

## What's in a Name?

### Changing Labels for the Dutch Language

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[ ROEL VISMANS ]

The naïve language user (and foreign language learner) has good reasons to feel confused by the names for the Dutch language, both in English and in Dutch. There are two sources for this potential confusion. One lies in the English word *Dutch* itself and in its history, the other in the variety of names that have been given to the language by its own speakers over the centuries and which persist to the present day. The English word *Dutch* is similar to German *Deutsch*, but they refer to different languages, a state of affairs that English learners of German in particular have to learn to live with. The official name for the Dutch language is *Nederlands*, but many Dutch people refer to it as *Hollands* and many Flemish people use the word *Vlaams*. In this article I will discuss these issues in order to throw some light on them.

The English word *Dutch* is cognate with the German word for 'German', *Deutsch*, as well as its Dutch equivalent *Duits*, i.e. the Dutch word for 'German'. All three words stem from an earlier Germanic word, *theodisc*<sup>(1)</sup>, meaning 'popular, of the people', which was used in the early middle ages throughout the West-Germanic language area to distinguish the spoken language from Latin (and French and other non-Germanic languages). In Dutch the word developed into various forms, most notably Middle Dutch *dietsc* in the south-west and *duutsc* elsewhere. In Dutch, present-day *Duits* developed from the latter form, whilst the word *Diets* is now archaic, although sometimes still used in non-technical references to Middle Dutch. Moreover, regional names like *vlaemsc* or *brabants* were also used in the Middle Ages, evidence of the sensitivity for regional differences that existed at the time. At the time, some of these regional labels also occurred in the surrounding languages, for example in English (e.g. Flemish) and in French where the word *flamand* appears to have been more widely used than *thiois*, the (medieval) French translation of *dietsc*.

In the course of the 16th century, as standard languages began to develop, the term *Nederduits* (again with various spellings) gradually entered the language as a way of distinguishing Dutch from (High) German. The overlap between this development and the emergence of a Dutch political entity with its own national identity is certainly no coincidence. This was soon followed by the introduction of the word *Nederlands* alongside *Nederduits* in some official texts and in books about the Dutch language. Gradually *Nederlands* began to replace

*Nederduits* and by the end of the 19th century the word *Nederduits* had almost completely disappeared. It is now only used to refer to the Low German dialects (*Plattdeutsch*) spoken in Northern Germany. Regional labels also continued to occur, however. Of some interest in this context is the title of a Dutch grammar by W.G. Brill that appeared in 1946 as *Hollandsche spraakleer* and was later reprinted as *Nederlandsche spraakleer ten gebruike bij inrichtingen van hooger onderwijs* ('Dutch grammar for use in institutions of higher education'). This shows that the label *Hollands*, in essence a regional reference, was also being used to refer to standard Dutch in much the same way as it is today, certainly in colloquial language. We shall return to this issue below.

Other languages soon began to copy the formal distinction between Dutch and High German with direct translations of the word *Nederlands*, for example into French *néerlandais* and German *Niederländisch*. Just as in Dutch, however, forms like *hollandais* and *Holländisch* also occur and are reserved for more colloquial speech. In English, meanwhile, *theodisc* developed into Dutch which was first used to refer to all precursors of present-day Dutch and German. However, the English word *German* already existed as well, so from the late 16th century onwards English also began to distinguish between Dutch and German in line with the political and sociolinguistic developments on the continent but with different words than in Dutch or French and German:

*Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (WNT), the greatest dictionary in the world (1864-2001) © Jonas Lampens



In the 15th and 16th c. 'Dutch' was used in England in the general sense in which we now use 'German', and in this sense it included the language and people of the Netherlands as part of the 'Low Dutch' or Low German domain. After the United Provinces became an independent state, using the 'Nederduytsch' or Low German of Holland as the national language, the term 'Dutch' was gradually restricted in England to the Netherlanders, as being the particular division of the 'Dutch' or Germans with whom the English came in contact in the 17th c. (OED)

However, in English there is no equivalent of the label *Hollands* as there is in, for example, German or French. It is noteworthy that in the early modern period some authors tried to incorporate the prefix *neder-* in their names for the Dutch language, e.g. Thomas Basson's *Coniugations in Englishe and Netherdutch* (Leiden 1586) and William Sewel's *A compendious guide to the Low Dutch language. Korte wegwyzer der Nederduytsche taal* (Amsterdam, 1700). However, such sensitivity may have been due to the fact that Basson was an English immigrant and Sewel the son of an English immigrant. The latter was not consistent in his inclusion of *Low* alongside *Dutch*, witness the title of his dictionary: *Nieuw woordenboek der Nederduytsche en Engelsche taale .... A New dictionary Dutch and English* (Amsterdam, 1691).

