

The Dutch Tongue – Ben v.d. Have – Chapter 1

1.1 The world of words

The first Thursday I rang Thomas's bell, I already had half a week's lessons behind me. The language institute called the course 'Survival Weeks'. And it was exactly that. Every day, from nine to three, one teacher for three pupils, speaking as little English as possible. But at night I dreamed more about the teacher than about Dutch.

It was a relief that Thomas welcomed me in English. Dinner consisted of thick pea soup. *Snert* – Thomas called it. He had decided to introduce me to the Dutch kitchen – something that did not enjoy particular culinary fame.

It wasn't until after dessert that he asked me about my lessons.

'We started with numbers. From one to twenty, Dutch and English keep pace with each other. After that, Dutch takes a different order (*eenentwintig* instead of *twenty-one*), but you soon get used to that. I thought I could count quite well after a day. And I could also pay. I soon discovered that in Dutch you never say: 'That is ten euros and twenty-five cents. You say: 'That is ten twenty-five. You only use *cent* for amounts less than one euro, and you only use *euro* for round sums ("That is exactly twenty-five euros").'

'And how far have you got with nouns?' asked Thomas.

'I had to make a shopping-list. I looked up the Dutch words in a dictionary and also wrote down the plurals. Bread is *brood*, plural *broden*, milk is *melk*, no plural, apples is *appels* and potatoes is *aardappels* or *aardappelen*. That's confusing, two different plurals.'

'And what's even more confusing,' added Thomas, 'is that Dutch has two definite articles. In English you only have one – *the* – but in Dutch you have to choose between *de* and *het*. It is *de appel* and *het brood*. That's going to cause you a lot of problems. By the way, did you actually do that shopping?'

'Yes, and it was pretty difficult. I wanted a loaf of bread to use for sandwiches, so I asked for *één brood*, which was a bit daft, because they had twenty different sorts. The woman asked: "Wit of bruin?" and I understood that at once, so I answered: "Wit." They had a number of different varieties in that, so then I simply pointed at one. The next time, I'll go to the supermarket.'

'They have even more types of brown. The funny thing is that you never ask for bread in a baker's. You don't even use the word. You say *één wit met sesam* or *één knip* or *één volkoren* – it all depends on what fancy names the baker has thought up for his bread.'

'How many words will I need to know in order to make myself understood?' I asked.

'You'll go far with a vocabulary of about a thousand. Plus the words you need for your personal needs, such as the apples, meat, and the rolls you prefer to eat. But you'll learn those quickly enough.'

'How many words are there in Dutch?' I wanted to know.

Thomas said he would have to disappoint me. 'We don't actually know.'

'Why not? I read somewhere that English has more than two million words.'

'And I've read somewhere that it is only half a million. Those figures show you that there's no real answer to your question.'

'But why don't you just take the dictionary?'

Thomas gestured for me to get up. He took me over to an enormous wall of books.

'Look,' he said, 'this is the biggest dictionary in the world, even bigger than the *Oxford English Dictionary* – and everybody thinks that's enormous. It is the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*. They worked on it for nearly 150 years and when, in 1998, it was finished, it had about 45,000 pages. We can make a good guess about how many entries it contains ...'

'Why? You could count them.'

'Yes you could, but nobody does it. Life is too short for that. But there have been some surveys and based on these' – Thomas flipped over a few pages – 'they think that the number of words is somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000, but probably nearer to 400,000.'

I was impressed. Forty volumes! I took one down from the shelf. 'And these contain every word in Dutch?'

'No. On the one hand, Dutch has fewer words, because these contain all sorts of words from the past that nobody uses any more. On the other hand, Dutch has more and I will explain why.'

'Look,' said Thomas. 'In the first place, a dictionary is always behind the times. The vocabulary changes quickly. By the time a new edition appears, the language has already developed further and new words have been added. A dictionary can never keep up.'

'To rectify this, they have published a book annually since 1999 entitled *De taal van het jaar* – the Language of the Year – that contains a few hundred new words. In 2005 these included:

- *Cryomeren*: Not cremating a body but covering it with nitrogen. It is derived from the word *cremeren* – cremate – and the Greek *kruos*, "ice, frost". It is popularly called "*vriesdrogen*" – freeze-dry.
- *Happy slapping*: acquired from English.
- *Minigroenten*: cucumbers and carrots as big as your little finger, and peppers as big as a marble.
- *Ophokkip*: poultry that has to be kept indoors because of bird flu.
- *Pimpen*: improve. Taken from the American TV-programme *Pimp my ride*.
- *Schaduwweeduwe*: (shadow widow) – the "other woman" who, after the death of her married lover, remains alone.
- Sudoku.
- TAO: the cause of delays on the railways. Derived from *Treindienst Aantastende Onregelmatigheid* – irregularities that disrupt the train timetable.

'In the second place, there are categories of words that could be included in the dictionary but have been purposely omitted. For example, names. First names and names of places are not included in a normal dictionary, except when they have an additional meaning. *Jan* can also mean "sailor" and *Abraham* appears in the expression: *hij heeft Abraham gezien* ("he is 50 years old"). *Hilversum* also means "the broadcasting industry", *Den Haag* means "the government" and an *Utrechtenaar* is a homosexual. And think of all the acronyms. One you know very well is AIDS. A typically Dutch acronym is *bommoeder*, in which *bom* is an

abbreviation of *Bewust Ongehuwde Moeder* – Intentionally Unmarried Mother – a woman who wants a child but doesn't want a father to go with it. But Dutch has hundreds of thousands of acronyms for organisations, functions, laws, and so on – many more than English. A dictionary simply can't begin to include them.

