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ON THE UNFOREIGNNESS OF ENGLISH

Abstract:

This article proposes a new perspective on the growing ubiquity of English in Dutch society, suggesting it has become “unforeign.” Through analyses of a Dutch comedian’s song, a linguistic landscape of the city of Leeuwarden, and a popular TV show, it shows how English is increasingly not seen as a separate language anymore but has found a place in the Netherlands. The article interrogates where exactly these changes are happening, suggesting that popular culture, commerce, and youth culture are sites where the public is most attuned to these linguistic and societal changes. Ultimately, the article concludes, the becoming-unforeign of English is an asymmetrical process: instead of effacing Dutch, it creates a new linguistic situation in which knowledge of the Dutch language remains essential.

Keywords: Anglicization ♦ popular culture ♦ translanguaging ♦ Netherlands ♦ language contact

Introduction

“Anglicisation is typically Dutch,” so ran an op-ed by D66 politicians Jan Paternotte and Alexander Rinnooy Kan (2019) in Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. They were referring to the slow creep of the English language in higher education in the Netherlands, with universities changing their language of instruction to attract more international students. Paternotte and Rinnooy Kan appreciate this cosmopolitan gesture; others deplore the shift away from Dutch, embarrassed by or taking offense with poorly-translated English phrases such as “how do you underbuild that,” which incorporates a literal translation of the Dutch verb “onderbouwen” (Hagers, 2009; what is meant is “support”). The fear that the Dutch language is due to disappear at the hands of (less than stellar) English—or whichever language might succeed that one as the prime carrier of globalization in the future—is a persistent feature in debates over the

country's practices and cultural identity over the past five decades, although these have intensified with the arrival and rise of the internet. To give but one more example that attests to how widely these discussions range: recently, a columnist proudly declared he “continued” to speak Dutch with a waitress at an Amsterdam terrace, in an attempt to counter the supposed “contempt” the Dutch feel for their own language (Niemantsverdriet, 2021).

To a significant degree, English has already nestled itself in the Netherlands as a language of communication—and not only in the higher education, tourism, and international business sectors. It is my contention in this paper that English has become so normalized in commerce, youth culture, and popular culture (three spheres of society with significant overlap), that it has become what I will call “unforeign” and starts to manifest as such across society—a kind of sociocultural spillover. Expressions and words in English do not have to be translated anymore to be intelligible; rather, they function without impediment on the same level as Dutch vocabulary. Perhaps we can even say they are now considered Dutch words.¹ English has found its way into everyday conversation: it is not only that its use no longer needs translation, but that it seems to be able to do without a sense that translation would even be remotely necessary. As such, the use of English in the Netherlands is an exemplary instance of “translanguaging,” or the use of “idiolect or linguistic repertoire without regard for socially and politically defined language labels or boundaries—in order to make sense, solve problems, articulate one’s thoughts, and gain knowledge” (Li Wei, 2016, p. 4; see also Baynham & Lee, 2019). We must observe, however, the collective nature of this effort, suggesting a new relationship between people’s speech and their environments—or what is usually called a language ideology (Woolard, 1998)—in which Dutch as a clearly bounded language is left behind in favor of more fluid approaches to language.

I do not want to claim that this situation—the ease with which English has nestled itself in the Netherlands, and made itself at home there—is unique, globally. However, this process is striking when read against the country’s history as a European nation-state, a political form historically averse to linguistic mixing and multilingualism (Gal, 2006, 2009; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Nation-states are, historically, attached to an understanding of languages as

¹ The Dikke Van Dale, one of the official dictionaries of the Dutch language, includes a word once the editors find it “during a longer period of time frequently in newspapers, magazines, books and online (including blogs and social media).” Additionally, the word has to be “generally known” and has to appear in “many different types of texts.” Words that used only in particular disciplines, social circles or regions, are not included. See https://www.vandale.nl/klantenservice/meestgestelde-vragen-van-dale-redactie#ow_1.

bounded and distinct from one another; multilingualism appears at most as serial monolingualism. This nationalist model of languages also presumes fluency and standardization, rather than mixing and a partial competence. Silhouetted against this background, the emerging situation in the Netherlands is interesting for its implicit move away from the old model.²

Increasingly, then, English is “unforeign” in the Netherlands. This might not hold for the entire society, but I argue in this paper it does apply to some spheres of life—exactly those that shape how Dutch youth interact with and see the world, and therefore constitute practices that will only cement themselves once younger generations solidify themselves in society, raise children, and so on. In this paper, as a literary and cultural scholar with an interest in sociolinguistics, I think through what is happening in the domains of popular culture, entertainment, and commerce as an entry point into a more wide-ranging discussion on globalization and the relationship between various languages and the groups they represent, hold together, and call into being—or, phrased differently, what happens when larger groups in society collectively start translanguaging. What I am interested in, in other words, is what the late Jan Blommaert has called the “sociolinguistics of globalization”. Under globalization, he writes, “the traditional concept of ‘language’ is dislodged and destabilized”, with “the structure of people’s repertoires and the patterns of multilingual language use ... becom[ing] less predictable and significantly more complex” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 2, 5).

