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## A Great Language

Why Do Foreigners Learn Dutch?

If you want to study Dutch you no longer need to travel to the Netherlands or Flanders. All over the world, interest in the Dutch language is growing. Today Dutch is being taught at approximately 220 universities in more than 40 countries. An estimated 10,000 students are taking Dutch as a main subject at a university outside the Netherlands or Flanders. If you count the number of students taking Dutch as a minor subject or a practical language course, the total is much higher. There are more than 600 teachers of Dutch based in universities as far afield as Aruba, Australia, South Africa and Sweden. Since 1970 they have been represented by the Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek (IVN), an international association that aims to promote 'extramural' Low Countries studies, i.e. teaching at universities outside the Dutch-speaking regions. The IVN does this in a number of ways, including the organisation of a three-yearly colloquium where teachers and students of Dutch from all over the world can meet and exchange information. The association also publishes a journal, *Neerlandica Extra Muros*, which keeps teachers in departments of Dutch outside the Netherlands up-to-date on recent research in the wide-ranging discipline of Low Countries studies. The *IVN-krant* is a newsletter, which is posted on its website. Since March 2004 each issue of the newsletter has included a contribution from a student of Dutch (who is about to complete a course or has just done so) describing his or her introduction to the language.<sup>1</sup>

The Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie*) is an umbrella organisation within which the Netherlands, Belgium and Suriname co-operate on issues relating to Dutch language policy, language teaching and literature. It supports Dutch teaching abroad in various ways; for example, universities where Dutch is taught may be eligible for a special grant. The emphasis is on regions bordering Flanders and the Netherlands, i.e. Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, the Nord and Pas de Calais départements in France and the French-speaking community in Belgium. The Dutch Language Union also runs summer courses every year in Zeist, Gent and Hasselt. Each course lasts three weeks and is designed to introduce foreign students to the Dutch Language, culture and society. The courses are highly successful. In addition, the Dutch Language Union co-ordinates the examinations for the Certificate in



Japanese women dressed like Dutch flower girls, saying 'cheese' to the camera in the now bankrupt Holland Village.

Dutch as a Foreign Language (CNaVT). In 2004, 2,111 students registered for the examinations and 1,455 were awarded the coveted Certificate.<sup>2</sup>

So Dutch Studies is flourishing, and that would not be possible if no-one was interested in Dutch. Every one of the many thousands of students who learn Dutch has a specific reason for doing so. I made a 'virtual' tour of the world and asked as many university teachers and students as possible why people want to learn Dutch, the language with 22 million native speakers that is an official language in three countries (the Netherlands, Belgium and Surinam) and ranks 37th in the list of, in total, some 6,500 world languages.<sup>3</sup>

### Long live the linguaphiles!

In many cases the answers to the 'why' question are obvious. Many of the respondents have family or friends in the Low Countries, or know people with a Dutch background. They like to be able to wish their friends or relatives *'Prettige verjaardag'* instead of *'Joyeux anniversaire'* or 'Happy Birthday'. Secondly, in the countries bordering on Flanders and the Netherlands, and in countries to which Dutch-speakers have emigrated, people study Dutch because their roots are in the Low Countries and they want to learn about their heritage. In the United States, certainly, this has been one of the main reasons for studying Dutch. More recently, the number of students in this category has fallen. The children of the last generation of Dutch immigrants from the 1950s now have children of their own who have grown up in America and therefore feel less affinity with the Netherlands. A third category is those who study Dutch purely for pleasure: they simply enjoy learning languages, so why not learn Dutch? These students – the 'linguaphiles' – often achieve more in terms of promoting the language than governments can achieve with a whole series of promotional campaigns. *'Long live the linguaphiles!'*, as one teacher of Dutch in America enthusiastically put it.

The fourth category of students could be described as opportunists. They believe or hope that a knowledge of the Dutch language will look good on their CV and give them an advantage in the job market. This is certainly the case in what President Bush still referred to in 2004 as 'the new Europe', the former Eastern Bloc countries that joined the European Union in May of that year. Countries such as Poland and Hungary are keen to attract new investors, and the new

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member states open up a dreamed-of new market for Dutch and Flemish companies. But the presence of Flemish and Dutch companies in any country will have a stimulating effect on the Dutch language. In Sweden, for example, people who work for the Dutch electronics company Philips sometimes feel the need to learn Dutch. Translators and interpreters are aware that a qualification in Dutch is essential for those who want to succeed in the small but specialised market for Dutch translation. A student from Italy notices that a good many books are translated from Dutch into Italian, and believes it will be easier to find work with a qualification in Dutch than with a qualification in another language. A student in Germany openly admits to studying Dutch because he wants to 'benefit from the economic advantages'.

