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Heidi Gassman

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A Woman as *Burgemeester* ?

A Close Analysis of Politically Correct Dutch and the Influence of World English

Heidi Gassman
Brigham Young University

Introduction

English, linguistically, is an ambiguous language as far as gender is concerned. When we see the word *teacher*, we do not know whether the teacher is male or female. Dutch, however, is not so ambiguous in terms of gender. For instance, in Dutch there are two different terms for teacher, depending on the sex of the speaker: *leraar* (male) and *lerarin* (female); hence, the reader or listener knows exactly what the gender of the speaker is. But is this unambiguity changing in the Dutch language? Are there certain terms that are becoming ambiguous in Dutch because of socio-political factors and not linguistic factors? Most importantly, is one of these factors the widespread use of English?

With all the controversy going on about politically correct language in English (a world language), it seems that similar controversies would be occurring in other languages, even ones so strictly gender-based as Dutch. And in fact there is an ongoing debate in the Netherlands about politically correct language. Pierre Brachin notes about Dutch:

The language reflects the development of social relationships. *Arbeider* (worker), which itself had been something of a step up compared to *werkman* is gradually giving way to *werknemer* (employee), which is free of any emotive connotations. In the same way, *dienstmeisje* (maid) had

been replaced by *hulp in de huishouding* (domestic help). (43)

Thus, the Dutch are becoming more and more socially aware of the effects of their gender-based language. Since Dutch is one of the closest relatives to English, and since English is such a widely used language in the Netherlands, it seems possible that English is having an effect on the way the Dutch view their language. Also, it only stands to reason that if English is influencing the ambiguity of Dutch, it would also have an influence on the political correctness of Dutch since the more ambiguous a word gets, the less likely it is to offend.

Method

Selection of Data

Brachin states, "The Second World War represented a major turning-point for the Netherlands. . . . The expansion of telephone communication, the mass media, and the tape recorder gave the spoken language a dominant position which is felt even in politics, education and literature" (43). Since the mass media reaches a large audience and is most likely quite politically correct because of that audience, I decided to analyze one aspect of the media—radio. Since I receive a transcribed text of the Dutch radio news (Radio Nederland Wereldomroep) every day by e-mail, I decided to print up the news from November 25 to

December 8, 1996 (9 days). Each day of text contained about ten different stories dealing with both international and local topics and averaged about five single-spaced, printed pages, for a total of seventy-four pages of printed text. Because many of the stories dealt with international topics (including stories involving English-speaking countries, i.e., United States and England) and because many international stories deal with world politics, I anticipated finding terms that were internationally political in nature (i.e., president, minister, leader).

Process of Analysis

The chosen process of analysis may be a little primitive—ocular scanning. In other words, I read through the entire text looking for the defined features (all nouns): politically correct terms (*werknemer* [employee] instead of *werkman* [workman]); plural terms, which are usually in masculine form (*vertegenwoordigers* [representatives (the feminine singular form is *vertegenwoordister*)]); feminine terms (*leidster* [female leader]); non-politically correct terms (*manschappen* [men (military term)]); and masculine terms (*leider* [male leader]). Each feature was marked with its own color as is shown below:

politically correct terms (light blue)
 plural terms (dark blue)
 feminine terms (red)
 nonpolitically correct terms (black)
 masculine terms (green)

Since the majority of Dutch nouns are masculine (there are also neuter nouns—the feminine began to drop out in the Middle Dutch period [1100–1500]) (Donaldson 162), I chose to find most of those and then compare the other terms to them.

Results

After marking up the text, I came up with the following results:

plural masculine terms = 123
 masculine terms = 119
 politically correct terms = 43
 nonpolitically correct terms = 3
 feminine terms = 2

As I had anticipated, the majority of the words were masculine in nature. This is to be expected since the feminine no longer exists (in

theory) and since many plurals are in the form of the masculine. Also, since many of the words were political in nature and since the majority of the world's leaders are male, it is again not surprising that the majority of the words are masculine. However, except for two cases (*leidster* and *prinses* [princess]), whenever a female was referred to as a mayor, minister, leader, ambassador, or other political position, the masculine term was still used. For instance, in one story a woman in Iran had been named as a mayor of one of the suburbs of Teheran. She was referred to as *burgemeester*—a definite masculine term (compare to the English word *master*). In another story, Madeleine Albright (former United Nations ambassador) was named as the American Minister of Foreign Affairs. She was referred to as *minister*—again a definite masculine word (notice the same spelling in English). There were also two cases where feminine possessive pronouns were used in conjunction with a masculine noun (*oppositie* [opposition] . . . *haar* [her] and *regering* [government] . . . *haar* [her]). Most likely, these uses are leftovers from the feminine.