English also has one other term for the Dutch language, *Netherlandish*. However, it is rarely used, even by linguists and it is significant that in four of the seven quotations for its entry in the OED, the word *Dutch* is added by way of explanation, e.g. 'The origin of new Netherlandish or Dutch is to be found with the *Rederijkers*', a quote from the 1890 Chambers Encyclopedia. In other contexts, the adjective *Netherlandish* tends to refer to art from the Low Countries.

## Confusion

An added complication is that words like *Dutch* or *English* are not only nouns referring to languages, but also adjectives denoting political entities and especially nations. This is true for English as much as it is for Dutch, e.g.: *het Nederlands elftal* ('the Dutch eleven'), *the English football team*. Moreover, in English the names for some languages are also used as nouns referring to people, e.g.: *the Dutch lost spectacularly*. This link between language and nation, fundamentally a 19th-century concept, continues to shape much of our thinking about language and the way we speak about it today.

One way of speaking about countries is the *pars pro toto* in which the name of a small area of a country is used to refer to the whole nation. Thus, many British people say 'Holland' when they mean 'the Netherlands', in much the same way as many continentals say 'England' for 'Great Britain'. Indeed, during the Olympic Games in London in 2012 many English people could be heard celebrating 'English' successes, even if the other UK nations (Scots, Welsh, Northern Irish, Manx, etc.) would have said 'British'. The Dutch are less particular, not only when it comes to football (they all sing *Hup Holland Hup*), but often also when they refer informally to their own country (*Nederland*) as 'Holland'. Even so, regional sensitivities sometimes become apparent, because strictly speaking 'Holland' only refers to the two western provinces of North and South Holland.

Along similar lines, 'Flanders' now usually refers to the entire Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, even though the term originally only denoted the county of Flanders, the present-day provinces of West and East Flanders. However, a slightly different situation pertains to 'Flanders' than to 'Holland', as 'Flanders' (*Vlaanderen*) is actually also the official name for the region.

These differences between formal, official, and informal, colloquial naming conventions for the Netherlands and Flanders are reflected in the present-day names for the Dutch language. Officially and even legally, the name for the language is *Nederlands*, but *Hollands* is often used by Dutch people to talk about their own language, e.g. in the phrase *praat gewoon Hollands* ('just speak Dutch'). In many ways this phrase means more than it says, because it can be used as an admonition to anyone acting above their station. Here, *Hollands* is equivalent to 'normal', 'ordinary', 'everyday'. Similarly, people in Flanders regularly refer to Flemish Dutch as *Vlaams*, reserving the term *Nederlands* for official and formal usage. What is referred to as *Vlaams* and *Hollands* covers a wide range of speaking styles, from standard language, through colloquial speech, to dialect. In particular, *Vlaams* as a general label can also be a cover term for the colloquial Flemish variety known as *tussentaal* (lit. 'in-between language' a.k.a. *verkavelingsvlaams*) which combines a number of features from dialects, supra-regional speech and standard Dutch.

In Flanders, *Hollands* refers to Dutch as it is spoken north of the border, and likewise in the Netherlands people refer to Flemish Dutch as *Vlaams*. However, the label *Belgisch* (lit. 'Belgian') can probably be heard just as frequently in the Netherlands to refer to Dutch spoken in Belgium, but never in Belgium. When Dutch and Flemish people use these terms to refer to the language from the other country, they have a set of characteristics in mind which is perhaps not clearly defined, but on which there is a general consensus. By and large, these characteristics comprise a combination of phonological and lexical features, predominantly the quality of the consonants 'g' and 'w' (in Flanders 'soft', voiced /ɣ/ and bilabial /w/, in the Netherlands 'hard' voiceless /x/ and labiodental /w/) and a limited set of words. These features are also frequently used to draw unflattering caricatures of each other.

