Pauliene van Eldik discusses Dutch, the language of the Netherlands and several other countries spread across the world.



Dutch

Where is it spoken?
Dutch is the official language of the Netherlands and one of the official languages in Belgium, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles. While Belgium is a neighbouring country to the Netherlands and the language overlap seems quite logical, Dutch also spread to Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles through colonization in the 17th century. Colonization has also resulted in a significant influence of Dutch on Afrikaans and Indonesian languages.

What kind of language is it?
Dutch is part of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. More specifically, it is a language of the West-Germanic sub-group, just like English and German. In the pull-out of Babel Issue 2, you can find a clear infographic on the Indo-European language family.

Where did it come from?
Around 500 AD the High German sound shift took place, separating High German (in the south of Germany) from Low German and Dutch. This shift, also known as the High German consonant shift, mainly resulted in the affrication of some voiceless stops, which can be seen when comparing English and High German cognates (for example 'ship' and 'Schiff'). Since this shift did not take place in the Northern regions, including what we now call the Netherlands, Low German and Dutch are more similar to English ('ship' in Dutch is 'schip'). This sound shift is typically seen as the starting point of the Dutch language, while the Netherlands itself did not yet exist. At the time, three dialects where spoken in the Low Countries (today's Belgium and the Netherlands): Frisian, Saxon dialects and Lower Franconian dialects. The Lower Franconian dialect was mainly spoken in the middle and south of the Low Countries and it is this dialect that is referred to as Old Dutch and that later developed into Middle Dutch. It is important to keep in mind that in the period of Middle Dutch (13th–15th century), the Low Countries were much divided and there were many dialects and no central language that unified the country.



The relief of Leiden by Otto van Veen. The Spanish under Francisco de Valdez (nl) attempted to capture the rebellious city of Leiden, South Holland, the Netherlands. In the end the siege failed when the city was successfully relieved in October 1574.

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Who speaks it?

It is estimated that 23 million people currently speak Dutch as their mother tongue and that there are 5 million non-native speakers. The majority of Dutch-speakers live in the Netherlands. In the aforementioned countries where Dutch is also an official language, it is typically only a part of the population who can speak it.

Because a lot of Dutch people migrated to Canada, America and Australia in the 19th and 20th centuries, there are still some people in these countries speaking the language of their migrant ancestors. Since Indonesia used to be a Dutch colony, the language is still spoken there by some of the older generations.

What is it like?

Dutch is said to be in between German and English, with mainly German grammatical characteristics. One of the ways in which this is apparent is that a Dutch verb phrase can be split by an adverbial, resulting in a non-finite verb at the end of the sentence. For example, a word-for word-translation of Ik wil naar het strand gaan ('I want to go to the beach') would be 'I want to the beach go'. This structure does not make sense in English but does in German. Disregarding this dividing power of the adverbial, Dutch usually follows the Subject-Verb-Object order in sentences.

In Dutch, two articles are used: de for masculine and feminine words and het for neutral words. Even though Dutch natives don't have any problem with this, it is one of the biggest challenges for learners of Dutch to identify which article a word should have. Further, plurals always take de and almost all nouns in Dutch can take on a diminutive form, with the result that the article will become het, regardless of the original article. For example, de schoen (the

Dutch in 5 minutes

Hallo	Hello
Hoe gaat het?	How are you?
Dankjewel	Thank you
Molen	Windmill
Tulpen	Tulips
Hagelslag als ontbijt	Chocolate sprinkles for breakfast
Doe maar normaal, dan doe je al gek genoeg	Just be normal, that's already crazy enough

shoe) can become het schoentje (the 'shoe-ie' / the small shoe).

As you can see from the words 'schoen' and 'shoe', the similarities are not too hard to spot. Dutch and English share a large number of cognates, and the Dutch language has many loanwords from English. Other similarities with English include the way verb tenses are uninflected and the use of the Latin alphabet.

One of the things that the Dutch language is well-known for is its hard-sounding consonants. The Dutch g /ɣ/, in particular, can be very tricky. This guttural sound is a voiced velar fricative and to many non-Dutch speakers it sounds as if you are making a spitting noise. It is produced similar to /g/ but without obstructing the airflow by touching the soft palate (velum) with your tongue. Another challenge is the Dutch /r/, which is pronounced with an alveolar trill. This vibrating sound can be hard to produce for non-Dutch speakers – even some native Dutch speakers find it difficult.

Is it defined as safe, endangered, moribund or extinct?

With nearly 17 million inhabitants, the Netherlands is one of Europe's smaller countries. However, due to the Dutch sense of national pride and its spread across the world, the language is not small enough to be in danger of extinction. Some language purists do see English as a threat as many English words have entered the Dutch language over the past decades. Some of these words simply do not have a Dutch counterpart (like 'computer'), but others have gradually replaced Dutch terms (for example 'sale' for 'uitverkoop'). However, the majority of the Dutch population welcomes these additions to the language and sees them as a form of enrichment and globalization.¶



Map of the Low Countries: The Netherlands, Belgium and East Friesland.

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Find out more

Online

For language facts and information about the pronunciation of Dutch, go to www.bbc.co.uk/languages/other/dutch/guide/

Books

Roland Willemyns (2013), *Dutch: Biography of a Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.