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Željana Pancirov Cornelisse
University of Zagreb

Is Dutch dying out?

The Dutch language is a mother tongue for 23 million people. It is the 8th language in the European Union and it is being taught at 190 universities around the world. On the Internet it takes up an important role as one of the most frequently used languages. Therefore, why should one be afraid that Dutch is dying out?

The biggest concern is that English is going to take over the global communication as a “lingua franca”. In the past English loaned words from Dutch. Today the situation is the other way round. Dutch people are very modest when talking about their language and culture and they accept the multicultural society as an integral part of their everyday life. Being multiculturally-minded, they are building up a multilingual society as well, but sometimes they forget about the importance of their own mother tongue. How is the Dutch language treated by its native speakers and how strong is the preference (especially) for the English language within various segments of the Dutch society? Modern technology is developing very fast, making an increasingly significant impact on languages. Due to historical circumstances, Dutch has influenced other languages throughout many centuries, leaving its traces in other cultures.

The Netherlands plays an important role in the European Union and is one of its founding members. In order to maintain good international contacts, using the knowledge of Dutch and other foreign languages is of high importance for the development of business and a successful economy. The crucial question regarding the mentioned contacts is whether national identity pride (the use of the Dutch language) or the tendency towards simple, more effective communication in English will eventually prevail. This begs the question what kind of future the Dutch language is facing within the European Union.

Key words: Dutch; language disappearance; globalization; multicultural society; national identity.



1. Introduction

When you lose a language, you lose a culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art. It's like dropping a bomb on a museum.
(Kenneth Hale)¹

One might think that the discussion about the disappearing of the Dutch language sounds too blunt, non-realistic or maybe even insulting for someone who comes from the Dutch-speaking area. Despite the fact that this issue is not a recent one, it is still quite controversial. The constant change of events in the modern society of the Dutch-speaking area invites us to recollect the reasons which led to the importance of the Dutch language, as well as the reasons why we constantly have to talk about the issue. Every single conference for the so-called “Neerlandici” (or Dutch language experts) covers different aspects of this problem on different levels. Purists and those who support optimal language purification are striking back by organizing themselves into associations like *Stichting Taalverdediging*, *Stichting Nederlands* and *Ampzing Genootschap*. Linguists are constantly trying to prove that Dutch is an important language and that it will survive in spite of all the negative prospects. But how bad can those prospects be? There is a notion that, as a consequence of globalisation English is going to assume the role which the Dutch language plays nowadays in the Dutch-speaking countries. What is happening in the society itself which makes it so frightened regarding the survival of Dutch? Is that fear justified? How will Dutch survive in today’s modern world with its advanced technology, or in a multicultural and a multilingual society, not to mention changes in the language itself?

2. Critics

In 1995 the renowned Dutch writer Harry Mulisch stated that in 75 years Dutch would become the second language to the people of the Netherlands and Flanders (Janssens and Marynissen 2008: 251). There have even been predictions stating that Dutch-speaking people should quickly learn another foreign language because Dutch would die out in about 25 years (Beheydt 2003: 152). In 2007 the Dutch journal *Onze Taal* published a book *De toekomst van het Neder-*

¹ <http://www.economist.com/node/3518542>.



lands ('The Future of the Dutch Language') discussing some predictions made by the general public² and by experts about the future of Dutch, particularly about its pronunciation, style and grammar. Not everyone is pessimistic, but the prevalent opinion pertaining to the Dutch-speaking area is stated in the following comment:

The future of the Dutch language is dependent on the maintenance of English as the world language. In my opinion this will be so and therefore the Dutch language will look like this paragraph. Unfortunately! (Christiaan Bakker, Rotterdam) (Aukema 2007: 121)

Even though linguists started to debate the slow disappearance of the Dutch language as early as the 1960s (Stroop 2003: 15), there had already been for centuries a fear of the supremacy of other languages, namely Latin, Greek, French, and more recently German and English. Still, English is deeply influencing other languages, sometimes to such extent that "new" language combinations are coming into existence because of literal translations from one language to another (and vice versa). Those hybrids were named *Dunglish* (Dutch and English), *Denglish* (German and English), *Danglish* (Danish and English), but also *Chinglish* (Chinese and English) and even *Franglais* (French and English). They were constructed to make communication easier, usually by the young population.³

Could one predict the future of Dutch? Crystal (2000: 11) states that a language dies when no one speaks it any more. Is this a realistic picture of the Dutch language? Michael Krauss's statements gave hope for Dutch. His conclusion is as follows - a language can die out if parents do not teach their children their mother tongue any more, if it has less than 100,000 speakers, if it is not an official language and in situations where the young choose an alternative that is more attractive to them (Beheydt 2003: 154). The government is also responsible for the survival of a language. If it ignores its use, the language prestige will be lower and as a consequence of that it will lose its status (Schramme 2004). What the general public thinks about the governments' involvement in the language prestige issue was very clear in the year 2011 when the new Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was criticised because of many English loanwords that he was using when speaking Dutch. The purists from the *Stichting Taalverdediging* and *Sticht-*

² There were more than 2,400 participants.