In the Netherlands, this process takes the form of—among other things—popular culture and everyday expressions of culture, such as linguistic landscapes, are calling into question traditional understandings of languages as discrete and distinct—or calling these into question *once again*, as has been done very extensively already (see, e.g., Gramling, 2021; Young, 2016). Specifically, I would like to defend the proposition that we increasingly find in cultural expressions that are not strictly gatekept that “English” is no longer a language *foreign* to the Netherlands but is in fact an integral part of that constellation casually called “Dutch”. In this paper, I examine three such moments of heightened language contact, all of which go further than merely a shift to using English in certain domains of life in the Netherlands; rather, they index the incorporation of English features into Dutch. To understand what exactly this means, we first need to understand the Dutch linguistic situation.

² While I focus on the Dutch case in this paper, anecdotal evidence suggests similar processes can be traced elsewhere in Europa, such as Scandinavia, where high fluency rates in English are also translating into that language gaining ground.

Dutch Mono- and Multilingualism

The modern country that is the Netherlands was created after the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna in the early-nineteenth century as a buffer state between France, the various German states, and the United Kingdom. At first, it included the French and German-speaking lands that are now Belgium (until 1830) and Luxembourg (until 1890). The historiography on why the 1830 Belgian Revolution took place is extensive, and the story that it was sparked by the nationalistic opera *La muette de Portici* well-known. Although the main drivers were economic, political, and religious reasons, language policies by the Dutch king William I also sparked controversy (Marteel, 2020, pp. 70-76). His emphasis on a standardized, Netherlandish form of Dutch alienated not only the French-speaking élite in Belgium, but also the lower classes, who spoke their own Dutch variants—a diversity that continues until the present day (see e.g., Van Hout & Knops, 1988, for an early appraisal).

The early Netherlands was thus characterized by a strong, top-down drive to bring the young country together and impose a set of homogeneous laws. It has been suggested that because the country took form in the heydays of European Romantic nationalism, William's fervour was inspired by its main philosophers propagating language as the best means to achieve national unity (Vosters & Janssens, 2015, p. 153). Other scholars have advocated an interpretation in which language is not an ideological instrument, but rather stands on equal footing with infrastructural projects and public institutions (Leerssen, 2013, p. 330). In any case, a strong national identity for the Netherlands was formed, including a literary canon, national museums such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and a school system. The result of these processes is perhaps best summed up by Joep Leerssen (2018, p. 153), who writes that in the 1950s the French president Charles de Gaulle thought that “there were only two well-established nation-states in the entire six-member [European Economic Community]: France and the Netherlands”.

If the Dutch state since 1815 has succeeded in crafting a strong Dutch national consciousness, this identity comes with all the pitfalls that usually accompany nationalist projects. Firstly, it decouples the European state from its imperialist possessions elsewhere (Judson, 2017; Kumar, 2010)—in the case of the Netherlands, primarily the Caribbean, Suriname, and the Dutch East Indies. This decoupling not only erases colonial diversity, but also falsely makes it seem as if the European state is wholly self-sufficient. Secondly, there is a strong attraction to what we could call believing the abstractions of the map over the complexities of territory. Linguistic diversity is usually poorly represented on 2D maps, which suggest only language is spoken in one place, thus making languages spoken by smaller groups of people invisible—see, e.g.,

Pieter Judson (2016) on the Austro-Hungarian Empire's case. Over the course of the twentieth century, a framework for linguistic minority rights—partially instituted and shaped by the Council of Europe—was developed (Jackson Preece, 2005), which worked to recognize other languages spoken than the national one.

In the contemporary Netherlands, this means in practice that Frisian has acquired the status of second government language, a status English and Papiamentu also enjoy in Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba, which since 2017 have been “special municipalities”. Since 1993, furthermore, under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Netherlands has recognized as languages distinct from Dutch Limburgish, Low Saxon, Romani, and Yiddish (Rijksoverheid). This leaves languages spoken by large immigrant groups, such as Arabic, Tamazight, or Turkish, still unrecognized. Further, and the focus of this research, is that English also remains unrecognized as a language of the Netherlands outside the three Caribbean islands—although in line with my argument in this paper one may wonder if recognizing English as a distinct language from Dutch would do justice to its position as an unforeign language.