Conclusions

Implications

From these results, it would appear that Dutch is adopting and adapting many English terms (internationally political ones especially) *without regard to gender*. It has already been established that Dutch borrows a lot from English. De Vries, Willemyns, and Burger note:

In the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially in the twentieth, many words were borrowed from English because of the political, economical and cultural supremacy of the English-speaking world—beginning with Great Britain, and after the First World War, the United States. English was, in this period, the most-used world language. Because of the media, especially the radio and the television, this language became known, in a relatively short time, as a worldwide language. The borrowing of words from English is in full swing in almost all the languages of the world, including Dutch. (250)

Thus it is only logical that because English has become such a widely used language, Dutch would borrow from its vocabulary. But it would also seem logical, given the strict gender-based

nature of Dutch, that it would accommodate these words according to gender. Of course, many of these words may just be cognates of one another as English and Dutch belong to the same branch of the Indo-European language family. In any case, that is not the issue here. What is at issue is whether one of the reasons Dutch is losing its unambiguous linguistic nature is because of the influence of English.

From the results above, it would seem that the answer is "yes." One need only to look at words that are used frequently in an international forum (i.e., political terms such as minister, premier, president, leader, advisor, ambassador, general, judge, lawyer, mayor) to realize that they (the words) are dominated by English. Of course, many countries probably adapt or modify these words to fit their language (pronunciation, spelling). It appears as if Dutch has done that, too, only the rules regarding gender have seemed to diminish. From reading the text of the Dutch radio news, one may not be able to tell (without context) whether a *minister* is referring to a male or female or whether an *ambassadeur* is referring to a male or female. In other words, it appears that Dutch is not as unambiguous as it once was.

Of course, one must not forget that we are also dealing with politically correct language here. There were at least forty-three instances where a blatant politically correct noun was used (i.e., *werknemer* instead of *werkman*). This, however, does not seem to be the most important factor. Masculine nouns that are used in a political and international setting and that are becoming more ambiguous seem to be of more importance. These are words that should (if they do not already) have feminine counterparts. Yet the feminine counterparts are not frequently being used in international settings; instead the masculine form is used. Thus, we have ambiguity because we do not know (out of context) whether we are dealing with a man or woman. Yet in the case of political correctness, this kind of ambiguity might be considered a good thing because the more ambiguous a term, the less likely it is to offend someone. Perhaps the Dutch realize this as they become, like most of us, aware of the influence of a language on a society; the fact that there were only three blatant nonpolitically correct terms backs this up. Perhaps the Dutch are merely simplifying their language. In any case, it would appear very possible the political Dutch-speaking world is following the giant political English-speaking world in creating ambiguity for the sake of political correctness.

Summary and Suggestions

It's obvious that English speaks for itself in an international setting; English is continually becoming more and more widely known and used and is having an influence on other languages worldwide. This influence is becoming more and more apparent in the Dutch language. Marijke van der Wal, professor of historical linguistics at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands agrees:

Next to Dutch, English is spoken as a direct language in university teaching in the Netherlands: the Dutch students learn to use English—the language of international science—better, and the Dutch universities can become more appealing to students from foreign lands. English has already found an important place in business. . . . Further, it must be pointed out that the many English-speaking television programs and the pop music with mostly English lyrics, have an influence, especially on the younger generation. (376)

The question is, "What kind of influence?" From this study it seems as if the ambiguity of the English language (at least with regards to gender) is rubbing off onto Dutch. Words in Dutch that would normally have an indication of gender seem to be diminishing, especially words that are used in an international forum. This ambiguity could very well become engulfed in the already ongoing political correctness debate in the Netherlands. If Dutch is becoming more ambiguous in its gender-specific words, then points have been scored for political correctness.

In studying this topic, there are a few things I would have probably done differently had I known the outcome. This is, after all, merely a preliminary study. The first is my method of analysis; ocular scanning is just not as efficient as computer scanning would be (especially late at night). Because I did use my own eyes to scan, the margin of error is probably higher. Also, my sampling could have been larger—a month's worth of news would have given me more stories and subjects to examine. Another factor to consider is that this text was oral (at least I am assuming so since it is radio news); an analysis of a written text may produce different results. A good suggestion for further study would be to analyze both and compare. Also, one must take into account that some of these words never had the need of a female counterpart until this century. Last, my

knowledge of Dutch is definitely not comprehensive; there may be words for which I do not know the exact meanings and usages.

In addition, there is still one aspect that needs to be studied further: the plural. Both males and females are referred to using the masculine form. For instance, instead of using *vertegenwoordigers* and *vertgenwoordisters* (masculine and feminine forms of *representatives*), only *vertegenwoordigers* is used. This, from my experience in Dutch, is completely acceptable and not so ambiguous; most Dutch-speakers realize that the masculine plural is used to include both genders. However, when the feminine plural form (a marked form) is used, it includes only females. Further study could be done to find out how the Dutch are now reacting to this usage. Is it changing? Will the marked, feminine plural eventually drop out because it's used so rarely and because it discriminates? Most important, will the ambiguity of English continue to exert its influence regarding this usage? With more research into Dutch sociolinguistics, these questions could be answered.

It is interesting to note that I started out with a totally different goal in mind. I was originally looking for blatantly politically correct words (i.e., *werknemer* instead of *werkman*), but as I began

reading, I noticed that there were not very many. That is when I started noticing that there was not much variation in the masculine terms. Needless to say, my goal changed. As I read and analyzed, I realized that political correctness and ambiguity go hand in hand—a phenomenon that has happened in English and is now, thanks to the influence of English and to other social changes, happening in Dutch.

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