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Dutch: the language, its history, its dialects

Dutch (ISO 639–3: NLD) is a West Germanic Indo-European language spoken in the Netherlands and Belgium (Flanders), as well as in Suriname, on Aruba, and on the Netherlands Antilles, by a total of over 21 million speakers (Lewis 2009).

Dutch is an English-language exonym, a cognate of the archaic endonym *duits/diets* and also of German *deutsch* 'German.' The current endonym in the Netherlands is *Nederlands*; in Belgium we also find endonymic *Vlaams* 'Flemish' and exonymic (French) *flamand*. Next to *Dutch* and *Nederlands* (German *Niederländisch*), a third name one may encounter is *Hollands* (French *hollandais*) deriving from the name of the western part of the Netherlands. This name is also used by speakers of Dutch dialects when referring to the Dutch standard language (a testimony to the linguistic and cultural dominance of the western provinces of the Netherlands, Noordholland and Zuidholland).

The two languages most closely related to Dutch are Afrikaans (AFR, a seventeenth-century offspring of Dutch spoken in South Africa) and Low German (Low Saxon/Niederdeutsch, NDS), the German of North Germany, which has given way to High German (Standard German, DEU) as the German standard language. Somewhat further removed, but still quite similar to Dutch, are High German and Frisian (also known as Western Frisian, FRY). The two remaining West Germanic languages, Yiddish and English, are historically close to High German and Frisian, respectively, but have developed in such a way that their syntax is now quite different, and hence also quite different from the syntax of Dutch.

The Dutch language as it is known today emerged in the seventeenth century as the result of conscious efforts to promote a standard variety, derived from the Hollandic variant spoken in the urban centers in the west of what is now the Netherlands. These cities flourished partly because of a large and prestigious southern Dutch immigrant community, which must have affected the cultured speech considerably (see Van der Wal 1992). What also played a role was the prominence of printing in the southern parts (e.g. Antwerp), providing a written model for the developing official language. At the same time, the standard

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language emerging in the west was heavily influenced by the speech of lower-class immigrants from the east (Van der Sijs 2004:46 f, Howell 2006). The standard Dutch language, then, is not the direct descendant of a single dialect, but the result of language change through dialect contact in combination with language reform.

The dialects spoken in the Dutch-language area, which have so far proved remarkably resilient, can be divided into two large groups: the Low Saxon dialects spoken in the north-east, and the Low Franconian dialects spoken in the south, center, and west. In addition, there is the dialect of the south-eastern provinces of (Dutch and Belgian) Limburg (Limburgish, LIM), which is a Rhine-Franconian variety somewhat closer to the High German dialects. The Low Franconian dialects include Brabantish, East Flemish, West Flemish, Zeeuws, Hollands-Utrechts, and the dialect of North-Noordholland and the North Sea Coast (an area originally inhabited by Frisian speaking people; the North-Noordholland dialect is confusingly called *Westfries* 'West Frisian'). Low Saxon dialects (Gronings, Drents, Stellingwerfs, Sallands, Veluws, Twents, Achterhoeks) are also spoken across the border in Germany (Eastern Frisian, Eemsländisch, Low German) and therefore cannot strictly speaking be called dialects of Dutch.

Information on many aspects of the syntax of these dialects has recently become available in Barbiers *et al.* (2005, 2009). An older, but thorough, survey is Weijnen (1966). Individual syntax-oriented dialect descriptions include Overdiep (1940), Vanacker (1948), and De Bont (1962) for Low Franconian dialects, and Sassen (1953) and Van der Haar (1967) for Low Saxon dialects. Haegeman (1992) is a monograph in syntactic theory based on the Low Franconian dialect of West Flemish.

Since Dutch is the result of a process of standardization starting in the seventeenth century (what we might call the Early Modern Dutch period), the denominations for the earlier periods (Old Dutch, until 1100, and Middle Dutch, 1100–1500) are misleading. The texts we have from these periods are written in earlier stages of various Low Franconian and Low Saxon dialects. Of 'Old Dutch' we have very little; most significant is a small collection of psalm translations, the *Wachtendonckse Psalmen*, written in what appears to have been an Old Eastern Low Franconian dialect. Of the earliest stage of the Low Saxon dialects (called Old Saxon or Old Low German) we have considerably more (see Holthausen 1921, which includes thirty pages on its syntax). Of 'Middle Dutch' we have a great many texts, mostly from Low Franconian Flemish and Brabantish, later also Hollandic, but also from Low Saxon North-East Netherlandic varieties and from the Limburg dialect. The syntax is treated in Stoett (1923), Weijnen (1971), Heersche (1991), Duinhoven (1988, 1997), and Van der Horst (2008). On the syntax of Early Modern Dutch, see Overdiep (1931–1935), Vanacker (1963), Koelmans

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(2001), and again Van der Horst (2008). The history of twentieth-century Dutch syntax is described in Van der Horst and Van der Horst (1999).

This book presents an introduction to the syntax of the current spoken standard Dutch language, with only occasional reference to data from earlier stages or dialects.

Written Dutch in general presents a faithful reflection of the syntax of the spoken language, although it must be kept in mind that the standard orthography was designed as a compromise among various regionally tainted varieties of standard Dutch. For example, the plural and infinitive ending written as *-en* (/ən/) combines the ending *-ə* heard in Low Franconian speaking areas with the syllabic nasal ending *-n̩* characterizing Low Saxon speech.

Another factor affecting written Dutch has been the nineteenth-century tendency to embellish the grammar of Dutch by introducing in the orthography grammatical categories known from related Germanic languages, mostly High German, but absent from Dutch. This can still be seen in the artificial distinction made between the 3PL pronouns *hen* and *hun*, intended to reflect an accusative–dative distinction which Dutch lacks. The desire to resurrect long-gone case distinctions affected the spelling system considerably, introducing a determiner paradigm of masculine *de/den* 'the-NOM/ACC' vs. feminine *de/de* 'the-NOM/ACC,' whereas the relevant case and gender distinctions were nonexistent outside the area of personal pronouns.

These and other discrepancies between the spoken and written language gave rise to a late nineteenth-century spelling reform movement with sympathizers directing their attention at the syntax of the spoken language. As a result, the study of Dutch syntax has been enriched early on by valuable treatments of colloquial Dutch, such as W. de Vries (1910–1911) and Overdiep (1937), a tradition carried on by Paardekooper (1986) and J. de Vries (2001).

Today, the two most remarkable features of written Dutch absent from the spoken variety are (to my mind): (a) the tendency to use feminine anaphoric pronouns to refer to inanimate entities (due to the illusion that Dutch distinguishes masculine and feminine nouns, combined with uncertainty about which noun has which gender), and (b) the tendency to avoid final finite auxiliaries in embedded clauses (yielding the order AUXILIARY–PARTICIPLE instead of PARTICIPLE–AUXILIARY, apparently not to betray any influence from German; see Haeseryn 1990: 40 and references cited there).

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