

Janke is not a Yankee

How Dutch is American English?

In the last century English has taken over the world. But in its turn the language itself has also picked up an awful lot of things from that world. Everyone knows that French had an important influence on English after the Battle of Hastings in 1066. What is less generally known is that Dutch has left traces there too, particularly in American English, and even in other North-American languages. So much is clear from a recent study by Nicoline van der Sijs.

Van der Sijs has become one of the most eminent linguistic history experts in the Dutch language area. She publishes a new book virtually every year. The thoroughness of her approach makes all her books worth reading, and the same goes for this latest study: *Cookies, Coleslaw and Stoops. The Influence of Dutch on the North-American Languages*. It is the first survey of the history of Dutch in the United States. Dutch and Flemish emigrants travelled to America in two waves: in the seventeenth century and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All kinds of monographs have been written about the influence the emigration had on the language. For instance, Van der Sijs cites as one of her sources an 'unpublished manuscript' (an *Introduction to Low Dutch Dictionary* of around 1980). That is characteristic of her method of working. She does not confine herself to readily accessible sources. Poems, plays, children's books, maps, dialect maps, cartoons – Van der Sijs leaves no stone unturned in telling her tale.

In the book she tells her story in three stages. After an introduction a good hundred pages long on the history of the Dutch language in North-America, she writes about the Dutch words that have made their mark on American English. She has recorded that influence in a thematic glossary. So we can read about Dutch words in the American vocabulary in the areas of food, drink and luxury delicacies: *cookie* (from Dutch 'koekje'), *smear-case* (from 'smeerkaas'), *waffle* from ('wafel'); in the plant and animal world *groundhog* is a literal translation of the Dutch 'aardvarken'; in the field of household goods and everyday items (*bake-*

oven ('bakoven'), *bed-spread* ('bedsprei'), *dobber* ('dobber'); in children's language: *Santa Claus* (Sinterklaas), a saint commemorated every year at the beginning of December. The figure the English expression refers to, dressed in red plush with a cap and sleigh who brings presents for the children around Christmas time, is called the 'kerstman' - Father Christmas – in Dutch), *rolle bolle* ('rollebollen'), and so on. The third and final part of the book deals with the influence of Dutch on the North-American Indian languages. For example, words such as *appel* (apple), *komkommer* (cucumber), *kool* (cabbage) and *watermeloen* (watermelon) have been adopted by a number of Indian languages (Loup, Mohican, Mohegan-Pequot and Munsee), along with the names of animals such as *kalkoen* (turkey), *kip* (chicken), *varken* (pig) and *poes* (cat), and words for clothing such as *broek* (trousers/breeches) and *hemd* (shirt).

Van der Sijs' approach has led to some fresh insights. As already stated, she is the first to provide a comprehensive survey of this subject, and that in itself is something new. But scraps of new information can also be found in the studies of individual words, which are always underpinned with references from the literature. Until now the etymological literature has stated over and over again that the word *knickerbockers* for 'kniebroek' ultimately derives (via an author's pseudonym) from the Dutch surname 'Knickerbakker'. Van der Sijs patiently traces the trail back. From the book *A History of New York* published by Washington Irving in 1809 under the pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker, a book in which Dutch colonists were portrayed wearing knee-length trousers, via the history of the Knickerbocker family in the United States, to the assertion that the family name derives from an old occupation. 'Modern sources' she writes, '*stick to the explanation of the name of the occupation of Knickerbacker ('baker of knickers' (children's marbles)), but this is highly unlikely, because it is doubtful that someone with such a specialized occupation could make a living in the seventeenth century. What is certain, however, is that knikkerbakker, howsoever spelled, exists in Dutch neither as the name of an occupation nor as a family name.*'



forward by small steps. That is also true of historical linguistics. In this book Van der Sijs takes such steps with verve, with total conviction, and once again in such a way as to make the book a very enjoyable read. Moreover, she has a good eye for details that appeal to the imagination. For example, she writes that many Americans with a Dutch or Flemish background – a good five million of them in all – express their pride in the fact by means of bumper stickers with texts like: *You're not Much if You're not Dutch* and *Being Belgian is Beautiful*. 'Apparently', Van der Sijs remarks dryly, 'one can be proud of one's Dutch background without being able to speak the Dutch language.'

Ewoud Sanders

Chocolate figures of the Dutch original Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas - right), who gave his name to the pagan figure known as Santa Claus in English (left).

Van der Sijs therefore concludes that the family name Knickerbocker is probably a corruption of the Dutch nickname 'Kinnebak' ('kakement'='jaw/s'). The whole reconstruction occupies a good three pages, but for lovers of this genre it is a pleasure to read her persuasive reasoning.

We find another new insight in the history of the word *Yankee* – a word that dozens of eminent philologists have sunk their teeth into before her. Over the space of six pages Van der Sijs patiently sets out all the theories, including their sometimes questionable argumentation, to come to the conclusion that at least one widely-held theory simply does not fit: *Yankee* is not derived from the Flemish Christian name Janke (a diminutive of Jan), because the diminutive form – *ke* is not to be found in any other American-English word borrowed from the Dutch. It is far more likely to have come from the Dutch double Christian name 'Jan-Kees'.

Probably many people would see these examples as mere insignificant trifles, but knowledge often moves

Nicoline van der Sijs, *Cookies, Coleslaw, and Stoops: The Influence of Dutch on the North American Languages*. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2009.