

Pronunciation

This introductory chapter will assume that the reader will either be working in class under the guidance of an instructor who can illustrate the sounds of the spoken language, or has access to some of the many tapes, CDs, broadcasts and other audio means that are readily available. These are discussed in detail in Chapter 27.

In the presentation of sounds that follows, every Dutch sound discussed will be transcribed in the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet. We will follow the usual custom of always enclosing IPA symbols in square brackets.

I.1 Vowels

I.1.1 *Front, rounded, front-rounded vowels*

Front vowels are those pronounced with the tongue more or less raised in the front of the mouth such as “eat,” “it,” “date,” “end.” IPA symbols for front vowels are [i], [ɪ], [e] and [ɛ].

Back vowels are those pronounced with the tongue raised in the back of the mouth, such as “food,” “foot,” “code.” IPA symbols for back vowels are [u], [ʊ] and [o].

Front-rounded vowels occur in Dutch but not in English. They involve the raising of the tongue in front of the mouth while keeping the lips rounded or puckered at the same time. Front-rounded vowels occur in French (**vu, deux**) and German (**müde, dünn, Söhne, können**). IPA symbols for front-rounded vowels are [y], [ʏ], [ø] and [œ].

1.1.2 High and low vowels

“High” means that in the sound in question the tongue is raised close to the roof of the mouth. “Low” means that the tongue is further away, i.e. more “relaxed.” So we say that the vowel of “eat” is high, “end” a mid-vowel and “add” a low vowel. The equivalent IPA symbols would be [i], [ɛ] and [æ].

1.1.3 The vowels

Vowel in Dutch spelling	Example		IPA	Remarks
ie	ziek	sick	[i]	Like English “seek” but rather short in Dutch.
	hier	here	[i:]	Same quality as the previous example, but about twice as long before r .
i	dit	this	[ɪ]	
ee	steen	stone	[e:]	Has a tendency toward a diphthong, less strongly so than English “main” but more than German <i>zehn</i> . This is especially true in the western cities in the Netherlands.
e	met	with	[ɛ]	
oe	boek	book	[u]	Pronounced shorter than English “boot.”
	boer	farmer	[u:]	Like Dutch ie , roughly twice as long before r .
oo	boon	bean	[o:]	As Dutch ee , tends to a diphthong, less so than English “bone” but more than German <i>Bohne</i> .
o	pot	pot	[ɔ]	

aa	kaas	cheese	[a:]	
a	dat	that	[ɑ]	You will hear that this vowel is pronounced much further back than the preceding one.
uu	minuut	minute	[y]	Resembles French <i>minute</i> .
	buur	neighbor	[y:]	As Dutch ie and oe , this vowel sounds more or less twice as long before r .
u	nul	zero	[ʏ]	Similar to German <i>müssen</i> .
eu	neus	nose	[ø:]	Like French <i>deux</i> , German <i>Söhne</i> .

1.1.4 Summary

Dutch vowels are all distinct from one another by virtue of their differences in what we might call “vowel color,” usually termed their quality. It is also useful to note that they differ in quantity, meaning their duration: some are always short, others always long, and still others short or long depending on the surrounding sounds.

a e i o u	always short [ʌ ɛ ɪ ɔ ʏ]
aa ee oo eu	always long [a: e: o: ø:]
ie oe uu	long, but only before r [i:r u:r y:r] (rather) short everywhere else [i u y]; this includes when they end a syllable or word, such as zie, hoe, nu

1.1.5

A neutral vowel, which is comparable to the last syllable of English “soda” or “sofa” occurs in unstressed (unaccented) syllables in many words. In Dutch, the neutral vowel sounds like the short **u** [y]. It has several spellings, the most common of which are:

e	be<u>h</u>al<u>v</u>e	except	(the most usual spelling)
ij	mo<u>g</u>elij<u>k</u>	possible	
i	twint<u>i</u>g	twenty	

1.2 Diphthongs

A “diphthong” can be defined as the succession of two different vowels in a single syllable. Examples in English are “how,” “boy,” “time.” Notice that in the third example the spelling does not suggest the diphthong that is there, the sound that we misleadingly call “long i.” The IPA symbols for these three diphthongs would be [aʊ], [ɔɪ] and [aɪ].

