

In the Dutch Mountains

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Many years ago, when I was teaching English 101 at a community college in Arizona, there was a quiet, older woman in the back of my classroom. She did not participate much but she was a devoted student. When visiting the local super market one day, I noticed she worked behind the bread counter and we chatted briefly. On the last day of class, she waited till everyone had exited the room, then walked up to me and told me that years before, she had to drop out of high school because of a teen pregnancy and only now, in her forties, could she resume her education. Her eyes were welling up with tears when she said: "Thank you so much for teaching me how to write. I have a new take on life and it's all because of your class."

Fast Forward: I have been teaching Dutch at Cal for ten years now and it seems highly unlikely that a student in Dutch 1 would come up to me at the end of the semester to make a tearful admission that I changed their life because I taught them to speak Dutch. And if they did, I might be wondering whether they were stoned or trying to cozy up to me because they were stressed out about their final grade.

To make matters worse, when I tell Dutch people that I teach Dutch to American students, they roll their eyes in baffled amazement and utter: "But for Pete's sake, **why**...?" This tells us something very interesting about native Dutch speakers, namely:

- a) they are not very chauvinistic about their own language or insistent that others should learn this smaller language and
- b) they speak English willingly and gladly when called upon, so if Americans do want to rise above their monolingual status, the Dutch seem to imply, why not try your hand at Spanish or Mandarin, or if you really do plan on working for the CIA, Urdu or any of the other "terrorist languages" Bush II decided to support.

It doesn't make it any easier when Americans sometimes ask me whether Dutch, in spite of the 20 million speakers around the world, is an endangered language, like Cornish or Yiddish.

The inferiority complex about Dutch is hardly justified, because even though Dutch ranks (last time I checked) 58th in the list of world languages which is just above Kurdish and Serbo-Croatian, it is the 10th language on the internet and a tier 1 language for Silicon Valley companies who are translating their content for the global market.

In addition, Dutch should be taken more seriously from a world history point of view: due to the Dutch dominance in the seventeenth century across the globe, we have 10 kilometers of Dutch East India materials that have hardly been touched by international scholars because of the language barrier. Here in Berkeley at the Bancroft, we have an entire un- and underused room full of boxes, i.e. the Engel Sluiter collection, compiled by a Berkeley historian and containing transcripts of all the documentation of all the places around the world where the Dutch touched down and left a paper trail. Finally, even though England and France have always claimed the Enlightenment and the beginnings of an egalitarian society that we base the modern Western world/if not America on, an early Enlightenment (freedom of religion, freedom of the press etc) took place in the Netherlands with figures like Spinoza and Bayle. I quote Jonathan Israel who wrote this in the *TLS* about a year ago:

"[...] around 1700, Holland rather than England counted internationally as the world's most foremost model of a tolerant, prosperous republican ethnic and religious melting pot [...] The Dutch Republic was also the world's model for commercial freedom. Even after Britain had long overtaken it in economic dynamism in the mid-eighteenth century, the Dutch Republic, as Diderot pointed out in the 1770s, still outstripped Britain in one crucial aspect: the Netherlands was the first society in known human history to give a decent standard of living to everyone."¹

¹ Jonathan Israel, "How the Light Came In," book review of Anthony Pagden's *The Enlightenment, Times Literary Supplement*, June 21, 2013, p. 9

So there's plenty to like about the Dutch, aside from the general cliché of tulips, prostitutes and pot...

And yet, I do feel like a missionary at times, not an ambassador, for Dutch is a hard sell on a campus where Asian students outrank all others, and languages like Korean have long waiting lists. It also means that on the first day of class, I really have to hook my students to stay and that means sexing up the curriculum to make sure Dutch on the Berkeley campus does not become an endangered language, too. But the cynic/some would call it a Dutch uncle in me too often also reverts to the question of relevance.

