

# Dutch in the World Language System

## *El neerlandés en el sistema lingüístico mundial*

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The Dutch tend to underestimate Dutch. That is what happens when a relatively small language is confronted with the imposing presence of a much larger language such as English. But in the global language system, Dutch, or Netherlandish, belongs among the upper 1% among some 7000 languages: sorted according to the number of their native speakers, it ranks 56<sup>th</sup> with 25 million Netherlanders and Flemings (from Northern Belgium). Dutch and Flemish are officially considered as one and the same language by the Belgian and Dutch «Union of the Netherlands Language». Moreover, some 300 000 Antilleans and half a million Surinamese in the Caribbean also speak Dutch (that is, most of them learn it in school, though many already speak it at home).

The importance of a language may also be expressed by its Gross Linguistic Product: the total value produced by all speakers of the language. According to this criterion, the Netherlandish speakers end up in quite a robust 14<sup>th</sup> position<sup>1</sup>, which by all accounts puts them among the very large language groups of the world. In his *Languages and their Territories* of 1987 Jean Laponce ranks the Dutch Gross Linguistic Product in 12<sup>th</sup> place. On the other hand, this GLP is in part created by Neerlandophones as they speak English on the job in highly globalized sectors of the economy.

1. <http://www.unicode.org/notes/tn13/tn13-1.html>, visited 29 April 2016.

Within the *Global Language System* (cf. my *Words of the World*), Dutch is a typical central language, one of approximately 150 such languages. Each of these is closely linked with a number of peripheral languages, like a planet surrounded by so many moons. In the case of Dutch, these peripheral languages include Frisian (recognized as a language of the land in the constitution of the Netherlands), Sranan Tongo (the Creole of Surinam), and Papiamentu (the Creole of Curacao and other Antilles). A central language is usually the official language of a state. In the case of Dutch, it is the official language of the Netherlands, one of three national languages of Belgium, and the only official language in Flanders.

The use value of Dutch to foreign language learners, expressed as its «Q-value», is much higher than the sheer number of its speakers may suggest. I defined this measure as the product of the percentage of speakers of a given language and the percentage of multilinguals among them, within the relevant «language system». Since the percentage of foreign language speakers among the Dutch is very high, the Q-value of the language increases accordingly.

As a state language, Dutch is associated with and supported by the Dutch state and also by the Flemish «community» of Belgium. Like all state languages, it is a language of the parliament and the courts, of laws and regulations; it is spoken on TV and on radio, taught in elementary schools, used throughout the educational system, and studied in university departments of linguistics; there are grammars and dictionaries, spelling and style guides; it appears in printed and digital newspapers, books, libraries and archives; and most major software comes with a Dutch version. When the speakers of such a central language think of their language, they implicitly think of it in terms of the state, since they consider their language equally rule-governed, equally permanent, and as sharply demarcated from its neighbor as the state is. And even though the Dutch tend to be somewhat dismissive of their own language, more so than the contemporary Flemish, Dutch is vital and vibrant in Flanders and the Netherlands.

On the face of it, English seems to be everywhere, on TV shows and in advertisements, in popular music, in university classrooms and in business meetings. But only in a few highly globalized sectors of society is English spoken on an everyday basis (e.g. tourism, finance, aviation, diplomacy, scientific research, maritime transport, popular music). At home and on the job, however, Dutch is the language of choice; this is where foreign books are overwhelmingly read in Dutch translations and all foreign films and TV series are subtitled in Dutch.

A considerable part of university teaching and academic publishing occurs in English. Here English drives out Dutch, as universities compete for their share of foreign students and academics vie for citation scores in «high impact», «peer reviewed» (that is, English-language) journals. The Royal Netherlands Academy of Science, aware of this threat to the status of Dutch in the universities, has proposed a crisp criterion: «Use Dutch as a rule, then English only if ...» Dutch is the «default language» and English is

to be used if and only if there are good reasons to do so. There are, indeed, more and more of such «good reasons».

Surprisingly, the two major neighboring languages, French and German, hardly play a role in the Dutch language area and are in relative decline as acquired languages, even though the number of high school students who learn them may have increased over the years, though largely because the overall number of secondary school pupils has grown. English is the first and foremost foreign language learned and used. In the Global Language System, this makes planet Dutch a satellite of English as a supercentral language that connects a large number of such central languages like planets circling a sun.

This exclusive orientation towards English marks a major, but largely unnoticed shift in Dutch culture, which a century ago was mostly attuned to its neighbors France and even more so, to Germany. The present predominance of English in the Netherlands signals an orientation toward the US rather than to the UK, yet also toward the EU, which paradoxically has *de facto* adopted English as the *lingua franca* even (or precisely because?) it is no one's native language on the continent. At the same time, the European Commission vehemently denies that any one of the 28 official languages of the EU has precedence over the others, and insists that its youth should learn as many different languages as possible. Of course, the EU routinely conveys this message in English.

Another long-standing supercentral language, French (the supercenter of the «Francophonie» and one of Dutch's fellow co-official languages in Belgium), has gradually given way to English in the European Union, since the UK became a member in 1973. Because of the prominent position it occupies among the dozen or so supercentral languages in Europe, English is said to be a «hypercentral» language at the center of the linguistic galaxy, a «black hole» around which all other supercentral languages revolve: after all, when speakers of different supercentral languages such as Spanish, and, say, Chinese, Hindi or Arab, meet, they most likely will speak English to make themselves understood.

If its economic significance is taken into account, Dutch figures among the world's leading languages, even though not many people outside of the Netherlands and Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium choose to learn it as a foreign language, since foreign visitors can rightly trust that they can do business locally in English. In the World Translation System, as pictured by Germain Barré and described by Heilbron and Sapiro, it plays a minor role: much is translated from English into Dutch, much less from Dutch into English. And much less still is translated from languages other than English into Dutch.

However, Dutch is by no means an insignificant language in the global system, as it is neither a big nor a small language. As they say in Holland, it is «too small to be a tablecloth and too big to be a napkin». In a nutshell, Dutch among the languages of the world is a *middling* language.

Almost without exception, the Dutch-speaking population used to be white-skinned Caucasians, but since 1945 a steady inflow of migrants, from newly independent Indonesia first, from Morocco and Turkey later, then from the former colonies of Surinam and the Antilles, and now from the Middle East and Africa, has changed the ethnic, linguistic and religious make-up of the Low Countries. Although many first generation immigrants never get around to mastering Dutch completely, the second generation invariably becomes proficient in the language and adopts it as the home language when they become parents themselves. The Dutch-speaking inhabitants of Flanders and the Netherlands are not all of the same religion, and the number of Muslims has increased considerably the religious mix over the last generation, even though most of them quite likely are also becoming more secular, just like generations of Dutch and Flemish Catholics and Protestants before them.

Large-scale immigration has indeed prompted vehement debates on the identity of the Dutch and Flemings. The language, of course, is a unifying factor, both within Flanders and within the Netherlands as a whole. But it does little to bring these two regions together. There is a surprising lack of mutual interest between them. To borrow Winston Churchill's quip about the language breach between the UK and the USA, it could be said that Flanders and the Netherlands are like «Two nations divided by the same language».

And yet, a community may be defined as a group of people with a common agenda, who talk about the same things at the same time. From that perspective, indeed both Flanders and the Netherlands, though rather separate, are today both tightly-knit communities. In each, it is the common language, Dutch, that drives the collective conversation. In the end, the two peoples are quite similar and homogeneous, since what is Flemish about the Flemish is Flemish, and what is Dutch about the Dutch is Dutch.