) deserves mentioning here. As an attempt to combine the two major streams within the Meertens Institute it might have been more successful, but it indicates in which way socially relevant research can be conducted which additionally strengthens cooperation between the two groups. Additional research projects in this area are being planned and should be encouraged.

2.7 Strengths and weaknesses

The *Self Evaluation* contains a SWOT analysis that seems fair and balanced. The committee noticed that the director is very well aware of the weaknesses of the institute and the possible problems it might encounter in the future, but it also got the impression of a strong and confident institute that knows its value.

Strengths

- the quality of research.
- the Meertens Institute provides a stimulating environment, and the facilities are good.
- a strong position within academia: mostly on the national level, but increasingly international as well.
- subject matters that will have increasing relevance for society in the future.

Weaknesses

- An ambivalent attitude towards the relationship between the two research groups within the institute: the mission statement points toward further cooperation, but in practice the theoretical and methodological orientation of the two groups differs.
- Lack of clarity with regard to the way in which research and documentation can work together. Since the amount of labour, time and cost that go into documentation and digitalization is considerable, its scope and integration into research are in need of constant reflection.
- A management structure that depends too much on the director, and – in its flat structure – lacks professionalism.
- A financial situation which, although stable, does not contribute to growth and threatens to diminish the institute's innovative potential.
- The accessibility of the documentation material: the website is not entirely up to standard, databases are often not available online. No overall plan appears to be available for common standards to be used and interoperability between Meertens' own databases and cooperation with relevant databases of other institutions.
- Research is often carried out in relative isolation. Many researchers work on their own themes. This individualist approach means that sometimes the research projects lack integration.

3. ASSESSMENT OF RESEARCH

Weighing the factors mentioned in the previous chapter, the committee came to the conclusion that, on the scale of the *Standard Evaluation Protocol 1999-2003*, the Meertens Institute in general is *very good*. It plays a national leading role in both fields, and can be considered an ‘international player’.

The atmosphere is positive, the institute is dynamic and the recommendations that were made in the previous assessment have mostly been followed quite successfully. In more detail:

The *quality* of research is very good. International standing is one of the most decisive factors when assessing the quality of research. Variation Linguistics is internationally renowned and the group can certainly be called an ‘international player’, especially in the European context. In formal linguistics, the reputation of the Meertens Institute in the international scientific community is very high. Some of the research in this area even deserves the label ‘excellent.’ Ethnology as a field is less internationally organized. A peer-reviewed journal system is yet lacking and research in this area is therefore more difficult to assess. But here as well, the progress is remarkable. The ethnologists made a big leap forward: it is rare to see an institute make such progress in such a short period of time. It will be a remarkable success if the institute manages to maintain this level during the next years.

The *productivity* of the research is also very good, although we still see possibilities for an increase of the number of publication in international journals. The committee recognizes that the *Self Evaluation* also mentions this as a challenge and is aware of the fact that big projects, such as the dialect atlases, have used up a lot of time and energy. Now work on these is about to be finished, it is to be expected that more internationally visible publications in peer-reviewed journals will be submitted.

In ethnology, the book is the most important medium. But this group as well should try to reach internationally leading journals as often as possible.

The *relevance* of the institute is definitely very high. The ethnology group publishes a lot of books (and even some CDs) that cater towards the interest of the general public. There is a new ethnological journal, CULTUUR, which looks promising, although it has not been in existence long enough to gain firm ground. In general, one can say that ethnological topics have an increasing position in the public debate, and the Meertens Institute’s presence in this arena is convincing.

There is cooperation with other universities, museums, and one of the professors is a member of an important advisory council to the Dutch Minister for Education, Arts and Sciences (Raad voor Cultuur). Variation Linguistics has been very successful in attracting money from different sources, and Dutch Ethnology increasingly manages to get support from NWO as well.

The institute is aware of the social relevance of its collections (preserving cultural heritage). The new DOCs (Centres on Documentation and Research) try to bridge the gap between documentation and research, but this demands the continued attention of the directorship.

The evaluation committee came to the conclusion that the *vitality and feasibility* of the Meertens Institute are also very good. It has redefined its position in Dutch culture and society, internal reorganizations have been successful, and there is no reason to assume that the lively and stimulating atmosphere in the institute will subside.