The ubiquity of Standard Dutch as the language of communication in the Netherlands is questioned from four sides—although one must acknowledge that the presence of Standard Dutch remains strong in official writing and education. Firstly, there is broad variety within what is called “Dutch”, not only from Flemish speakers, but also due to speakers from different regions, generations, and subcultures within the Netherlands (for a case study on such “superdiversity”, see, e.g., Mutsaers & Swanenberg, 2012). Recent academic recognition of this internal variation attests to a changing conception of multilingualism as serial monolingualism (a leftover from the nationalist paradigm) to multilingualism as based on internal variety, fluidity, and partial competence—what Rachael Gilmour (2020) has recently and ironically captured in the case of the United Kingdom as conservatively-slanted discussions on “bad English”. Secondly, the recognition of various minority and regional languages concretely captures the Netherlands' postmonolingual moment (Yildiz, 2012), in which national monolingualism is traded in for an emerging appreciation of Europe's on-the-ground multilingualism. Thirdly, the Netherlands' imbrication in globalized international trade and travel, symbolized by its Rotterdam harbour and Amsterdam airport Schiphol, have led to its population expressing the highest self-reported proficiency in English in the EU after its English-language member states (Gerhards, 2014, p. 59). This self-assessment is reflected in the growing recognition, both academically and in popular media, that English is gaining an increasingly strong footing in the country (cf. Veenstra & Knooihuizen, 2021). Fourthly, the

influx of English into Dutch society is cemented by Dutch not being (widely) taught abroad as a foreign language, as well as the large groups of migrants not being required to learn Dutch.

One explanation for this last point lies in the relatively small presence of Dutch worldwide. Spoken by some 25 million people across the Netherlands, Flanders, the Netherlands' overseas municipalities Bonaire, Sint Eustasius, and Saba, and the three Caribbean countries within the Kingdom, Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten, as well as some older generation Indonesians who were taught the then colonial language in their youth, Dutch does not have the same global footprint as some of the languages surrounding it. German and French, for example, are widely taught—in Europe, if not beyond—in high schools and carry more symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Dutch does not have this position. Because of this lack of sociocultural prestige, Dutch companies hiring international employees and Dutch universities attracting international students often do not offer language training, cementing the influx of English as a *lingua franca* and further challenging the position of Dutch (cf. Edwards, 2016).

This article engages with some of globalization's effects on the place of the Dutch language in the Netherlands' society. It is perhaps not surprising that the Dutch self-reported proficiency in English of over 85% has its effects on the culture at large, which in turn are reflected in the population's attitudes towards language use (cf. Gramling, 2021, p. 28). In the rest of this paper, I will discuss three examples taken from Dutch popular culture and commerce that show just how far the language called English is influencing linguistic utterances and communications in the Netherlands that are not structured or gatekept. Ultimately, I want to consider how these changing linguistic practices relate on a more theoretical level to community formation: if the nation-state presumes a standardized, clearly bounded and differentiated national language that holds together a disparate group of individuals called the nation (Gal, 2006, 2009), what does the blurring, fusing, or even dissolving in everyday, spoken language of the boundary between Dutch and English mean for the imagined community that is the Dutch nation?

Kees Torn, “N-E”

My first example concerns a comedic song that incorporates and is in fact built around linguistic translation from Dutch into English. As such, it constitutes a prologue of sorts to the rest of my argument: while this song does show that cultural practices have mirrored the entanglement of Dutch and English for quite some time already, up to the point that a general public can be expected to play with translation between these languages, at the same time it maintains a fairly pronounced boundary between the two languages. Although English is shown to hide in Dutch, and vice versa, the two remain distinct.

In his show “Doe mee en win” (Participate and win), which ran from 2004 until 2006, the Dutch *cabaretier* Kees Torn played a highly sophisticated game of translation—disguised as puns—between Dutch and English.³ In the song “N-E” (Nederlands-Engels, meaning Dutch-English), Torn plays with the fact that some English words sound like Dutch words. I will explain his game of translation by way of an example—Torn’s first one in the segment:

Dutch: “Waarom duik je nooit eens met mij in de koffer, Kees?”

Literal English translation: “Why don’t you ever dive into the suitcase with me, Kees?”

Idiomatic English translation: “Why won’t you have a one-night stand with me, Kees?”

The Dutch word “koffer” is translated into English as “(suit)case”, with “case” sounding like the Dutch name “Kees”. According to Torn’s rules in this game, “Kees” can meaningfully come after “koffer”, with the English “case” being an invisible connector. In the later performance, there would be a silence after “koffer” to allow the audience to make the double translation into English and then back into Dutch.

