

Working on the future of the language

Portrait of the
Nederlandse Taalunie

(Dutch Language Union)

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Advice, policy, monitoring and implementation

A flourishing language. The Dutch language is healthy: the number of Dutch speakers is increasing, many new works of Dutch literature are being published and interest in the Dutch language is growing abroad. A vigorous, living language, Dutch doesn't need much help to survive, but every now and then a few rules and regulations are required to keep everyone working together harmoniously. And that is precisely why the Taalunie was founded.

Three countries with a shared interest: a language that can be used effectively by as many of their inhabitants as possible.

One language, three countries. The Dutch language is spoken in the Netherlands, Belgian Flanders and Surinam. The Netherlands and Flanders have worked together on linguistic issues, language policy, language teaching and literature for many years. In 1980, they confirmed their cooperation in these areas by founding the Taalunie. Surinam has been an associate member of the Taalunie since 2004. Three countries, each with its own history, but with a shared interest: a language that can be used effectively by as many of their inhabitants as possible, both within and outside their language areas.

The purpose of cooperation. Cooperating on language, language teaching and literature can produce considerable benefits. Trends in these fields often make themselves felt in different countries at the same time.

Cooperating saves money and effort, boosts the status of Dutch and means not having to re-invent the wheel over and over again. To give just a few examples:

- introducing a uniform spelling system;
- sharing the task of developing expensive language aids, such as reference works;
- pooling expertise and sharing ideas on the teaching of Dutch;
- providing in-service training for teachers of Dutch and literary translators;
- developing a language policy within the European context.

Putting the language user at the centre. As important as it is to promote a uniform grammar and spelling, it is not the task of the Taalunie to tell language users what is and isn't proper Dutch. The main duty of the Taalunie is to create the necessary conditions for using Dutch as effectively as possible, so that Dutch speakers can get by with it in as many different situations as possible, even abroad. After all, the most important 'clients' of the Taalunie are not the governments of the Netherlands, Flanders and Surinam, but the people who use Dutch to communicate.



Achievements

- A descriptive grammar of Dutch (the ANS), the official spelling dictionary (*Het Groene Boekje*), a dictionary of pronunciation and various bilingual translating and learners' dictionaries
- The *Taalunieversum* website, including the language advice service and the digital magazine *Taalschrift*
- An on-line library of Dutch literature (the DBNL)
- Human language technology (HLT): the HLT Agency (*TST-centrale*) manages and preserves key digital archives, for example the Spoken Dutch Corpus (CGN), a database of contemporary Dutch as spoken by adults in the Netherlands and Flanders
- NL-Translex: a computerised translation system (Dutch-French, Dutch-English and vice-versa)
- Member of the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL)
- Support for approximately 220 faculties of Dutch in 43 countries
- Courses for foreign students and teachers
- Certificate in Dutch as a Foreign Language (CNaVT, over 2500 course participants annually)
- Literary and educational awards: the *Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren*, the *Inktaap*, the *Taalunie Toneelschrijfprijs*, the *Scriptieprijs* and the *Taalunie Onderwijsprijs*
- Association agreement with Surinam

The language inside-out. The Taalunie represents the interests of language users in many different ways. Just two examples are its involvement in compiling dictionaries and grammars. It develops special databases and applications that can then be used for other purposes, for example to create translation software. The Taalunie also works to enhance the status of Dutch within the European Union. Another aspect of language promotion is teaching. Although the Netherlands, Flanders and Surinam each has its own educational policy, there are many areas in which they can usefully collaborate: continuing professional development, in-service training, and the development of common basic principles. The Taalunie targets not only primary and secondary school teaching, but also adult education and the teaching of Dutch as a second language. Outside the Dutch language area, the Taalunie supports Dutch language and literature programmes at university level and primary and secondary education in Dutch in the German border region, Northern France and in Belgium's French-speaking community. Finally, the Taalunie encourages language-related cultural and literary cooperation, which takes many different forms. One important point of concern is the way in which information and documentation is compiled and made available, often on the Internet. Another focal point of policy is the position of reading and books in our society. Finally, the Taalunie awards a number of literary prizes, for example the *Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren*.

Spider in the language web. The Taalunie is a relatively small organisation. It must therefore depend on other parties – universities, interest groups, councils and committees – to help it prepare and implement its policy. The Taalunie has also set up various committees and platforms that include experts working in the field; these ensure that it can continue to function as a spider in the language web.

