

# How Progressive are the Dutch? On Language, Literature, and Gender Norms in the Netherlands

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*ABSTRACT* Artikel ini mempertanyakan sejauh mana masyarakat Belanda progresif di bidang norma bahasa, kesusasteraan, dan gender. Dinilai dengan diskusi tentang norma bahasa di kamus Van Dale dan resepsi terhadap kamus tersebut di Indonesia serta pandangan terhadap penulis wanita dan statusnya dalam masyarakat Belanda. Artikel ini berkesimpulan bahwa kebudayaan Belanda tidaklah seprogresif yang dibayangkan orang. Dalam hal gender, pandangan terhadap status dan kemampuan perempuan yang agak miring mungkin disebabkan oleh perempuan itu sendiri. Dalam hal kesusasteraan, misalnya, perempuan akan diperlakukan sama seperti laki-laki jika mereka menulis dan bertingkah laku berbeda dari yang sekarang.

*KATA KUNCI* Progresif, masyarakat Belanda, bahasa, kesusasteraan, gender.

The Netherlands is regarded by most foreigners as being extremely progressive. This is however not in all respects true. For example, in comparison with other Western European countries the Netherlands still has serious gender problems. To illustrate this, some percentages can be quoted. At the end of the twentieth century only 5% of the Dutch women had a full time job and 54% did not have a salary at all because they were housewives. This is one of the lowest scores in Western Europe (cf. De Harde Kern 1996: 81). If we take a look at female and male employees in technical professions, the Dutch score was also one of the lowest. Here only 8% were female; and only 1% of technical university professors were female (cf. De Harde Kern 1996: 93). These percentages show that home and family are still largely regarded as the female domain, whereas paid jobs, especially in the technical sector, are seen as the male domain.

One could ask why this should be regarded as a problem. The answer is that according to the first article of the Constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands men and women in that country have equal chances and are treated equally.<sup>1</sup> Most Dutch people are convinced this is true in practice too; it is a popular conception that feminism is outdated and that

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<sup>1</sup> The first article of the Dutch constitution reads: "Every person in the Netherlands must be treated equally in equal cases. Discrimination on the grounds of religion, philosophy of life, political convictions, race, sex or whichever other reason is prohibited."

emancipatory activities are no longer necessary. Thus, the self-image of the Dutch is interestingly enough, as positive as the one foreigners have. Percentages such as the ones quoted; however, reveal a reality which is less bright. Gender norms still shape the possibilities of women and men and cause a discrimination of the former group.<sup>2</sup> Wealth, prestige and the power to influence Dutch society are still largely reserved for the men.

The Dutch do not only usually think that men and women have equal chances and are treated equally in society, but also in the Dutch language and Dutch literature. In this article, I shall concern myself with the question whether this is true or not, focussing on some interesting aspects. With regard to language, it is relevant to inspect the authoritative Dutch dictionary. This I did with a group of students and two colleagues during my stay as a guest teacher at the Universitas Indonesia of Jakarta.<sup>3</sup> As regards literature, I will present some details from my own investigations on the equal chances and treatment of female and male writers in the Netherlands after the World War II.<sup>4</sup>

The authoritative dictionary for the Dutch language is the three-volume *Van Dale Groot woordenboek der Nederlandse taal*, which is cited here in the 13th edition of 1999. In my course of lectures on gender linguistics at the Dutch Department of the UI, this dictionary was analysed by the students in several sessions.

Our point of departure was the fact that certain feminine and masculine terms are not symmetrically used in the Dutch language. This is the case, amongst other things, for personal pronouns. *Zij* 'she' and *haar* 'her' (object pronoun and possessive pronoun) can only be used for women, whereas *hij* 'he', *hem* 'him' and *zijn* 'his' are used for men, but also for mixed groups and in general remarks. Thus, masculine pronouns also are used as generic terms (cf. the English language, which has the same principle). For example, *iedereen wil begrijpen wat hij leest* 'everybody wants to understand what he reads' includes female readers if this sentence refers to all readers, in spite of the masculine pronoun. Of course, it can also refer to a special group of readers, which possibly does not contain women. Consequently, women often are not sure if only men are meant or if they themselves also are included, whereas for men the situation is always unambiguous. Moreover, psycho-linguistic research has shown that many people, when they read or

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<sup>2</sup> The notion 'gender norms' is used here for the prevalent stereotypes and values with regard to both sexes in a certain period; gender norms do not tell us anything about real men and real women, they only show the opinions people have about them.

<sup>3</sup> My stay as a guest teacher at the Dutch Department of the Universitas Indonesia lasted from February 1st until April 13<sup>th</sup> 2002. I warmly thank my colleagues Inge Bernard and Eliza Gustinelly, as well as the students of the fourth year, for their enthusiastic discussions on the subject.

