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# Introduction

Many books are a labor of love. This, I'm afraid, is not one of them.

Indeed, *Voertaal: English* and its predecessor – *Native English for Nederlanders: a personal cultural and grammatical guide* – were born out of frustration and irritation.

Like many foreigners who come to the Netherlands – despite my Dutch name and my Dutch parents, I am in fact an American – I initially thought that the Dutch spoke wonderful English. I later learned that they actually speak adequate English. And when I finally figured out the Dutch school system, I realized too that a better way of describing this less than overwhelming command of English was a *zes-plusje*.

What is the problem, you ask? For starters, Dutch-born speakers of English resort far too often to expressions like ‘sparring partner’ which are rarely used by native speakers and which they then proceed to pronounce incorrectly. More seriously, they frequently mangle their verb tenses in English, producing stilted language which no native would ever speak. To make matters worse, the Dutch love to use English swear words (the S-word and the F-word, to be precise), which can get them into real trouble when they are conversing or – even more problematic – corresponding with the natives. And they never bother to master their prepositions, resulting in such howling errors as ‘Welcome in the Netherlands’. And that’s only the beginning.

Observations such as these provoked me to write a series of weekly columns about English – in English – in *Het Financieele Dagblad*, the newspaper for which I’ve written stories in both

Dutch and English for more than 10 years. My target audience were university students, managers, academics, lawyers and accountants – anybody, in fact, for whom English is increasingly becoming the *voertaal*, or working language, of his or her day-to-day professional life.

The columns, which were generally well-received by readers, in turn spawned the book *Native English for Nederlanders*, which took my publishers by surprise by selling more than 10,000 copies in six months' time. I was not surprised, given the challenges which a tricky language like English poses for even the most determined of foreign speakers. The subject is endless, and endlessly fascinating.

In many ways *Voertaal: English* is a companion volume to *Native English*. The first book sets out my views on why the Dutch make certain mistakes in English, using my early columns as a point of reference, while this volume elaborates on these views with new examples and fresh tips taken from my more recent work. The columns were designed to be bite-sized chunks of practical tips and insider advice on everything from the language you should use in job applications to the grammatical mystery of the gerund. Of the more than 100 columns that appeared in the newspaper, slightly more than half have been collected here.

The columns are grouped thematically. The first section is devoted to 'linguistic etiquette' or culture, the second to grammar and the third to *Dunglish*, the ugly and erroneous language that results from literally translating from the Dutch and then trying to pass it off as proper English.

To me, there is an obvious underlying theme to both books: the Dutch *do* speak pretty good English but they could improve their skills immeasurably if they understood the cultural imperatives that underlie the language.

For one thing, English as a language values indirectness in the same way that the Dutch language, and the Dutch themselves, love directness. Dutch speakers of English ignore the culture of English at their peril, as English is far more than a language. It is a mysterious code and a daunting intelligence test, all rolled into one. The spelling is illogical, the grammar is strewn with exceptions, and people very often say the opposite of what they mean. English, in short, is meant to be difficult – and it is.

*Voertaal: English*, like *Native English*, approaches the English language entirely from the perspective of the Dutch reader. The Dutch make mistakes which other cultures or people do not, and it is these mistakes that these columns address and attempt to correct. The good news is that the Dutch, unlike Anglophones, are not afraid of speaking foreign languages nor are they intimidated by the thought of making mistakes. Pragmatic in business as well as in communication, they generally manage to get their message across in the world of commerce and, in so doing, they have conquered markets from Alaska to Zanzibar.

My goal is to help you truly perfect your English, to put you on the road to achieving near-native skills. If all else fails, I hope that you will at least be able to detect Denglish when you see or hear it, and that you will manage to banish this wretched hybrid from your own speech – for all our sakes.