Spelling	Example	IPA	Remarks
ei	trein train	[ɛi]	([e] + [i]). Note that ei and ij are two spellings for the same sound.
	dijk dike		
ou	koud cold	[ɔu]	([ɔ] + [u])
au	blauw blue		
ui	huis house	[œy]	([œ] + [y]). This is a front-rounded diphthong.
oei	moeite trouble	[ui]	([u] + [i])
ooi	mooi nice	[o:i]	([o:] + [i]). The first component of this diphthong is long.
aai	haai shark	[a:i]	([a:] + [i]). Note the difference between this and the first diphthong above; first component long.
ieu	nieuw new	[iy]	([i] + [y])
eeu	leeuw lion	[e:y]	([e:] + [y]). First component long.

1.3 Consonants

Consonants are either voiced (vocal cords vibrating) or voiceless (vocal cords not used).

Consonant in Dutch spelling	Example		IPA	Remarks
p	paal	post	[p]	The first three consonants are voiceless stops, and in Dutch they are unaspirated, meaning they are not followed by the little puff of breath that we hear in English “peel,” “team,” “cool.”
t	tien	ten	[t]	
k	kat	cat	[k]	
b	been	bone	[b]	The two voiced stops are always pronounced voiceless at the end of a word, in other words identical to the voiceless stops.
	heb	(I) have	[p]	
d	deze	these	[d]	Voiceless at the end of a word.
	had	had	[t]	
f	feit	fact	[f]	At the beginning of a word, the sound resulting from the juxtaposition of s and j occurs in borrowings from other languages; it occurs in the middle of Dutch words.
s	saai	dull	[s]	
sj	sjaal	scarf	[ʃ]	
	meisje	girl		

ch	machine machine	[ʃ]	The sound in this spelling occurs only in words borrowed from French.
tj	katje kitten	[tʃ]	Resulting from t and j standing next to each other; roughly similar to English “ch.”
ch	acht eight	[x]	
g	geel yellow	[x], [ɣ]	In parts of the east and south of the Netherlands, as well as in Flanders, a voiced sound is often heard. It is pronounced [ɣ] only in loanwords.
	logies lodging	[ʒ]	This pronunciation (the sound of the “s” in English “measure”) is heard in words borrowed from French.
sch	schip ship	[sx]	Note that this spelling represents a succession of two distinct sounds.
	praktisch practical	[s]	At the end of a word and in suffixes, the ch is not heard.
v	veel much	[v]	This is pronounced fully voiced (like English “veil”) in the south and in Flanders, but in much of the rest of the Netherlands it is not distinguished from f .
z	zout salt	[z]	
l	laat late	[l]	

r	room cream	[ʀ] [r]	The pronunciation most often heard in the north, especially in the cities, is the “guttural” one, phonetically called “uvular.” But in much of the country and throughout Flanders, the tongue tip trill (the “Spanish r”) is heard.
m	maan moon	[m]	
n	niet not	[n]	
ng	tong tongue zingen to sing	[ŋ]	As “ng” in English “singer,” never as in “finger.”
j	ja yes	[j]	
w	wat what	[v] [w]	In the Netherlands, a slight contact of lower lip and upper teeth, lighter than English “v”; in Flanders, normally pronounced similar to – but not exactly the same as – English “w.”

1.3.1 Summary

- 1 **b** and **d** are pronounced as **p** and **t** at the end of a word, i.e. they become voiceless. The voiced sounds **v** and **z** likewise do not occur at the ends of words, but here—as we’ll see in the next chapter—the spelling does indicate this.
- 2 **ch**, **sch**, **g** and **r** require special attention, since the pronunciations they represent are not the ones suggested to speakers of English by their spellings.

1.4 Assimilation

Two or more consecutive consonants (except **l**, **m**, **n** and **r**) must be pronounced either all voiced or all voiceless. This is true whether the consonants occur within one word or at the end of one word and the beginning of the next.