After playing scales on the on-stage piano, Torn continues his playful song:

Dutch: “Mijn pianospel is niet meer zo virtuoos als toen ik veertien was, want ik heb de laatste jaren minder les. Minder, les.”

Literal English translation: “My piano game is not as virtuosic as when I was fourteen years old, because the last few years I have had less lessons.”

Idiomatic translation: “I’m not as virtuosic at playing the piano as when I was fourteen years old, because I’ve had fewer lessons in recent years.”

When isolated, the Dutch “minder” can translate into English as “less”—although in the particular sentence Torn presents, “fewer” is grammatically correct. “Less” sounds like the Dutch “les”, which in turn would translate into English as “lesson”. Thus, in the Dutch line “les” is allowed to come after “minder”.

After these two examples, Torn starts to interact with his audience, rather than sing to them. Accompanying himself on the piano, he sings sentences but stops before the last word, which the audience is expected to finish. He starts as follows:

³ A Dutch cabaretier is similar to an American or British comedian, although the range of on-stage performances tends to be broader, including jokes and anecdotes, music and songs, and more serious reflection. A taping of Torn’s song can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHY0nst_Qwo.

Dutch: “Terwijl ik mijn vriendin met een stuk taart...”

English translation: “As I [no verb given yet] my girlfriend with a piece of cake...”

The audience’s initial response is to say “keek”:

Dutch: “Terwijl ik mijn vriendin met een stuk taart keek...”

English translation: “As I looked my girlfriend with a piece of cake...”

“Taart” can indeed translate into English as “cake”, which sounds like the Dutch “keek”. This suggestion, however, would make for a nonsensical sentence, as is apparent from the English translation above. In contrast to English, Dutch does not distinguish between “cake” and “pie”; for both of these words, the Dutch translation is “taart”. The correct next word is therefore “paai”, after the English “pie”, which does make a logical, if again slightly odd, sentence in Dutch:

Dutch: “Terwijl ik mijn vriendin met een stuk taart paai...”

English: “As I satisfy my girlfriend with a piece of cake...”

This is the first line of a relatively coherent song about a man cheating on his girlfriend with an ex-partner that frequently includes end rhyme—Torn himself admits that the second half is less coherent, although not less funny. “You should try it at home,” he encourages the audience, referring to the difficulty of first of all the translations and secondly the effort to create cohesion: “Do you know how long I worked on [these seven stanzas]? Six years!” Torn then gives some examples of German and French versions, and of an English version with another layer of translation. In this version, the last phonetically English “Dutch” word is translated back into English and then again phonetically into Dutch to complete the sentence. This can be seen in Figure 1:

Wat gek dat ik die hoer hoor hier. (How strange that I hear that whore here.)

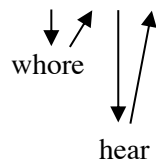


Figure 1. Torn’s song with an extra layer of translation. The arrows pointing down indicate which English word the Dutch word translates into, the arrows pointing up what Dutch word the English word sounds like.

Even if “N-E”—and the linguistic play behind it—is based on the phonetic similarity of certain words in English and Dutch, and a Dutch public’s familiarity with them, as a whole it relies on

translation. In other words, even if the English “pie” is integrated into a Dutch sentence as “paai”, this segment of his show emphasizes the foreignness of the word and the act of translation necessary to insert it in the sentence. The conceit of the song relies on the linguistic intimacy between Dutch and English, both Germanic languages, at the same time as it codifies the principle of translation in the back and forth between words, meanings, and sounds. “N-E” thus usefully points out how the Dutch cultural archive (Said, 1994; Wekker, 2016) contains a longer engagement with the closeness of Dutch and English, although the song is not yet characterized by the effortless mixing that defines my next two examples. It is only because of the public’s familiarity with English that Torn’s joke works as a song.

Leeuwarden’s Linguistic Landscape

On the weekend of March 20-21, 2021, I walked around the Dutch city of Leeuwarden with the aim to create a linguistic landscape of the city—to, in other words, map the “linguistic objects that mark the public space” (Gorter, 2006, p. 3). To do so, I took a wide definition of linguistic objects, but quickly zoomed in on advertising signs and shop signs. On the one hand, such signs in public space are meant to inform citizens—or, in the case of commercial shops, potential customers. On the other hand, and particularly important in the context of my conjectures in this paper, they have a symbolic function in that they make visible power relations between languages and potentially signal developments in language use before these become officially recognised (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25).

