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Instructors' Perspectives

Niet Neuken in de Keuken: Teaching Dutch on the Berkeley Campus

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Dutch is not a language—it is a throat disease.
~ Author unknown

The first day of *Dutch 1* was crucial because this course was one of the “gateway drugs” to the Dutch program as a whole. And this could be challenging.

It is a well-known fact that students do a bunch of window shopping that first week of class. If they don't like what they see, if the textbook is the price of half a month's rent or the lecturer has a bad case of tartar that makes his breath reek like an unopened grave, students will drop you and your class like a hot potato.

And teaching a foreign language class is a form of missionary work in the US anyway. Most American students told me they had a negative experience learning a second language in middle and high school, so swaying them to take Dutch is as hard as trying to make it rain during a California summer.

Needless to say, I always told them Dutch is one of the easiest and closest languages to English. Also, unlike German, Dutch did away with its cases. And I am not talking suitcases, but the fact that German uses, among other things, a different article for nouns, depending on its grammatical role in the sentence.

One year, I went into an entire philological argument in front of my class about how Dutch used to have cases too, but during WWII Nazi Germany deported and killed most of our Jewish population and, on top of that, confiscated all of our bikes, and, well, when you steal a Dutch person's bike and go about the country rounding up fellow citizens, you can never get back into his good graces... so I said, after the war, to distinguish our language from German, we had a successful referendum to get rid of those damned Germanic cases. Silence. The class was in awe.

Then I told them it was my lame attempt at an April Fool's joke... and they were still in shock. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, but a little nonsense can go a far way, too, as we know now all too well, living in the post-truth era. Ugh.

No cases is all fine and dandy, but then American students discover that where English has only one definite article (*The*), Dutch has two (*De* (about 70% of all nouns) and *Het* (about 30% of all nouns)). That is enough information to scare them off on the first day, so I never disclose too much more... like telling them, for example, that Dutch word order gives the average American a splitting migraine.

In that first week, I used to minimize Dutch language anxiety as much as I could, emphasizing that the Dutch are a very serious people, but that partying and *gezelligheid* is as

much a part of our national character as building bridges, creating land out of water and eating cheese.

For those who still may have had doubts and uttered idiotic things like “*Isn’t it a dying language?*” or “*Isn’t it like Gaelic?*”, I liked to put them out of their delusional thinking quickly by telling them that Dutch is still an official language outside of the Netherlands... like in the better part of Belgium, as well as Surinam and the Dutch Antilles. And don’t forget, I would tell them, that four semesters of Dutch might make reading *Afrikaans* feel like a walk in the park. So basically, a world language, ahem...

If that didn’t convince them, I always felt I had to disclose a dirty little secret: the Dutch literally don’t expect any American to speak their language, and, as a result, it gives one a unique opportunity to listen in on the conversations of Dutch tourists visiting San Francisco and Berkeley.

And it gets worse, because the Dutch seem to assume that theirs is a secret language and *the* tool to ridicule others, in the presence of the other and at a normal speaking volume. This still works in my family. When we’re in a restaurant and a questionable character walks in, we switch to Dutch. When we’re on a nice walk and someone doesn’t pick up the poop of their dog, we switch to Dutch. When someone has butt-ugly shoes and we want to say something evil about it, we switch to Dutch. Until of course, the other person is Dutch, too, and then we wish we could die.

So after my little pep talk of telling them all the practical ways you could use Dutch (like for knitting, planting flower bulbs and making spaghetti, and oh, and lest I forget, *zeuren, zeuren en nog eens zeuren* (complaining, bitching and moaning, a central part of the Dutch character)), I used to ask my poor unsuspecting students whether they knew some Dutch already.

The standard phrase that would always be presented with some giggles and blushing was the phrase *Niet neuken in the keuken*, which translates to *No screwing in the kitchen*. When I asked some of my Dutch friends at home whether this was a common expression in their kitchens, there was mostly bafflement and surprise. As far as I know this simply isn’t a mandate around Dutch kitchens, but maybe this really says something about America’s perception of the Dutch; namely, that the Dutch like fucking and are very open about it (because we might be tempted to do it *anywhere*, like in our kitchens), but then we’re also neat freaks, so we must put a ban on *neuken in the keuken* because we like clean counter tops... just as a matter and measure of common sense hygiene around things that we put in our mouth and have to digest.

Since a phrase like *Niet neuken in de keuken* and too much attention to the *neuken* part can seriously derail your lesson plan, my next question was why they had come to my class, or rather, why they wanted to learn Dutch.

The largest group of students I typically attracted was the so-called heritage group. Aside from the fascinating fact that 1.43% of Americans is of Dutch heritage, the typical students I got had a Dutch mother, father, *oma* or *opa*. Some of these students might know some words, or whole sentences, while others knew very little but did remember compulsory family visits to *Madurodam* and the *Keukenhof* on their summer vacations.

A happy few spoke Dutch fluently because both parents spoke Dutch at home religiously or they had a Dutch mother or father who had an iron discipline and wouldn’t tolerate any English. But here’s the kicker, since looks can be deceiving: A student might be fluent in Dutch, but they couldn’t write and/or spell it if their lives depended on it. This is a somewhat weird phenomenon, which I called the “raised by Dutch wolves” phenomenon. Romulus and Remus were raised by wolves and they may have founded Rome for all we know, but they were neither fish nor fowl, not 100% human and not 100% wolf. I’m pushing this analogy and I am not sure it works, but then Rome wasn’t built in one day either...