- 1 When a spirant (a “continuant”) **f**, **s**, **ch**, **g**, **v** or **z** is combined with one of the stop consonants **b**, **d** (voiced) and **p**, **t** or **k** (voiceless), the stop consonant controls the voicing or voicelessness of the entire group:

<i>Spelled</i>		<i>Pronounced as if written</i>
hoofden	heads	[hoovden]
ijsbeer	polar bear	[ijzbeer]
opvouwen	to fold up	[opfouwen]

Remember that spelling notwithstanding, a **b** or **d** at the end of a word is voiceless:

ik heb veel	I have many . . .	[ik hep feel]
zij had zeker	she had certainly . . .	[zij hat seker]

- 2 When two stop consonants are combined in a group, if either one is voiced they are both voiced:

uitbreiden	to extend	[uidbreiden]
op duizenden	on thousands	[ob duizenden]

- 3 When two spirant consonants are combined, the group is voiceless:

afzetten	to remove	[afsetten]
het is veel	it is a lot	[het is feel]

- 4 Final voiceless consonants often become voiced when followed immediately by a vowel:

heb ik	have I	[heb ik] (i.e. hep + ik)
lees ik	do I read	[leez ik]

1.5 Stress

The main stress (“accent”) in Dutch is generally on the first syllable of a word, as in English. Prefixes and suffixes containing the unstressed vowel *e* (*be-*, *er-*, *ge-*, *her-*, *ver-*, *-e*, *-en*, *-er*), as well as the prefix *ont-*, are not stressed.

In all cases where the position of the stress is ambiguous, it will be indicated by a line under the stressed syllable, e.g. **stadhuis**, **toevallig**, **Amsterdam**.

Spelling

2.1 Spelling rules: closed and open syllables

You will find that the Dutch spelling system is a very consistent one. That is, by and large, each sound is spelled in only one way, and each symbol represents only one sound. But part of its logic is the spelling of vowel sounds and here Dutch does things in a way no other language does. The spelling system is based on the distinction between what we call closed and open syllables. First we need to understand what is meant by these terms.

A word may consist of only a single syllable (**kat**, **ga**), but many words consist of two or more syllables (**za-ken**, **aan-ko-men**), each one of which follows this rule: we call any syllable closed when it ends in a consonant and open when it ends in a vowel:

- When two consonants stand between vowels (**mannen**, **armen**), the syllable division usually comes between them, so we divide **man-nen**, **ar-men**. The first syllable ends in a consonant and is therefore closed.
- When one consonant stands between vowels (**bomen**, **deuren**), the syllable division comes before the consonant, so here we divide **bo-men**, **deu-ren**. It must begin the second of the two syllables and the first thus ends in a vowel and is open.

The spelling rules are as follows.

The Dutch short vowels **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u** are always written with one letter and can occur in closed syllables:

man	man	pot	pot	bed	bed
vul	l, he fills	zit	l, he sits		

When another syllable is added, for instance **-en** to form the plural, the final consonant must be doubled so that the syllable remains closed:

mannen	men	potten	pots
bedden	beds	vullen	we, they fill
zitten	we, they sit		

Note: Remember that (except in a few loanwords) you never see any doubled consonants at the end of a word.

When one of the above vowels occurs in a word of one syllable where it is already followed by more than one consonant, no change needs to be made when a syllable is added:

arm, armen	arm, arms	word, worden	I become, they become
kerk, kerken	church, churches	kust, kusten	coast, coasts
ding, dingen	thing, things		

2.1.1 Summary

The short vowels **a, e, i, o, u** are always followed by at least one consonant. When another syllable follows, they must be followed by two or more consonants.

The rest of the Dutch vowels, including all the diphthongs, can (but might not!) occur in an open syllable. All such vowels are spelled with two letters when they happen to stand in a closed syllable:

laan	avenue	<i>diphthongs</i>	
peer	pear	trein	train
boom	tree	dijk	dike
buur	neighbor	ruik	smell
fout	mistake		
dier	animal		
deur	door		
boek	book		

These vowels might stand in an open syllable (a) in a word of one syllable without a following consonant or (b) when another syllable is added. Then the vowels spelled with a double letter (the first four, above) drop one of these letters. The logic here is that the single following consonant (a) or the absence of any consonant (b) is enough to indicate that the syllable is open:

lanen	avenues	sla	lettuce
peren	pears	—	
bomen	trees	zo	so
buuren	neighbors	nu	now

Notice the blank in the second column. An *ee* at the end of a word must always be written with two letters (for instance *zee* “sea”) to distinguish it from the unaccented vowel as in English “soda” which is regularly spelled with *e* (for instance *ze* “she”). This distinction is not made inside the word, however, resulting in an occasional ambiguity such as *regeren* (*re-gee-ren*) “to govern” but *regelen* (*ree-ge-len*) “to adjust.”