Yes, I tell my students, learning a foreign language, whether it's Chinese or Czech, is not so much about end results such as near fluency, but about getting out of your own cultural comfort zone, leaving your familiar surroundings behind and surrendering yourself to something strange and foreign, for which every American should learn to develop a tolerance if we want to call ourselves true world citizens even if we are or remain, for the most part, monolingual Neanderthals.

But what is the relevance of one semester of Dutch, after which most students leave the language behind and never try their hands/tongues at those funny sounds again? What is my significance, and how do I make peace with feeling so irrelevant at times? Or why do we still support these smaller languages on a campus like Cal? Is the Dutch program truly necessary when every moron in the Netherlands learns to speak English from the moment he is out of diapers? Well, of course, you guessed it, this is not about the Dutch, but this is about young Americans, Gen X'ers for the most part whose only introduction to a foreign language is sometimes that one Dutch or Swahili class. And, yes, then I will feel a little more relevant, for then I become the apostle of foreign languages and need to convey, no sway them, that globalism is here, and globalism is now. A better example than the Dutch, who always learned to speak other languages to do more business globally from Batavia to New Amsterdam and Surinam to South Africa one could not have.

Interestingly, the founder of Rosetta Stone, who was an avid language learner, talked about his experience with Chinese, which he had learned in a language lab at home in the US. However, when he then arrived in Beijing and was actually able to have a short but simple conversation with a Chinese cabbie, he felt excited and validated. However scary it is to start a conversation with a native speaker, we all remember the thrill of first communicating in another language and being understood and understanding. So, more than anything, a foreign language may be a puzzle at first but becomes the ultimate communication tool, a social thing and the thing that makes us human while also becoming the gateway to contact with a human from a completely different culture and that contact, that validation upon contact, is much more exciting than Google Translate.

Like the maker of Rosetta Stone, I had a very authentic but entertaining and somewhat similar experience in one of my advanced Dutch classes, which for the most part consisted of young Americans who had learned Dutch from me. Many of them had never even been to Holland. At that time in my life, my mother was suffering from Alzheimer's and she had some pretty wild hallucinations. My siblings back in the Netherlands took care of her daily, were in contact with her daily and sometimes would bitch about what a burden this had become, to me via Skype. So when I was showing my class a YouTube video and I had forgotten to turn off Skype, my one sister, who had had one glass too many, probably *because* we were all so stressed out about my mother, barged right in via Skype, across the screen, typing in Dutch:

Just talked to mom

There is an overweight monkey sitting next to her on the couch

He asked her for a prosecco (lol)

Completely bonkers

And P. (my sister's partner)

Is getting fed up with all this talk about mom

The Dutch idiom here is (and I warn you, this is crude): "P. is growing a horse's dick from all the talk about mom."

At that point I closed my laptop, blushing, but the students had been reading all along and were asking what was going on, why my mom was sitting next to an overweight monkey, how a monkey could ever even ask for a prosecco and why the guy named P. was growing a horse's dick. Without leaving the classroom in America, they had had a genuine language moment with a native speaker that they were puzzled by, but here's the kicker, they understood Dutch, so suddenly they had been part of this very private conversation and they felt validated by the fact that they picked up the words and meanings so fast. Dutch was no longer a soup of mere gutturals but more of an open book. More importantly, at that moment, Dutch was relevant, and I was relevant for taking them to that level in comprehension

That experience was interesting to me in that it confirmed to me that students, like the maker of Rosetta Stone, crave those genuine unrehearsed language moments with native speakers and feel especially validated when they understand what is said or written. For this very same reason, I use story telling in Dutch to recreate the same experience and I have had GSI's set up experiments with native speaker pen pals, while in my advanced classes I also encourage students to submit good pieces to media outlets in the Netherlands; last semester this even led to an opinion piece of one of my students being included in one of the major national newspapers *De Volkskrant*: the student had had only three semesters of Dutch under his belt and no previous, like heritage, experience with the language, so it can be done, but only if we encourage our students to excel and try. Another example: my advanced group of students also did an exercise in diplomacy last semester: last year there was a Russia-Netherlands anniversary, but due to some diplomatic incidents back and forth and Russia's stance on homosexuality, there were pieces in the Dutch media about whether the rest of the anniversary celebrations should be canceled. All the students wrote opinion pieces after debating it in class and I sent their pieces to the Dutch Consulate who then engaged into the discussion with us. These kinds of exercises take the language out of the language lab and the isolated space in which we teach our languages at Berkeley, and put them in action, in context and in contact with native speakers and that sort of REAL TIME