As such, there exists what Jasone Cenoz and Durk Gorter have called a bidirectional relationship between linguistic landscapes and broader sociolinguistic situations: a given linguistic landscape “reflects” the power relations between languages, but also “contributes to the construction” of these relations (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006, p. 67, 68). If we see commercial advertisements and shops’ linguistic signs as examples of bottom-up, unsupervised and ungatekept language use, then we can expect them to differ from officially sanctioned language rules, which characterize language education and most written media. In this sense, a linguistic landscape “is not a neutral phenomenon but needs to be contextualized in a contested sphere of the ‘free’ space that ‘belongs to all’” (Shohamy & Gorter, 2008, p. 4). In this free space, linguistic experimentation is possible—and, indeed, takes place.

Leeuwarden is a middle-sized city in the north of the Netherlands of around 90,000 inhabitants. It is the capital of the province of Friesland—or Fryslân, as the area is called in the local Frisian language. The province is a well-known tourist destination, still welcoming around 1.5 million tourists in coronavirus year 2020 (Lamme, 2021), most of whom want to sail on its lakes and

visit its islands in the Wadden Sea. Although a substantial number of tourists comes from the Netherlands, pre-Covid-19 a little over 50% came from abroad. These numbers might justify the presence of English as a language of communication in Leeuwarden’s linguistic landscape; however, the period the data for this paper was gathered—March—falls outside the touristic peak season, and March 2021 was furthermore characterized by a lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

There is another reason to expect to see other languages than English in the cityscape: the regional Frisian language. Although Frisian is an officially recognised minority language in the Netherlands and supported by a strong cultural and political infrastructure, it is relatively invisible in Leeuwarden’s linguistic landscape (Jensma et al., 2020). A Frisian national consciousness came into being in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, when its élites started to use the language to claim a position within the Netherlands and construct a distinct identity (see Jensma, 1998; cf. Leerssen, 2022). Despite these élites often living in urban areas, Frisian today is mostly seen as a rural language—a perception that is reinforced by its relative invisibility in the province’s urban areas. Here, then, we see how Leeuwarden’s linguistic landscape both reflects Frisian’s subordinate position vis-à-vis Dutch and—increasingly—English, but also contributes to prolonging that status difference.

A walk through the city’s centre confirms that while the Frisian language might be featured on the occasional sign, on the whole it plays a very minor role. Instead of Dutch and Frisian competing for prominence, to any visitor it becomes clear that Dutch and English are most visible. Often, the two languages are used together on one and the same sign, but with different purposes.

Figures 2–4 give a first indication of how widespread the use of English is in commercial communication. Whether it concerns a bank advertisement (“Growing a better world together”, Figure 2), the name of a popular type of sharable e-scooter (“GO”, Figure 3), or the names of storage facilities and fitness schools (Figure 4), it is almost impossible to not encounter English on the Netherlands’ high streets. These examples feature relatively simple linguistic signs, which arguably communicate very little: if somebody were not (very) well-versed in English, they would not miss much in terms of information.



Figure 2. A sign at the Rabobank ATM. All pictures from Leeuwarden taken by the author.



Figure 3. A GO Sharing e-scooter.



Figure 4. Two Dutch businesses: On the left, a branch of Storage Share; on the right, a Basic-Fit gym.

The use of English for slogans and marketing, however, is very common, as Figure 5 also attests to. On this image, we see an advertisement for Magnum ice cream, a Unilever brand: “Made to be broken” it reads, all letters capitalized. Notably, until late November 2020, Unilever was a British-Dutch multinational corporation, after which it closed its Netherlands headquarter and based itself completely in London (see Nilsson, 2020). The advertisement’s use of English, however, speaks to the ubiquity of this language in commerce and marketing.



Figure 5. An advertisement for Magnum ice cream, with the Frisian Museum in the background.

The Magnum advertisement does not contain information about potential allergies, which consumers would perhaps like to know before buying the product. As such, it is not too different from the earlier examples, which also do not need to communicate vital information, but rather display signs that are meant to attract—or, in the case of the bank—inspire customers. What matters, thus, is the immediate experience of the image over potentially accompanying text. Put differently, using Roland Barthes' distinction in *The Elements of Semiology* (1967), the denotative meaning of the visual image takes precedence over the connotative meaning of the word.

Figure 6 shows an example that is qualitatively different from the earlier pictures. Here, we see a poster informing potential customers of a clothing store how they can safely shop in times of corona. Specifically, at the time this photograph was taken, there existed a policy that allowed customers to book a time slot to visit non-essential shops at least four hours in advance. As the

text on the white lines in the middle make clear, people can call (“bel”) or direct message their “Local store”. Alternatively, a customer can make use of “Click & Collect”, meaning they place their order by telephone and then collect it in the store. At the bottom of the poster, potential customers are enticed—in Dutch—to visit with the promise of a twenty per cent discount on their purchase.



