

The Low Countries. Jaargang 4 (1996-1997)

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A Brief History of the Dutch Language

Reckoned by the number of people who speak it, Dutch is the third Germanic language. It comes after English and German, but is spoken by far more people than Swedish, Danish, Norwegian or Frisian. In fact, with its approximately twenty-two million speakers Dutch is about the same size as Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Frisian taken all together. Compared with most of the world's languages the history of Dutch is very well documented, and for this reason it gained attention very early on in international linguistics. Outside linguistic circles, however, not much is known about Dutch, certainly far less than is known about the Netherlands and Belgium, the countries where Dutch is the standard language. Many a tourist in the Low Countries is surprised to find that there is a Dutch language which is quite distinct from German or English. If he delves more deeply, he will also find that Dutch has been a civilised language for more than a thousand years and has a rich literature.

Over dit hoofdstuk/artikel

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He will discover too, that *'Nederlands'*, *'Hollands'* and *'Vlaams'* are three separate names for the same language. This lack of clarity in terminology is sometimes confusing for foreigners, so confusing that it regularly leads to the misconception that the standard language in the Netherlands is different from that in Belgium. This is not the case. Dutch is spoken in both Belgium and the Netherlands. There is a ready historical explanation for the difference in terminology: because the standard language in the Netherlands is based primarily on the dialect of the province of Holland, in the other provinces the designation *'Hollands'* came to be used to describe the standard language, whereas in Belgium *'Vlaams'* was used to indicate what was not French. However, today *'Nederlands'* is the official and most usual designation in both countries.

Old Dutch

The history of a language never has a clear and precise beginning. Languages do not simply appear out of thin air; one could always begin the story somewhere earlier in the annals of time. The story of Indo-European

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languages can be traced back to around 3000 bc, but at that time there

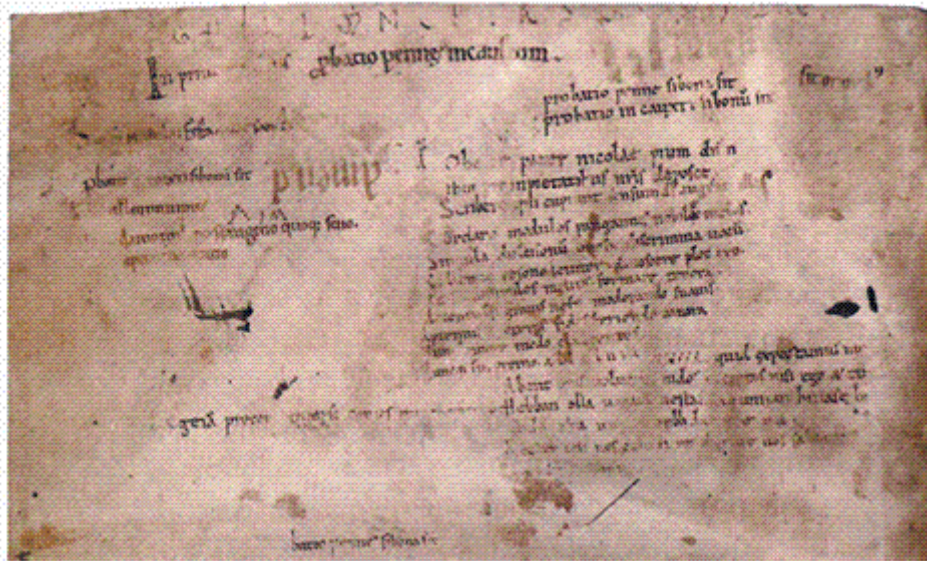
was no separate Dutch language, any more than there was a separate English or German language. Germanic split itself off from Indo-European in the period 1000-500 bc. Round about the beginning of the Christian era Germanic began to diversify, although the different dialects could probably be understood by the speakers of any one of them for a long time. The Germanic languages did not differentiate themselves definitively from each other until after the fall of the Western Roman empire in 476, in the period of the migrations. If we confine ourselves to the West Germanic group, two things which happened in that period are of great significance. The first of these is the crossing of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes from the continent to England, in the fifth century ad. This marked the beginning in England of the history of English as a distinct branch of Germanic. The other significant event is the characteristic change which took place from around 600 ad in a number of Germanic dialects in the south of Germany, known as the so-called High German sound shift. This brought about a striking difference between, on the one hand, High German (*zu, Pfeffer*; etc.), and on the other hand, Dutch and Low German (*toe, peper*). If one had to give a date for the beginning of Dutch as a separate language, then it would be best to say it was in the period about 600 ad, when English, Dutch and German each began to go their own separate way.

