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# Introduction

Fifteen years into our marriage, my Dutch wife Jeanet turned to me one day and said ‘I like you better in English.’

At first I thought we were facing a marital crisis. Later I learned that it was more serious than that. We were actually confronting a linguistic problem of huge proportions.

As an American of Dutch descent, I had arrived in the Netherlands at the age of 25 with a rudimentary grasp of Dutch, mostly of the *huis, tuin en keuken* variety. I could understand everything that was said around me, thanks to my immigrant parents having spoken Dutch to me and to each other during my childhood in the suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts. In most cases, I could even respond in basic Dutch, though I was unable to distinguish between *de* and *het*. I had managed to reach the ripe old age of 25 without realizing that it was *het boek*, not *de boek*, for instance.

If I didn’t want to languish at my *steenkolen* level forever, it quickly became obvious that I needed to work hard and I did. I learned *’t kofschip*. I memorized which words took the article *de* and which took *het*. I figured out where and when to drop that most difficult of Dutch words – *er* – into sentences like *Er waren er vier*.

Then, having struggled to master Dutch, I was suddenly to find out, years later, that my wife actually preferred me to speak English. In my own language I talked faster, made more jokes, laughed more frequently, argued more furiously, but I also knew when to be oblique, when to be polite and when to hint at a subject rather than confronting it head-on.

In English, in short, I was myself. I had learned a new language, Dutch, but had remained true to my native linguistic culture. Speaking Dutch as a true American is like playing water polo according to the rules of basketball. It can be done, but not easily or at all convincingly.

Ultimately, I learned the hard way that the new language you learn as a non-native speaker cannot be divorced from the culture from which it springs, and that a proper command of the language involves more than simply stringing the right words together in the right order.

If I were going to learn to speak proper Dutch, I would have to become far more direct, like the Dutch themselves. I would have to drop a lot of the politeness which riddles English but which sounds so exaggerated in Dutch. In the end, I would also need to drop the superlatives that are demanded of English speakers ('great!', 'wonderful!', 'fantastic!') and adopt a more deadpan style. I needed, in a nutshell, to *doe maar gewoon* and pretty quickly, too.

Speaking good Dutch, or good English for that matter, requires that you understand and absorb the culture and adapt yourself accordingly while also – somehow – remaining true to yourself. It's a tall order but certainly feasible, provided that you are helped on your way by friends, family, colleagues and, I hope, a book like this one. Can you ever truly go native? Probably not. But even the status of 'near native' will bring you closer to reaching your goal of speaking good, proper, native English.

In any case, my own experience in learning proper Dutch later in life was the point of departure for a series of weekly columns I write in *Het Financieele Dagblad* aimed at Dutch business people who need and want to speak proper English at work. At first, I tackled mostly sticky points of grammar. But pretty soon I found myself knee-deep in murky cultural issues. I needed to explain, for example, why Anglo-Saxons are so formal and

hierarchical and how this gets expressed in their language, English.

More and more, I started injecting personal experiences and opinions into the texts. For a financial journalist trained at Reuters and the *Financial Times* and now deputy editor of *Het Financieele Dagblad*, I was at first extremely uncomfortable about stepping out of the background of the story and into the foreground. But it was a necessary step. If I were going to explain how to speak proper English, I would need to explain how I learned proper Dutch.

The two storylines were linked. For me, learning Dutch was all about dropping deference, toning down politeness and learning up-front directness. For Dutch speakers in an increasingly English-speaking world, the challenge is the reverse – to come across as more polite and indirect, while at the same time mastering the subtleties of grammar.

Having come from the opposite direction to perfect my Dutch, I understand the challenge of speaking proper English. Partly it's a matter of hard work in the field of grammar and of rote learning when it comes to spelling. But above all it's a question of understanding the underlying linguistic culture. Once you've figured the Anglo-Saxons out, it's far easier to speak their language with ease and assurance.

Accordingly, grammar is dealt with entirely from the Dutch person's point of view. Dutch speakers make certain common mistakes in English because they're coming at the language from a perspective that is completely different from that of a French or Chinese speaker.

Wherever possible, I discuss the cultural differences between the Netherlands and Anglo-Saxon societies which account for these, often unwitting, faux pas.