It is no coincidence that this remark was made by a student from Germany, one of the regions bordering the Netherlands in which Dutch is increasingly being taught in secondary schools. This is a result of the Euroregions, officially defined as 'transfrontier co-operation bodies'. Career prospects are therefore good for Dutch speakers who want to go into teaching. At universities in Lower Saxony and North-Rhine Westphalia, the regions on which the Dutch Language Union is focussing its efforts, the rapid rise in student numbers for Dutch can only be controlled by the introduction of tuition fees for students in certain categories, and by the recently introduced *numerus fixus*, i.e. a limit on the number of places available.

Very few students cited an interest in literature and culture as the reason for learning Dutch. Although art historians sometimes learn Dutch because they want to study the paintings of the Golden Age, many of the students I contacted emphasised their interest in contemporary Dutch culture. A Spanish architect is learning Dutch because she admires Dutch architecture and wants to learn more about it. A student in Vienna comments on the powerful impact of Dutch design. The Netherlands, she thinks, has a strong tradition in graphic design. When it comes to Dutch literature, opinions differ. Someone from Cambridge finds modern Dutch literature from the nineteenth century on very interesting. Others are of the opinion that the Dutch-speaking regions have produced at least a few exciting writers. But there was one individual who finds the *belles lettres* of the Low Countries 'quite mediocre – well, apart from Harry Mulisch'.

The Low Countries' international reputation is, then, probably a better ambassador for the Dutch language. The Low Countries as a haven of tolerance, freedom and openness: this image is still uppermost in the minds of students abroad. In Hungary, people look up to the Netherlands with its 'free' (i.e. tolerant and multicultural) mentality that is 'unique in the world'. Explaining why he decided to study Dutch, an American student referred to the 'very laid-back' mentality, particularly with regard to the drug enforcement laws, which are evidently still attracting world-wide attention. A student in Germany replied that his fellow students study Dutch 'because they want to smoke good dope'. So the cliché still prevails, much to the frustration of the Austrian student who visits the Netherlands regularly: 'Some people associate the Netherlands with marijuana and coffeeshops. I'm not into that at all, and I've never met a Dutch person who goes to coffeeshops regularly.' It is nevertheless true that many people learn Dutch in order to study legislation on drugs, euthanasia and gay marriage. Although the impression of freedom has faded somewhat since 9/11 and the murders of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, legislation in the Netherlands and



Belgium still incorporates enough exceptional 'freedoms' to ensure that people in other countries continue to take an interest in Dutch and Flemish culture.

### A 'soft' language

Many students have a positive perception of Dutch and Flemish people. A student from Poland who had visited the Netherlands found the people *'polite and always willing to help'*. Someone from Vienna described the Dutch as *'open and easy to talk to'*. Students of Dutch in Belgrade referred to the Dutch as businesslike, well organised, tolerant and self-reliant, but somewhat on the frugal side. Their impression of the Flemish was quite different: sincere, cheerful, optimistic and friendly nationalists – in other words, like the Serbs themselves. This identification is apparently an important reason for learning Dutch.<sup>4</sup> Many students and teachers find it very useful that they can use the same language in two European countries. In that respect, Dutch has an advantage over Spanish and Italian. Moreover, the differences between the Dutch spoken north and south of the border provide some interesting points for comparison. An Austrian student drew a comparison with German as it is spoken in Germany and Austria. Others are aware of the need for 'political correctness' when using terminology relating to the Low Countries. Someone in Hungary found it *'difficult to know how to refer to Flanders, Holland or Belgium without offending anyone.'* The interest of the majority of students is oriented towards the Netherlands. A teacher from Strasbourg replied that his (French) students are barely aware of the fact that Dutch is also spoken in Flanders. And, to many people, Amsterdam still sounds much more exotic than drab Brussels, which is often regarded – wrongly, I might add – as a dull city full of bureaucrats. Some respondents have first-hand experience of the complex language situation in the Belgian capital. During a visit to Brussels, a student from Poland had problems shopping because he did not speak French. Officially, Brussels is a bilingual city and every shopkeeper should be able to serve customers in Dutch. The reality is often different, although the situation has improved considerably over the past twenty years. A student from Wallonia complains: *'I wish everyone was bilingual.'* Many Dutch speakers in Brussels would agree with him.