The language of the period 600-1200 is mostly referred to as Old Dutch. From the period 600-800 virtually nothing has been handed down to us apart from geographical names, personal names and a very small number of runic inscriptions. In that respect the history of Dutch parallels that of English and German. The oldest surviving Dutch to be handed down probably dates from the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century: the *Holland List of Pagan Practices* (Hollandse lijst van heidense praktijken) and the *Utrecht Baptismal Vow* (Utrechtse doopbelofte). The oldest rather longer text that has been preserved is the *Wachtendonck Psalms* (Wachtendonckse psalmen): fragments from an interlinear psalm translation from the tenth century. Also important for our knowledge of Old Dutch is the *Egmond Williram* (Egmondse Williram, frequently also referred to as the *Leiden Williram*), a translation and adaptation of what was originally a German commentary on the Canticles, undertaken presumably in the monastery at Egmond. Very well-known, but not the oldest Old Dutch, is the sentence: *'hebban olla uogala nestas hagunnan hinase hi[c] [e]nda thu uuat unbidan uue nu'*, from the eleventh century (preserved in the Bodleian Library, in Oxford).

All in all, little Old Dutch has been preserved; decidedly less than is the case with Old English or Old High German. In this context we must bear in mind that in the Low Countries reading and writing were not introduced until the seventh and eighth centuries, with the coming of Christianity, and that originally Latin was the language used for writing. The difference in the extent of what has been handed down, compared with the neighbouring languages, is largely due to the fact that in that period the Low Countries were sparsely populated. Moreover, the area which could be inhabited was much smaller then than now.

If we take present-day frontiers, then three dialects were spoken originally in this area: Frisian, or at least Inguaeonic dialects in the north and along

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Old, but not the oldest: the Dutch text (c. 1100) which was discovered in 1932 (Bodleian Library, Oxford).

the western coast; Saxon dialects in the east (contiguous with the Low German area); and Lower Franconian in the centre and south. It is these Lower Franconian dialects that we designate as Old Dutch, and that we shall come across later as Middle Dutch dialects (1200-1500), and it is from these that the standard Dutch language has developed.

Middle Dutch

From the thirteenth century onwards a wealth of material has been handed down. The population of the Low Countries increased rapidly in that period. The habitable areas were considerably expanded by land reclamation and impoldering. Great cities grew up in the south, such as Bruges, Ghent, Brussels, Mechelen and Antwerp. With the appearance of the cities a new population group came into existence alongside the nobility, the clergy and the country people: the townspeople. It was these townsfolk who first began to use the native language, Dutch, also as a written language on a large scale. The greater part of the texts which have come down to us from the thirteenth century come from the cities in the south. In the north (the Netherlands as we know them today) cities did not flourish until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In the beginning there was no standard language. People used the dialect of their own city or region as the written language. It is evident, however, that as early as the thirteenth century the language of a city such as Bruges served to some extent as a model. In the fourteenth and fifteenth century, due to changes in political and economic circumstances, Ghent, Brussels