Language is a tool. By itself it serves no purpose; it is there to be used. Dutch speakers must be able to use their language as effectively as possible. All Dutch speakers, no matter where they come from, need their language in order to survive on a day-to-day basis, whether at home or at work, in school or out.

Instrumental approach to language policy.

The Taalunie develops practical tools that help Dutch speakers use their language effectively in as many situations as possible. Those tools range from dictionaries and grammars to certificates in Dutch as a foreign language and Internet resources, for example a digital library of Dutch literary works. In the abstract sense, such tools may consist of rules and regulations that allow Dutch speakers to read decisions and laws produced by the European Union in their own language.

Access. Digital resources can only be used to their best advantage when they are accessible for universities, companies, the government and individuals. It's also vital to update, expand and manage the databases properly. That's why the Taalunie is involved in setting up a consortium for human language technologies, the HLT Agency (*TST-centrale*), which will pool various resources and forms of expertise.

Philosophy. The philosophy of the Taalunie is expressed in its instrumental approach to policy. Our purpose is to help language users, and our policy is guided by what such users want and need. That's why the Taalunie pays close attention to the social function of language and language policy. The extent to which people are able to function in society and participate in the community is often determined by their language, how they use it and their language proficiency.

Going digital. Language is increasingly going digital. Digital tools are becoming more important. We use them to look up things on the Internet, translate between languages, consult voice-controlled information services, carry out research and development and share ideas. The Taalunie manages a vast number of digital databases; a few examples are its on-line language advice service (*Taaladvies*), its list of geographical place names, and various terminology databases. Because the databases are digital, they can be linked to one another and combined to produce striking synergies.

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windwijzers

“As a researcher in human language technologies, I welcome the arrival of the HLT Agency (*TST-centrale*). Our knowledge and research tools used to be very fragmented. Thanks to the HLT Agency, those days are gone for good. The HLT Agency is the key resource for everyone interested in human language technologies, from researchers to public servants and business people. I also think that the Nederlandse Taalunie has had a positive impact on the development of human language technologies. It coordinates matters on an international scale, so that scientists know what research has already been carried out in the Netherlands and Flanders and what areas are still unexplored. That way we can avoid a lot of duplication.”

Walter Daelemans, professor of Computational Linguistics at the University of Antwerp, on the HLT Agency.

Babylon in Brussels? One of the challenges of a united Europe is how to deal with multilingualism. Is Europe merely a tower of Babylon? What is the price tag attached to multilingualism and can we control the costs if the EU continues to expand? How many working languages will the EU designate and when will they be used? And what is the position of languages like Dutch, with a medium-sized population of speakers? These are all questions that the Taalunie is exploring, and its efforts have produced results. For example, the Taalunie has developed four modules for computerised translation as part of the NL-Translex project. Translation services use the modules to translate texts in and out of Dutch quickly. The Taalunie is also working with other national organisations to develop a Europe-wide policy on language, aimed at supporting the official European languages and promoting multilingualism. One product of this cooperation is the founding of a European Federation of National Institutions for Language (*EFNIL*), in which the Taalunie plays a key role.

Spelling and grammar. The official spelling rules were last amended in 1995. Since then, everyone has got used to the changes that were introduced. Although the new spelling system has shown itself to be effective, some improvements are still possible at word level. In 2005, a revised edition of the official spelling dictionary – popularly known as *Het Groene Boekje* (The Little Green Book) – will be published incorporating those improvements. The spelling rules themselves will remain unchanged. In addition to *Het Groene Boekje*, the Taalunie also manages other basic reference works, for example the Spoken Dutch Corpus (*CGN*) and bilingual translating dictionaries. These products will be updated as required in the coming years and be made available to a broad readership, specifically in digital form.

HLT Agency (*TST-centrale*). The Taalunie is working to set up the HLT Agency: a consortium for human language technologies. The HLT Agency is a collection of digital language facilities that are managed from a single location. The collection includes Dutch language corpora, lexica and vast pronunciation databases, terminology databases and bilingual electronic dictionaries. These are extremely important resources for science and the business world. They can be used to develop voice-controlled information services, for example travel information. The HLT Agency ensures that all stakeholders have quick access to these resources and can make use of them under transparent terms and conditions.

