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**The Dutch-Speaking  
Community :  
*'Hollands' and 'Flemish'*  
De Nederlandstalige  
Geemschap :  
*'Hollands' en 'Vlaams'***

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## The Dutch-Speaking Community: 'Hollands' and 'Flemish' *De Nederlandstalige Gemeenschap: Hollands en Vlaams*

The language which English speakers call 'Dutch' is traditionally seen as being spoken in the Netherlands, a small country in Northern Europe. Most people know that is related to English in some way, and also to German, which is logical because this country is positioned between England and Germany. What many people don't know is that Dutch is actually spoken in Belgium, or in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of this country. A great deal of people consider Belgium to be a French speaking country despite the fact that more than half of the populace is 'Flemish' speaking. Flemish is the variety of Dutch spoken in Belgium, and in this paper I will discuss the relationship between Flemish and traditional 'Hollands' Dutch (that form of Dutch spoken in the Netherlands). It will reveal itself to be a complex relationship involved with both historical and social factors that act to divide and subdivide the community. Having lived myself for the last couple of years in both Holland and Belgium I have been given the chance to gain a real insight into language, and especially the way it varies depending on a wide range of different political, social and economic circumstances. It will soon be made clear that Bell's *Uniformation Principle* is a living reality (Wardhaugh, pg. 18): the linguistic processes which can be observed now are the same as those which operated in the past, so in order to understand the attitudes of Dutch speakers today, we have to have an insight into the history. In this paper I will be discussing 'Dutch' in all its different forms, attempting to present an idea of the incredible wide range of variation that occurs in such a small area of land. It is well known that the Dutch speaking area of the world can fit more than thirty times into Western Australia alone.

Dutch is a language primarily spoken in Holland and Belgium, although Dutch colonialism brought the language also to Suriname and Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> It is classified as a Germanic language that falls into the West-germanic family, sharing this category with English, Fries and German. (Toorn, pg. 17). In the context of this discussion we will be exploring the multi-form variations observable in the Dutch-speaking community, and we will quickly see that this is no easy or simple task. For example, the Belgian variation of Dutch (Flemish) is considered by many to be a different language worthy of separate classification. (Fromkin, 1990). This helps to demonstrate that what defines a language as opposed to a dialect or some other type of variation is dependent not on a kind of reality but on what one is taught to think about certain languages.

For non-Dutch speakers the contrast between Flemish Dutch and Holland Dutch is clear: it occurs at the boundary between the two countries. In Holland, if one begins to speak in 'Flemish' the accent is immediately recognised and the listener may make a comment relating to the distinctive sounds connected to that 'Belgian' language ('Belgisch'). This 'Belgian' language of course doesn't exist, and is merely the name that has been chosen to refer to that far away language spoken by the Flemish, a race distant from the Dutch even though the language itself is technically the same. The Dutch reaction to Flemish becomes even more surprising if investigated a little closer. Television programmes that are taken from Belgium and shown on Dutch television, for example, include Dutch subtitles even when the words imitate exactly what is written on the screen. The Flemish find it also quite frustrating to walk into a shop and to ask for something in standard Dutch, and simply not be understood or be answered in English because the sounds are simply so foreign to the ears of Dutch speakers: because of a small difference in accent and even smaller in vocabulary, the Dutch refuse to understand the 'Flemish' and the Flemish do their best to avoid listening to the Dutch because they have been taught in the context of Flemish culture to find the sound of Holland Dutch aesthetically unpleasant, which extends to a general dislike of Dutch beliefs and attitudes.

What makes it all the more confusing is when we realise that the core of Flemish speaking countryside stretches into Holland: Brabant and Limburg are divided into both Belgian and Dutch divisions. 'Brabants', the accent adopted on both sides of the border in Brabant, was actually the original language accepted as the standard form (Toorn, pg. 64). As such, common dialects of 'Flemish' can also be heard in the Dutch countryside, and the further South you travel the more the sounds seem to resemble the stereotyped Flemish 'variation'. However, the Dutch are still able to distinguish between

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<sup>1</sup> Since their independence the Indonesians have distanced themselves from this language.