<sup>4</sup> On this subject, I have held a lecture at the Seminar on Gender and Literature at the Universitas Indonesia, organized by Dr. Lilawati Kurnia of the German Department on April 10<sup>th</sup> 2002.

hear such general remarks, think solely of men (cf. Irmen and Köhncke 1996, Klein 1988).

The same problems hold for nouns, such as professional names. Most professional names can acquire a feminine form, for instance *schrijver/schrijfster*, '(male) writer/female writer' (cf. *author/authoress* in English). In Dutch, many forms exist, of which the most common are *-er/-ster*, *-/-es*, *-/-e* and *-/-in* (cf. Gerritsen 2002). The masculine terms refer to men, but they are also used generically, whereas the feminine terms only refer to women. Again, although a sentence such as *schrijvers verdienen vaak weinig geld* 'writers often do not earn much money' officially covers male and female writers; in practice people tend to forget the female part of a professional group.

Such characteristics of the Dutch language seem to be no coincidence. They strongly suggest that in Dutch culture men are seen as more important than women, that men are regarded as the central part on which everything should be focused. This is confirmed by the difficulties people have in using generic terms in a truly generic manner.

If this point of view is correct, does the *Van Dale* dictionary show something of these gender problems? Does the authoritative Dutch dictionary, made by experts, live up to its claim of objectivity, or does it differentiate between women and men? This question is all the more interesting as the most recent publication on the subject of feminine and masculine professional names, De Caluwe and Van Santen (2001), commissioned by the Dutch and Flemish Ministeries of Culture, signals no big problems in *Van Dale*.

The students analysis; however, and the discussion with them and my colleagues, revealed several serious difficulties. In the first place, in the example sentences in the *Van Dale* dictionary, few feminine pronouns and nouns are used. In many cases the masculine forms can be read as generic, but as we have seen that this does not function well it is a pity the dictionary does not reformulate such sentences. As for generic pronouns, Dutch gender linguists since many years point out that sentences like *iedereen wil begrijpen wat hij leest* easily can be rewritten—for example *mensen will en begrijpen wat zij lezen* 'people want to understand what they read' (cf. Gerritsen 2002, Sneller and Verbiest 2000 and 2002). But if these cases are not counted, the *Van Dale* still uses more masculine than feminine terms. There are many pronouns which can only be read as specifically masculine, such as *hij heeft er part noch deel aan* 'he has nothing to do with it.' The same applies to nouns, of which one example is: *de oude heer deed ook nog een dansje mee* 'the old gentleman also ventured to dance.' This means the dictionary is largely focused on men and tends to forget women.

Secondly, our group also found problems in the definitions. At times they are not gender neutral; *Van Dale's* definitions can show prejudices and clichés about women and men. As this is quite a complicated subject, which touches on cultural differences between the Netherlands and Indonesia, I will only mention it by the way.

I will dwell longer on the subject of feminine and masculine professional names. A third problem we discussed is that the general definitions and the example sentences in the *Van Dale* dictionary all follow after the masculine professional name, even in those cases in which, due to the alphabetical order, the feminine name comes first. The feminine name is only followed by a short specific definition, such as for *schrijfster* 'female writer': 'she who writes, especially a female writer'. In this way, a hierarchical difference between both sexes is created. It is suggested that the general, normal professional is male; besides, the female professional is made almost invisible.

Fourthly, feminine professional names—as far as they are mentioned, which is not always the case—have an uncertain position in the *Van Dale*. Mostly, the feminine name has an entry of its own. Sometimes, however, it is included in the entry of the masculine name, although we found it impossible to establish any clear criteria for this difference. For instance, *schrijfster* 'female writer' has its own entry, whereas *verkoopster* 'female shop assistant' is included in the entry of *verkoper* '(male) shop assistant.' A striking point with regard to the second solution is also that the feminine name never appears before the masculine name, although it sometimes should, alphabetically spoken, come first. Thus, the entry of the shop assistants reads: 'verkoper (de(m.); vgl. -er), verkoopster (de(v.))', followed by the definition. Another example for this practice is the entry *theoloog, theologe* '(male) theologian', 'female theologian'. The reverse practice is non-existent, that is to say, the masculine name is never included in the entry of the feminine name.

This means the basic organizing principle of a dictionary, the alphabetical order, is ignored if this would result in the female coming before the male.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this must be again that the dictionary focuses on men. They are seen as the central part, around which the women are arranged in haphazard ways (if they are mentioned at all) which show a hierarchization of both sexes.

Our group of teachers and students conferred about the best solution for a gender neutral treatment of feminine and masculine professional names. Our solution would be that the *Van Dale* dictionary combines both forms always in one entry, after which the complete definitions and example sentences should follow. Which of the two forms comes first, should solely depend on the alphabetical order. The counter argument that combined entries sometimes are not possible because—according to the alphabet—other entries should be put between both forms, can be dismissed: the dictionary has already proved that departures from the alphabetical order are not regarded as a problem.