There are still a number of students who favour Belgium, in spite of its language problems. A student from Germany described Belgium as *'a nice place'*, and a respondent from Hungary prefers Dutch as it is spoken in Belgium to the Dutch spoken north of the border. Many students appreciate the variation in the language: *'with all the different dialects, the language is a culture in itself'*, someone remarked. Yet this can also cause problems. Dutch dialects are difficult for a non-native speaker to understand. And they cause a great deal of confusion: which variant is the standard?

Learning Dutch and German at the same time can also be confusing. *'The language itself isn't difficult to learn with German, but after a while it's confusing because I don't know whether a word is used only in German or only in Dutch'*, one student confessed. Students who have chosen to learn Dutch because they think it is 'easy' to learn in combination with German are often disappointed. Linguists often refer to the interesting position of Dutch as a Germanic language. In addition to its own particular features, the language also has features of English and German. This intermediate position leads to some interesting

comparisons for students of Germanic languages. Someone from Portugal commented: *'You're learning something new, but there are elements that you recognise.'* A student from Slovenia found Dutch *'softer and more melodious than German'*. One German-speaking student explained that she sometimes finds Dutch difficult *'because it is easier than German'*. The Dutch language has peculiarities that cause problems for foreign learners. The definite article is a good example: when do you use *de*, and when do you use *het*? Many non-native speakers wrestle with this problem. Another problem is the difference between spelling and pronunciation, particularly the use of different spellings for a single sound. When do you use the *ij* spelling, and when do you use the *ei* spelling? Why is *controle* spelled with a *c*, and *kolibrie* with a *k*? Other students of Dutch have problems with prepositions, the use of *er*, word order, and with the pronunciation of the 'g' and the 'h'. It is difficult to master the rhythm of Dutch sentences. Moreover, someone commented, the Dutch speak much too fast!

Paradoxically, foreign students experience the greatest problems when they actually visit the Low Countries. They make every effort to speak Dutch but are often rebuffed, as a somewhat dismayed student from Sweden explained: *'I really wanted to speak Dutch when I was in Amsterdam, but everyone spoke such good English.'* A German student had the same experience, and was very unhappy about the fact that *'you don't need to know any Dutch in the Netherlands because everyone prefers to speak German'*. The Flemish and Dutch should be more confident about using their own language. Because they are keen to demonstrate their own language skills, they deprive people of the opportunity to practise speaking Dutch in everyday conversation, something that is very important for foreign learners. This was confirmed in an internal study commissioned in 2004 by the Institut Néerlandais, the Dutch cultural institute in Paris.<sup>5</sup> The institute's Dutch courses attract some 230 students every semester. It began to notice that many students did not complete the course, and commissioned a survey of students' wishes. The study revealed that students would prefer more day-to-day conversation in their lessons.

Another conclusion from the study was that, even during language lessons, students want to learn more about culture and everyday life. The replies I received from university students of Dutch indicated the same thing. They too are keen to learn about contemporary culture in Flanders and the Netherlands. From the students' point of view, the most successful courses are those that go beyond the bare language itself. They think it very important to experience Dutch and Flemish culture for themselves. Some students even choose to learn Dutch because they have heard that the teaching staff are very active in this respect and make their lessons interesting.

Students are quick to realise that, by learning Dutch, they can also learn a great deal about the rest of the world or about themselves. A German student, for example, appreciates the fact that, by studying Dutch, she has also learned more about the Second World War. Others are enthusiastic because, via Dutch, they have been introduced to the history of colonialism and the overseas possessions.

A number of students suggested some logistical improvements. Two students from Germany complained about the lack of good textbooks for learning Dutch. There is also a lack of good Dutch-German/German-Dutch dictionaries designed for foreign learners. According to one student, the dictionaries that are currently available do not contain the information that non-native speakers need, such as how a particular word or expression is used in sentences.

