

Changing Times

Dutch Studies in the Twenty-First Century

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Dutch Studies is global: it is taught at some two hundred and twenty universities and institutes around the world. Nor is this a recent development; many departments of Dutch Studies in Europe and the United States date from the mid-twentieth century, and Dutch Studies in London is currently celebrating ninety years of existence. Some 600 lecturers teach thousands of students – for example there are over 3,000 undergraduates doing Dutch in South Africa.¹ Quite what is meant by ‘Dutch Studies’ varies from place to place. Learning the language is central, and most advanced Dutch courses include the study of Dutch and Flemish culture. Beyond that, however, there may be the traditional focus on language and literature, which involves learning the history of the Dutch language and of the literature produced in it, together with some attention to recent linguistic issues and literary developments; or the historical emphasis may be extended to include art history, especially of the Dutch Golden Age. But increasingly, the focus is on contemporary society, the media and all forms of culture including popular and business culture. Of course the fortunes of different centres of Dutch Studies will vary as different countries feel the effects of the current recession, and there will be departments which are vulnerable when cutbacks have to be made.

Nevertheless, there is a new mood in the academic discipline of Dutch Studies and a strong sense of the future for a discipline that is beginning to respond to the challenges of globalisation. The impetus for change comes partly from changes outside the academy but is at the same time related to wider developments in the Humanities. What does it mean to study a national language and culture in a globalised world? How does the ‘national’ relate to the ‘local’? And in the case of Dutch Studies in particular, what is the purpose of the traditional division between its practitioners ‘intra muros’, that is inside the Netherlands and Flanders, and those ‘extra muros’ in the rest of the world? This last question has become more pressing of late as increased staff and student mobility has begun to dismantle the wall separating the two groups. In a recent speech, the Director-General of the Dutch Language Union, the Dutch-Flemish inter-governmental treaty organisation which has responsibility for the Dutch language and related matters, suggested it was time for the outsiders to become ‘emancipated’. From an external perspective they already are: they function as

*The Woordenboek der
Nederlandsche Taal*
(Dictionary of the Dutch
Language), the largest
Dictionary on earth, 1864-2001.

Nottebohmzaal,
Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik
Conscience, Antwerp.
Photo by Jonas Lampens.



independent academics at universities all round the world. Perhaps now is the time for the 'insiders' to recognise other forms of knowledge, other academic traditions and the new perspectives they bring. This process is already underway, and is entirely appropriate for the new internationalised academic world which operates transnationally and interculturally.

In an interview for a recent report on the state of the Humanities in the Netherlands (*Duurzame Geesteswetenschappen. Rapport van de commissie Nationaal Plan Toekomst Geesteswetenschappen*, Amsterdam University Press, 2008), Professor of Media Studies José van Dijck notes the recent success of media studies and European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She describes a 'clear shift away from specialised courses of study towards more general study areas which combine different disciplines', and she mentions the declining interest in the study of languages. This situation is not limited to universities in the Netherlands. A recent online questionnaire made available in 2008 to all academics in the field of Dutch, and returned by 169 individuals from across the world, revealed similar problems. However, it also revealed a discipline in flux and open to collaboration with an astonishing range of academic subjects - forty-two in total, ranging from history and art history to media studies, other European languages, linguistics, theology and classical languages, philosophy, translation studies, sociology and law. Many of those who responded to the questionnaire emphasised the importance of multi- and interdisciplinary working for the future of Dutch Studies.

The questionnaire was part of the research carried out by a commission appointed by the Raad voor de Nederlandse Taal en Letteren – the Council for Dutch Language and Letters – which is an advisory body to the Committee of Ministers overseeing the work of the Dutch Language Union. The commission was appointed to look into the state of the discipline of Dutch Studies. Later in this article I will return to its recommendations. But first, a more detailed picture of teaching and learning in the subject as well as of scholarship and research will attempt to capture both the diversity of the subject and developing trends.

Teaching Dutch Studies outside the Low Countries

Dutch Departments outside the Netherlands and Flanders tend to have been multidisciplinary for some time; in the Anglo-American academic world, for example, the study of history including art history and cultural history has always been a popular part of Dutch Studies. More recently contemporary social and cultural studies have been added, and Dutch can also be studied as part of a comparative programme, whether in history, literature or translation. In Germany, the University of Münster's Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien (Centre for Low Countries Studies) describes itself as interdisciplinary in both teaching and research, with a special focus on '*relations and processes of exchange*' between the Netherlands, Flanders and Germany. Alongside language learning, students study political, historical and economic subjects. In addition, more traditional linguistic, literary and cultural studies are offered through the Institut für Niederländische Philologie. At the Sorbonne, the study of Dutch language and literature has acquired a different emphasis to include not only the history of ideas, but also translation and pedagogy.