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and Antwerp took over the role of linguistic model. Through their political history the separate areas of the Low Countries became more and more an entity, so that the need for a standard language increased. In addition, from around 1450 onwards, the art of printing contributed to a certain gradual standardisation of language and spelling. Yet with regard to texts from before 1500, for instance the various translations of the Bible, it is mostly easy to see in which language they were written. Not until the sixteenth century can we state that there was a standard written language in the Low Countries.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are without doubt the period during which the Dutch language underwent the greatest changes. This is also a period of considerable change in the general history of the Low Countries, and in which the Netherlands and Belgium emerged for the first time as two separate political entities.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Low Countries still formed a single more or less loosely connected area, in which the various parts (among others, Holland, Brabant, Flanders, Utrecht, Hainault etc.) were conjoined by marriage, inheritance or conquest. Under Charles v the parts still had a degree of autonomy, but everything changed with the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648), when the Low Countries rose up against Charles' son, Philip ii of Spain. At the height of the conflict they withdrew their allegiance to Philip ii and the 'United Provinces' declared their independence. Spain refused to accept this, and tried to reconquer her lost territories. The attempt was partly successful: the southern areas came under Spanish rule again, but the north was able to retain its independence. With the Peace of Münster (1648) the Low Countries were divided along these lines. The northern provinces together formed a new state (the Netherlands), the southern provinces (Belgium) remained under Spanish authority.

This had far-reaching consequences. The Northern Netherlands flourished to an extent never known before, politically and economically as well as in terms of culture and scholarship, whereas the Southern or Spanish Netherlands faced centuries of stagnation and decline. After the fall of Antwerp in 1585 there was a great stream of emigrants from the south, especially to the cities of Holland (Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden etc.).

In the north the process of standardisation of the language continued. From the seventeenth century onwards the standard language has been based on the dialect of the province of Holland (mixed with southern elements on account of the large numbers of immigrants). The other (northern) provinces turned increasingly to the language of Holland. From the sixteenth century onwards dictionaries, grammars and spelling books appeared. Dutch was used for all areas of life, including scholarly circles and the (Protestant) church. An important step in the history of the standard language is the appearance of an official translation of the Bible in 1637. Far more than in earlier translations of the Bible into Dutch, the translation of 1637 is a deliberate attempt at compromise in language: this translation had to be one which could be used throughout the whole of what is now known as the

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The 'States Bible', printed in Leiden in 1637.

Netherlands. Indeed, it has served in this capacity right into the twentieth century.

The southern provinces (the Spanish, later Austrian Netherlands, now Belgium) played scarcely any part in this process of standardisation. It is true that in the Dutch-speaking part the Dutch dialects remained in use, but the language of the state, and later also the language of law and the church, was French. Therefore there was no overarching standard language, and, moreover, contact with the Netherlands was limited. In fact, in that part of the world, from the seventeenth century

up to the end of the nineteenth century, the use of Dutch (i.e. Dutch dialects) was driven further and further back by French.

In the seventeenth century, under the leadership of Jan van Riebeeck, Dutch colonists established themselves in South Africa. Their language developed there in a totally distinctive way, and over the centuries has be-

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come increasingly differentiated from Dutch, both in vocabulary and grammar. Modern Afrikaans can still be understood, with some difficulty, by people who speak Dutch, but today we must regard Dutch and Afrikaans as two separate languages.

Some characteristics

Broadly speaking, the Dutch language acquired in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries those characteristics which it still has today. The original Germanic case system, still present in Middle Dutch, disappeared after the sixteenth century. In this respect Dutch is more like English, in which the cases also disappeared after the Middle English period, whereas German has preserved its cases into the present time. In fact this difference from German was apparent very early: in Old Dutch dative and accusative tended to fuse, while in Old High German they remained distinct, as they do to this day in modern German.

On the other hand, Dutch developed a word order that is closer to German. Unlike in English the verbs are not all placed together. In main clauses the conjugated verb is in the second position, and the remaining verbs are at the end of the sentence. Dutch also has a different word order for dependent clauses.

In addition, Dutch has its own special characteristics, such as a future with *zullen* and *gaan*, a passive with *worden* and *zijn*; two genders for nouns (*de* and *het*) compared with the one (*the*) in English and the three (*der*, *die* and *das*) in German; and highly developed use of prepositional adverbs (*erin*, *daarop*, *waardoor*, etc.) which certainly do exist in English and German but enjoy only marginal use in those languages.

