

Righting English that's Gone Dutch

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1

Clogged English

In which this book and its subject matter are introduced

Maybe you're Dutch and have written a piece in English, on your laptop or PC. You've run spelling and grammar checks on it and have dealt with the mistakes¹ these have identified. You give it to an English native speaker to read, and she tells you it's Dungleish. You want to know why, so that in future you'll write English without a Dutch accent. Or perhaps you're an English native speaker, knowing little about Dutch, but a Dutch author has asked you to check something he's written. You find some obvious errors that are easy to correct, but there are other things in the text that you don't understand or that seem unusual English and you're not sure how to tackle them. Though the individual sentences seem to be grammatically correct, the writing is clunky: it doesn't flow. You wonder in what way the author's Dutchness has clogged up the English. Or you might be an English native speaker living in the Netherlands and have learnt to speak Dutch, or have been reading a lot of Dungleish – or both – and you realise that your native English is slipping away: you're going Dutch linguistically. You're not sure how clogged your English has become, and you'd like to know which symptoms to look out for and how to unclog your English. Or maybe you're just interested in language interference: how one language can subconsciously affect how you communicate in another language? Whichever of these categories you fall into, this book is for you. It sets out to expose features of the Dutch language and Dutch conventions about writing and publishing that Dutch authors transfer to their English writing. Some of these may also clog up the written English of native speakers who're going Dutch.

This book originated from articles I wrote for SENSE (the Society of English-Native-Speaking-Editors in the Netherlands) about aspects of Dungleish that I've regularly encountered when editing Dutch-authored English. The Dungleishisms intrigued me; some were creeping into my own native-speaker English and I noticed them in the English of my native-speaker colleagues too. As I tracked down the reasons for them, I began to learn more about the differences between the conventions in Dutch and English writing. This interest led me to do a doctorate in applied linguistics, during which I learnt much more about which aspects of Dutch get transferred to written English, why, and how readers react to them. I'd like you to share these insights.

¹ It's useful to call the sorts of slips a writer makes when tired or in a hurry **mistakes**. You can correct a mistake yourself when it's pointed out to you, or when you reread what you've written. But an error is ingrained: you don't realise you've written something wrong or wrongly, and even after it's been pointed out to you, you have to be told or taught how to put it right.

Going Dutch

How does English go Dutch? In fact, all language learners make blunders as they try to communicate, even when learning their first, or native, language. That's why little British and American children say things like 'I swimm^{ed} in the sea' or 'Look at the sheeps'. Errors like these, made because there are exceptions to the rules of language, are what computer spell checkers and grammar checkers are good at pointing out and correcting. They're the sorts of errors that textbooks for people learning English as a foreign language deal with. But neither these textbooks nor the standard computer software can cover all the errors caused by transferring features from a certain language to English. Yet **transfer** (this is the technical term) is very common, because when speaking or writing a foreign language we often deliberately or unintentionally follow the principle of 'this works in my language, so it should work in yours'. As Dutch and English are related languages, this strategy often works. But when the transfer from Dutch into English fails², you end up with *Dunglish*: English that's gone Dutch. As I pointed out in the first edition of this book: English goes Dutch when Dutch speakers use it according to Dutch rules.

It has been suggested that it's perfectly possible for Dutch speakers to get by in broken English: *steenkolenengels*.³ Whether this is desirable is another matter. *Dunglish* may be understandable to the Dutch, but try it out on a Spaniard or Japanese – in writing! During a conversation in English you can ask a Dutch speaker what she means, but when you're reading a Dutch-authored English text you can't ask the author. A text has to communicate on its own. So if the words are English but there are Dutch features in the layout, word choice, sentence structure and punctuation, the writing will have a foreign accent, even if the individual sentences are grammatically correct. Though this doesn't matter much in informal contexts like emails, or letters to acquaintances, it won't project an image of professionalism and competence. The trouble and expense of producing a glossy brochure with beautiful photographs are wasted if the text is *Dunglish*.

The subject matter(s)

In this book I explore some of the most immediately obvious or problematic types of Dutch interference in written English. As well as covering those that are most common in Dutch-authored texts, I also deal with some of the more unusual influences of Dutch on English, such as devoiced consonants, quotation marks and conventions to do with names and titles. I show how

² Linguists call this failed transfer **interference**. Usually, the interference comes from your mother tongue, but, as I know only too well, the foreign language can also interfere with an expatriate's mother tongue!

³ As Marc van Oostendorp has argued in *Steenkolen-Engels* (L.J. Veen, Amsterdam, 2002).

some Latin and French borrowings can't be used in English the same way they are used in Dutch. And, based on the research I did for my doctorate, I have tried to explain the various elements which, when combined, produce a style of writing in English that's gone Dutch.

