

## Dialects are awesome, and are you listening to BBC Radio enough?



Ask anyone on the streets of Leiden what language people speak in the Netherlands, and s/he will look at you funny and say: "Dutch of course". S/he will probably walk away thinking "Jeez Louise, those geezers from the university become dimmer every year". But in fact it's not as straightforward a question as it may seem at first hand. True, the official language of the Netherlands is Dutch, but my Dutch (coming from The Hague) is not the same as that of someone from Amsterdam, let alone as that of someone from Groningen. Now while this has mostly to do with accents, people speak in dialects as well, which may be completely incomprehensible to me. Why is that? Why don't we all speak the same Dutch? It seems counterproductive after all: wouldn't it be more efficient if we all spoke the same?

Firstly, a quick note on the difference between accent and dialect. As with so many linguistic concepts, this is not a super easy demarcation, but it seems at least relatively clear. An accent has to do with pronunciation and pronunciation only. What happens is that some features of one's mother tongue are transferred into the spoken language, indicating that a speaker is not speaking one's mother tongue. Examples taken from Dutch and English are for example the pronouncing of the *th* in *that* as a *d*, since Dutch does not have that consonant. But accents also exist within a language: I for example, coming from The Hague, have tendencies to end words spelled with word final *-en* as *uh*. The same applies of course to the land of the Green Hills: there is a marked difference in pronunciation between Bristolites and Glaswegians. Now people may have some dialectal features in their speech, or flip in a dialect word once every so often, but a dialect is something else entirely.

A dialect is a language variety spoken in a specific geographical area (be it a village, a province, an island or a city).

A dialect is much more than an accent, since it may be present in all areas of linguistics. For example, morphology may be different: in Sallands, a dialect spoken east of Utrecht, the rules for the formation of diminutives are different from those of Standard Dutch. There may be extensive lexical differences: for example, in Babberichs dialect (look it up, it's a place to the east of Arnhem next to the German border), a can of whoop-ass (an interesting expression in its own right) is not referred to as the Standard Dutch "een pak slaag", but as "un posje smaer". Nice eh? Similarly, syntax and phonology may be divergent.

Now we may ask ourselves a seemingly simple question: what is the function of dialects? To paraphrase the Golden Rule of Real Estate Agents: it's all about three things: identity, identity, identity. We are how we speak, and by speaking people may know what group we belong to. We constantly (sub)consciously divide the world by that simplest of demarcations: "us and them." This can be done by such simple things as using a particular pronunciation of a word, or using a specific word which identifies you as someone belonging to a particular group. The most famous example of this is the shibboleth: "a word or phrase that is stereotypical for a certain group of people, who specifically can or cannot say it." This term stems of course from the Book of All Oneliners: the Bible (specifically Book of Judges, chapter 12) where it says something along the lines of "And those and those people could not pronounce the word "Shibboleth" but rather said "Sibboleth" instead, whereby which all and everyone knoweth whereof that they were born from and such more, whereupon they were slain where they stood".

Now, we are not very much in the habit of slaying people who speak a bit differently (at least I am not, can't really talk for you lot), but this stereotyping is still

very much present. As soon as a Dutchman hears someone produce a soft *g*, that speaker is immediately placeable in the south of the Netherlands. And whether we want to or not, we immediately subconsciously have all kinds of non-linguistic feelings: people from the south are seen as hillbillies, dumber than the rest of the Dutch. But there is no evidence, least of all linguistic, that this is actually the case!

These connotations are deeply ingrained in our society. Let us take a little looksie at a case study: the news on national television. In the Netherlands there seems to be not one newscaster on the national news who speaks with an accent. This seems strange: we have an extremely rich variety of dialects and accents in our country (maybe because we have such a small country does it become necessary to distinguish where people are from?). However, as research has shown, the Dutch view their news anchors as Paragons of the Standard Language: we look to them for providing us with an example of how one should speak.

The only people on Dutch national news who have accents are, interestingly, weathermen. This can be seen in both a positive and a negative light. Positive, because dialect speakers have at least a foothold in the big bad world of newscasters. Negative because weathermen are the lowest sport on the ladder in news land: although some of them are actual scientifically educated meteorologists, they are still viewed as somewhat 'appendectical' to the "actual" news. In fact, casting dialect speakers as weathermen may even reinforce stereotypes: the typical dialect speaker is a farmer who only cares about the weather because it may affect his cows. The news seems split in two: the real and serious news for speakers of standard language, urban, hip people on the one hand, who care about Syria and what not, and rural people on the other hand, who just turn on the news to see if the cows can go outside.