Finally, the Dutch vocabulary contains fewer Romance loan words than English, but more than German.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

The period of prosperity that the Netherlands enjoyed in the seventeenth century was clearly past its peak in the eighteenth. If the Netherlands had been an important maritime power in the seventeenth century, in the eighteenth its position in international politics grew steadily weaker. The economy also stagnated. After the French conquest (1795-1813) the Netherlands had little influence left. At the Congress of Vienna it was decided that the Northern Netherlands and the Austrian Netherlands should be joined. The thinking behind this was that it would provide a stronger buffer against the still feared

France. Although the Low Countries were indeed united for a short period, under the Dutch king William I, the tension very quickly increased enormously, and in 1830 the southern provinces broke away and the independent kingdom of Belgium was proclaimed, achieving official recognition in 1839.

We must be mindful of these circumstances when considering the history of the language. In the Netherlands the process of standardisation continued. Around 1600 it is true that there was a standard written language (main-

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ly because a more or less uniform spelling was used in the various provinces), but there was still no standard pronunciation to go with it. The dialect of the province of Holland, the most densely populated and economically the strongest province, and in particular the dialect of a few cities in Holland (such as Haarlem and Amsterdam), became the norm for the standard language. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century, however, that this standard pronunciation (mostly referred to as '*Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands*' (General Educated Dutch) or *abn*) was used by the educated sectors of the population in all the provinces (of the Netherlands!). When there were official rulings on spelling in the nineteenth century (1804, Siegenbeek; 1863 De Vries & Te Winkel), it was clearly apparent that in certain respects the norm for pronunciation was still not completely fixed. However, by the end of the nineteenth century the norm was so generally accepted that a champion of spelling reform such as R.A. Kollwijn could select pronunciation as the basis for his plans.

In Belgium, developments were totally different. Under Spanish, then Austrian, and then French rule no standard Dutch language could develop. The state, law, and increasingly education used French. Contact with the Netherlands was limited, so that people did not participate at all in the process of standardisation which was taking place in the Netherlands. The Dutch dialects were in a weak position compared to the dominant French, so that the use of Dutch (i.e. Dutch dialects) was actually driven back ever further in that part of the world. The short period of union between the Netherlands and Belgium (1815-1830) and even the deliberate pro-Dutch language policy of King William I were unable to reverse the decline of Dutch in Belgium.



C.H. Hodges, *Portrait of King William I of the Netherlands*. c. 1816. Canvas. Second Chamber, The Hague.

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Yet more than half the Belgian population were Dutch-speaking (i.e. in Flanders; the South, i.e. Wallonia, was traditionally French-speaking). In the course of the nineteenth century resistance to this neglect of Dutch began to grow. The Flemish movement, with leaders such as Jan Frans Willems and Hendrik Conscience, stood up for the rights of Dutch, mostly called 'Flemish' in those days. Originally it was a romantic movement, focused on its own language and literature. However, gradually the Flemish Movement also took on a social and political character, and turned its attention to the emancipation of the Flemish (i.e. Dutch-speaking) sector of the population. Contacts with the Netherlands were deliberately

strengthened. Very slowly, step by step, people succeeded in improving the position of Dutch in Belgium. The first language laws specifying equal rights for Dutch and French date from the end of the nineteenth century, but it is actually only in the course of the twentieth century that Dutch in Belgium has achieved equality with French.

When the Flemish Movement began there was a difference of opinion on what the standard language should be. On the one hand there were those who advocated a separate 'Flemish' or 'Belgian' Dutch standard language. On the other hand there were those who pleaded for association with the standard language which already existed in the Netherlands. Both camps were in agreement that one or other standard was essential, because in competing with the powerful French language the variation in dialects was a serious disadvantage. Those who favoured a separate Belgian standard Dutch were in a weaker position than those who favoured the Dutch of the Netherlands: standardisation is a lengthy process, and there was a standard already available (in the Netherlands), whereas a separate Belgian standard was a dream of the distant future. Therefore, in the end the successful view was that it would be sensible for Dutch-speaking Belgium to associate itself with the standard language that had already developed in the Netherlands over the centuries. In recent decades education, radio and television have considerably increased the spread of the Dutch language of the Netherlands in



Scenes from the language battle in Belgium: *'The Minister of Foreign Affairs to a journalist: you are far too critical, my dear sir! As you*

may have noticed, we do have Flemish people working at the Foreign Office' (Cartoon by Pil, 1969).