Figure 6. A poster on a clothing store’s window front informing customers how to safely shop in times of the global pandemic.

This text, which is already a mixture of Dutch and English (“local store”, “click & collect”),⁴ is complemented by an English-language slogan-like text at the top of the poster: “Let us upgrade

⁴ “Click & collect” is not this store’s invention, but rather the official name of government policy, noticeably making it an example of top-down use of English.

your wardrobe”. However, even if this sign features text in both languages, there is still a clear hierarchy between them. Those elements that convey important information about shopping procedures and precautions are written in Dutch, suggesting a public sphere that still operates in this language. English is less of a communicative tool here, and more—as it was in the earlier examples—a rhetorical flourish meant to attract customers. Dutch is practical and local, English is stylish and global (cf. Seargeant, 2012).

However, stores that have opened their doors more recently, such as the bakery in Figure 7, have also started using English as the language of practical communication. In this case, a sign outside the bakery contains only English-language text welcoming potential customers, giving a rough indication of the products available, and sharing details of the company’s social media. The sign remains rather simple—no coronavirus instructions, for example—and mixes words with images, making sure that somebody who might not know the word “pastry” can still have a sense of what is sold. Nevertheless, the complete disappearance of any Dutch text here is notable.

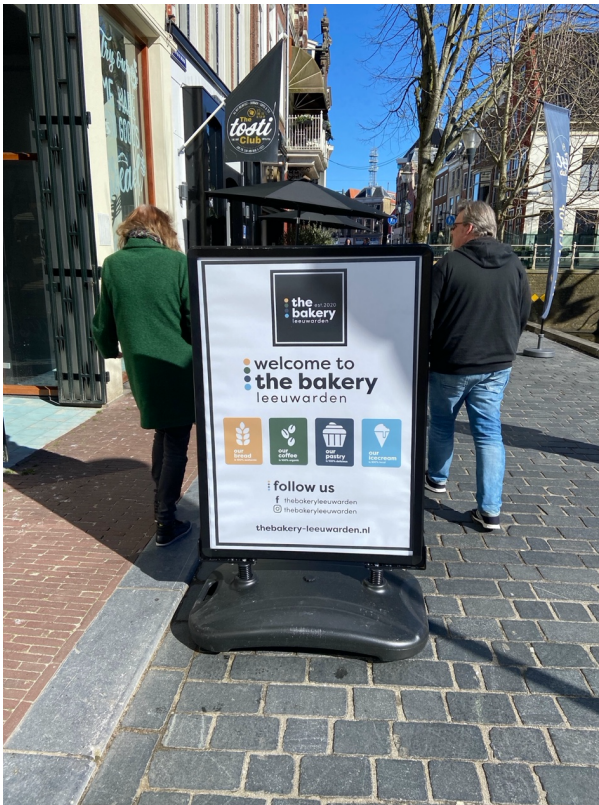


Figure 7. An information sign of a recently opened bakery in Leeuwarden.

This brief linguistic landscape of the provincial capital of Leeuwarden indicates, firstly, the ubiquity of English in Dutch public space. It also suggests the variety of types of information given in English (names, slogans, contact information), while, thirdly, also making clear that the usage of English is still limited to information that is easy to process and does not endanger the shopping process or public health. As such, it shows a public sphere marked by experimentation and free from top-down linguistic gatekeeping. These signs, however, do enact a status difference between the two languages, and press home the central questions in this paper: to whom do these advertisements, information sheets, and welcome signs speak? Whom do they wish to inform and attract? Who is, in other words, their imagined community?

“Ik ga helemaal real met je zijn”

The effortless inclusion of certain English phrases into an otherwise Dutch context—or translanguaging—happens not only in commercial shopping streets in the Netherlands but can also be seen in some of its most prominent TV shows. In this section, I discuss the case of *Wie is de Mol?*, a TV show that made headlines in early 2021 because of the amount of English strewn through otherwise Dutch dialogue among the participants. *Wie is de Mol?* is certainly not the only show in which this happens—which is exactly the point I am trying to make, namely that the examples presented here are in no way unique but represent much larger trends. In any major show in which the dialogue is not scripted—whether it is *The Voice of Holland*, the first version of a near-global entertainment franchise, or *Matthijs gaat door*, a music programme lightly modelled after *Jools Holland*—similar patterns can be discerned. Not coincidentally, these programmes are pop cultural, youth and/or musically oriented.