Belgian Flemish and the Dutch variations because of the small lexical and sound contrasts. This may be a small contrast, but forms the difference between being understood and being treated as a foreigner. What is surprising is the attitudes this small difference will evoke in the Dutch listener. If you speak a Southern Dutch dialect such as *Brabants* or *Limburgs*, or a variation of this, you will be certainly be understood by the speakers of standard Dutch, although it is possible that you will be looked down upon because of the diglossia present in Holland between standard Dutch and any Dutch dialect. If however, you were to cross the boundary and speak Flemish, you will be seen as someone from a completely different country and most likely not understood. If they do understand you, you will certainly be for the Dutch an exotic foreigner or a sort of relic from the past.

Within Holland the language divisions are easier to classify as Dutch has been accepted as the standard language. In Belgium however, the question is even more complicated. What is known as the *taalgrenzen* (language boundaries) for Flemish speakers were not laid until after the first world war. This means that the Flemish have on the one hand been fighting for their own language identity away from the French speaking oppressors while at the same time trying to identify themselves as a race apart from the Dutch who seem to have an entirely incomprehensible and ugly culture. As such, 'Dutch' or 'Flemish' is viewed in Flanders in a wide variety of contrasting ways. Many of those working in education believe that they speak the same language as the Dutch, that this unifies them in the Dutch speaking area. Many of the Flemish however never take the trouble to learn standard Dutch, but instead speak French and their dialect. Many consider Flemish to be an independent language to Dutch and reject the language standardisation that has occurred over the last fifty years. Discussing the various forms and attitudes to 'Dutch' is evidently not a simple question, leaving us with a number of open ends that will have to be explored in more detail.

Until a couple of years ago the standard form of Dutch spoken in Holland and introduced into the general Flemish educational system was known as ABN, which is short for *Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands*. This can be translated as 'General, Civilised Dutch.'<sup>2</sup> As mentioned, this was a form of Dutch spoken in Brabant, a kingdom that is now half in Holland and half in Belgium. Toorn defines ABN as being 'the language from one area that formed the beginning point for the standard language of an entire country'(pg.64).<sup>3</sup> Toorn goes on to discuss other cultures that have treated a single language in a similar way, for example French from the language spoken in Paris and Greek from the form spoken in Athens. These distinctions are of course political tools for the creation of unity and are not universal language truths as is largely accepted within the communities: like in France in Greece, those that don't speak the standard language (ABN) are considered by most to be farmers ('*boeren*') or simply coming from a lower social division. As mentioned, the primary exception in the contemporary world is Flemish Dutch, which is seen by many as almost belonging to an entirely different language family despite the fact that it is technically very similar to the standard form. A Comparable situation to this contrast between 'Flemish' and 'Dutch' can be readily seen in India with their distinction between Hindi and Urdu. Although these languages are also highly similar, they are recognised as separate entities both by language policy and the populace. (Wardhaugh, pg. 26).

Both Dutch and Flemish, then, outside the collective subconscious of its speakers, are highly similar languages. In order to discover the deeper contrasts that exists in the minds of its speakers, we will have to explore the history of the Dutch speaking area. In the middle ages, the area we now know as 'Flanders' was indeed at its cultural and economic height. The famous work of the Flemish primitives comes from this period, including the work of Bosch who is arguably the most well-known of the Flemish painters. Because of their skills at making cloth, Ghent and Bruges (old Flemish cities) became important business centres rivalled only by Venice. At that time, French was still the 'Lingua Franca' of the business world and Flanders was aligned politically to France. As such, a diglossia was already present, where the H was of course French and Flemish well and truly the L. According to Tuchman (1978, pg. 76) "Flemish cloth and French wine were exchanged in trade, the count's court was patterned on that of France, the nobility inter-married, French prelates held high offices in Flanders, use of the French language was spreading, Flemish students went to schools and colleges in

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<sup>2</sup> Contemporary language policy no longer allow the term ABN to be used, because the term *beschaafd* is considered to be elitist. Now standard Dutch is known simply as AN or 'General Dutch.'

<sup>3</sup> Translated from Dutch by Zachar Laskewicz.

