

The Making of *My First Van Dale*: a Pre-School Dictionary

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Abstract

In May 2005, the Dutch firm Van Dale published a remarkable dictionary: *Mijn eerste Van Dale* ('My First Van Dale'), intended for pre-school children aged 2 and above.

The target group: children who are just beginning to talk and who can focus on pictures.

The purpose: to encourage language development in an entertaining manner.

The resource: a scientific list of the first 1000 words learnt by children, each word being illustrated and used in a rhyming verse of two to four lines.

The principle: verses, sounds, rhyme and metre are attractive to children and help them to retain new ideas. The verses and pictures also encourage discussion and interaction.

The result: a book that – given the sales, responses and follow-up products – clearly fills a void.

The conclusion: it is useful to offer a serious vocabulary as part of pre-school education, in the form of verses combined with illustrations.

1 Van Dale's dictionaries for children

Van Dale is the Netherlands' largest publisher of dictionaries. The most important dictionary of the Dutch language, the 'Grote Van Dale', entered its 14th edition in 2005. I have worked for Van Dale since 1982, the last fifteen years as Editor of the Children's List.

The Children's List started in 1987, its first title being a 'Basic' dictionary for children aged ten years and over. In 1994, this was followed by the 'Junior' dictionary, intended for children aged 8 to 10. In both cases, we decided to break away from a number of dictionary conventions:

* *We used a personal 'you' style:*

(1) **entrance:** the place where you enter a building. (Other dictionaries would use an impersonal style with 'one' or the passive form).

* *We tried to adopt the children's own perspective:*

(2) **hangar:** a garage for aeroplanes.

* *Definitions could consist of several sentences:*

(3) **demonstration:** a demonstration is a meeting of many people. They are all in favour of something or opposed to something. They demonstrate their views, often loudly.

* *The definition may include the headword:*

(4) **porous**: porous materials have many tiny holes. Water or air can enter those holes. Bricks are porous.

In 2001, we published a Dictionary of Phrases and Sayings, intended for the 10-14 age group. This seemed to complete the Children's List. After all, most children younger than six or seven can hardly read, let alone look up words arranged in alphabetical order.

2 A dictionary for pre-school children?

Recent decades have seen increasing emphasis on the pre-school years as an important phase in language and vocabulary development. If children learn poor Dutch at this age, they may find it extremely difficult to catch up later on. The problem has perhaps become more widespread following the arrival of a large immigrant population in the Netherlands and Belgium. Various programmes designed to help children build their vocabulary have been developed, and indeed are still being developed. It was in this context that we first decided to explore the possibilities of a dictionary for very young children.

3 The orientation phase

In an orientation phase, we investigated the existing range of lexical books for very young children. We found that almost all relied heavily on pictures, had little actual text, very few headwords (all of which were selected at random) and were structured according to theme rather than alphabetical order.

We contacted a researcher who had compiled a list of the first one thousand words learnt by Dutch children (Schlichting & De Koning, 1998). This list has a sound scientific basis, being compiled from recordings of spontaneous speech by four-year-olds, and a vocabulary list from which teachers of children in the first two years of primary school were asked to identify those words which their pupils ought to know. The one thousand words should therefore form the active vocabulary of a four-year-old child starting school, being those required to function effectively in this environment. The list includes all word classes and parts of speech, including function words. We decided to use this list as our starting point.

We wanted to go beyond merely presenting words and pictures. The 'feel' for language must form an important aspect of our dictionary. Quite independently, Liesbeth Schlichting (the researcher) and I arrived at the idea of enhancing the 'definitions' with short rhyming verses. After all, we know that young children are particularly sensitive to sounds, rhyme, metre and repetition, all of which provide a sense of security and familiarity. We therefore set about writing some trial verses.

Having recruited an established children's writer, Betty Sluyzer, we had assembled our editorial team. Betty would provide the creative input. As the lexicographer, I would provide structure and taxonomy, while our educationalist Liesbeth Schlichting would ensure an appropriate level of vocabulary. We also called upon the services of a renowned children's illustrator, Paula Gerritsen, since the visual aspect of the finished product would be extremely important.

4 Principles and method

During my career as a lexicographer, I have come to recognize a number of important principles which will contribute to the success of any new product:

(a) **Formulate the purpose of the book and its target group concisely.** Users from other target groups will come forward at a later date.

(b) **Formulate detailed instructions for the authors.** Ensure that you can account for what you are doing and why you are doing it. As the project progresses, it may be possible to relax the rules slightly.

(c) **Conduct market research to determine whether you are on the right track.** This will involve testing the proposed approach by means of a well-designed questionnaire presented to members of the target group.

sub (a): Purpose and target group

In this case, the target group was the 2 to 3 year age group and the purpose was to develop vocabulary in an interesting and entertaining manner. The means would be verses, to be read to the child by a parent or other older person, supported by illustrations.

sub (b): Detailed instructions

The instructions to the authors included a.o.:

- *The headword must appear in the verse*

Small:

An elephant is big.

A mouse is small.

Is there anything smaller
than a mouse at all?

- *Adopt the perspective of a pre-school child:*

(The) ring:

We run, we jump,
we laugh, we sing.

With our friends
we form a ring.

- *The verses should, in principle, be written using only the one thousand words on the list.*

This was a major restriction, particularly with regard to rhyming. The object of this instruction was to keep the book simple and basic.

- *The verse must provide some information about the headword*

The prototypical characteristics of the headword should be included in the verse, e.g. for **boat**: sailing, water; for **money**: pay, buy; for **listen**: ear, hear, etc. I like to use the term, 'poetic definition'.