Japan's contacts with the Netherlands date back to 1600, so it is not altogether surprising that it has been possible to study Dutch at university in Japan for at least part of the last century. And in Autumn 2007 Nagasaki University made a fresh start with a programme of study that emphasises Dutch Studies as a bridge to Europe, both through the development of an understanding of

Japanese-Dutch relations and also through the study of translation.

New technologies have made it possible for small departments to work together, not only nationally but also transnationally. Take the example of the bachelor programme in Dutch Language, Literature, and Culture in a Central European Context developed by the Universities of Vienna, Brno, Olomouc, Budapest (KGRE), Debrecen, Wrocław and Bratislava. The partners in this project had already been collaborating in smaller ways, for example in developing teaching materials and curricula, and in a Central European exchange project before they took the major step of creating a Joint Curriculum. The important point to note about the new bachelor programme is that it approaches Dutch Studies from its own local perspective, incorporating translation studies, East-West European relations and Dutch literary history within a European context. Students enrolled on the programme must study at one of the partner universities, and courses are offered via an electronic platform to participating universities.

The Virtual Department of Dutch is a technology-enabled collaboration in which four UK universities pool their expertise and locally-developed study materials to support and enhance classroom learning via a website. These learning resources are also made available free of charge to people learning Dutch anywhere in the world. Besides this, students enrolled at the Universities of Cambridge, Nottingham and Sheffield and University College London have the opportunity to work together remotely through a virtual learning environment which is used in combination with video conferences. The focus for this collaborative learning is an annual project involving the UK universities' Dutch writer-in-residence and the outcome is a group translation of a text by that author. Since 2009 it has been possible to follow a Master's course in Dutch Cultural Studies entirely by distance learning.

Teaching Dutch Studies inside the Low Countries

A quick survey of university websites in the Netherlands and Flanders shows that *Neerlandistiek* – Dutch Studies – at bachelor's level still tends to focus on the study of language and literature, though often with attention also to the social and cultural context. In other words, it is primarily the study of a national language and culture for Flemish and Dutch students, and still uses a modified traditional framework. There are signs, though, of a more dynamic and intercultural approach. For example, Flemish universities do not offer Dutch as the sole subject of study; it must be combined with another language and literature. These differences in emphasis and approach in the undergraduate curriculum between Dutch Studies at home and abroad are not in themselves a barrier to student exchanges: students from the Netherlands and Flanders can benefit from the intercultural perspective on their culture offered by a period of study abroad, and students of Dutch from abroad need to understand the function and perceptions of Dutch as the national language of the Netherlands and Flanders.

So far this sketch has only outlined undergraduate study. There are many opportunities for study at Masters level, most of them in the Netherlands and Flanders. A quick internet survey of current programmes shows that on the whole Masters curricula appear conservative. Generally speaking, at Flemish universities the Masters, or taught graduate programme, is viewed as a con-

tinuation of the bachelors, or taught undergraduate programme. It provides students with an opportunity to take their study of Dutch language and literature further along similar language and literature lines. In the Netherlands Masters-level study seems to offer the prospect of further specialisation in one of the subject areas studied at undergraduate level, such as literature, language or culture. Because of their small size, not many Dutch Studies departments beyond the Dutch language area are in a position to offer a full Masters programme of study.

Inside-Outside collaboration

One interesting innovation is the brand-new two-year Master's programme in Dutch-German Studies offered by the Universities of Nijmegen and Münster. It will be the first cross-discipline and cross-border Master's programme in Dutch-German Studies from which students will graduate with two degrees – both a German and a Dutch Masters degree. More importantly: it practises what it preaches, so that students are taught not only economics, law, history and politics, but also intercultural studies and business communication. The Institut für Niederländische Philologie also offers a Dutch-German Master's programme on literary translation and cultural transfer. Students spend a term in Nijmegen, but currently are not awarded a dual qualification.

The Nijmegen-Münster transnational collaboration is not the only one: the University of Amsterdam offers a master's programme in Comparative Dutch studies together with the Freie Universität Berlin. This programme also exploits its transnational character to the full, emphasising the study of Dutch language and culture in its international interactions. The object of study is also new in that it includes the usage of Dutch and perceptions of Dutch culture outside the Netherlands. The programme also has quite clear ideas about the kinds of roles its graduates will be suited to in the workplace: it *'will prepare you for a career in international Dutch Studies, a wide field which employs researchers (in universities), policy makers (in embassies, cultural foundations) and cultural mediators (in international publishing houses and journalism).'* These master's students divide their time equally between Amsterdam and Berlin.

In summary, it is possible to see that at the very least the field of Dutch Studies is broadening out and moving across borders in new ways. There is a dynamism that places the emphasis on movement between cultures or on Dutch language and culture itself crossing boundaries. There will still be a need to understand the local, and in the context of Europe and globalisation, the 'local' just happens to be the national language, literature and culture of Flanders and the Netherlands.