³ <http://www.worldwidewords.org/turnsofphrase/tp-den1.htm>.



ing Nederlands started to write protest letters (even to Rutte himself) and published them in their newsletters. Mark Rutte used to work for the big Dutch multinational Unilever where the working language was mainly English. The purists at *Stichting Nederlands* think that his way of speaking is very clear, but that he uses unnecessary English words.⁴ A survey conducted by the journal *Onze Taal* in April 2011 showed that 67 percent of the respondents was against such language use by the Prime Minister (Jansen 2011: 139). The purists at the *Stichting Taalverdediging* also have other worries: if someone like Mark Rutte, an educated Dutchman in a high position who was working for a multinational company (although it was situated in the Netherlands) has problems speaking pure Dutch, what is the future of the pupils attending bilingual higher education, who will continue their academic education in English?⁵ This is another issue that can lead to further problems. The universities are becoming internationally oriented. Around half of the Master studies are held in English and it is not that unusual anymore to get a degree in Dutch writing a thesis in English rather than Dutch.⁶ The knowledge of foreign languages is necessary for a better future not just of the individual itself, but for the progress of the country where that individual works and lives. Globalisation dictates new rules that have to be followed in order to survive, but it is also necessary to save national identities through their national languages.

3. Small but still a *World Language*

The society that fights for the position and the promotion of the Dutch language, the *Nederlandse Taalunie* (The Dutch Language Union), uses a very powerful slogan promoting the language: “Nederlands Wereldtaal!” (“Dutch, a World Language!”).⁷ Dutch is not nearly as big as English or Chinese (the languages that are predicted to take over the global language position), but how big is it then and what is its importance?

⁴ <http://www.stichtingnederlands.nl/midden.htm>.

⁵ <http://www.taalverdediging.nl/nbindex.html>

⁶ <http://www.pzc.nl/nieuws/algemeen/binnenland/8322985/Engels-wint-terrein-in-hoger-onderwijs-.ece>.

⁷ <http://taalunieversum.org/taalpeil/2010/>.



The Dutch language is the mother tongue of 23 million people and is one of the 40 most widely spoken languages in the world. Except in the Netherlands, Dutch is an official language in Belgium, Suriname (former Dutch Guiana), Aruba, Curaçao and Saint Martin, but it is also a mother tongue for many inhabitants of Northern France. It is the 8th language in the European Union and it is being taught at 190 universities around the world.⁸ On the Internet it is one of the ten biggest/most used languages.⁹ There are other countries and languages where Dutch plays an important role or where it has influenced other languages, although we do not recognize the words as Dutch at a first glance. A couple of very famous examples of Dutch words in English are *brandy* (*brandewijn*); *coleslaw* (*koolsla*), *cookie* (*koekje*, *koekie*), *Santa Claus* (*Kerstman*, but the name came from *Sinterklaas*) or *boss* (*baas*) (Van der Sijs 2009). Many English words in the domain of shipping come from Dutch, such as *cruise*, *skipper* or *yacht*. Others include words in the domain of art history (e.g. *landscape*, *easel*, *sketch* or *etch*) (Millward 2011: 198, 326). These influences are mostly connected with the rich Dutch history and wealth consequent to its status as a successful seafaring nation. That is the reason why the Dutch language is being spoken on big continents like South America, Africa and Asia. It is interesting to point out that in Indonesia history and law students should learn Dutch if they want to seriously engage in these professions. A major part of the Indonesian law system is still available only in Dutch, making it necessary for anyone involved in legal matters to have a working knowledge of Dutch.¹⁰ Many inhabitants of the former colonies such as South Africa, Suriname and Indonesia are now living in the Netherlands contributing to the multicultural and multilingual image of the modern Dutch society.

4. The Dutch language and its threats

In his discussion about the threats to the Dutch language Beheydt (2003: 152–163) sees two types of influences: internal and external.

⁸ http://taalunieversum.org/taal/feiten_en_weetjes/#top.