Although the labels *Vlaams* and *Hollands* are frequently used for Dutch in general, they can also be applied in their much stricter sense to provincial dialect from East or West Flanders and North or South Holland. Other provincial dialects are usually labelled similarly, although there are further sub-divisions of the Dutch dialects (see the maps on <http://www.streektaal.net/>). Thus, we can have for example *Gronings*, *Drents*, *Brabants*, *Zeeuws* or *Limburgs* referring to dialects from the provinces of Groningen, Drenthe, Brabant, Zeeland and Limburg. Only *Fries* refers to a distinct language, Frisian, spoken in the Dutch province of Friesland and recognised in law as an official language there.

## Some order

My brief for this article was to 'create some order in the confusion' of the nomenclature for the Dutch language. On the one hand, there is 'confusion' about the English word Dutch. This is quite easily explained by historical developments, although it is not helped by the existence of a term like Pennsylvania

Dutch, the name for a variety of High German spoken in the American state Pennsylvania by the descendants of German settlers. Nevertheless, the differentiation between 'Dutch' and 'German', which has existed in English from the 17th century, mirrors quite neatly the differentiation between *Nederduits/Nederlands* and *Duits* which developed in Dutch a few decades earlier.

On the other hand, there is 'confusion' in Dutch due to the existence of various colloquial and regional labels alongside the formal name *Nederlands*. From the outside, e.g. for English-speaking learners of Dutch, this may indeed seem confusing, but it points to the different and complex realities that exist for speakers of Dutch and how they express those realities. In addition to the (generally accepted) existence of standard Dutch (*Nederlands*), they have different perceptions of other speakers of the language. More importantly, they need to be able to express their sense of linguistic identity: as speakers of *Hollands*, *Vlaams* or *Surinaams-Nederlands*, or none of these; perhaps as speakers of a regional variety, of an 'ethnic' variety or of *straattaal* ('street language' or 'youth language'), or as speakers of standard Dutch who wish to reject variation. More often than not, that identity is a complex one in which several factors interact, such as regional origin, nationality, level of education, age and gender. In today's globalised world, the linguistic identity of speakers of Dutch is also frequently shaped by language contact, not only with English, but with a wide range of other languages from around the world. It is a complex reality that also exists elsewhere, even if it is not expressed in quite the same way.

The following table is offered as a first guide through the labels discussed in this article. ■

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>There are various spellings for this word depending on the source consulted. Here I use the modern English version, which would in Old English have been written with the character thorn: þéodisc. For further etymological information, see the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT) and the *Etymologisch Woordenboek van het Nederlands* (EWN). I have consulted the online versions of OED and WNT.

#### FURTHER READING

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Dutch label	English label / translation	gloss
	<b>Dutch</b>	everyday English word for the Dutch language
	<b>Netherlandish</b>	learned English word for the Dutch language
<b>Belgisch</b>	Belgian	used esp. in the Netherlands to refer to Southern (Flemish) Dutch and distinguish it from Northern (Netherlands) Dutch
<b>Diets</b>		archaic word for Middle Dutch
<b>Duits</b>	German	
<b>ethnisch Nederlands</b>	ethnic Dutch	variety of Dutch resulting from language contact between Dutch and another language (cf. van der Sijs ed., 2005)
<b>Hollands</b>	Hollandish	colloquial term for Northern (Netherlands) Dutch; also dialect from the provinces North or South Holland
<b>Nederduits</b>	Low German	in the early modern period also used to refer to Dutch, now only used for the Low German dialects spoken in Northern Germany ( <i>Plattdeutsch</i> )
<b>Nederlands</b>	Dutch	the formal Dutch name for Dutch, in existence since the 17th century. The official name for the standard language in both Flanders and the Netherlands
<b>Straattaal</b>	street/youth language	variety of Dutch spoken by young people with influences from English and other languages, esp. Sranan
<b>Surinaams Nederlands</b>	Surinamese Dutch	variety of standard Dutch spoken in Suriname
<b>tussentaal</b>	in-between language	colloquial variety of Dutch spoken in Flanders combining features from dialects, supra-regional speech and standard Dutch
<b>verkavelingsvlaams</b>	in-between language	= <i>tussentaal</i>
<b>Vlaams</b>	Flemish	colloquial term for Southern (Flemish) Dutch; also dialect from the provinces West or East Flanders