Education: the future of Dutch. Proper education in Dutch ensures that the language will remain an effective communication tool for new generations of users. Although the Netherlands, Flanders and Surinam each has its own policy on education, they have many things in common and share many interests.

Harmonising and sharing. The Netherlands and Flanders have both acquired a great deal of expertise in recent years in teaching pupils whose native language is not Dutch. Schools and teachers within the Dutch language area would benefit from being able to access each other's knowledge and encourage each other to develop sound policy measures in this area. It used to be much more difficult for the Netherlands and Belgium to share their expertise with each other, because they applied different attainment aims, basic competencies and evaluation tools. To ensure greater harmonisation, the Taalunie drafts common policy principles, for example on integration, early second-language acquisition and language competencies for teachers. Once the basic principles have been agreed, it is much easier for the two countries to work together on developing good teaching practices.

The language passport. Language competency can make the difference between integration and isolation, between acceptance and rejection, between success and failure. The social aspects of language are therefore high on the list of priorities of the Taalunie. It is concerned about people who have not mastered the Dutch language sufficiently well, and its policy is intended to help this group function more effectively in the community. The main tool that the Taalunie uses is education in Dutch as a second language. For immigrants living in the Netherlands and Flanders, language competency is a passport to a better future. Language can be a problem for many Dutch and Flemish people as well, however, especially those who are illiterate or who have trouble with reading and writing. This is another area in which the Taalunie is trying to achieve closer cooperation.

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“Cooperation between Flanders and the Netherlands in the field of language education and first and second language acquisition is the biggest achievement of the Nederlandse Taalunie, in my opinion. The Dutch and the Flemish may speak the same language, but that doesn't mean that they tackle things in the same way. They differ in the way they approach integration, education, even radio and TV. The Taalunie has made it possible for the two language areas to share their thoughts and experiences on such subjects. That leads to new insights and ideas on both sides. Both the Netherlands and Flanders benefit.”

Simon Verhallen, Institute for development and research on Dutch as a second language (ITTA)

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Sharing resources and information on the Internet. The new media, and in particular the Internet, are helping to disseminate new insights and ideas about the Dutch language. The Internet is a powerful tool for teachers and other persons involved in education, offering a lot of information at very little cost. The Taalunie has made ICT one of the focal points of its policy. Its website, www.taalunieversum.org, already offers an abundance of information and that will only increase in the future. For example, teachers and researchers can consult an entirely digital list of research projects and programmes carried out in the past decades that have focused on Dutch as a school subject. Another useful tool is the notification service with which the Taalunie refers interested parties to articles in professional journals on teaching Dutch.

Out of the drawer. Lots of good things are happening at schools these days. Many creative teachers are coming up with exceptionally effective projects related to learning Dutch. The problem is that such projects often stay firmly within the four walls of the relevant school. The Taalunie wants to take such projects out of the drawer and into the classroom. One way that it does this is by awarding the *Taalunie Onderwijsprijs*. This prize is presented every two years to a primary school and a secondary school. Another educational prize is the *Scriptieprijs*, which the Taalunie awards for the best thesis written in Dutch on a topic related to Dutch language and literature.

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Digital treasury: the Taalunieversum.

The Taalunieversum is a gateway to the Dutch language. Behind the digital doorway www.taalunieversum.org lies Ali Baba's cave, full of wonders for researchers, teachers, text writers and anyone with an interest in Dutch. It contains everything from children's stories to literary translation, from geographical place names to literacy courses: in short, a treasure-trove of articles, teaching materials, research results, visual images, references and links. Teachers of Dutch and other people working in education will find research summaries, professional journals and educational terminology. One of the most popular sections of the site is the language advice service (*Taaladvies*), where anyone with a question about correct grammar or usage can consult over 1200 FAQs.

Dutch: a small global language. It sounds crazy, but you can study Dutch in Kiev, and in fact the Dutch programme is quite popular there. Dutch is offered as a main subject or secondary subject at more than two hundred universities in over forty countries. The students enrol because they are interested in the Dutch language and literature, but also because they see that studying Dutch offers them opportunities. For them, Dutch opens up a window on a different world, and sometimes leads to a bright future.

Dutch is offered as a main subject and secondary subject at more than two hundred and twenty universities in over forty countries.