## My heart is orange

So how does the future look for extramural Dutch Studies? Good, in many cases, but we need to remain vigilant. In English-speaking regions, interest will remain limited to a small group of specialists whose work requires highly advanced literacy skills. In the United States, the cultural centre of our globalised world, there is relatively little interest in Dutch – or any other foreign language, for that matter. But we still need to make sure that Dutch becomes more established in this centre of global culture (which has at least 100,000 Dutch speakers). Extra efforts are needed to achieve this. In South Africa, too, the position of Dutch is difficult and socio-political developments are working against it. But a university teacher from South Africa remains optimistic: *'there is a lot going on, and a lot will be done in the future, too.'* In former colonies such as Indonesia and Surinam, which, like South Africa, have special ties with the Dutch Language Union, the interest in Dutch will continue. After the Netherlands and Belgium, Surinam is the third country in the world where Dutch is an official language. The country joined the Dutch Language Union in December 2003, which means that there will now be greater emphasis on the Dutch language in education. This should boost the number of students studying Dutch. In Indonesia, a knowledge of Dutch is important for those who want to work in tourism and for those who want to study Indonesian history or law.

Within the European Union, the question of where Low Countries studies is heading received a mixed response from teachers. In the regions that border on the Dutch-speaking areas, interest in the discipline is increasing. This is also the case at universities in the new EU member states. But this trend is also having a negative impact on Dutch: the languages of the new EU member states – some of which have more native speakers than Dutch – are providing attractive opportunities for translators and interpreters, particularly now that those languages are used in European institutions. In cities such as Trieste, located just where the Romance, Germanic and Slavic language areas meet, Dutch is facing strong competition from the 'new' European languages. It is also suffering because German is becoming less popular in the other Western European countries. Because students of German are often required to study another Germanic language too, fewer students of German may also mean fewer students of Dutch.

Increasing student mobility in Europe is also endangering extramural Dutch programmes as more and more students spend only one or two years at the home university before leaving to complete their studies in the Low Countries. If this trend continues, the number of people studying Dutch outside the Low Countries may well decline, and cash-strapped universities may then start to consider whether the department can justify its cost. Over the last few years cutbacks have already claimed some victims; the Dutch department at the University of Hull has been closed, and from 2007 it will no longer be possible to study Dutch as a main subject at Leipzig. On a more positive note, the Dutch department at Sheffield is expanding, and a full teacher-training programme for Dutch will be developed at Oldenburg.

European students are apparently becoming more and more aware of the fact that they will be living in a united Europe. Some hope that studying Dutch will help them to become *'a true European citizen'*. Many are even considering moving to the Netherlands or Flanders when they have completed their studies.

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## NOTES

1. See [www.ivnnl.nl](http://www.ivnnl.nl)
2. See [www.taalunie.nl](http://www.taalunie.nl)
3. I would like to thank them. Without their help, I could not have done this.
4. Jelica Novaković, *Orde van den Prins*
5. Dreville, Delphine, *La linguistique présentée pour l'obtention du diplôme de Jules Verne, Faculté de l'éducation, Chemin*

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Nederlands'. In: *IVI*  
Liberati, Alessandra  
Marynissen, Ann, 'I  
*van de Orde van de*  
Salverda, Reinier, ''  
Talasi, Zsolt, 'Diep  
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Nevertheless, as one university teacher of Dutch in England pointed out, it is still important to continue promoting Dutch because 'it will never be the first subject that springs to mind when people are deciding what to study.' A teacher in Portugal also explained that a proactive approach is needed to stimulate interest in Low Countries Studies. Perhaps it would be a good idea to involve enthusiastic students who are learning Dutch as a foreign language. Some of them are already acting as ambassadors for the Dutch language. 'Dutch is a great language', according to a student from Sweden. 'My heart is orange!' added an enthusiastic student from Vienna. But the most remarkable reactions came from Russia and Slovenia. 'In Dutch you can express your thoughts using only a few words', a Russian student explained. 'If you choose the right words, the result will always be clear and coherent.' One student from Slovenia has an even stronger reaction to hearing such lucid and coherent language: 'It still gives me goose bumps to hear journalists and presenters speaking perfect Dutch on television.'

You can experience this too. Wherever you live, you will be able to join a Dutch course somewhere in your area. If you learn the language properly, you will always be able to express yourself clearly and succinctly. So do it! It will give you goose bumps – it's a great language. ■

Translated by Yvette Mead

#### NOTES

1. See [www.ivnnl.com](http://www.ivnnl.com)
2. See [www.taaluiversum.org](http://www.taaluiversum.org) and [www.cnavt.org](http://www.cnavt.org)
3. I would like to thank all the teachers and students for taking the trouble to answer my questions. Without their help, this article would not have been possible.
4. Jelica Novakovic-Lopusina & Irena Ajdinovic, 'Tussen hemels en aards' in: *Nieuwsbrief van de Orde van den Prince* (to be published).
5. Dreville, Delphine (sous la direction de Mme Valérie Haas), *Les interruptions de parcours en formation linguistique: un système de formation en décalage avec les besoins de son public* Mémoire présenté pour l'obtention du DESS 'Ingénierie en Formation d'Adultes', Université de Picardie – Jules Verne, Faculté de Philosophie – Sciences humaines et sociales, Département des Sciences de l'éducation, Chemin du Thil, Amiens, 2004.