Laon, Reims, and Paris.” French was spoken on all levels of politics, business and social life, and Dutch was confined to the peasants.<sup>4</sup>

Even in the sixteenth century no strong Dutch or Flemish nationality had developed. The area known then as the ‘Low Lands’ (the Netherlands) was divided into seventeen feudal states with independent ruling families that were eventually conquered by the dukes of Burgundy and finally inherited by Spanish rulers. At this time in Europe it was felt that language boundaries had nothing to do with political borders. (Palmer, pg. 128). However, when power fell into Spanish hands changes began to occur in the Northern part of the country where Calvinism had taken hold. They rejected the extremities of Spanish Catholicism and through their own form of ‘protestantism’ stood against the Spanish rule: the fight for independence became political and religious at the same time. In 1609, after long and bloody wars, the Dutch were finally granted their independence and proceeded to become in their own right world conquerors. Flanders was at this time damaged by almost forty years of war and was known as the ‘Spanish Netherlands’ in contrast to the independent Holland. The population of Belgium (in contrast to Flanders) were to receive their independence later, although the country itself was to remain strongly Catholic under the influence of the Spanish.

The nationalism connected to Dutch speakers was therefore strongly developed around the time of the laying of the boundaries that separated the Northern low countries from the Southern, and this became reflected in a more controlled standardisation of the Dutch language that was coupled with a strong sense of Dutch identity, united by protestant ideals. The so-called Flemish speakers remained in the hands of foreign rulers, including the Spanish, the Austrians and the French, until finally an independent state ‘Belgian’ state was recognised with its own independent government.

Because of the force of historical events as well as political stakes held by French speaking parties, Belgium became a largely French speaking country, and a strong diglossia evolved in which French was seen very much as the High language and Dutch the Low. Not until the twentieth century was it possible to even speak of a Dutch based education, although the laying of the ‘language boundaries’ between the world wars set the ball in motion. The present state of affairs is quite unusual in that a large number of different attitudes to language has been left behind after turbulent years of the Flemish quest for language independence. According to Toorn (pg. 64), there have been movements from academic circles to standardise the Flemish language in the form of the Dutch ‘ABN’ so that young people will speak the same language as their Dutch fellows. In opposition to the academics, Flemish activists demanded a more truly Flemish ‘AN’ in which a Flemish identity would contrast to that of the Dutch. At the same time and in complete opposition to both parties there were those in the Flemish population who supported a French speaking Belgium, primarily because French was the H for the upper middle class and the nobility, and according to those interested in holding the power where the language is, was it important for it to stay that way. With time political and economic circumstances change, and the ball fell into the court of the Flemish who became economically dominant in Belgium.<sup>5</sup>

The language question, however, is far from resolved, and all over Flanders one can find examples of different attitudes and opinions relating to language. In a great minority are the French speakers, usually people who were once servants of the nobility or the children of very wealthy families who are ‘Flemish’ but have never learnt to speak Dutch. There are also communities who speak dialects so different to Dutch that it is mutually incomprehensible for speakers of ‘ABN’. The West Flemish for example, speak *Westvlaams* (Westflemish) for which a 10 volume dictionary Westflemish-Dutch exists! It still happens that upper middle class families speak Westflemish and French and never take the trouble to learn Dutch. In any case, most speakers of Flemish dialects (and there are many different dialects with their own dictionaries and cultures) learn standard Dutch as a second language. Some dialects, however, appear to be more popular than others. ‘Gents’ (the language of Gent) for example arose during the industrial age at the beginning of the century and was spoken by workers. Because

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<sup>4</sup> This attitude to the superiority of the French language was to play an important role in the developing of the Flemish identity, and can certainly be sensed in the Flemish spoken in Belgium today.