Dutch language and literature abroad. The Taalunie supports the teaching of Dutch abroad by providing grants, for example to start up a course, to purchase books, magazines and a computer, or to bring in guest teachers. It is also concerned about the quality of Dutch language and literature courses abroad. To promote quality, the Taalunie provides different forms of assistance, for example an expertise centre (*Steunpunt Nederlands als Vreemde Taal*) to which foreign teachers of Dutch as a second language can turn for advice on teaching methods and teaching materials. It also offers a range of training courses for both teachers and students.

Summer courses. Every student of Dutch should spend some time in Amsterdam or Antwerp and visit the Rijksmuseum or the Rubenshuis at some point during their programme. The Taalunie gives many of them the opportunity to do so. Every year, it organises summer courses in Dutch Language and Culture in the Netherlands and Flanders. Over three hundred students head for the North Sea every year to immerse themselves in Dutch and everything associated with it for three weeks. The Taalunie also regularly organises in-service training courses for teachers, allowing them to continue working on their professional development.

Language boundaries are blurring. Most of the border controls in the European Union have disappeared, and it almost seems as if the language boundaries are going the same way. In the 'Europe of the Regions', a wide variety of different languages live comfortably side-by-side. The border areas of the Netherlands and Flanders are a good example: Dutch is spoken in many parts of Belgium's French-speaking community, in northern France and in the German border region, and it is also offered as a subject at primary and secondary schools and in adult education. The Taalunie supports such classes in cooperation with the local authorities.

Key facilities. In addition to the specific support offered to each border region, teachers in such areas often benefit from exchanges programmes and from receiving assistance as a group. The Taalunie offers them a number of key facilities, such as information, advice and documentation. It is involved in developing digital and other teaching tools for the entire group, and organises in-service and retraining courses and seminars to aid the professional development of teachers who are native speakers of French or German.

Indonesia: old ties. People can sometimes use Dutch to get by in unexpected places. One of those places is Indonesia. Some older Indonesians still speak Dutch, but even the younger generation is interested in the language. University students, for example law students, are often required to study Dutch texts. Many universities in Indonesia therefore offer courses in Dutch as a source or occupational language. Students and other interested parties can enrol in general Dutch courses at various educational centres, the most important of which is the Erasmus Language Centre (ETC) in Jakarta. Each year, some 1500 to 2000 students take Dutch courses there.

South Africa: a testing ground for multilingualism. South Africa is another country that has special ties with the Taalunie, which does more than support university programmes in Dutch language and literature there. In particular, the Taalunie works with South Africa on multilingualism projects. South Africa is very interested in the expertise of the Taalunie in this field, and the Taalunie in turn benefits from its cooperation with South Africa. The two countries are currently concentrating on human language technologies and on testing and certification.

In the 'Europe of the Regions', a wide variety of different languages live comfortably side-by-side.



ZEEPIEREN No 19

“The Nederlandse Taalunie makes an important contribution to the teaching of Dutch in the Czech Republic. The Dutch faculties in Prague, Olomouc and Brno are regularly given grants for in-service training, student courses and projects. The University of Palacky, for example, received a grant to start up a programme in Business Dutch. I was awarded a scholarship to write my thesis on the reception of Dutch literature in the Czech Republic. In September 2003 I also took an in-service course for teachers given by the Taalunie. I still get a lot out of what I learned then.”

Lucie Fruhwirtova, teacher of Dutch at the University of Palacky, Czech Republic

A tall, black, vertical pole stands against a clear blue sky. Three red, rectangular signs are attached to the pole, arranged vertically. The signs are slightly tilted and appear to be made of wood or a similar material. In the background, a range of mountains is visible under a clear sky. The overall scene is bright and clear.

“The bigger languages are becoming more dominant within the European Union. To prevent a medium-sized language like Dutch from being overwhelmed, we need to defend and enhance the position of our language and, by association, our culture, for example by seeing to it that Dutch literature is translated into other languages. The problem, however, is that there are very few really good literary translators. That’s mainly because there are so few proper programmes in literary translation. The Taalunie has therefore set up a number of courses in literary translation itself. I’ve taught a few of these courses, and I can say that they are really very good. They certainly produce results.”