The opening up of Dutch Studies is beginning to be reflected in textbooks for students and their teachers. From inside the Low Countries there is the important new nine-volume Dutch-language history of literature in Dutch, of which five volumes have already appeared. In an international context, such an undertaking represents the 'national' literary culture in the first instance to the Dutch-speaking world and plays an important part in creating a sense of Dutch and Flemish culture. It was funded by the governments of the Netherlands and Flanders via the Dutch Language Union. Of course, the new literary history also presents a more or less sanctioned picture of literature in Dutch for specialists

Carlo Mistiaen, *Overzicht van de Nederlandstalige spraakkunst* (Survey of Dutch Grammar), 1997, aluminium, paper, string, glass, 300x239x201cm. Courtesy of James van Damme Gallery.

in the outside world. As such, it is doubly interesting for students outside the Netherlands and Flanders who will not only refer to it for literary knowledge, but will also read it in the cultural studies classroom as evidence of cultural politics in the Low Countries. The volumes of the new literary history were written by specialists based in the Netherlands and Belgium.

The year 2009 has seen the publication of two more literary histories, this time outside the Dutch language area. *A Literary History of the Low Countries* was edited by Theo Hermans who is based at University College London, though the contributors themselves are subject specialists from inside the Dutch-speaking area. Nevertheless, the history's international audience has resulted in a volume that acknowledges the international dynamic at work in a litera-



ture which has more usually been seen as isolated from such developments. As the title of the second literary history suggests, *Inleiding Nederlandse literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* (Introduction to the history of literature in Dutch for international Dutch Studies), it has been written specially for the Dutch Studies academic community outside the Netherlands and Flanders. Its authors Judit Gera and Agnes Sneller themselves belong to

this community and have created a practical textbook for BA students. These developments are paralleled by two current projects in Germany: a German counterpart to *A Literary History of the Low Countries* is currently being written, and a course textbook on literature in Dutch for German BA students is also being developed.

Research in Dutch Studies

An unexpected feature of the picture that emerged from the survey conducted by the Council for Dutch Language and Letters was the significance of research to the majority of academics in the field, not just those at Dutch and Flemish universities. What is more, the majority of respondents to the questionnaire regarded collaboration as essential to good research: it was valued for bringing about cross-pollination from different disciplines and for the synergies thus created; for the building and expansion of networks of researchers interested in related topics; and also for supplementing particular research expertise with new knowledge areas, methods and perspectives. Another unexpected aspect was that among those favouring international collaboration were academics working both inside and outside the Netherlands. Indeed, it could perhaps even be said that this was one of the most significant findings of the Council's investigation into the state of Dutch Studies: that the old belief in one-way intellectual traffic from the Netherlands and Flanders to the rest of the world, based on a presumed 'home' dominance – the so-called centre-periphery model – is certainly on the way out. In fact, it is in the process of being superseded.



A way forward

The Council for Dutch Language and Letters has brought out a report and recommendations on Dutch Studies: *Naar een internationale en interdisciplinaire neerlandistiek* – Towards an international and interdisciplinary Dutch Studies. This report pays attention to problem areas in Dutch Studies such as the structural barriers to staff and student exchanges and the vexed question of international publication: should academic books and articles resulting from research into the Dutch language, literature and culture appear in Dutch or in English? Is there a need for an English-language journal alongside Dutch ones? And what can be done about the fact that the aspirations and ambitions of academics in the field are ahead of actual practice? The recommendations (see link below) themselves focus on narrowing this gap. Their object is to stimulate collaboration in teaching and research through well-focused staff and student mobility, fully prepared through good use of the opportunities offered by new media. As we saw above, some universities are already doing this for themselves, and small transnational research groups are springing up with the support of the International Association for Dutch Studies and the Dutch Language Union. ■

NOTES

1. It is impossible to pinpoint numbers with any accuracy as the picture is so dynamic. The websites of the International Association for Dutch Studies (www.ivnnl.com) and the Dutch Language Union (<http://taalunieversum.org/taalunie/>) give some facts and figures.

FURTHER INFORMATION

BA Dutch Language, Literature and Culture in a Central European Context: <http://dcc.ned.univie.ac.at>

Virtual Department of Dutch:

<http://www.dutch.ac.uk/>

Comparative Dutch Studies at Amsterdam and Berlin universities:

<http://www.studeren.uva.nl/ma-comparatieve-neerlandistiek>

Master's in Dutch-German Studies:

http://www.ru.nl/irun/news_agenda/news_0/news_folder/unique_two_-_year/

Raad voor de Nederlandse Taal en Letteren Report '*Naar een internationale en interdisciplinaire neerlandistiek*':

http://taalunieversum.org/taalunie/advies_van_de_raad_over_internationale_neerlandistiek/