



Babel

Young Writers' Competition
• undergraduate

From cookie to boss:
how Dutch influenced US
language and society

YANKEE



YANKEE STADIUM

The sphere of cultural and linguistic interrelations has always been a fascinating one. **Claudia Bensi**, the undergraduate winner of Babel's Young Writers' Competition, explores how 'Dutchness' worked its way into North America.

If you look closely at the New York City flag, there's little doubt that more than one detail will capture your attention. In fact, it would be difficult for the sharp-eyed not to notice how this tricoloured symbol features the same colours as the original Dutch flag: orange, white and blue. Not to mention the central band, which against all expectations depicts the four arms of a windmill. However, this emblem is definitely not the only element that attests to the historical Dutch connection in the North American area and, in

this sense, investigating Dutch linguistic and cultural influences on the US territory proves to be more interesting than expected.

The Dutch language landed on the New Continent in September 1609, when the English captain Henry Hudson sailed up the river that was later to receive his name. The orders from the Dutch East India Company were to find a northern route to the Indies. Instead, what he found was a densely wooded island that proved suitable to be a colony: *Manna-hata*. The Dutch colonisation of the land soon

followed, and in 1624 colonists settled permanently in the area they called *Nieuw-Nederland* (New Netherland). This zone roughly comprised the present-day states of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware. In effect, New Netherland became a Dutch province with Dutch as its official language. It was only a year later that the colonists (whom the Native Americans called *Swannekens* – 'people of the sea') settled in Manhattan, the place that would eventually evolve into New Amsterdam and serve as their capital city.



However, although their relationship with the indigenous population was less than amiable, the Dutch had much more to fear from other European powers in North America. This was apparent when, in 1644, the English sailed into New Amsterdam and seized the Dutch province, an incident which became one of the causes of the Second Anglo-Dutch War. It then took a further decade before the English assumed total command of New Amsterdam, which they renamed 'New York'.

Thus, the period of Dutch supremacy in the American East Coast did not last long. Between 1624 and 1664, the area was a province of the Netherlands, with Dutch as its lingua franca. However, after the British invasion, English became the most important language of the region, with the Dutch and the Native Americans adopting it as (at least) their second language. Eventually, after World War II, most of the Dutch, Flemish and Frisian immigrants had definitively switched to English, sometimes via an intermediate stage, **Yankee Dutch**.

Yet, as we will see, the demise of Dutch authority over New Netherland did not spell the end of their language in North America, as the previous four decades of Dutch rule certainly left their mark on the Amerindian languages spoken in the area.

What was the result?

As evidence of the lasting Dutch linguistic influence exerted in North America, we cannot fail to mention the presence of Dutch loanwords adopted by American English. According to the Dutch linguist Nicoline Van Der Sijs, there are approximately 246 loanwords that, for the most part, are still in use. Some of

Yankee Dutch represented a transition phase between Dutch and English: the people using it wanted to Americanise fast and were on their way towards a complete change to English. For this reason, the Dutch vocabulary was widely replaced by English words and phrases, but word order and sounds remained Dutch, with the English loanwords being pronounced in a 'dutchified' way, as in '*t is een sjeem* for 'It's a shame' or *Bevoor de piepel* for 'Before the people'.

Further examples include English-Dutch compounds (like *cornstokken* for 'cornstalks'), Dutch words that got new meanings after the example of homophonous American-English words (thus *drijven*, 'to float', acquired the meaning 'to drive') and loan translations, such as *publieke school* for 'public school', *Dankgevingdag* for 'Thanksgiving Day' and *Wat is de troebel?* for 'What's the trouble?'.

these are very widespread, others are used only regionally, but they did not occur in British English, or did so only later, through American English.

In this regard, it might seem impossible that 246 Dutch loanwords could have a significant impact on American English. However, a simple reflection will be sufficient to understand why the situation of the Dutch language in the US has been considered unique. On the one hand, right from the start, the Dutch represented a very small minority among the inhabitants of America – even in their own province, which was home to people from all parts of the world with many different mother tongues. Nevertheless, this small group managed to exert such a persistent influence on the American language and culture that, in 1972, the American linguist Charlton Laird observed that "more words per capita have been borrowed into American English from [the] early Hollanders than from any other sort of non-English speakers". On the other hand, the importance of the Dutch influence on American English becomes evident when we compare it with that exerted on British English. In the first

instance, we are dealing with an overall four-century interaction, with a small number of Dutch speakers involved, and in limited situations. Whereas in the second instance, because of the small distance, contact with British English lasted for nine centuries, was frequent, and occurred under all sorts of circumstances (trade, war, travel, immigration and literature). In this context, considering the approximately 500 Dutch loanwords included in the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, it isn't difficult to notice that the Dutch influence on American English was proportionally greater than its impact on British English.

Interestingly, the small collection of Dutch loanwords adopted by American English appears to have infiltrated many different semantic fields, providing us with a fascinating picture of the type of contact between Dutch and English speakers in North America.

Obviously, it will not come as a surprise that many of the loanwords were introduced by the Dutch to name and describe the hitherto-unknown flora and fauna they found in the New Continent and, in the same way, American English also borrowed

some Dutch words for species indigenous to Europe. In this sense, borrowed words include names like *Antwerp* (a variety of raspberry and a name for a variety of homing pigeon), *groundhog* (a heavy-bodied American marmot), *kip* (a young chicken), *pit* (the hard stone or seed of a fruit), *span* (from Dutch *span*, meaning 'two or more yoked draft animals') and other widespread landscape-related words such as *canal* and *bush*.