# Section I

## The dos and don'ts of English

*The American inventor and businessman Thomas Edison once said that genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. When it comes to learning English as a second language, I'd say that the challenge is 60 percent linguistic and 40 percent cultural.*

*Speaking proper English requires more than memorizing words and grappling with grammar. To speak it effectively and with flair, you need to understand the culture from which the language springs in the first place.*

*If you're a native speaker, the cultural background to English – what I like to call linguistic etiquette – comes naturally. American, British and Australian children are born to it, and this subtle, invisible body of knowledge is then reinforced at school and later at university.*

*Indeed, the cultural heritage is so implicit that the native speaker is probably not even aware of it. What kind of language is effective in an English-language CV? When is it acceptable to put your university degree on your business card? And what on earth is a Yogiism?*

*If you come to English later in life, it helps to have a crash course in such intangibles. This is precisely what the columns in this section aim to provide.*

## Drs mr X

It wasn't so long ago that the columns of *Het Financieele Dagblad* were riddled with titles and degrees. Back then, we didn't write about CEOs called Jan Jansen. We wrote about people called *drs. ing. J.M.C. Jansen*.

The newspaper's style has since changed. We've dropped the initials and adopted first names. We've also done away with university degrees and titles.

Still, the Dutch are more attached, at least in a visible way, to their university accomplishments than their American and British counterparts. This is obvious from a glance not only at business cards but also at lists of conference speakers.

Having worked hard for their degrees, many people are still keen to have their names preceded by *mr.*, *drs.* or *ir.* Unfortunately, these honorifics are virtually meaningless outside the Netherlands. The honorific *mr.* is particularly confusing, especially when followed by the name Suzanne. To the untrained Anglo-Saxon eye, it simply looks like a typographical error for Mr. (*de heer*).

Although the Netherlands is moving towards a bachelor's and master's degree system, it still holds true that Anglo-Saxons tend not to flaunt university degrees (although they do, it has to be said, tend to hang their diplomas on the walls of their offices, something Dutch people would never do). The addition of BA after one's name looks not only a bit pompous but also slightly skimpy. A bachelor's degree in the English-speaking world is not at all uncommon, so there's usually no need to mention it on a business card.

A graduate degree might be relevant but only if it's in the same field as your current line of work. If you have a master's degree

in fine arts (MFA), mention it if you're a museum curator. If you've moved on to the world of finance, then drop the MFA.

The same holds true for doctorates. If you have a PhD, you can, in appropriate circumstances, tack it on at the end of your name. Or you can call yourself Dr. But you can't do both: it's one or the other.

In general, though, less is more. Except, that is, when you're travelling outside the Anglo-Saxon world. The Russians, Japanese, Italians and Austrians are still smitten with university degrees. So make sure you carry different business cards to cover all these various contingencies.

## CV-speak

A Dutch friend of mine at university was a brilliant physicist. He not only had his own lab in Oxford, he also spent a week each month at the European Particle Accelerator in Geneva. But when it came to writing an application letter or drawing up a cv in English, he was hopeless. His presentation was dry, his achievements were understated and the overall effect was that of a wet blanket. It was, in short, a paper version of *doe maar gewoon*.

He did the right thing by asking a native English speaker to proofread his letter and cv. But to get to the interview stage, Dutch speakers need to do more than translate their cv into English. They must switch cultures and learn to sell themselves on paper the way an Anglo-Saxon would.

When writing an English cv, you must never see this crucial document merely as a list of qualifications. Instead, you should approach it as an all-or-nothing sales pitch. Use the cv to land the interview, not the job.

For the Dutch, this means overcoming their fear of appearing too full of themselves. Don't just say that you're a marketing manager at Unilever. Make clear, using power verbs, that you have 'achieved' this or that milestone, 'won' an award or 'managed' the launch of a new campaign.

Other tips: the British refer to a cv in their covering letter, and Americans to their resume (no accent mark). Neither designation should be put at the top of your cv: it's clear enough that you're providing an overview of your working life.

In the Netherlands it is customary to state your age and whether or not you have children. Both should be avoided when applying to an American or British firm, as they don't want to

open themselves up to discrimination suits. Never include a photo for the same reason.

Most Dutch cvs include a line for hobbies, with 90% of people confessing to a love of reading and walking. Unless you can claim to have a genuinely exotic or unusual hobby, it's best to keep mum.

Your cv is your one shot at getting that all-important interview. Sell yourself by concentrating on your strengths. A *doe maar gewoon* attitude will never be one of them, at least not abroad.