When I was new to this country, I began to suspect that a lot of Americans had Dutch heritage, because sometimes at the supermarket, after a shallow conversation about strawberries or asparagus, a checker might note my accent and ask where I was from. I would say I am Dutch and often the reply was *I am Dutch, too*, which is confusing if you have just come from tax-free shopping at Amsterdam Airport. What they really mean is that they are an American mutt but are 10% Dutch because they have a distant Dutch ancestor who came from Holland to take a stab at dropping potatoes in the Michigan clay. That said, at Berkeley, I did have a decent group of young people whose folks had emigrated more recently and were now tulip growers and dairy farmers in the Central Valley.

The second group that frequented my classes were the ones, and often doctoral students, who needed to learn how to merely read Dutch because they were a Vermeer scholar, a student studying Southeast Asian studies (Indonesia was a Dutch colony for no less than three centuries), or they were sociology students who were zeroing in on the Dutch for their dissertation because they wanted to figure out why pot, prostitution and euthanasia were all decriminalized in our polder paradise. I also had engineering students who were interested in the water engineering of the Dutch and I had a bunch of astronomers.

Mostly though, it was people who did art history or folks who focused on aspects of colonial society in the Dutch East Indies. As such, the two groups (heritage versus history) couldn't be more diverse: while role plays of how you can ask for smoked sausages at a Dutch butcher can be a life skill in itself, it was frustratingly far removed from topics such as the light and dark in Rembrandt's paintings or the exploitative *cultuurstelsel* in Indonesia that enriched the Dutch in their canal houses and estates along the river *Vecht*, but left the Indonesians living in slums.

There was a third group of students who came to my classes, though to call them a group is really a misnomer. Usually it was one student per semester, per class. These were the students who professed a real passion for the language, which would make any native Dutch speaker immediately suspicious. This is the person who will tell you *I was in Amsterdam last summer, and listening to Dutch, oh my god... it is such a beautiful language*. Interesting, yes. Old language, yes. I'll take fascinating, too, but beautiful?! That language of gutturals and mumblings and stutters, beautiful?! I would look in the student's eye, trying to read the student's mind. My next question was whether they had tried any pot, or *Nederviet* in Amsterdam, which, for a long time, was some of the most powerful weed in Europe.

What can I say? If I smoke weed, my toilet doesn't gurgle, it sings. A blue jay doesn't scream but is merely expressive, and the light in my living room makes it glow like a painting by Pieter de Hoogh.

These people who were so passionate about Dutch also consisted of the odd and lost linguistics students who wanted to write about Dutch idiosyncrasies such as the diminutive -*je*, which we can put behind a noun to make it look smaller. By the way, the diminutive is not as easy as it seems because why is it *huis* and *huisje* (*house* and *little house*) but boom (*tree*) becomes *boompje* and *boon* (bean) *boontje*? Or they would want to write about the Dutch word *maar* (but), which, besides its function as a coordinating conjunction, has a bazillion other features depending on where you put it in a sentence or phrase.

By my second week, I knew who would stay and who would go. If someone was on the fence, I needed to make one more argument why Dutch was easy and lovable. And I had an argument, *jewel*. Of all the European languages, Dutch has been the most tolerant of the Other, and by that I mean English in particular. While French and German chauvinists translate as many English words into their French and German counterparts, the Dutch will keep the English word and act as if it had always been a part of the immediate family.

There are estimates that, of all the languages that Dutch imports as is, 8-10% of new words come from English on an annual basis. A high tolerance for English also means that it's hip to throw in an English word here or there, so I would tell my students that if you become blocked in your sentence because you get stuck on that one word you can't remember or don't know, just throw in the English word and you'll be the coolest thing since sliced bread.

What's even more interesting is that certain English verbs will get conjugated in a Dutch way. This is really a kind of bastardization of a language, or *Dunglish* as I like to call it, but it does strike an English speaker as zany. Thus, the past participle of *uploaden* is *geüpload*. Photobombing and photo-editing is called *fotofucken*, and a Dutch friend told me recently that her ex had been completely brainwashed by his new girlfriend, as in *Ja, hij is helemaal gereboot door Anneke*.

Also, some English expressions get translated literally, and when I still lived in Holland you'd be considered daft if you said something like *Dat is niet mijn ding* (That's not my thing) or (oh, the horror!) *Dat zuigt* for *It sucks*. Many things suck in life, but you can kill me if I'll tell you that it *zuigt*.

Speaking of things that suck, the curse word *shit* has now been replaced by *fuck* which often gets pronounced in a Dutch way, so the -u- turns into more of an -o-. With that, we really can speak of some etymological closure because the English word *fuck* comes from *fokken* which means to breed (of farm animals, and not of people like your parents, who, as we all know, never fucked, or not in that way).

The introduction of the verb *fokken* always led to great hilarity in the classroom, especially if I would taunt my students to conjugate it as in *Ik fok, jij fokt* and *wij fokken*. I tell you... *fokken* has no semantic charge or shock factor for the average Dutch person at all, but *neuken* on the other hand? *Neuken in the keuken?* Who would do such a thing?!