(PAROLE versus LANGUE) as I call it, is a huge success with students and gives them the realization of relevance and the realization that yes, there are actually 20 million Dutch speakers out there in the world with whom we can communicate in their own language, and how awesome is that. Moreover, native speakers, have more and deeper connections with other native speakers, so as native speakers we should utilize that resource, even though, I have a feeling, this resource gets underutilized in the classroom.

Finally, last year, the *New York Times* printed a very interesting article of a study that showed that readers of literature become more empathic. One of the things the study had tried is have job applicants read some world literature like Chekhov or Jane Austen right before they went into a job interview and this actually triggered more empathy in the interview, i.e. a better interview performance.² Likewise, the learning of a foreign language generates cultural empathy, which again, is something Americans ought to acquire more of, knowing how few Americans carry passports or go abroad, and horrors, how few US Congressmen and Senators carry passports or go abroad. Once again, teaching or learning another language is essential for a greater global empathy and whether a student learns that by taking Slovenian or Finnish is, in the end, irrelevant. The greater gain is cultural empathy and not the fact whether this student knows at least 10,000 words in Dutch, which will enable him or her to converse in the language adequately or read a newspaper without the use of Google Translate.

In closing, you may have wondered about my title “In the Dutch Mountains”. The title, just as my job title (Teacher of Dutch in an Anglophone country) is ironic of course. You are correct in believing that there are no mountains in the Netherlands. More than half the country lies below sea level and while the south is above sea level and hillier, overall, it is flatter than an old man’s behind (this is sexist, but as women we have some

² Pam Belluck, “For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov,” *New York Times*, Oct. 3rd, 2013: <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/03/i-know-how-youre-feeling-i-read-chekhov/>

catching up to do). Thus exposed, The Netherlands has had no natural barriers against invaders, and consequently, has been run over by enemy tribes and later, invading countries, like Spain, France and Germany. While opposing these countries the best we could, we, at the same time, opened our borders to the persecuted, which, in previous centuries, were those who were persecuted because of their religion (Jews, Huguenots). Our lack of geographically sound borders can be seen as a blessed metaphor of our openness to foreigners and foreign languages. Because of this, The Netherlands is one of the most multicultural places in the world. Amsterdam alone counts more than 150 different nationalities. While the more conservative government of the last few years has put greater emphasis on the fact that immigrants need to learn Dutch, too, for the longest time, English was the lingua franca, the glue to have all those different nationalities conversant with each other. This too, this aptitude to speak English for the sake of communication and keep shops and cash registers open, is part of our national identity, and just as Dutch as windmills and tulips.

In other words, while this internationalism of the Dutch has made my job at Cal much more difficult, if not impossible, what students take away is maybe the most valuable lesson of all, notably, that the Dutch survived in the world economy because of their multilingualism and that may be an important reality for young Americans, as America is faced with increased competition from China, India and Brazil. While I work harder and harder to create authentic Dutch language moments in my American classroom, the underlying lesson and relevance here is that Americans need to embrace their global identity more if we want to stay ahead of the game. Any interaction with my Dutch classes at UC Berkeley will teach them just that, whether they become fluent or not. The thank you notes I have received from former students over the years confirm this and often, and to their surprise, they tell me that their minor or major in Dutch Studies has made them stand out in the job market in one way or another... so going for a hike in the Dutch mountains is not entirely ludicrous or frivolous but an excellent exercise in global empathy, validation and respect.