Literary translator Frans Denissen on the status of Dutch

Literature knows no frontiers. Dutch literature is not an island. A growing number of Flemish and Dutch authors are being translated into other languages. The Taalunie encourages that by assisting the Support Network for Training of Literary Translators. The Taalunie also encourages transfrontier discussions about literature and reading.

Promoting reading proficiency. To ensure that Dutch literature continues to flourish, people must read and keep on reading. Some people read a lot, others never open a book. Why is that, and is it a problem? The Taalunie believes that answering these questions is vital to promoting reading proficiency, something that requires a lot of research and involves developing new materials. The Taalunie also focuses on more concrete projects, however; one of these is the *Inktaap*, a literary prize presented by school children. Secondary school pupils read the books nominated for three important prizes and choose their personal favourite. That book receives the *Inktaap* prize.

Literature on the Internet. The new media, and the Internet in particular, can play a tremendous role in disseminating the culture of a language. There is enough information about writers, books and literary organisations on the Internet already, without the input of the Taalunie. What the Taalunie prefers to do is to cluster this information. It investigates what information is needed and how to make it easily accessible, and it consults potential users in policy-making, education, the sciences and the media.

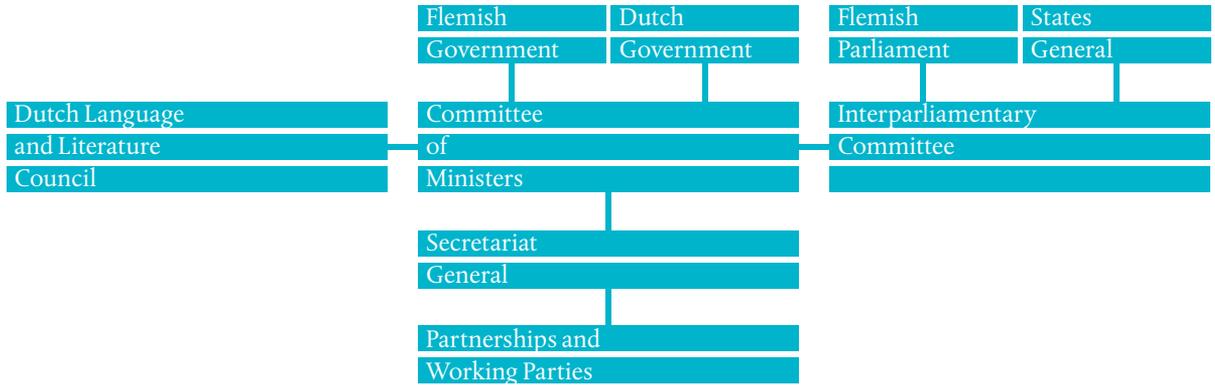
Digital library. A book doesn't need to be made of paper anymore. A growing number of literary texts lead a second life on the Internet, where they can be easily accessed by researchers and readers.

The Digital Library of Dutch Literature, www.dbnl.org, is an important portal for them and it is supported by the Taalunie. The site not only contains novels, plays and poems, but also articles, reference works, reviews, biographies, portraits, and audio and video clips. The digital library also provides access to texts that are no longer in print.

Results. Dutch-Flemish cooperation in the field of literature has produced excellent results in other areas. The following are just a few examples:

- Under the auspices of the Taalunie, nine authors are working on a detailed history of Dutch literature in seven volumes. The first volume will be published in 2005.
- The Support Network for Training of Literary Translators (*Steunpunt Literair Vertalen*) organises summer courses and introductory courses for translators translating from Dutch into another language. It also runs courses for translators who translate literary works from another language into Dutch.
- Every three years, the Taalunie awards the *Prijs der Nederlandse letteren* to a Dutch-language author for his or her entire oeuvre. It is the most prestigious prize of the Taalunie and the only literary prize presented by the governments of the Netherlands and Flanders.
- The *Taalunie Toneelschrijfprijs* is awarded every year to the author of an original play in Dutch.

Advice, policy, monitoring and implementation. The Taalunie has four bodies: the Committee of Ministers, the Interparliamentary Committee, the Dutch Language and Literature Council and the Secretariat General.



Bodies and working methods. The Committee of Ministers sets the policy of the Nederlandse Taalunie. The Committee consists of the Flemish and Dutch ministers for education and culture. The Interparliamentary Committee, made up of twenty-two Dutch and Flemish members of parliament, monitors this policy. The advisory body of the Taalunie is the Dutch Language and Literature Council, which has twelve members. The Secretariat General is responsible for preparing and implementing policy. The Secretariat employs approximately twenty-five staff and is headed by a Secretary General. Surinam is involved in all four bodies.