⁹ http://taalschrift.org/editie/75/je-komt-er-verder-mee-dan-met-chinees?utm_source=attending&utm_medium=mail&utm_content=reportage&utm_campaign=2010-75.

¹⁰ http://taalschrift.org/editie/75/je-komt-er-verder-mee-dan-met-chinees?utm_source=attending&utm_medium=mail&utm_content=reportage&utm_campaign=2010-75.



Internal influences refer to the problems that Dutch is facing as a consequence of changes in the standard version of the language. As already mentioned, languages come and go. Dutch is no exception. Standard Dutch is getting “looser”, because of all the different language variations (e.g. dialects, regional languages, street languages, but also influences of ethnical Dutch or even English) that are, of course, all part of the standard. While some think that this is good for the development of the language (it gives a certain dynamic quality to it), others are convinced that by that process the language will become “corrupt”. Van der Sijs (2004: 631) wrote about a research investigating what the Dutch people think about the so-called “corrupt Dutch”. Half of the respondents (out of a total of 500) are convinced that Dutch is going through many changes. It is worth pointing out that three quarters of the respondents older than 50 claimed that the language is being completely ruined. The explanation is, for example, that most Dutch people cannot write letters or e-mails in correct Dutch but – interestingly enough – 80 percent of them are convinced that they do not belong to this group. On the other hand, the Netherlands and Belgium are multicultural countries with many immigrants and their mother tongue (or even bad mastery of the language) changes the form of standard Dutch. Furthermore, young people have developed their own language and they have a very big impact on language change. Actually, they are not doing anything different than the older generations. The only difference is that throughout the history of the Dutch language French and Latin played an important role. Nowadays these languages are English and even Sranan (one of the languages spoken in Suriname). Young people love to use words or even whole sentences taken from other languages because they think it gives a higher prestige to their own. It goes so far that the Dutch youth developed their own dialect, referred to as the “Smurf language”. Finally, the media and modern technology exert a strong influence on the changes especially in written Dutch. Some of the most notable examples of this can be encountered in the language of text messages, chatboxes, online forums, e.g. *nx* or *niks* ‘nothing’ and *bbq* ‘barbecue’. Everything has to be as short as possible to make communication quicker, but whether it will change the concept of standard Dutch overall, only time will tell (Van der Wal, Van Bree 2004).

It seems that external influences are a bigger problem, because international language (and cultural) propaganda is inevitable. It is also a question of identity. It seems that Dutch-speaking people do not care about their language (Stroop 2003: 17). Research has confirmed this thesis. My personal experience also supports it, during my nine-year stay in the Netherlands, during my vacations there, and even when promoting Dutch in Croatia. Not that long ago a Dutch person



asked me why I thought that the Dutch language was so significant and why I should talk about it so much, obviously disagreeing with me and claiming that nowadays everyone speaks English anyway, so we do not need Dutch. She said that she was teaching her children about Dutch being a small language and she was giving preference to teaching other languages. According to her, Dutch is just a small dot on the world language map. Fishman (1989: 369–370) concludes that the national language is usually not used for the correspondence when considered by its own language communities as a language not being appropriate for the international function such as Dutch, Greek or Swahili. Unfortunately it is notable that this situation did not change in the case of the Dutch language for more than 20 years when the above mentioned statement was made by Fishman.

Are Dutch people going to lose a part of their identity, seeing that identity is closely related to language? Linguists are, of course, not the only ones who care about this. The Dutch Language Union is an important organisation for the survival of the Dutch language. It financially supports (through different projects) the “intramural”¹¹ and “extramural”¹² fight for the strong position of the Dutch language. We have already seen that there are also other organisations that react to the actual language problems in the Dutch society (like the *Stichting Taalverdediging*). One should think that the Dutch queen Beatrix would stand behind her people and speak Dutch with pride, and she does do that, but when she visits other countries she speaks English. Strop (2003: 16–17) noted an example when she visited Russia and addressed everyone in English. The problem was that the host did not speak English, so the Dutch-Russian interpreters found themselves in a very awkward situation as their services were not necessary. Even the students of the Dutch language could not profit to hear the queen speaking her “Queen’s” Dutch. It is little wonder that later Russian newspapers rightly asked if the Netherlands had a national language at all. Linguists and government are not the only ones that have to fight for the survival of Dutch but also the community as a whole. In my opinion, the Dutch community sometimes gives up too fast. One should not be surprised if they order a cup of coffee in Dutch in the centre of Amsterdam and the personnel replies in English saying that they do not speak Dutch. Is it because everyone has given up on Dutch? Or is it what we have out there just a multicultural and multilingual society open for everyone?

