

# Introduction

## 0.1 The Dutch language

The language known to us as Dutch is spoken as a native tongue by some 16,500,000 people in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and by 6,250,000 in Flanders, the northern half of the recently federalized Kingdom of Belgium. One occasionally sees “Dutch” and “Flemish” referred to as though they were two separate languages, but, in reality, there is one single standard language spoken by nearly 23,000,000 people. There are some differences in pronunciation, vocabulary and, occasionally, style, but they are no more important than those between the British and the American varieties of English—even less if we count the fact that there are no differences in spelling customs.

The matter of the English names by which the language is referred to has long been a source of confusion. The word “Dutch” (**Nederlands**) is used to refer to the geography, legal system and government, education, folklore and so on in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, while “Flemish” (**Vlaams**) customarily refers to an equivalent range of aspects of Flanders. The language—the same “Dutch” (**Nederlands**) in both countries—is the main exception to this. In Dutch there is an additional complexity: many people in the heavily urbanized west of the Netherlands refer to their language as **Hollands**, although this usage is resisted in the rest of the Dutch-speaking area.\*

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\* Up until two centuries or so ago the cover term for the languages of the Lowlands was “Diets,” but also **Duits** or **Nederduits**, which at the same time meant “German.” The Dutch word **Duits** now means only “German,” and corresponds to the German word **Deutsch**. The English word “Dutch,” which originally did not distinguish “Dutch” from “German,” has simply been restricted in a different direction.

The names by which the countries involved are called are, unfortunately, sources of a parallel confusion in both Dutch and English. “The Netherlands” is a plural noun even though we are referring to just one country, although the same country is more commonly called by its international name “Holland.” The official Dutch name of the country is **Koninkrijk der Nederlanden**, but everyday usage prefers **Nederland**. For international convenience, the Dutch—particularly in those same western cities—refer to their country as **Holland**. Strictly speaking, however, “Holland” refers only to the two western provinces where most of the largest cities are located. The official name of Belgium is **Koninkrijk België**, the northern, semi-autonomous half of which is called “Flanders” (in Dutch **Vlaanderen**). Here there is a close parallel to the situation in the Netherlands, in that “Flanders” strictly speaking refers to only two western provinces.

A glance back through history gives us a hint as to how this complicated situation came about. “The Netherlands” is plural because several centuries ago the area we often call by the general term the “Low Countries,” occupied by the two countries we have been talking about plus a section in northern France, consisted of a loose confederation of semi-independent principalities, duchies and the like. Eventually this profusion of little states coalesced into the two kingdoms we know today, but many of these long-gone political divisions continue to echo in the modern names.

As to language, this Low Countries region was divided into a Dutch-speaking area in the north and a French-speaking one to the south. The language boundary between the two ran east to west, cutting the area more or less in half. Today the linguistic boundary has hardly changed its location through the centuries and now it runs through the middle of present-day Belgium. It was this situation of two relatively evenly matched languages competing for “language rights” within one country that was one of the chief motivations for the recent federalization of Belgium into largely autonomous regions.

But centuries ago, there was no such language as “Dutch.” The northern half of the area just referred to was a collection of local dialects, mostly mutually intelligible but without a standard form of speech for all. In the late Middle Ages and especially from the 1500s on, a standard form of the language began developing in the important trade cities in the west, such as Amsterdam and Antwerp. It was this single language for all that eventually evolved into standard Dutch as we know it today.

Literary works in Dutch go as far back as the twelfth century, but these early examples are strongly coloured by local dialect. The later development

of a standard language meant the creation of a vehicle in which a rich and varied literature could develop and flourish. Dutch literature, now reflecting the cultures of both the Netherlands and Flanders, therefore has a long and distinguished history.

Today the standard language of education and the mass media is most Dutch-speaking people's "native language." But alongside this, many of the local dialects continue a modest existence. Many—particularly in the western urban centers—have disappeared, and those that survive lead an often precarious existence as they become increasingly irrelevant in the modern world, although in some areas there has been a reawakened pride in the local area and its traditional form of speech. There is still literature written in dialect and on TV there is even a soap opera in one of the eastern dialects. Recently two widespread dialects, one in the east and the other in the southeast, were granted the status of distinct languages by the Dutch government. The local accents of much of the rest of the country have by no means been standardized out of existence. As everywhere in the world, a person's speech tends to be a giveaway of local origin. The Dutch, too, are well able to place another Dutch speaker by region of origin and often by the town—in the large cities, even by neighborhood.

A language spoken by a complex society will have not only geographical variation but social variation as well. From the origins of standard Dutch five centuries ago, the language has always been characterized by an unusually wide gap between *schrijftaal* "written language" and *spreektaal* "spoken language," although in the present day this gap has become considerably narrower. Some examples of the written Dutch versus spoken styles are presented in Chapter 16. As in any other language, Dutch speakers convey to each other messages such as "formal," "relaxed," "slangy" and "uneducated."

Today the Dutch language is spoken by not only the nearly 23 million people in the Netherlands and Flanders, but has taken—and is taking—its modest place around the world. A form of Dutch carried to the southern tip of Africa in the 1600s has since evolved into *Afrikaans*, one of the official languages of the Republic of South Africa, and the Dutch language used to be known as far away as Indonesia and Japan. It is still one of the official languages of former Dutch possessions: Surinam, on the north coast of South America, and Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, still a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Since 1980, an organization called the "Dutch Language Union" (*Nederlandse Taalunie*), on behalf of its member states the Netherlands, Belgium

THE NETHERLANDS  
AND  
FLANDERS

- 1 Groningen
- 2 Friesland
- 3 Drente
- 4 Overijssel
- 5 Gelderland
- 6 Utrecht
- 7 Noord-Holland
- 8 Zuid-Holland
- 9 Zeeland
- 10 Noord-Brabant
- 11 Limburg
- 12 Flevoland



- 1 West-Vlaanderen
- 2 Oost-Vlaanderen
- 3 Antwerpen
- 4 Brabant
- 5 Limburg

and Surinam, has taken responsibility for all aspects of the furtherance of the Dutch language including literature and education, most conspicuously helping to subsidize the teaching of Dutch around the world. The Dutch language is widely taught today in many countries. These few thousand people are learning to read and appreciate Dutch literature in the original, although literary works in translation are reaching a far wider audience, meaning that the literature is, in fact, enjoying something of a renaissance everywhere.