
Crossing borders in lexicography: How to treat lexical variance between countries that use the same language

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In the past decades the identity of Belgian Dutch has changed considerably. It no longer tries to copy Netherlands Dutch, but is following its own course. This development should be reflected in Dutch dictionaries. For different dictionaries (e.g. bilingual and explanatory dictionaries) and for different categories of words (e.g. juridical or informal words) different strategies should be adopted.

1. Introduction

Like all languages, Dutch has many regional variants. It is spoken in the Netherlands (by more than sixteen million people), in Flanders (by more than six million people), in Suriname (by almost five hundred thousand people) and in the Netherlands Antilles (by more than two hundred thousand people). In addition to the regional variants within these countries, there are also lexical differences between these countries. Only in Suriname, for example, is a meeting called a *kroetoe*, only the Flemish call ham *hesp*, and only in the Netherlands Antilles is a European Dutchman called a *macamba*. There are also other differences, in the various countries' natural phenomena or in their legal systems, for instance, and in the accompanying names. Only in Belgium is the Assize Court called an *assisenhof*, only in the Netherlands is a houseman - or if you're American, an intern - called a *coassistent*, only the people of the Netherlands Antilles call their island council an *eilandsraad*, and only the Surinamers call their local council a *ressortraad*.

Such differences exist in all kinds of languages - English, German, French, Spanish and Italian, for instance - and they pose the lexicographer an interesting challenge. Because of their multiplicity, we shall focus in this article on the differences between Belgian Dutch and the Dutch of the Netherlands.

2. Belgian Dutch

In Flanders a great wave of emancipation has swelled up over the past ten to fifteen years. Until the Eighties, Flemish language advisors and norm-setters always adhered to the Netherlands Dutch norm. With the exception of institutional terms, Belgian Dutch words were rejected and replaced by the Netherlands Dutch variant.

Since the Nineties, however, almost all Flemish language advisors and norm-setters have considered their own Belgian Dutch to be a fully-fledged variant that has to be handled and described in exactly the same way as Netherlands Dutch. That a word is not used in the Netherlands is no longer a reason to reject it out of hand. The Belgian Dutch words linguistically-aware Flemings use when they are consciously 'minding their language' are now regarded as standard. In addition to these there are, of course, the dialects and an informal, colloquial language, usually referred to in Flanders as *tussentaal* - an in-between language.

3. History of the dictionary

As far back as the 1872 edition of the *Van Dale Great Dictionary of the Dutch language*, the labels 'Southern Dutch' and 'Flemish Dutch' were already in use. In such early editions,

completely in keeping with the spirit of the age, ‘West Indian’ – i.e. Antillean and Surinamese – colonial government terms were covered. And until 1948 not only were Dutch East Indian colonial terms included, but also the variants of Dutch East Indian colloquial language.

During the second half of the 20th century, the colonial past faded into the background, not only in the living language, but also in the dictionary. At the same time, a realisation arose that the inventory and description of lexical idiosyncrasies in the ‘overseas’ parts of the Dutch-speaking world was both desirable and necessary. During the Nineties, Surinamese Dutch entries were therefore thoroughly revised. Some four hundred typically Surinamese words and expressions were added, not only unusual terms related to flora and fauna almost unknown in the European part of the Dutch-speaking world, but also the more familiar words denoting Surinamese products, dishes and traditions. In addition to this, the label *Surinamese Dutch* was introduced to indicate that these words and expressions are typical of the variant of Dutch used in Suriname, or – and this is specific to Surinamese Dutch – typical of the Dutch spoken by people of Surinamese origin in the Netherlands.

Up until 1995 Netherlands Dutch was the point of departure for any definition. After ‘95 the dictionary became somewhat less Hollandocentric. A new system was devised in which the institutional terms *Belgium* and *Belgian* or *Netherlands* and *Dutch* were included in the definition. Belgian words that are not related to institutions were labelled Belgian-Dutch, with a distinction being made between standard Belgian Dutch and informal or colloquial Belgian Dutch.

In the Eighties Van Dale published its first *Grote vertaalwoordenboeken*, its first comprehensive translation dictionaries. For all the various types of dictionary, we shall now discuss whether and in how far any usage that is typical of the Netherlands or of Flanders deserves inclusion.

4. Foreign language - Dutch dictionaries

Is it helpful or indeed necessary to include Belgianisms or Hollandisms in an English-Dutch dictionary? Let’s begin with an English word for which a neutral translation exists. *Onion*, for example. *Onion* can be translated into the neutral *ui*. In Flanders, however, one can also use *ajuin*, the colloquial term. Should *ajuin* therefore also be included as a translation of *onion*? The obvious answer here is that that is only worthwhile in the most comprehensive dictionaries, dictionaries that list many synonym translations.