• *Write descriptively so that the artist immediately has something on which to base her ideas.*

- *Encourage interaction and questions. This will keep children interested.*

- *No verse must have more than four lines, with no more than forty characters per line.*

- *Avoid compound sentences.*

• *Avoid function words wherever possible: they make the content vague and difficult to understand.*

These instructions were intended as general guidelines; they were not set in stone. They helped us during our discussions.

sub (c): Market research

The market research involved a focus group of twenty parents and their pre-school chil-

dren. Having shown them some initial proofs, we asked respondents to complete a questionnaire. We also held a meeting with the parents to exchange experiences. This process resulted in some modifications. In addition, we visited a number of children's bookshops and playgroups to seek answers from these other perspectives. During the editorial process, we continued to consult parents and playschool teachers, asking them to read and comment on the verses produced thus far. Most responses were positive: children would repeat the rhymes or learn them to the extent that they could supply the last line, while the pictures encouraged conversation and interaction.

One example of the feedback from parents was that the verse and the picture must correspond exactly. For example, the first version of the 'buggy' (pushchair) verse states that the occupant is holding a teddy bear. However, the bear did not appear in the picture, leading to immediate protests from the children.

An important question during the market research was whether we should arrange the verses by theme or in alphabetical order of headword. This being a 'dictionary', we immediately thought of the alphabetical arrangement. However, most other books for this target group favour the thematic approach (cf. the books of Richard Scarry). One disadvantage of the thematic approach is that some words will fall within more than one theme, while others will not fall within any theme. A practical objection was that some themes would take up more pages than others. In consultation with the parents, we eventually decided on an alphabetical arrangement, with a thematic index at the back of the book.

Experience and intuition proved important mainstays of this project. Today's dictionary compilers often have no time for any deep scientific research; a product has to be produced. A practical and creative attitude is therefore essential, together with a ready ear for the wishes and requirements of the end users. Matters such as price, size, design and the timing of publication also proved to be important considerations.

5 Design and layout

In a product for this target group, design is especially important. After all, the children cannot yet read, so the pictures form the only part of the content with which they are directly concerned. The book must also be of a format suited to small hands. It was therefore decided that the basic design should be six headwords per page, with one large and five smaller illustrations. These illustrations would be placed in frames of fixed position and dimensions. The artist herself could choose which verse would be accompanied by the large illustration. The idea behind having one large illustration on each page was to provide both variation and a point of focus for the child. In most cases, children will always look at the larger illustration first. This approach demanded that the list of headwords would be established beforehand, since it would not be possible to add a word without omitting another on the same page.

6 Illustrations

The requirements we set for the illustrations were that they should be bright and jolly, with the emphasis on the relevant headword rather than on the verse as a whole. Moreover, they should reflect the multicultural society in which we live.

7 Production

Following all the preparations, the final list of headwords was decided and the instructions defined more closely. The team could now begin work in earnest. The three authors met regularly to discuss their verses. It was the differences between us that made the work so interesting. Points of contention included:

- When is a verse metrical enough? The metre can vary between the verses, but we did not always agree on whether a particular verse ‘ran’ well.
- We had agreed that the verses should be written using the list of one thousand words, plus a few ‘extra’ words where necessary. This led to further discussion: when could a word which was not on the list be considered too difficult? Would a child be able to understand a difficult word from the context, or at the very least be able to ignore it? We later learned that this is indeed the case and that we may have been slightly too strict.
- Creativity played an important role, more so than when formulating a standard dictionary definition. What impression should we try to create; where should we include little jokes? This rendered the ‘descriptive’ process very personal. At first, we had difficulty accepting criticism of our own verses, but gradually we came to recognize the ‘higher purpose’.
- We maintained regular contact with the artist. She sometimes had difficulty in matching picture to verse while also making the headword prominent. Sometimes the illustrations had to be amended, sometimes the text.

8 Publication

In May 2005, one year after we had commenced the project, ‘My First Van Dale’ appeared in the shops. Within five months, sales had exceeded 25,000 copies. The responses were – and remain – extremely positive.

It is interesting that the book has reached a much larger readership than the original target group of pre-school children. It has proven an excellent gift for new mothers: even young babies enjoy looking at the brightly coloured pictures and perhaps learn their first words. Toddlers enjoy having the verses read to them, while the book is also suitable for older children who are just starting to read, given the interesting pictures and the simple vocabulary of the verses. ‘My First Van Dale’ is also being used by those with dyslexia, physical and mental disabilities, the hearing-impaired, speech therapists, and foreigners wishing to learn Dutch.

Helpful advice for parents and playgroup leaders is included both in the book itself and on our website (www.vandale.nl). Tips include:

- Undertake related projects together, such as finding examples of the keywords you have just read: a car, a mug, red things (if you have just read ‘red’), a monkey, a pair of trousers, etc.
- Ask questions such as ‘Do you ever do this?’ ‘Do you enjoy it?’ And if it is not a pleasant or sensible action, ‘What would happen then?’ ‘Would you do that?’

9 Follow-up products

In May, a CD which includes a number of the verses in the book set to music was released. There are now also German and Frisian translations, and there are many other ideas

whereby the concept of 'My First Van Dale' can be taken further. However, it is usually impossible to translate the verses directly: some creativity is required.

10 In conclusion

We are currently working on a new Van Dale dictionary for young children which centres on abstract words and concepts. Perhaps we will be able to report on this at Euralex 2008. Or who knows? By then we may be working on 'My Last Van Dale'!

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