

Is English threatening the Dutch language?

Recently I have come into contact with a group of people called “Stichting Nederlands”. This is a group that actively resists the increasing number of English loanwords in the Dutch language. This organization was created in 1998 by people who were aware of the “English craze” (from their website), and tries to both dam in the amount of new English loanwords and come up with “good” Dutch alternatives. They are not alone in their opinion: *OnzeTaal*, a popular magazine about language, has a whole file on the anglification of Dutch. They feel that if something is not done, Dutch will be the second language in the Netherlands by 2060, after English. But is this fear justified? Will Dutch disappear in fifty years?

There is something to say for people who fear that Dutch will disappear: the number of languages in the world is declining rapidly. An often-heard estimate is that of the 6,000 languages used today, 90% will be lost within the next 100 years. However, it is (at this point) very and extremely unlikely that Dutch will be a part of these dying languages. The reasons for this are manifold. Dying languages usually have declining numbers of speakers, but Dutch speakers are only increasing in number. Nowadays there are more than ever with more than 23 million speakers. A language is severely threatened when it is not the official language of a nation, or when children aren't taught in the tongue anymore, or when another language takes over the original language. None of these factors apply to Dutch. But there is of course language contact, and new words do appear.

New words are created all the time: they can for example be made from existing words by derivation (an **NCIS-like** show) or compounding (a **mothergoosefucker**), or they can come from other languages. This last phenomenon is called borrowing, or loaning words. It is certainly true that in the last decades we have borrowed quite extensively from English. Before that, there were periods when Dutch borrowed

heavily from French and German. In fact, of the total number of loanwords in Dutch, the majority is still from French and Latin. Even words like *kaas* ultimately derive from Latin. Latin used to have a lot of influence in Roman times and in the Middle Ages. Later, the Dutch borrowed a lot of words from French, especially in the 16th to 19th century when French culture was dominant in Europe. Lastly, German was influential as a language, supplying many words that we today would hardly recognize as being German (such as the word *leenwoord*, meaning *loanword*) English words have only really started to appear in Dutch after the Napoleonic wars, when French influence waned.

Two other things are very important to realize about the distribution and life of loanwords. Opponents of English in Dutch often say that there are many thousands of English words seeping into every part of Dutch. That is not strictly speaking true: a lot of the English words are restricted to very specific fields, such as business management. Your Average Joe won't use any of these words. Furthermore, it is vital to understand the notion of fashion words. As I said earlier, Dutch has loaned words from many other languages in the past, but these words also disappear again. A good example of transitoriness of loanwords comes from a Dutch book I recently read, called *Eenzaam Avontuur*. This book was written in 1948 and has an inordinate amount of French words in it, words that must have been quite readily understood at the time. Reading this book now it strikes me as distinctly odd and old-fashioned to read words such as *désavoueren* (see how the word is bastardised with the Dutch verb marking suffix *-en*), or an *embarras de choix* (an expression which I didn't even readily understand). These expressions have (as far as I'm aware) disappeared from our language use.

Finally, evidence has seldom been found that borrowing would hasten language death. Language death often goes through various stages, but there must always be a replacement language.

In other words, language death is almost always preceded by bilingualism. There is a type of language death called *sudden death*, where the last speaker of a language dies without there being a bilingual period, but this is very rare. An example of this is Tasmanian.

So loanwords, no matter how many there may be, are not a threat to Dutch. This is unfortunately not the whole picture of the language contact between Dutch and English. The fact cannot be denied that the global use of English is spreading rapidly. Besides there being more than 300 million L1 speakers of English, the number of L2 speakers is enormous, with estimates varying from 500 million to 2 billion. Many of these L2 speakers are just like us: we use our mother tongue for the largest part of our daily lives and only use English in restricted domains. One of these domains is higher education. This is unsurprising when one studies English Language and Culture, but it is not only our own study where English is very common: most of the masters are in English, many bachelors, such as Linguistics, are partly taught in English, and a great number (maybe a majority) of studies, including Medicine, draw heavily upon English literature. This is the real threat to Dutch, and it is right here in our own university.

Why is the use of English as the primary language in higher education dangerous? This question can be answered on several levels. For the purpose of this article it is most relevant that the increasing use of English can lead to domain loss. It is not unthinkable that at some point all higher education will be taught in English. The advantages are clear: books do not have to be translated, worldwide communication between students, professors and staff will be greatly facilitated, and it will be easier for our students to study and teach abroad. But the dangers are that we lose part of identity and part of our creativity: of the more than 19,000 students at Leiden University, how many are able to communicate in English at the same level

as they do in their mother tongue? And when all higher education is taught in English, then it might be beneficial for students to gain more knowledge of English in high school. And to prepare them for that, it might become necessary to teach more English in elementary school! And then eventually Dutch will become the primary language of education, and finally of our country. This may seem as a *reductio ad absurdum*, but this is a lot more likely to happen than the death of Dutch because of loanwords. Education is a vital register for the continued survival of a language.

The problem of course is: what can we do about it? Any solution has so many disadvantages that it becomes impossible to employ. The "Stichting Nederlands" is strongly opposed to using English words where perfectly good Dutch words are available. This of course is impossible to enforce: speakers (and writers to a lesser extent) will damn well use whatever word they like! But the use of English in education can be controlled. One of the actions that have to be undertaken is the translation of scientific books in Dutch. A costly solution, yes, but one that will ensure the lasting possibility of being able to teach in Dutch, not in English. All arguments about internationalization are of course plausible, and if all bachelors are taught in Dutch than at some point more English education has to be introduced.

This is an ongoing problem. But let me just repeat here: Dutch is not under threat. Loanwords have been around forever, and will continue to be used. Whether or not to use English loanwords is mostly a question of aesthetics, and people should decide for themselves what they think is beautiful and what is not, because in the end, *de gustibus non est disputandum*. It would help though if people would just let other people be, and stop nagging about all kinds of "wrong". Remember folks: there is no right and wrong in language: there is only usage.

Marten van der Meulen