On to the next word. In the English-Dutch dictionary *advisable* is translated as *raadzaam*. That word is also used in Flanders, but one will far more frequently encounter *aangewezen*. That meaning of *aangewezen* is unknown in the Netherlands. Another example: in both the Netherlands and Belgium, sunstroke is referred to as a *zonnesteek*, but in Belgium it is more usually referred to as a *zonnslag*. If the regional word is used more frequently than the neutral word, it is therefore advisable – *raadzaam*, *aangewezen* - to include that word. Speakers of the regional variant will after all be more likely to use that word.

And then there are also words that are translated very differently in Flanders and the Netherlands. One example is *couch* - the sort of couch you sit on - which is translated in Belgian Dutch as *zetel* and in Netherlands Dutch as *bank*. (A Belgian *bank* – the sort you sit on - is translated into English as *bench*). Both *zetel* and *bank* must naturally be included in every English-Dutch dictionary.

Finally, there are words that – thanks, for example, to different legal or administrative systems – are only used in one of the two countries, or are given a different name in the two countries. *Alderman*, for instance, is translated in Belgium as *schepen*, but in the Netherlands as *wethouder*. Because it would be completely incorrect to use the inappropriate term in a translation, both variants have to be included in all dictionaries. This is shown in table 1.

	English	neutral	Belgian-Dutch	Netherlands-Dutch	
neutral word frequent	onion	ui	ajuin		only include regional word in comprehensive dictionaries
regional word more frequent	advisable	raadzaam	aangewezen		include regional word
not a neutral word	couch		zetel	bank	include regional words
different reality	alderman		schepen	wethouder	include regional words in every dictionary

Table 1. Foreign Language - Dutch

5. Dutch - foreign language dictionaries

The question of whether regional words deserve a place in, for example, a Dutch-English dictionary is also relevant. For someone who speaks Belgian Dutch or Netherlands Dutch, regionalisms - for example, the Hollandish *achenebbisj* (which means *shabby*) or the Belgian Dutch *bisser* (which means *repeater*, as in a pupil repeating a year of school) - are very normal. A user-friendly Dutch-to-a-foreign-language dictionary will therefore have to include those words.

In many cases regionalisms are more informal than neutral words. They often denote everyday household items (*frigo*, which means *fridge*, for example), or they are mostly used in colloquial speech (such as *effenaf*, which means completely). That informal aspect can often be conveyed in a translation, by choosing there too for an informal word. The fact that a word is a regionalism is more difficult to convey in a translation. There is no sense in translating Belgian Dutch into, let's say, Caribbean English because they are two completely different regions. This is shown in table 2.

	neutral	Belgian Dutch	Netherlands Dutch	English	
neutral word frequent	ui	ajuin		onion	always include
regional word more frequent	raadzaam	aangewezen		advisable	
not a neutral word		zetel	bank	Couch	
different reality		schepen	wethouder	Alderman	

Table 2. Dutch - foreign language

6. Explanatory dictionaries

The *Van Dale Great Dictionary of the Dutch Language*, or the *Dikke Van Dale* - the fat Van Dale - as it is affectionately known, is the most authoritative explanatory dictionary in the Dutch-speaking world. In this dictionary, as mentioned earlier, a distinction is made between institutional terms and other differences in usage. For institutional terms, the definition mentions whether they are a Dutch or a Belgian variant. For the rest, only the typically Belgian Dutch words or meanings have so far been labelled.

Thanks to the changed relative positions of Belgian Dutch and Netherlands Dutch, typically Hollandish words will also be labelled in the new edition. With its 270,000 lemmata the Dikke Van Dale is a voluminous dictionary. It is therefore important to develop strategies by which typical Netherlands Dutch words can be found relatively easily in the current wordlist.

Existing labels can provide useful information, particularly the sociolect and register labels. The more than eleven hundred words that are labelled *Bargoens* (slang) in the DikkeVan Dale, for instance, are either unknown or barely known in Belgium. They can therefore be regarded and labelled as Netherlands Dutch colloquial speech. The same applies to the many words that are labelled *informal* or *vulgar*. Such words are also often regional.

Words and expressions now labelled as typically Belgian Dutch can be examined to determine whether their counterparts in the Netherlands should be labelled as typically Netherlands Dutch. It is quite conceivable that Netherlands Dutch variants will be neither used nor understood in Belgium. The labelling of Netherlands Dutch variants is a huge job that has to be carried out step by step.

Also the much smaller *Prisma Handwoordenboek Nederlands* in the newest edition marks the Dutch Netherlands variants.

7. Conclusion

How a lexicographer should deal with lexical variants depends on all sorts of factors. A key factor is naturally the market the publisher wishes to target. It depends on the degree of variation, on the social and political position of the countries and languages, and so on and so forth.

Sociolect and register labels could be the point of departure for revision. For each regional variant it is also useful to look for an equivalent variant in the other language.

References

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Prisma Handwoordenboek Nederlands. Houten: Het Spectrum, 2009.