<sup>5</sup> Flanders, for example, has only a couple of years ago received political independence within Belgium.

the factory owners were largely French speaking, the Ghent dialect has a great amount of warped French words and phrases. For example the verb 'bougeren' (in comparison to the standard Dutch 'bewegen') is commonly used in the Ghent dialect, although it was taken from the French word *bouger*. (Cocquyt, pg. 18). This dialect was spoken by the lower echelons of society and for academics and politicians has been replaced by the standard form.<sup>6</sup>

Other dialects, such as the dialect spoken in Antwerpen, is different because it seen by its users as being standard Dutch despite the fact that, for people from other parts of Flanders, it is quite different both lexically and from the point of view of sound. In East and West Flanders there is sometimes even animosity towards the speakers of 'Antwerps' because people from Antwerpen cannot recognise that they are speaking a dialect and therefore appear to refuse to speak in standard Dutch.

Looking for actual representations of all these different language based phenomena is a large task indeed, one that would involve much more space than is available to us in this paper. We can begin, however, by presenting some particular examples of language variations. As has been demonstrated many of the dialects of Belgium are inundated with French vocabulary and phrases, some which are directly translated into Flemish and others remaining in French. Some examples are passing words such as *enfin* and *allé* which are used to end and begin sentences. The influence of French has affected the language in other ways, for example the rhythm of the language, the French 'r' present in many of the dialects, and even double negation which is reminiscent of basic French negation structures:

*Flemish:* Ik heb geen boeken niet meer

*English:* I have no books no more

It is interesting to note that the Flemish have done their best to avoid French influences in the creation of standard Flemish 'ABN'. According to Toorn "the resistance to French is very strong, seeing that propagation of this powerful culture-language forms a threat for their own language." (Toorn, pg. 67). An example is the Flemish use of the very Germanic *stortbad* for 'shower' rather than using the more generally accepted French word *douche*. By contrast, in the Netherlands French words and phrases have been much more easily taken over into the standard language (ABN) and are now in general use, as the French have not been a threat for a long time to the Dutch. A good contrast is the Dutch use of *jus d'orange* for orange juice, which is clearly taken from French, and the Flemish use of 'sinaasappelsap' which is of clear Germanic origin. Due to religious and political alliances the Dutch have also taken many words and pronunciations from English and German, which remain absent from the Flemish vocabulary. The Dutch, for example, say 'trem' for tram, which in Dutch pronunciation resembles the English much more than the Flemish open-a 'tram'. The Dutch use also the German word 'überhaupt' to support a given statement.

The present contrasts between the Dutch speaking areas in Belgium and Holland stretch far beyond simply the language. It could be said that the great difference in lifestyle between Belgium and Holland can be traced back to historical circumstances resulting in countries ruled by systems influenced by two contrasting religions — Catholicism in Belgium and Protestantism in Holland. As I have experienced it, this contrast can be sensed in almost every element of life including the education and legal systems, leading to an inevitable influence on the general attitude of the population. For me, the first strong contrast could be sensed in the architecture, suggesting contrasting attitudes to the function of space and light. It seemed that in Belgium the buildings were designed to keep the inhabitants within, represented by a seeming restriction on the amount of natural light provided for by the placing of windows. By contrast the Dutch buildings gave me a feeling of openness and lightness; the size and intelligent placing of windows having the affect of making the rooms seem larger, exaggerated by the tactical placing of starkly designed furniture. The buildings in Holland seemed bigger although the apartments were most probably to a larger degree smaller than those in Belgium: light acts to make one aware of the world outside the building, affecting the use of space

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<sup>6</sup> The only time I heard the Ghent dialect while I was living there was on a train early in the morning which passed by the factories of the cities.

within. This is one of a myriad array of contrasts I have noticed between Flemish and Dutch societies, something I would like to posit could suggest contrasts between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' societies. Perhaps it could be implied that the Catholics being more strongly bonded by religious concepts hold onto older ideas whereas the Protestants through their religious freedom strive for the new and the alternative, seen directly in Holland through the greater degree of movement towards alternative and 'new-age' religions. (Laskewicz, pg. 18).

As we can see from the elements discussed in this paper, the contrasts between Holland Dutch and Flemish Dutch are manifold and complicated. They relate closely to contrasting attitudes that speakers have to their languages and to one another, and relate to a complex social background and a rich cultural history. I would even like to suggest that the area is so interesting linguistically that it deserves closer sociolinguistic analytic observation, and I hope that outsiders in the future will share my interest.

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