¹¹ “Intramural” is considered to be teaching at the universities inside of the Dutch-speaking areas.

¹² “Extramural” is considered to be teaching at the universities outside of the Dutch-speaking areas.



Still, English is seen as the biggest threat to Dutch. This is evident in every pore of the Dutch society, ranging from the domains of the media and sports to commercials and fashion. If one opens any Dutch magazine, they will be overwhelmed with headlines in English such as “Me time!” “Live pink to inspire!”, “Back to school” or the commercials “Lift me up!”, “London look” and “Forever young”. Renkema, Vallen and Hoeken (2003: 17, 108) conducted a research which proved that commercials in English are more attractive than those in Dutch because they sound more prestigious. Another research states that English commercials are often not clear enough to the Dutch people because of language and/or cultural differences. In fact, the Dutch do not speak and understand English as well as they think they do. When translating their thoughts from Dutch to English many of them confuse the right usage of *please* or *thank you* (Ringeling 1997: 71-72). In science and education the use of English is prevailing. The problem again is the lack of creativity, because it is always easier to write and publish in your own mother tongue (Janssens and Marynissen 2008: 254). However, English has also been accepted as the international “lingua franca” in science.

Small national languages, i.e. national languages without international functions, are often avoided by their own mother tongue élites for highly technical and advanced topics, whether orally or in written form. Thus, English is used in advanced natural science and technological research/publication in Sweden, Holland, Israel and the Philippines. These languages *do* have terminologies for these functions, but these terminologies are much disregarded or are used for /adequate for *medium technology* pursuits only. (Fishman 1989: 371)

The issue of English in Dutch education caused numerous problems. The Dutch government encourages the usage of English in higher education, as mentioned before, especially on the Master level, as it attracts more foreigners to study in the Netherlands. In the 2001-2002 academic year there were more than 500 international courses offered to students in English, which lowers the prestige of the Dutch language. This could give rise to many problems. A doctor learns terminology in one language and has to present the subject to a patient in another. In the business sector issues of that kind are usually not that significant. Most of the communication is in English because of international contacts. A problem can occur if, as in the example of the Prime Minister, you change your job and find yourself again in Dutch-exclusive surroundings. One could also ask why there are so many job applications entitled ‘sales manager’ (Dutch: *vertegenwoordiger*) of ‘public relations assistant’ (Dutch: *telefoniste*) (Bennis, Cornips, Van Oostendorp 2004: 44)? There are existing Dutch names for those



job functions. Van der Sijs (2004: 633) thinks that this segment has a bright future and that Dutch is not threatened. Only 15 percent of loan words in Dutch have their origins in the English language. There are still significantly more loan words from the past: especially from French and Latin. The notion that English is a big threat is presumably a consequence of its strong presence on TV, on the Internet and in the media in general.

5. The European Union

The fact is that the Netherlands is one of the founding members of the European Union and a very important part of it. In this context the Dutch language can be called “the biggest small language”, because it takes the 8th place in the European Union. The rule is that at least 23 languages of the EU should be used: in the European Parliament, in the official documents, laws and instructions of the EU, as well as for the interaction of the citizens within the EU. Still, there is a tendency to concentrate on a possible “lingua franca” that would, for example, cut the translation expenses. Until now, even though languages of other members of the European Union are officially recognized, only three of them are being used constantly: English, French and German. However, multilingual societies in the EU are seen as a positive development because they instigate better economical, social and political growth within the Union.¹³

6. The future?

The discussion about the Dutch language is not over yet. It is probably going to last for a while.

The world generally pretends not to notice the discomforts of small national languages. Indeed, the usual pretense in ‘polite society’ is that these languages have no problems. On the surface, they are full members of the ‘gentlemen’s club’ of standardized, national languages. [...] But below the surface, there is discontent, some protesting openly that they are used too little and too carelessly and others protesting more discreetly, that they are little better than frivolous, expensive and self-deluding games. (Fishman 1989: 375)

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/pdf/doc3275_nl.pdf.