However, the Dutch language has also left its mark on everyday American life. For example, who would have thought that words relating to foodstuffs actually formed the largest linguistic contribution that Dutch has made to American English? *Brandy*, *coleslaw*, *cookie*, *cruller* (a deep-fried ring-shaped cake), *speck* (bacon), *noodles* and *waffle* are just some of the Dutch culinary loanwords that are used on a daily basis throughout the US. This may seem rather surprising, given that the Dutch are hardly renowned for their achievements in this field!

Dutch words for household goods, clothing and other similar articles worked their way into the English language as well,

but even more interesting is the fact that a number of customs and social institutions have been defined in part by notions that have their roots in Dutch culture and politics. Let's think of words like *filibuster* (an obstructionist or an act of obstruction in a legislative assembly), *stadthouse* (a town hall), *burgher* (a citizen), and *boss* (from Dutch *baas*), a term that, together with *Yankee*, has been defined as one of the most important Dutch loanwords in American English, mainly because it was not the name of an unknown object or a Dutch invention, but rather reflected a new view on society.

Surprisingly, even a number of place names in the city of New York remind us of the presence of Dutch settlers (incidentally, it was only after taking over New Amsterdam that the English embraced the Dutch practice of using 'New' in toponyms!). In this case, examples include *Broadway*, *The Bronx*, *Brooklyn*, *Harlem* and *Wall Street* (originally the wall that was built to protect the city against attacks from Englishmen and Native Americans). Dutch names also lie at the roots of some islands (*Long Island*, *Staten Island*, *Rhode Island*, etc.).

Of course, commercial contact resulted in a number of terms related to trade, currency (yes, *dollar* is a Dutch loanword!) and units of measurement, as well as transportation by both sea and land. However, the key innovation introduced in this field was certainly the suffix *-ery*, which was used to coin words that denoted a place where the activity referred to by the verb is performed professionally. This was modeled, for example, on the loanwords *bakery*, *brewery*, (*book*) *bindery* and *printery*.

Finally, even children's language and American colloquial speech cannot dispense with Dutch: this is the case with words like *pinkie* (the little finger), *Santa Claus*, *bazoo* (mouth), *dingus* (a humorous substitute for a temporarily forgotten or unknown name), *hunky-dory* (satisfactory, fine) and *poppycok* (nonsense).

Holland Mania

While it is true that the linguistic contribution of the seventeenth-century settlers can be called substantial, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a second wave of Dutch immigrants also played



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HOW MANY US PEOPLE SPEAK DUTCH TODAY?

According to the Language Map Data Center Census from 2010, there are currently around 136,000 US people who claim to speak Dutch at home. Most of them reside in California (17.28%), Florida (8.04%), Pennsylvania (7.26%), Ohio (7.07%) and New York (6.37%).

a part in reviving an interest in Dutch culture, thus preventing it from completely dissolving in the American melting pot.

Actually, a Dutch cultural influence had been far from absent over the previous centuries, since New Amsterdam was significant in many aspects that had an impact on American culture and politics. For example, some important vested rights which are still present in North America can be considered a legacy of the Dutch, as well as the famous American Dream, based as it is on the concept that everyone has the same chances of climbing the social ladder (and here is where *boss* comes in!). Not to mention the Dutch impact on the American process of independence: research has shown that during the drafting of the 1776 Declaration, Thomas Jefferson was inspired, among other things, by the Dutch *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe*, a document in which the Dutch declared that they no longer acknowledged the Spanish king as their sovereign.

However, it was between 1880 and 1920 that we saw the birth of a real 'Holland madness'. This was not only characterised by a warm American interest for contemporary Dutch art and culture, but also by the American peoples' acknowledgment that their Dutch legacy was important. In turn, this inspired their desire to get involved in 'authentic' Dutch culture. This also came about due to several American writers claiming that the Republic of the United

Netherlands, rather than England, was the 'mother' of the US.

Even now it seems that many Americans are very proud of their Dutch roots as, according to a US census, over five million Americans consider themselves to be wholly or partly descended from Netherlanders. All of which is reflected in many aspects of American everyday life: from the still-used expression 'You're not much if you're not Dutch', to the many festivities organised to maintain Dutch traditions; from the several projects aiming to rediscover seventeenth-century Dutch colonial houses and New Netherland documents of the New York archives, to the museums supplying information about the two waves of immigrants; from the American literary works that have focused on Dutch culture in the last few decades, to the special family gatherings in the original Netherlandish enclaves where Dutch words or phrases are used to strengthen a feeling of unity. Everything seems to stress Americans' desire to remain conscious of their Dutch roots.

For the same reason, commemorative days have been introduced to celebrate the ongoing American-Dutch relationship (such as the Dutch American Heritage Day, the Dutch American Friendship Day and the 5 Dutch Days) and bilateral foundations have been created in order to promote mutual friendship and exchange programs between the Netherlands and the US (the

most influential of which is the Netherland-America Foundation, which was founded in 1921 by, among others, Franklin D. Roosevelt).

Finally, even the Internet has much to offer Americans who are nostalgic about their Dutch origin. In fact, there are various websites where Dutch ancestry can be researched, as well as blogs and Facebook discussion groups 'for those who love the Dutch'. All of which is evidence of the fact that, despite the many years of history that have passed since Manhattan was surrendered to the English, the influence of the people from Holland has never been forgotten, and probably never will be. ¶

Claudia Bensi is of Dutch-Italian origins and currently lives in Florence, Italy. She recently graduated from Carlo Bo University (Florence), where she studied Liaison Interpreting and Translation, and hopes to continue her linguistic studies by attending a postgraduate course.

Find out more

Books

Nicolien Van Der Sijs (2009) *Cookies, Coleslaw and Stoops. The Influence of Dutch on the North American Languages*, Amsterdam University Press.

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Article

Jan Noordegraaf (2009) 'Dutch Language and Literature in the United States', in *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations: 1609–2009*.

Online

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