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Flemish Belgium. At present, therefore, the situation in Belgium is essentially no different from that in the Netherlands: in both countries Dutch (abn) is the language of culture, although there are sometimes slight but recognisable differences in pronunciation. One could compare these to the differences between British and American English. On the other hand the standardisation of Dutch is certainly far stronger than the standardisation of German, where even among the educated sectors of the nation there is still considerable variation in dialect.

The twentieth century

The language battle in Belgium went on for more than a hundred and fifty years, and one cannot say that it is completely over yet. No lives have ever been lost in the battle, it is true, but it has made a profound impact on society in Belgium. It has been the cause of untold misery, bitterness and frustration. Belgian domestic policy has actually been severely limited for the whole of the twentieth century, and sometimes even damaged, by the French / Dutch conflicts. The present-day transformation of Belgium into a federal state in which the Flemish (i.e. Dutch-speaking) and the Walloon (i.e. French-speaking) community each have a considerable measure of autonomy, is a direct consequence of this (see *The Low Countries* 1993-94: 118-124).

In the Netherlands all this went almost unnoticed. It is true that the Netherlands are also bilingual (in the province of Friesland some 400,000 inhabitants speak Frisian), but this has never led to sharp conflicts.

It can be said that it was not until the twentieth century that Belgian Dutch and the Dutch of the Netherlands began to develop equally and together. Nowadays circumstances are less unequal, and contact is intensifying all the time. Radio, television and education, and considerable mobility on the part of the population, all work to the advantage of a standard language, and to the further suppression of the dialects. At the same time, however, the democratisation of education, which means that far more than in the past all sections of the population participate in higher education and training, is compelling a certain widening of the norm for pronunciation. Around 1900 the standard pronunciation of Dutch was the exclusive characteristic of a small upper social layer, but today the abn pronunciation can be heard not only in all the provinces but also among all social classes. This has naturally led to some broadening of the norm. With hindsight one must say that the norm for pronunciation of a hundred years ago was extremely rigid even for those days.

Moreover, in recent decades the influence of foreigners, who settle temporarily or permanently in the Netherlands or Belgium and learn

Dutch, has put pressure on the norm for pronunciation. People in conservative circles are not always happy about this, but seen objectively it increases the accessibility and usefulness of Dutch. That applies also to the growth in the number of loan words. As the world becomes smaller, so will living languages pick up more loan words. What is more, Dutch seems to be very well able to incorporate the many borrowings into its own phonetic system, and its own morphological and syntactic rules.

In 1980 the Netherlands and Belgium concluded the Language Union

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Treaty (see *The Low Countries* 1993-94: 267-268). This treaty lays down the principle that the two countries must gear their language policy to each other. This is important, among other things, for a common system of spelling. By the way, the 1947-1954 spelling reform was also a joint measure, without a treaty. However, apart from spelling, political directives never have much influence on the development of language. Yet the establishment of the Language Union may be seen as proof of the fact that Dutch-speaking Belgium recognises and wishes to have the same standard language as that of the Netherlands, and that people are determined to be part of the one Dutch language community.

When the Language Union was set up in 1980 it was intended in the first place to further Belgian / Dutch relations. It is to be anticipated that the Language Union will also be turning its attention more and more towards European relations, and will defend the importance of Dutch in the European Union. Within Europe Dutch is not one of the major languages, but it is in the middle range. According to the extent to which they grow in number and begin to do more, the organs of the European Union will make increasing use of one or two languages of communication - probably English and German. Such a situation is nothing new for the Netherlands. In centuries gone by Latin was the language of scholarship and of the church, and later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, French was the language of international diplomacy. That never did Dutch any harm. On the contrary, it has only contributed to the open character of the language. But it is of the greatest importance that Europe should recognise how important all those diverse greater and lesser languages are. And their interests will be better served by the use of one language, or at most two, for international communication than by a disastrous rivalry between eight, or eleven, or fourteen competing languages.

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Translated by Sheila M. Dale.

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