The major threat is the financial situation: for continuing vitality, cooperation with universities and other research centres is necessary, as are contributions from new PhD-students. Excellence does not come cheap.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2000 evaluation report concluded with a number of recommendations, which the Meertens Institute has, in large parts, followed quite successfully, or at least addressed in the *Self Evaluation*. This resulted in the aforementioned assessment. The following recommendations are largely aimed at sustainability.

- The institute is constantly working on two tracks, which is the heritage of its unusual history. We recommend that the institute continues to try to increase interaction between the two groups. Cooperation with other fields may provide useful as well: sociology, anthropology, psychology as well as history departments, and social geography. This suggestion applies in particular to the onomastics section in Variation Linguistics. It might also increase the reputation of the ethnology group. The sociolinguistic element in the institute's research programs can play an important role in these exchanges and the management of the institute should provide ample resources for this element of the program. In the longer run, becoming part of a larger federative organization of research units in the area of Dutch language, history and culture might be considered.
- For the future of the ethnological group, the establishment of an academic curriculum in ethnology within The Netherlands will be of importance.
- The way in which Documentation is organized should remain a constant topic of attention. The new structure with three DOCs sounds promising in theory, but the way in which it will function is as yet unclear. The committee recognizes the importance of documentation as such (especially since universities lack the infrastructure to do this systematically) but was unable to get a clear picture of the current measures and indications to incorporate it into research. (On a side note: It might be wise to reconsider the name 'DOC', because this suggests an exclusive focus on the documentation aspect.)
- The evaluation committee sees a potential for increasing the online use of the institute's databases and catalogues as well as other documentations: as a means for research on the one hand, and as a service towards the general public on the other hand. This is where the website will become increasingly important. An overall plan based on international standards, should be designed for the Meertens Institute with regard to its data infrastructure, to provide for the interoperability of Meertens' own databases and to facilitate cooperation with relevant datasets of other institutions. The committee appreciates the efforts made in this direction.
- The current vagueness of research plans needs attention. One possibility would be to

accompany the current five year plans with annual programs and evaluation. This would make it possible to evaluate how successful research projects have been, and in the end, to increase productivity. Currently, especially the linguistic group runs a certain risk of fragmentation. Ideally, the sum of all research programs should present a coherent identity of the institute as a whole.

- With regard to the temporary stop of new PhD-program, the committee agrees with the viewpoint of many people working at the institute that this is not a good development. At this moment, the Meertens Institute appears to be eating up its reserves, which is a dangerous situation. We suggest it to be a task for the KNAW to set up an additional budget for ‘matching funds’ as part of its structural support.
- We recommend a re-evaluation of the management structure of the institute. At the moment it appears loose and egalitarian, which is not realistic for an organization of this size. To secure continuity, we envisage a more professional management structure. This seems to be especially important with regard to General Affairs (including financial affairs).

Finally, the evaluation committee considers it an achievement in itself that a research institute with such a specific Dutch focus manages to be ‘internationally visible’.

APPENDIX

1. PROGRAMME EVALUATION COMMITTEE MEERTENS INSTITUTE

Monday October 30

Dinner Evaluation Committee with Director Research Organisation KNAW:

- Prof.dr. Paul Schnabel (Chairman)
- Prof.dr. Peter Auer
- Prof.dr. Christine Burckhardt-Seebass
- Josje Calff MA
- Dr. Bertram Mourits (Secretary)
- Prof.dr. Theo Mulder (Director Research Organisation – as of October 1)

Tuesday October 31

9:00 - 10:00 Director Meertens Institute

Prof.dr. Hans Bennis

10:00 - 10:45 Management Team

Prof.dr. Hans Bennis (Director)

Dr. Leonie Cornips (Research Leader Variation Linguistics)

Dr. Willy Jongenburger (Head General Affairs)

Prof. dr. Herman Roodenburg (Research Leader Dutch Ethnology)

10:45 - 11:15 Coffee break

11:15 - 12:00 Discussion with the Scientific Committee of the institute

Prof.dr. Pieter Muysken (Member)