Note, however, that in accordance with the rule given above, the doubled letters are used whenever the syllable is closed (that is, when the vowel is followed by two or more consonants), whether or not another syllable follows:

paarden	[paar-den]	horses
feesten	[fees-ten]	parties
hoofden	[hoof-den]	heads
buurten	[buur-ten]	neighborhoods

The doubled vowels in the diphthongs *aai*, *ooi*, *eeu*, *oei*, *ieu* never change:

taai, taaie	tough
mooi, mooie	nice
leeuw, leeuwen	lion, lions
groei, groeien	I grow, they grow

The vowels spelled with two different letters remain unchanged when another syllable is added. Remember that a spelling with two different letters does not necessarily indicate a diphthong!

dieren	animals	treinen	trains
deuren	doors	dijken	dikes
boeken	books	fouten	mistakes
		tuinen	yards, gardens

2.1.2 Summary

- 1 The vowels **aa**, **ee**, **oo**, **uu** are spelled with two letters when in a closed syllable but with one letter when in an open syllable.
- 2 The vowels and diphthongs written with two or more different letters remain unchanged whether the syllable is closed or open.
- 3 All the vowels that can occur in an open syllable, with the exception of **ie**, **oe**, **uu**, before consonants other than **r**, are pronounced longer than the vowels that occur only in a closed syllable. For this reason, many texts call **aa**, **ee**, **oo**, **uu**, **ie**, **eu**, **oe**—the vowels that can occur only in open syllable—LONG vowels, and **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u** SHORT vowels.

Note that when we apply rule 1 of this summary and write **aa**, **ee**, **oo**, **uu** with a single letter in an open syllable, only the following consonants distinguish them from the closed-syllable short vowels, for instance:

zaken	affairs	zakken	pockets
redde	reason	redden	to save
bomen	trees	bommen	bombs
manen	moons	mannen	men
spelen	they play	spellen	they spell
slapen	they sleep	slappe	flabby

2.2 The relationship between **f** and **v**, **s** and **z**

- 1 Many words end in an **f** or an **s**, such as **brief** “letter,” **huis** “house.” When we add an ending and this consonant comes to serve as the first consonant of a following syllable, it is replaced by, respectively, **v** or **z**. The consonant may be preceded by **l** or **r**:

raaf	ra-ven	ravens
geloof	gelo-ven	believe
brief	brie-ven	letters
wolf	wol-ven	wolves
werf	wer-ven	shipyards
roos	ro-zen	roses
huis	hui-zen	houses
gans	gan-zen	geese
vers	ver-zen	verses
beurs	beur-zen	scholarships

This does not happen, however, when the s is preceded by **p**, **t** or **k**:

rups	rupsen	caterpillars
fietsen	fietsen	bicycles
heks	heksen	witches

This should feel familiar, because we do the same in English in “wife, wives,” “wolf, wolves” and “house, houses” (though in this last example the spelling does not show how we really pronounce it).

- 2 When we double an **f** or **s** on addition of another syllable, we do not change to **v** or **z**:

stof	stoffen	materials
das	dassen	neckties

- 3 Some exceptions to the rule given in point 1 are:

biograaf	biografen	biographers
elf	elfen	elves
kous	kousen	stockings
dans	dansen	dances

All the above words illustrating the rules for the replacement of f and s by v and z when a vowel follows have been nouns. But these are general pronunciation and spelling rules that hold for all parts of speech, especially adjectives and verbs:

lief	lieve
serieus	serieuze
grijs	grijze, grijzer

2.3 Pronunciation of the ending -en

In spoken Dutch, especially in the western part of the Netherlands, the -n of the common ending -en is normally dropped. So:

lopen to walk	is pronounced as if	[lope]
spreken (we, they) speak		[spreke]
gesproken spoken		[gesproke]
houten wooden		[houte]
brieven letters		[brieve]
ziekenhuis hospital		[ziekehuis]

These words are, however, never *written* without the -n. Notice that the remaining sound is the short vowel common in unstressed syllables (Chapter 1).