Sometimes, I can't resist exploring differences in conventions that most people don't ever notice. Why on earth would anybody want to know about the subtle signals sent out by using different types of quotation marks, for example? Or about the ways of listing authors alphabetically? Well, because these topics remind us that like all conventions, these writing and publishing conventions are embedded in a cultural mindset that is shaped by language and tradition. So, what's logical to English native speakers is often weird to Dutch native speakers – and vice versa. At the end of this edition, in a new chapter, I touch on how a Dutch mindset based on the history, landscape and customs in the Netherlands can result in obscure allusions in English text that should be fixed to avoid baffling non-Dutch readers.

Not all the differences I discuss are between Dutch and English: some are differences within the English-speaking world – chiefly between Britain and America. Even within a single English-speaking country, like the United Kingdom, there are differences in convention. It's useful to know about them and to be aware of the existence and validity of different native Englishes. Yet in spite of the variation in usage and convention within English, it is usually possible to draw a line between variants that are acceptable to English native speakers and those that are definitely 'foreign' and therefore should be corrected. Having lived, studied or worked in three anglophone countries (Canada, Guyana and Australia) as well as in my native Britain, and in one other non-anglophone country (Sabah, Malaysia) as well as in the Netherlands, I have an international outlook on English. Nevertheless, because I am a native speaker of British English, and because I believe that the English written on this side of the Atlantic should not be American, in this book I tend towards British usage.

Light touch

Though they will fascinate language freaks, the quirks and oddities of the interaction between Dutch and English discussed in this book will interest a wider audience. My target readers range from writers, editors and translators, to teachers and students: all who deal with writing in English and come under the influence of Dutch and Dutch culture. Any Dutch speaker who is intrigued by Dungleish will not want to be talked down to, so I have not written in 'learner English'.

To add to the fun of finding out how Dutch and English interact, and why, I've sprinkled some puns through the headings. Though some readers find these irritating, many share my delight in playing with words across two languages and cultures. Increasingly, English wordplays are popping up as part of the Dutch scene. Examples include **Siteseeing** (HEMA's punning title for a promotion for its service to put holiday photos on the internet) and the optician's chain **Eye Am**. In Amsterdam, you might spot punning delivery vans. There's **Nice to meat** (a butcher), and **Chick it out** (a poulterer). Anglophones will enjoy these jokes, but you need to be bilingual Dutch/English to understand why a slimming centre is called **Linewish**! Don't be misled by the light-hearted tone of my writing, the underlying message is serious.

Is this correct English?

Sometimes, a feature of Dungleish may be acceptable in English in a certain context. This is the case, for example, for embedded brackets, the historic present tense and inversions. Often, what is a common usage in Dutch is an uncommon or specialist usage in English, or was acceptable in the past but isn't acceptable today. In such cases, the Dungleishness is caused by incongruity: the usage is out of place. At best, incongruity may amuse, at worst, it may confuse.

Tea-ing off

I hope you'll read this book from cover to cover and that it'll be your cup of tea. But you may prefer to dip into it. If you do dip, you'll find the short explanations following each punning chapter useful, though the index will enable you to locate specific topics. In the text, I've followed the usual English convention of italicising foreign words and stressed words, so Dutch words appear in italics (*cursief*). I've used **bold** type in the running text (*doorlopende tekst*) to emphasise that the word or phrase being discussed is correct English; in the corrected examples the improved word(s) are underlined. Every chapter ends with a summary of advice. The Bibliography at the back of the book includes some specialist books for readers who want to find out more about the errors learners make in English and the differences between Dutch and English that trigger them, and also some useful free internet resources. At certain points in the book, but particularly on page 29, I have given tips on how to use search engines effectively to check how words and phrases are being used in English.

For years, I have been collecting examples of Dungleish usage in much the same way as other people collect stamps or beer mats. I have drawn on them and on other real-life examples to illustrate the points I discuss. As I specialise in editing and translating texts in the environmental and agricultural sciences, the examples tend to come from these areas. They are generally given in their authentic form, so please remember that they may contain other errors that I do not discuss in the text.

I'd like to end this introductory chapter by quoting a non-native speaker of English. George Mikes, a Hungarian, came to London as a correspondent in the 1930s and stayed on until his death in 1987. He wrote several very successful and witty books about Britain and the British, including *How to be an Alien* (published in 1946). The book, which is in perfect English, is full of aphorisms, one of which is:

Do not forget that it is much easier to write in English than to speak in English, because you can write without a foreign accent.

He was wrong. In the rest of this book I will point out features that give English writing a Dutch accent and suggest how you can put them right. I hope you'll enjoy the experience.