Finances. The Nederlandse Taalunie is financed by the Dutch, Flemish and Surinam governments. Each country's contribution is proportionate to the number of Dutch speakers. In 2004, the Taalunie had a budget of approximately nine million euros.

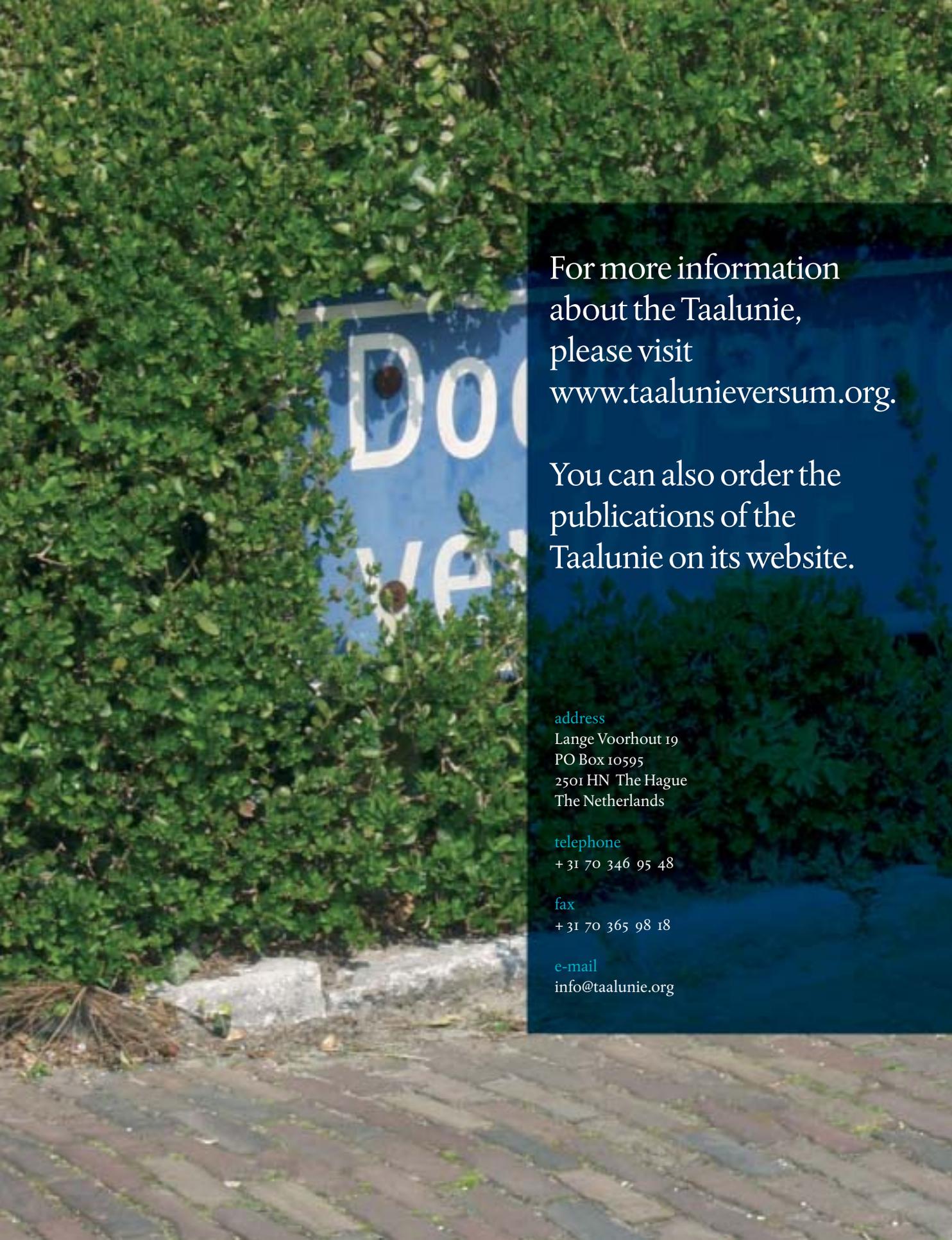
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