In the twenty-first season of the Dutch TV show *Wie is de Mol?* (Who is the Mole?), broadcast in early 2021, participant Joshua Nolet caused quite some eyebrows to raise. *Wie is de Mol?* is one of the biggest TV shows of the Netherlands, with each season’s episodes being watched by more than 2.5 million viewers—often good enough for over a forty per cent market share. In this show, ten “bekende Nederlanders” (well-known Netherlands) travel to a foreign country where they are to earn money through various exercises and assignments. There, they also must figure out who of them is not a candidate, but the “Mole” who tries to keep the group from earning any money at all by sabotaging their efforts to solve puzzles, complete assignments, and so on.

In the 2021 edition, Nolet—the singer of the Dutch English-language band Chef’Special—stood out not because he was the Mole (he was “eliminated” and left the game at the end of episode five), but because of the remarkable mixture of Dutch and English he spoke—that is,

because of his translanguaging and code-mixing. A short compilation video was posted to YouTube after the third episode aired, showcasing this mixture. These examples showcase some of the English expressions Nolet resorts to for motivational comments and commentaries (“Here we go!”, “Unite!”), while also pointing to him combining Dutch and English within one sentence (“De objective was duidelijk”, meaning “The objective was clear”). Below is a list of the sentences and phrases Nolet utters in this 30-second clip and where necessary a full translation into English on the right:

“Here we go!”	
“Keep up, Erik!”	
“Ik ga helemaal real met je zijn.”	I’m going to be completely real with you.
“I’m saving your ass.”	
“Bam, bam, money in the bank.” ⁵	
“Holy shit. Later. Gone.”	
“De objective was duidelijk.”	The objective was clear
“Te random.”	Too random.
“Te obvious.”	Too obvious.
“Unite!”	
“Let’s take the high road!”	
“What happened?”	
“Some fucked-up shit.”	
“Thank you very much.”	
“The alliance is born!” ⁶	

Nolet’s use of English was much remarked upon on social media, and also by the talk show *MolTalk* that airs immediately after *Wie is de Mol?*, from which the YouTube video I quote from is also taken. The general tone of these commentaries is one of amusement: at the beginning of the fragment, one of the two talk show presenters introduces the compilation by saying that “[a]s if the game isn’t difficult enough already, [Joshua] engages it bilingually”. This instance of noticing and emphasizing the presence of both Dutch and English in Nolet’s speech creates more distance between the two languages than Nolet himself seems to feel. It is, also, an instance of gatekeeping proper language use. To me, however, this case stands out not because of a particular individual’s idiosyncratic speech patterns, but rather because it speaks to—and perhaps even *cements*—the Netherlands’ increasing bi- or multilingualism. By way of

⁵ “Bank” is the same word in Dutch and English, although Nolet’s pronunciation is in English.

⁶ These phrases are taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydD_44tdpHI.

provocation I would even state that Nolet's is a case in which the border between Dutch and English dissolves, and thus shows the latter's *unforeignness*.

Some of Nolet's sentences are completely in English, while others switch between the two languages. In the latter category, we see examples such as “[t]e obvious”—meaning “too obvious”—, “[i]k ga helemaal real met je zijn”—meaning “I'm going to be completely real with you”—, and “[d]e objective was duidelijk”. (Additionally, one could argue that the sentence structure of “[i]k ga helemaal real met je zijn” is heavily inflected by English, with a stress on gaan/going that is historically uncommon in Dutch.) In either case, these sentences are framed by other sentences in Dutch, either from Nolet or other participants.

Conclusion, Part I: The Multilingual Dutch Public

The *MolTalk*'s host's remark that Nolet's bilingualism makes an already difficult game even more difficult, is a sign of both linguistic gatekeeping as well as a member of the show's public speaking out. In that sense, he joins the *NRC* columnist quoted in the introduction in drawing attention to the (growing) ubiquity of English in the Dutch public sphere. This act of marking is in itself not remarkable. Yet as all three examples discussed in this paper show, the Dutch have a sufficient knowledge of English to be able to understand possibly unexpected instances where this language is spoken—and even to participate in a game that is built on translation between Dutch and English, as in the song by Kees Torn.

The three examples discussed also show something else, namely the asymmetrical process by which English becomes unforeign to the Dutch. Neither Torn's song, Leeuwarden's commercial signs, or Nolet's speech is intelligible to someone who can understand English only (or English coupled another language that brings little to no comprehension of Dutch). Rather, this person would possess a partial comprehension of a few words here and there, at most the occasional sentence. In other words, this type of multilingual, linguistic innovation to a significant degree determines its audience (cf. Tidigs & Huss, 2017): an audience, moreover, that occupies a certain asymmetrical power relationship vis-à-vis those who understand English only and no Dutch. It is Dutch that is changing, opening itself up to the larger, international language that is English. Ultimately, this is not only a superficial development manifesting itself only in certain sectors: it shows a changing ideological position of language in the Netherlands, and a move away from the standard language ideology that characterises a strongly nationalist model.