'Third, many words simply escape our attention. There are a lot of words with a very limited use. They are only used in a certain region or city, a profession, or by a group of people who share the same interests. Footballers, students and managers have their own vocabularies, and these change rather quickly. The most difficult to follow is the language of teenagers. This is so dependent on fashion and changes so rapidly that it escapes any form of registration. They are all Dutch words, but their existence remains largely underground.'

'I think I asked a stupid question,' I said, as I leafed through the dictionary.

'Not at all,' said Thomas. 'It was simply a question to which there is no possible answer. The number of words in a language such as Dutch (or English) simply can't be counted. But there is another reason - and this is really what it is all about. Our language allows us limitless possibilities to invent new words.'

'And can I do that as well?'

Thomas nodded. 'Certainly. In Dutch, you can easily make up a new word by joining together two nouns. Our word for *bicycle* is *fiets*. You can add on a second noun to it: *fietsband*, *fietspad*, *fietspomp*. In English you say the same thing by using two words (*bicycle tyre*, *bicycle path*, *bicycle pump*) but in Dutch it feels like one word. You can also put another word in front of it: *damesfiets* (*woman's bike*), *vouwfiets* (*folding bike*) and even a *politiefiets*, a non-sporty but robust man's bike. Let's say that a man and woman want to get married, and instead of hiring a limousine or oldtimer to go to the town-hall in, they go on a bike. Nothing would stop them from calling their decorated two-wheeler a *trouwfiets* (*wedding bicycle*). And there you have it: they have created a new Dutch word.'

'Isn't that taking things a bit far?'

'It happens without anybody noticing. And it can be amusing. In Holland, a cabaretier always holds a so-called conference on New Year's Eve. When Youp van 't Hek did that in 2005, I kept a list of all the new words he used. There were more than twenty. For example:

- *cup-a-soup-humor* (not-very-funny jokes)
- *overgangsmuts* (a frumpy fifty-year-old woman – derived from *overgang* (menopause) and *muts* – officially the Dutch word for a bonnet but used here in its other meaning as twat or frump)
- *uitblaffen* (barking out – a dog blowing out a candle)
- *quotezakken* (rich assholes, a pun on the word 'klootzakken' (assholes) and the magazine Quote)
- *Talpahoogte* (low level – Talpa is a television station)

These are all incidental words that will probably never make their way into the dictionary. But they are all Dutch words, because they were coined by a Dutch person, obey Dutch rules, and are understood by the Dutch.

'There are also other ways of constructing new words. You can take the noun *fiets* and turn it into a verb by adding *-en* to the end (*fietsen*), and then you immediately have a past tense (*fietste*) and a past participle (*gefietst*). And you can also make a different noun by putting *ge-* in front of it: *gefiets* (*cycling*). As soon as a new word appears, exactly the same thing happens. Before you know it, everybody in Holland is eagerly doing *internetten*, *computeren*, and *sms'en*.

'Another thing the Dutch like doing is making words shorter. We saw that with all the acronyms, but you also have the same with first names. A Dutch person has an official name (the so-called christening name) that appears in his or her passport and on diplomas, and in addition a so-called *roepnaam* (a sort of nickname) by which he or she is addressed. The christening name is Wilhelmus Antonius, but he is called Wim. Or Johanna Geertruida Maria, known as Jansje.

'The language used by young people is full of what in Dutch is known as *afko*. You have *homo* (homosexual), *aso* (anti-social), *majo* (mayonnaise), *brabo* and *limbo* (Brabanter and Limburger). Or: *bi* (bisexual), *depri* (depressed), *ordi* (vulgar), *popi* (too popular).'

'What I also learned this week,' I said, 'is that you make words with *-tje*. You buy a *kaartje* or a *pistoletje* ham, or a *biertje*. I've seen a television commercial with hundreds of *biertjes* in it.'

'You're right,' said Thomas. 'That is typically Dutch. You sometimes see diminutive words in English (booklet, leaflet, doggie, piggy) but they are scarce. If you want to say that something is tiny, you use *small* or *little*. But in Dutch you can make a diminutive from any noun. For that, we use the ending *-je* or a variation of that. There are five possibilities:

- je: aapje, broodje, snoepje
- tje: biertje, leeuwte, uurtje
- pje: naampje, riempje, wormpje
- etje: balletje, lammetje, mannetje
- kje: woninkje, lezinkje, harinkje

The rules about when you use *-je*, *-tje*, or *-kje* are not difficult to learn and they pay you back big-time. You never have to choose between *de* and *het*, because all diminutives are always *het*. And you never have to choose between *-s* and *-en* for the plural, because all diminutives take *-s* as their plural. And for these reason, I heartily recommend diminutives to you! Would you like coffee?'

'Yes please,' I said. 'Een koffietje met een melkje en een suikertje.' The long explanation that Thomas gave about why these diminutives were not right in this sentence went right over my head.