

The study of English and the defence of Dutch

The text of a talk given by TOM McARTHUR to a conference of academics, civil servants and politicians in Amsterdam in October 1992, introduced by an account of the circumstances leading to the conference, by Dr CARLOS GUSSENHOVEN of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, and Secretary of the VCML (see below), which organized the conference.



When the *Verkenningcommissie Moderne Letteren* (VCML; 'Foresight Committee for Modern Languages') was officially inaugurated by the Dutch Minister for Education on 3 June 1992, it was assigned a large number of tasks. These tasks mainly relate to a widely felt need for more intensive internationalization of Dutch academic education, and to the possibility of concentrating particular research activities in certain universities and of creating collaborative programmes with researchers at other universities, both in the Netherlands and in other European Community member states.

Right from the start, many Dutch scholars involved in foreign language programmes were seriously concerned about the direction that the activities of the VCML might be taking. The cause for this concern was to be found in the following passage from 'Ontwerp HOOP 1992' (Ontwerp Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoekplan 1992; 'Draft Higher Education and Research Plan 1992'):

'In the context of the internationalization of education (in the humanities) we can distinguish two target groups: those that are receiving or are about to receive education in the modern Western European languages, and those that are not.

'For the first group it will become more efficient, more convenient and more attractive to receive a large part of their education in a country in which the language studied is actually spoken. In order to achieve such a situation one can choose between various models: there is the British model, in which the second year of the four-year curriculum is spent at a university in

one of the countries concerned, but which leaves the programming of the courses to the home institution; or one can leave the entire programme to foreign institutions. To make a choice between these options, the costs and benefits for Dutch society will have to be analysed; but in both modalities the staff working in the departments of modern Western European languages in the Netherlands will become less involved.' (p. 105)

It was especially the second option that this passage so casually mentions that appeared to require immediate attention in a wider context. This resulted in a conference 'Talen zonder Grenzen' ('Languages without Frontiers') held in Amsterdam on 23 October 1992, which was attended by representatives of all the modern

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language departments in the Netherlands and a large number of advisory and policy bodies. Dr McArthur was invited to provide a view from beyond the Netherlands of the Dutch contribution to English Studies worldwide.

To be frank, I am surprised to be here today and hardly dare hope I can be useful. It appears that you really are debating whether to abandon higher foreign-language studies in the Netherlands, on the grounds that scholars in other countries – the ‘target countries’ one might call them – can do the work better by taking your students and educating them on the job, so to speak. This is a strikingly original idea. In terms of wisdom and long-term planning it matches the present British government’s scheme to close down most of our coal-mining industry, on the grounds that we can no longer afford to tap and use all the wealth we have under the ground. The world is full of surprises like these, but I never get used to them.

In approaching today’s topic, however, I will try to avoid the politics of education and to limit myself to English Studies in the Netherlands and the place of English in your lives, as I understand it. Indeed, I agreed so promptly to come because I am fascinated by the current encounter between our two languages. English Studies nowadays is an industry in its own right: probably the most immense and diffuse investigation of any language ever. Currently, thousands are engaged in it, linked with a world student population of millions, and producing thousands of books, periodicals, monographs, papers and articles throughout the world. The total output is far more than the most diligent Anglicist can ever hope to read or even hear of.

Some people might conclude from this that the Dutch contribution must be small and probably decreasing, and might therefore be easily dispensed with, but if they did draw this conclusion they would be wrong. In my experience, the Netherlands is important in at least three areas: research into English grammar; publishing works on English linguistics; and promoting the electronic revolution, whose key language is English. It is impossible to provide much detail here, but I have added some sources in the bibliography accompanying this paper. Here, I shall only mention some names. In grammatical stu-

dies, Hendrik Poutsma, Etsko Kruisinga, R.W. Zandvoort and F.Th. Visser have produced renowned studies of English grammar. Among publishing companies, Elsevier, Mouton de Gruyter and John Benjamins have world reputations. In computational work, I have noted that Oxford University Press went Dutch for the software that runs the CD-ROM version of the Second Edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, and Joost Kist is well-known for his views on electronic publishing. The grammarians I mentioned above are part of a wider arc of Anglicists in mainland Europe, an arc that has included Otto Jespersen in Denmark and Hans Marchand in Germany, among many others. The tradition continues in, for example, the work of Jan Aarts, whose team at Nijmegen provides automatic word-tagging and parsing programs for ICE (the International Corpus of English), whose work is coordinated by Sidney Greenbaum at University College London; of Flor Aarts, who has published on aspects of grammar, and of J.A. van Ek, who with the British materials writer L.G. Alexander developed the Threshold Level for language teaching and learning under the auspices of the Council of Europe.

It is vital, as I see it, that such Anglicists continue their work and pass the torch on to future generations. English is now used by close to a billion people worldwide, two-thirds of whom were not born to the language. Its study is therefore far too important to be left to the Anglophones, whose observations, opinions, and assumptions need to be balanced by colleagues with non-Anglocentric viewpoints. Yet there is a paradox in this for the Dutch, because they have a special relationship with English. At some point since the Second World War, so it seems to me, English in this country ceased to be a foreign language properly so called. It has entered too much into the blood and sinews of education and the media here. Just as English is now widely acknowledged in India as an Indian Language, so English is now simply one of your languages, along with Dutch and Frisian. Not really an indigenous language but, as the Indians put it, ‘a window on the world’. In a sense the Dutch are special: not quite inside or outside the English-speaking world, but maybe slipping further into it with every passing decade. In 1992, English is yours as much as it is mine,

and as such you need to watch over it with care in your universities and elsewhere, as you watch over other things that are crucial to you.

I am not disinterested with regard to the Anglicization of north-western Europe: the Netherlands, Scandinavia and even Germany. I am a Scot and grew up speaking Scots, a medium of expression variously described as a northern dialect of English, as a national variety of English, and as a distinct language, the other tongue descended from Anglo-Saxon. Most Scottish people mix the two all the time – that is, maist Scots fowk mix the twa aa the time. Sometimes it lends them wings, sometimes it confuses them, making them uncertain which pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary to use. Scotland has been massively Anglicized since the 17th century, yet Scots is still there, an nae dout'll ay be there a hunnert year syne, a thrawn kenspeckle kind o Inglis that we cry the guid Scots tongue.

Because of their uneasy relationship with English, the Scots have had to take care with it, and as a result English-language scholarship has flourished among us. The first ever university department of English was set up in 1762 in Edinburgh with the title 'Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres'. It was a Scot, John Witherspoon, who in the US in 1781 created the term *Americanism* on the model of *Scotticism*. The founding editor of the *OED* in 1897 was the Border Scot Sir James Murray. Without this strong tradition of English Studies I suspect the Scots – a small nation facing enormous gravitational attractions from elsewhere – would have been less ourselves today than we are, if you see what I mean.

Some countries face the possibility of 'Scotlandization' – and indeed 'Irelandization' – in terms of the languages they use. In the situation in which the Dutch find themselves, which you know far better than I do, it might be a service to the guid Dutch tongue to keep a strong home base for the study of that often seductive, often coercive creature, the English language. □

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- (1) "Grammar", by Sidney Greenbaum, Dennis E. Baron & Tom McArthur, for reference to Hendrik Poutsma (p. 449).
 - (2) "Council of Europe", by Peter Strevens & Christopher J. Brumfit, for reference to A.J. van Ek.
 - (3) "Scots", by A.J. Aitken.
 - (4) "English Literature", by Raymond Chapman, mentioning the first chair of English literature (p. 367) and Bernhard ten Brink (p. 368).
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