In a striking parallel to discussions on colonial languages' relation to former imperial languages, we are forced to ponder the position that Dutch is only losing ground here—as some voices in

the public debate lament—and ask if Dutch is not also gaining something in the development of English becoming unforeign. To be sure, the rate with which this process is taking place surpasses the relatively circumscribed absorption of French and German words in previous eras into the Dutch language. Quantity, here, is to a degree quality. Historical lines of influence never came close to getting rid of the distinctions between languages, as I am proposing is happening today with English. The separation between languages is giving way, leading us on an analytical level to reconsider received notions of multilingualism. This reconsideration cannot ignore, however, a striking asymmetry: it is speakers of Dutch who drive the unforeignness of English, while those with no knowledge of the Dutch language will not be able to partake in and understand. The multilingual public is a one-sided one.

Conclusion, Part II: The Language of Community

Historically, nation-states such as the Netherlands are, or in any case think themselves to be, monolingual entities. Benedict Anderson’s account of the origins and spread of nationalism in *Imagined Communities* (2006 [1983]) is most notable because of its titular phrase. Concrete, material objects such as books and media stimulated and solidified the imagination of solidarity among “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). As the dawn of Europe’s modern history, the nation and nationalism were the new, modern shapes of that imagination, and there is nothing in Anderson’s formulation that prevents us in principle from applying the imagination to other scales of politics and belonging.

Any such retheorization, however, needs to take stock of the pervasive legacy of monolingualism Yasemin Yildiz has captured as the “postmonolingual condition”. A multilingually imagined community is different than a monolingual one (cf. van Amelsvoort & Pireddu, 2022). We must note the two places at which this multilingualism is active: the imaginative faculty itself can be multilingual, and/or it can imagine a multilingual community. This is explicitly “and/or,” for these two senses are likely to be entangled in practice. The examples discussed in this paper show this entanglement: if the imagination itself is multilingual, it means that the people who are imagining can work in and across two languages (translanguaging; cf. Flores & Lewis, 2016); and they consequently act as if their own multilingualism extends to everybody around them.

The example of Nolet, however, also forces us to critically examine multilingualism—especially when the argument is that in certain, visible parts of society the borders between different languages are dissolving, as I have put forth in this article. Different questions present themselves. Firstly, for whom is it that “Dutch” and “English” are merging? This is not only a

question about language, class, and linguistic proficiency. As I discussed before, one would need to be able to recognize both Dutch and English as separate languages, before one can understand their mixing and melting together. Speakers of Dutch are therefore at an advantage compared to those who only speak English, for whom the Dutch words remain unintelligible.

A second set of questions revolves around our exact definition of multilingualism. Throughout this paper, I have frequently referred to multilingualism and translanguaging while also keeping “Dutch” and “English” as separate categories, whether in quotation marks or not, even if my argument has been that this distinction might be considered useless, at least to the extent that languages may be fluid and have overlapping border zones. Yet perhaps we will be forced to conclude that Nolet’s speech—“Ik ga helemaal real met je zijn”, “De objective was duidelijk”—ultimately shows the breaking down of accepted notions of bounded languages. Even the most critical and forceful interrogation of such concepts retains its belief in “that which is casually called a language” (Young, 2016; cf. Jaspers & Madsen, 2019). In my final example, the boundaries that are evoked when speaking about “Dutch” or “English” dissolve: what remains is a “speech community” (Blommaert, 2006, p. 243; Silverstein, 1998) that is indifferent to them.

Such speech communities are distinct from linguistic communities, where the rules of normalized, standardized language remain strong. They form a space of unsupervised, everyday use of language that stands in relation to official linguistic communities but can also easily break away from its institutionalized, formalized rules. It is in the linguistic community that the monolingual pressure makes itself felt, while speech communities are more heterogeneous and fluid—allow, in other words, for the prefix “trans-” in translanguaging. From this perspective, it is only logical that the drift into the mixing of Dutch and English I have traced in this paper manifests itself in the unsupervised use of language by a myriad of businesses and individuals. Although all want to communicate, neither of these are beholden to state-sponsored systems of language standardization and monolingualization.

I have not discussed a dominant practice of language use in the Netherlands. At the same time, it is impossible to say at present when and where this mixing of Dutch and English—and the making-meaningless of those terms—in popular and youth culture and media will stop. I do not, here, want to end on a normative note whether this process is desired or not. Rather, my aim has been to open up a room for reflecting anew upon the relations between self and other, “here” and “there,” domestic and foreign. Following Anderson (and many other theorists of nationalism) and seeing language use as central to the formation of communities gives us a well-rounded view on these relations.

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