2.3.1 Let's try it

Add the ending -en to the following words:

tak	maan	reus	brief
feest	kous	zoon	pit
bloem	das	woord	

Add the ending -e to the following words:

leuk	vies	dik	boos
raar	serieus	mooi	arm

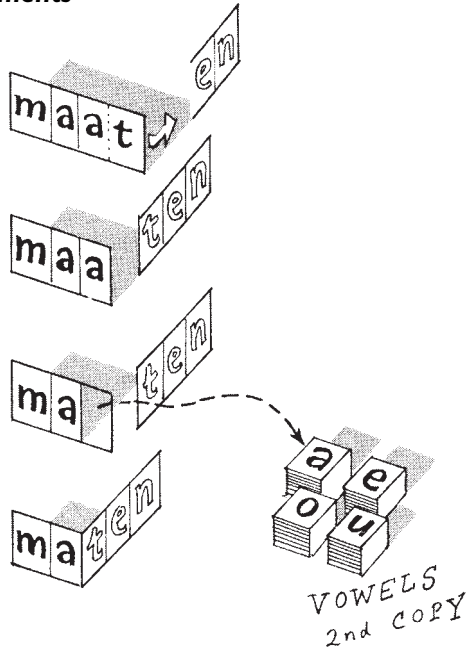
Making the spelling adjustments

putting an ending (most often -e, -en, -er) onto a syllable that contains a vowel spelled with two letters –

an ending beginning with -e attracts a consonant to it and a two-letter vowel gives one up easily, so the consonant 'turns the corner' –

but now the second of two identical vowels becomes superfluous, so it is stored away (to give back when we take the ending off again) –

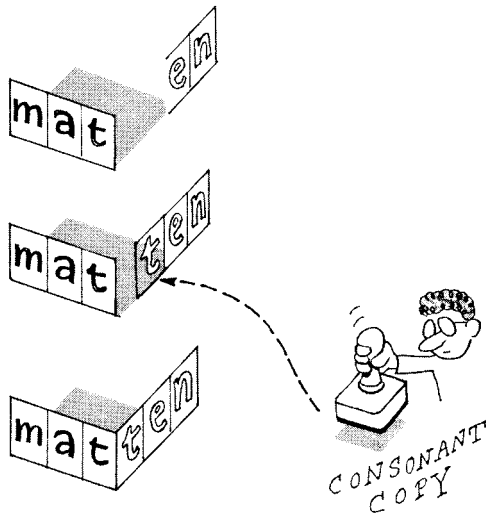
resulting in this economical spelling.

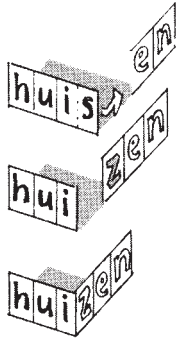


putting an ending onto a syllable containing a vowel spelled with one letter –

the ending still attracts a consonant to it, but a one-letter vowel holds onto the consonant –

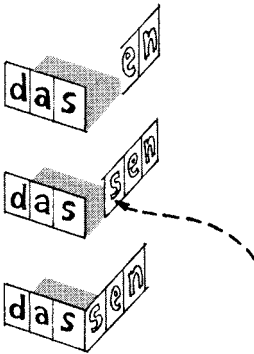
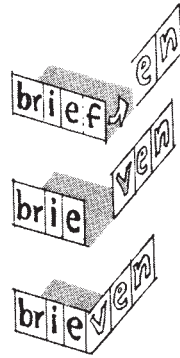
so a second copy of that consonant is brought in from storage (where we put it back when we take the ending off again).





when an **s** or **f** “turns the corner” (after any two-letter vowel) –

it normally turns into a **z** or **v**.



but when an **s** or **f** doesn’t “turn the corner” (after any one-letter vowel), it stays the same and has the usual copy brought in.