Even though there are always those individuals who are not the best representatives of their own language and culture, there are many Dutch speakers who will not quit that easily. Let us consider a few examples. A Newsletter that The Dutch Language Union published in 2010 says that 90 percent of the Dutch speaking people are proud of their language.¹⁴ There is a big enthusiasm about learning Dutch abroad,¹⁵ even in a small country like Croatia, which has had a full-time study programme since the 2008–2009 academic year. Books written in the Dutch language are very popular in the world. The best known Dutch writer is Harry Mulisch whose books have been translated into thirty languages. The most translated book from Dutch is still *The Diary of Anne Frank*.¹⁶ Pieter Aspe is the most famous Flemish writer.¹⁷ It is interesting that many foreign writers want their books to be translated and published in Dutch first, before they appear in the original version. It is because the authors get more attention in that way and they have great cooperation with their publishers. Dutch translators are also known for their fast and effective translations, so this combination works perfectly.¹⁸ Even big music artists have Dutch versions of their songs. In 2003 Bindervoet en Henkes translated (and published as a book¹⁹) 214 most famous songs by The Beatles, but in such a way that they can be sung in Dutch without any difficulties along with the original music.²⁰ In 2007 the same authors published the whole official oeuvre of the American singer and songwriter Bob Dylan. Thus, everyone can now sing the most popular songs in Dutch.

Even though this publication is in English, and considering the subject matter should actually appear in Dutch, I see it as an opportunity to describe the situation pertaining to the Dutch language and to suggest how it can be improved. As stated before, science accepts works in English because it makes them more international and globally understandable. This text should be viewed as propaganda for the language that many people do not believe in, so let us summarise the ideas expressed in this paper.

Dutch is not a big language, but it is strong because of its historical background. Even though English poses a threat to Dutch to a certain extent, Dutch is

¹⁴ http://taalunieversum.org/taalpeil/2010/watvindenwe_trotsoptaal.html.

¹⁵ http://taalunieversum.org/taalpeil/2010/nederlandsindewereld_onderschat.html.

¹⁶ http://taalunieversum.org/taalpeil/2010/literatuur_boeken.html.

¹⁷ http://taalunieversum.org/taalpeil/2010/literatuur_klassieken.html.

¹⁸ http://taalunieversum.org/taalpeil/2010/literatuur_groteauteurs.html.

¹⁹ <http://www.beatlesinhetnederlands.nl/>.

²⁰ <http://www.kkunst.com/kk/20031201738.php>.



still going to be a mother tongue to many, it is going to develop in its own direction, but it shall stay Dutch. The strong “army” of enthusiastic “intramural” and “extramural” experts will surely fight for its survival. The only place where the Dutch should not throw in the towel is its own society. If one loses the language, the identity is gone too.

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**Author's address:**

Željana Pancirov Cornelisse
Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu
Ivana Lučića 3, HR – 10 000 Zagreb
zpcornel@ffzg.hr

IZUMIRE LI NIZOZEMSKI JEZIK?

Nizozemski je jezik materinski jezik 23 milijuna ljudi, osmi jezik Europske unije te ga se podučava na 190 sveučilišta širom svijeta. Na internetu zauzima važno mjesto kao jedan od najčešće korištenih jezika. Dakle, zašto bi se trebalo brinuti da će nizozemski izumrijeti?

Najveća je zabrinutost da će engleski jezik kao „lingua franca” preuzeti globalnu komunikaciju. U prošlosti engleski je jezik posuđivao od nizozemskog, dok je danas situacija obrnuta. Nizozemci su vrlo skromni kada govore o svojem jeziku i kulturi te prihvaćaju multikulturalno društvo kao integralni dio svoje svakodnevice. Upravo zbog takvog načina razmišljanja i razvijanja višejezičnosti u društvu, ponekad zaborave važnost vlastitoga materinskog jezika. Kako postupaju izvorni govornici nizozemskog prema svom jeziku i koliki se prioritet daje (pogotovo) engleskom jeziku unutar različitih segmenata nizozemskog društva? Moderna se tehnologija razvija brzo i sve snažnije utječe na jezike. Slijedom povijesnih prilika nizozemski je utjecao na druge jezike stoljećima, ostavljajući tragove i u drugim kulturama.

Nizozemska ima važnu ulogu u Europskoj uniji i jedna je od njezinih osnivačica. Za održavanje dobrih međunarodnih kontakata korištenje nizozemskog i ostalih stranih jezika od velikog je značenja, a posebice za uspješno djelovanje u području poslovanja i gospodarstva. Ključno je pitanje za održavanje navedenih kontakata hoće li prevladati ponos nacionalnog identiteta (korištenje nizozemskog jezika) ili usmjerenost prema jednostavnijoj i uspješnijoj komunikaciji na engleskom jeziku. Navedena dilema postavlja neizbježno pitanje o budućnosti nizozemskog jezika unutar Europske unije.

Ključne riječi: nizozemski jezik; nestajanje jezika; globalizacija; multikulturalno društvo; nacionalni identitet.