12:00 - 12:45 Tour of the Institute

12:45 - 13:30 Lunch

13:30 - 15:30 Discussion with General Affairs

- 13:30-14:00 Head General Affairs (Dr. Willy Jongenburger)

- 14:00-14:30 Library/documentation/collections

Dr. Willy Jongenburger (Head General Affairs)

Koos Schell (library/collections)

Marianne van Zuijlen (documentation)

- 14:30-15:00 ICT / website

Edwin Brinkhuis MA (technology development)

Dr. Willy Jongenburger (Head General Affairs)

Mathilde Jansen MA (website)

Dr. Marc van Oostendorp (Chairman Website Committee)

- 15:00-15:30 Public Relations and DIV (documentary and information service)

Dr. Willy Jongenburger (Head General Affairs)

Dr. Theo Meder

Prof. Dr. Louis Grijp

- 15:30 - 16:00 Tea break
- 16:00 - 16:45 Discussion with the Committee Strategy and Policy (research committee)
 Dr. Marc van Oostendorp (Chairman; Variation Linguistics)
 Dr. Gertjan Postma (Variation Linguistics)
 Dr. Irene Stengs (Dutch Ethnology)
- 16:45 - 17:30 Discussion Commissie
- 17:30 - 19:00 Drinks / informal meeting with personnel of the institute
- 19:30 Dinner Evaluation Committee

Wednesday November 1

- 9:00 - 10:45 Discussion with Dutch Ethnology
- 9:00-9:30 Research leader (Prof.dr. Herman Roodenburg)
 - 9:30-10:00 Orale Cultuur
 Prof.dr. Louis Grijp
 Dr. Theo Meder
 M. de Bruin MA
 - 10:00-10:15 Materiele Cultuur
 Dr. Hester Dibbits
 Prof.dr. Herman Roodenburg
 - 10:15-10:30 Religieuze Cultuur
 Dr. Peter Jan Margry
 - 10:30-10:45 Feest & Ritueel
 Prof.dr. Gerard Rooijackers
 Dr. Irene Stengs
- 10:45 - 11:15 Coffee break
- 11:15 - 13:00 Discussion with Variation Linguistics
- 11:15-11:45 Research leader (Dr. Leonie Cornips)
 - 11:45-12:00 Syntactici
 Prof.dr. Sjef Barbiers
 Dr. Leonie Cornips
 Dr. Gertjan Postma
 - 12:00-12:15 Fonologen
 Dr. Ben Hermans
 Dr. Frans Hinskens
 Dr. Marc van Oostendorp
 - 12:15-12:30 Naamkundigen
 Reina Boerrigter MA
 Leendert Brouwer
 Dr. Doreen Gerritzen

- 12:30-13:00 PhD-students and postdocs Variation Linguistics
 - Reina Boerrigter MA
 - Ivo van Ginneken MA
 - Margreet van der Ham MA
 - Mathilde Jansen MA
 - Dr. Olaf Koeneman
 - Dr. Marika Lekakou
 - Alies Maclean MA
 - Maike Prehn MA
 - Marco Rene Spruit MA
 - Arien van Wijngaarden MA

13:00 - 14:00 Lunch

14:00 - 15:00 Final conversation with Prof.dr. Hans Bennis

15:00 - 16:30 Evaluation committee and draft report

16:30 - 17:00 Presentation of the main conclusions to the personnel of the institute

2. RECEIVED MATERIAL

About the Meertens Institute

- *Self Evaluation* 2006 Meertens Institute
- *Rapport Evaluatiecommissie Meertens Instituut* [2000]
- *Het oog op de toekomst* [research plan Meertens Institute 2000-2005]
- *Dynamische Tradities* [research plan Meertens Institute 2006-2010]
- *Jaarverslagen* [Annual Reports] Meertens Intitute 2001-2005

References with regard to KNAW

- *Standard Evaluation Protocol 2003-2009*
- *Duurzame wetenschap* [Strategic Plan Royal Academy 2007-2010]
- *Nederlands, tenzij...* [Report Of The Committee Dutch As A Language For Scientific Purposes Of The Royal Academy]
- *Judging Research On Its Merits* [Report Of The Council For The Humanities / Social Sciences Council Of The Royal Academy]