Unlike most books about foreign languages, this book doesn't concentrate on the long, difficult words but on the short supposedly easy ones. As we shall see, it is these short words that you're liable to mix up, not the long ones. By the same token, I devote a whole chapter to the use of numbers in English, a subject that is essential to understanding and writing proper English but one that most books and teachers ignore.

One aspect of language that I disregard is your accent. If you are old enough to read this book or to be interested in its subject matter, then you are almost certainly too old to get rid of your Dutch accent. Given all the other challenges which English continually throws your way, your accent should be the least of your worries.

Your Dutch accent can actually be an asset. English-speaking people expect you to have an accent and enjoy listening to it. They consider it charming and 'olde worlde'. Besides, accents abound in Anglo-Saxon countries. Although you should do your best to pronounce 'th' correctly, be aware that the path to speaking native or near-native English has little to do with how you pronounce words. Instead, native speakers of English share a common cultural base which, unlike their accents, can be studied, adopted and even copied by the astute Dutch speaker.

In eight relatively short chapters, I hope to cram in all the experiences, attitudes and prejudices that go into making somebody a native English speaker. Usually, this process takes a minimum of 18 years but I am aiming to condense the highlights into just 160 pages.

At the same time, I attempt to illustrate why in my view the Dutch are so handicapped in speaking English properly. First, they have a utilitarian attitude to all languages, including their own. For this reason, they are unwilling to devote the time and

energy needed to master the language. They mistakenly think: ‘People seem to know what I mean when I speak English, so why should I worry?’

Second, the Dutch overestimate their skills at speaking English but underestimate the cultural component at the very core of the language. Because directness is valued above all other virtues in the Netherlands, Dutch speakers are insufficiently aware of what I call linguistic etiquette. In English, words, intonation and language itself can be considered rude. In Dutch, by contrast, you are considered rude not because of what you say, but because of what you **do**.

Third, by focusing on **what** they are trying to say rather than **how** they say it, Dutch speakers of English all too frequently fall into the trap of relying on literal translations from Dutch into English, many of which go disastrously wrong.

For reasons I will explain later, I have chosen to use American rather than British spellings. More importantly, even though the book is aimed exclusively at a Dutch audience, I have opted to write it in English. Good teachers of French or German or Dutch will immerse their students in the new language from the start, and why should a book not do the same?

The only difference is that I am not trying to teach English to beginners. My assumption is that readers already have a working knowledge of English and, indeed, use it regularly, whether it be at the office or on vacation. But I also know that, despite years of practice, most Dutch people never approach a near-native level of English.

You cannot learn English from a book, not even this one. But you can be made aware of the pitfalls and the rewards of trying to speak it well. My intention, then, is to provide a cul-

tural, grammatical and personal guide to that most infuriating and fascinating of languages. If you are not a native by the end of the last chapter, then I trust you will at least have gained a better understanding of how to communicate effectively with those who are.

# 1. Language with an attitude

English would seem an unlikely candidate to be the world's pre-eminent language. For one thing, its spelling is illogical and inconsistent. At the same time, English grammar is complex and confusing and, what's worse, every rule seems to be accompanied by a long list of exceptions.

The English language is also far from being a unified whole, making its universal appeal even harder to understand. The two main strands, American English and British English, are in disagreement on everything from the spelling of basic words like color (colour) to the meaning of certain expressions. In American, a decision is 'up to you', while in British it's 'down to you'.

Yet for all its obvious defects, English has emerged victorious in the world battle of the languages. French, Spanish, Russian and German enjoy strong regional support but none of these languages has the potential to eclipse English on a world scale. Chinese, in terms of sheer numbers of speakers and the overwhelming potential of China's economy, may one day put up a good fight. But in the meantime, hundreds of millions of Chinese are busily learning English – and with good reason. English remains the passport to success for people worldwide, and this state of affairs is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

Indeed, the day is not far off when more Chinese speakers will be fluent in English than the 385 million people who live in officially English-speaking countries like the United States, Canada, Australia and Great Britain. Already, 11-year-old boys in Shanghai play complicated, simultaneous computer games with children in Mexico City, Johannesburg and Vancouver, and the language they communicate in is English.