In the UK, a much more enlightened view is taken regarding dialects: put on the BBC news and you will hear a variety of Englishes spoken. This started in the 1980's, when the first regional accent appeared on the news. It is still very much open to debate however: google "regional accents BBC" and you will find a wealth of news articles and forum posts, some very recent, highlighting the fact that the battle for equal treatment of accents and dialects is still not won. You might ask yourself the same question which many people online are asking themselves (homework kiddos, pay attention now): what do we want on the news: one standard language variety that everyone can aspire to, or a reflection of the actual linguistic situation in the country with all the richness that the different accents and dialects provide us (you see which way I am leaning)?

In a similar vein as the BBC news British comedy displays a plethora of different accents. This is where the educational part of this piece kicks in: you should all watch BBC comedy shows such as *8 out of 10 Cats*, *Mock the Week*, *Nevermind the Buzzcocks* and *QI*. Not because they are ridiculously and outrageously funny (although they are, and that is a good enough reason as any to watch them), but because you will be a much better speaker and understander of English. Remember those horrible listening exams from high school? When you had to sit through hours of some Mexican with a speech impediment explaining why the local library in Carenone-upon-Tyne should be saved? This is revisiting those terrifying memories, true, but in returning you will become a better person, a more tolerant person, and most importantly, a better student of English.

On another educational side note: listening to BBC Radio is an even better pastime. Two shows in particular stand out: *Just a Minute*, with the flamboyant and intrepid Nicolas Parsons presiding, and *I'm Sorry I haven't a Clue*. This last show (ISIHAC for friends) is really, honestly and undoubtedly the most

hilarious British thing ever. Listen how comedy favorites such as Jack Dee, Joe Brand, Stephen Fry, Andy Hamilton, Jeremy Hardy and many many others play such incredibly hilarious games as Mornington Crescent, Oxbridge English Dictionary and of One Song to the Tune of Another. Please. Do yourself a favour, do me a favour, and do your funny bone a favour: listen to this show. Again, it will teach you a lot about English, and you will break your back laughing. What more could you possibly want?

Let me finish with another request which is along the lines of what I have set out above. The social implications of dialects can be easily demonstrated by doing some dialectal field work. I implore you to just do it: it's heaps of fun, and you follow in a rich tradition of crazy fieldworkers, the most impressive of which is surely Edmond Edmont, who took a job mapping out the dialects of France, which resulted in a bike ride of about three years. Now, you don't have to do this (although bike riding in the Netherlands cannot be done often enough: when is the last time you've been to such picturesque places as Oegstgeest or Zutphen or Deventer? But I digress). An all together easier and less time-consuming way to test why dialects matter is to go to your local high school (say in Leiden) and ask the kids to name language varieties spoken in the Netherlands. What they will do is name some well-known varieties, such as Frisian, or Limburgian, and then they will continue to name very specific dialects of villages in the neighbourhood of where they live.

This is striking: to most listeners who are not from around Leiden, there will be no difference whatsoever in language use between speakers from Oegstgeest or Warmond. Ask someone from Leeuwarden to name varieties on a map, and s/he will not name these variants at all. But you see, that is exactly the point! These differences *only matter to people who notice them*. For people in some villages, it is a very important social distinction whether you are from this side

of the fence or from that side. You yourself are probably aware of these distinctions, sometimes even within your hometown. But again, it only matters if the identification is relevant for you.

So, friends, the gist of this piece is pretty clear: dialects are awesome, dialectal field work is amazeballs, the BBC is a treasure trove, and comedy is the best thing in the world. I could go on for hours about BBC comedy. If you too are a fan of such people as Frankie Boyle, David Mitchell, Dara O Brian, Bill Bailey, Russel Howard, Jack Whitehall, Ed Byrne, Holly Walsh, Dylan Moran, Ron Brydon, Eddie Izzard, Phil Jupitus, Sean Lock, Jimmy Carr, Ross Noble, Noel Fielding or Tim Minchin, email the *Angler* people, and we'll talk. Until then fellow English lovers!

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