#### SEE ALSO:

- Amft, Sabine, 'Een 'opdringerige' taal of een geleidelijk gegroeide vriendschap'. In: *IVN-krant*, vol. 9 (2004), no. 3.
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- Talasi, Zsofia, 'Diep in de Nederlandse kaas. Een onvergetelijke (zoek)tocht in het Nederlandse taal- en cultuurlabyrint'. In: *IVN-krant*, vol. 9 (2004), no. 2.

# INTERESTING WEBSITES AND ADDRESSES:

**Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek (IVN)**, Van Dorthstraat 6, 2481 XV Woubrugge, The Netherlands, tel. +31 (0)172 518 243, fax +31 (0)172 519 925, bureau@ivnnl.com, www.ivnnl.com

**De Nederlandse Taalunie (Dutch Language Union)**, P.O. Box 10595, 2501 HN The Hague, The Netherlands, tel. +31 (0)70 346 95 38, fax +31 (0)70 365 98 18, info@taalunie.org, www.taalunieversum.org

**American Association for Netherlandic Studies (AANS)**, c/o Amy Golahny, Lycoming College, Art Department, Williamsport, PA 17701, USA, golahny@lycoming.edu

**Association Française d'études néerlandaises (AFEN)**, c/o Dr. P. de Klerk, Université Stendhal, Grenoble III, Département d'études allemandes et néerlandaises, B.P. 25X, 38040 Grenoble, France

**Association de Néerlandistes de Belgique Francophone (ANBF)**, Inez de Valck, Université de Liège, Place Cockerill 3, Bâtiment A2, 4000 Liège, Belgium, idevalck@ulb.ac.be

**Association for Low Countries Studies in Great Britain and Ireland (ALCS)**, Department of Germanic Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, United Kingdom, tel +44 (0)114 222 43 96, fax +44 (0)114 222 21 60, alcs@sheffield.ac.uk, www.shef.ac.uk/alcs

**Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies (CAANS)**, c/o Basil D. Kingstone, French Department, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4, Canada, bkinst@uwindsor.ca

**Certificaat Nederlands als Vreemde Taal (CNAVt)**, c/o Sonia de Becker, Blijde Inkomststraat 7, 3000 Leuven, Belgium, tel. +32 (0)16 32 55 16, fax +32 (0)16 32 55 12, cnavt@arts.kuleuven.ac.be, www.cnavt.org

**Comenius, Association for Dutch Studies in Middle and Eastern Europe**, Universität Wien, Institut für Germanistik/Nederlandistik, Dr. Karl Lueger-Ring 1, A-1010 Vienna, www.ned.univie.ac.at/cms/comenius

**Fachvereinigung Niederländisch, Haus der Niederlande**, Alter Steinweg 6/7, 48143 Münster, Germany, fax +49 (0)251 83 285 30, geschaeftsstelle@fachvereinigungniederlaendisch.de, www.hain.uni-muenster.de/

**Steunpunt Nederlands als Vreemde Taal (Dutch as a foreign language)**, Spuistraat 210, NL-1012 VT Amsterdam, tel. +31 (0)20 525 31 52, fax +31 (0)20 525 30 52, snvt-fgw@uva.nl, www.snvt.hum.uva.nl

**Suider-Afrikaanse Vereniging vir Neerlandistiek**, R. Marais, Departement Afrikaans, Universiteit van Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa, rmarais@postinfo.up.ac.za

**Werkgroep Docenten Nederlands in Azië (Teachers of Dutch in Australasia)**, Hans Groot, Erasmus Taalcentrum, Via Koeriersdienst BuZa, P.O. Box 20061, 2500 EB The Hague, The Netherlands, erastaal@indo.net.id

Other links to websites of interest to those wanting to know more about Dutch and Dutch studies can be found at [www.ivnnl.com](http://www.ivnnl.com) and [www.taalunieversum.org](http://www.taalunieversum.org).

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