All in all, these discussions during my UI lectures on gender linguistics show one thing: an equal treatment of women and men in Dutch language

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<sup>5</sup> One could argue that in the combined entries the masculine name always comes before the feminine name because the last form is derived from the first; therefore, *Van Dale*'s approach would be gender neutral. This is, however, no valid argument, as in all other cases derivation is no principle. For instance, *vergaderagenda* 'meeting agenda' comes before *vergaderen* 'to meet, to assemble', just as the alphabetical order requires.

has not yet been achieved, something for which the *Van Dale* bears clear evidence. Even Dutch language experts are still subjective and gender biased, although it must be said that the dictionary has improved a great deal over the last twenty years.

Of course, there are many other gender problems in Dutch language that cannot be considered here, such as the treatment of both sexes in texts, which often still reveal gender norms. However, on this subject already quite a lot has been written (cf. for some recent opinions Smelik 1999, Sneller and Verbiest 2000 and 2002, Vogel 2001b), whereas the above mentioned issues, especially the third and fourth point, have hardly been touched on. What can be said about the second subject that is to be analysed here, the equal chances and treatment of men and women in Dutch literature? As was said at the beginning, most Dutch people think optimistically that in this domain all troubles also have disappeared. For example Elsbeth Etty (1999: 56), an important female essayist and reviewer, writes it is not 'true that there is discrimination on a large scale with respect to books written by women writers.'<sup>6</sup> Is Etty right or not?

For an answer to this question, I will start with a retrospective look at the literature of the Fifties, as it is interesting to get an impression of the different reception phases of books. Every book starts as a text, and it *can* become 'literature'. Simply said: when a book has been printed, at first literary reviewers write about it in the papers. In the second phase, essays, interviews, and radio and television discussions are produced. In the third phase, academic researchers give their opinion in scientific articles, monographies and literary histories. Then, a book is part of the literary canon. Naturally, this can only happen if all the opinions have been positive. If a book receives a negative judgment in the first phase, it will seldom obtain any serious attention in later phases. The book and its author are simply forgotten or remembered negatively.

This reception process contains one difficulty that is of interest here: modern socio-cultural and empirical research has shown that reviewers, essayists and academics are not, and cannot be, objective (cf. Bourdieu 1996, Van Rees 1983 and 1989). They have all kinds of norms and prejudices, including gender norms. Their judgment of a book is largely based on these norms and prejudices, not on the book itself. This means that the literary community does not *describe* the quality and the meaning of a book, but it largely *produces* it. The idea that quality is a characteristic of the text itself, which can be described objectively, cannot plausibly be defended any more.

What does this mean for the chances of male and female authors? In a case study, I have investigated the reception of Dutch prose between 1945 and 1960 (Vogel 2001a). Most of my academic colleagues were convinced male and female writers were treated equally in that period. Nevertheless, I could clearly prove the reverse: both sexes were treated unequally

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<sup>6</sup> I will use the notions 'woman writer/author' and 'female writer/author' as synonyms. The same applies to the notions 'man writer/author' and 'male writer/author'.

by reviewers and the rest of the literary community. In the Fifties, old and young people, women and men, thought that female writers could not be innovative or leaders of a new movement, that they were no real professionals and intellectuals, that their writings had a low quality and mainly imitated those of the men, etc.<sup>7</sup>

I want to stress that these opinions do not say anything about the reality of the Fifties. It can easily be proved that female authors did not only imitate men, or that their books were not more old-fashioned than the ones of their male colleagues. But because of the existing gender norms, the literary community assumed in advance this would be the case. Consequently, interesting aspects in the work of women authors were overlooked. Their books were judged too negatively, those of men too positively. In other words, people did not describe the quality and the meaning of these books, but they produced it; there by they produced a difference, a hierarchy between both sexes.

What happened to these authors in later reception phases? Earlier it was said that in general, if a book receives a negative judgment in the first phase, it will afterwards be forgotten or remembered negatively. That is what happened here also, as I could show in my investigation. The women are partly forgotten, partly remembered negatively, whereas the men are remembered positively. This can for example be seen in literary histories, which pay considerably less attention to female than to male writings of the Fifties. Furthermore, literary histories have created the notion *De Grote Drie* 'The Big Three' for the three male prose authors who are considered the best ones: Willem Frederik Hermans, Harry Mulisch and Gerard Reve. The poetry remembered best is that of the all-male movement of the *Vijftigers* 'poets of the Fifties' (cf. Meijer 1988). In this way, the position of male authors is clearly fixed as the highest. Thus, the hierarchical difference between the women and men writers of the Fifties still exists today.

However, in the last decade something fascinating is happening. The view on these women writers is changing – several of them, like Anna Blaman and Hella Haasse, are gradually being judged more positively. The low opinion many literary researchers had of Anna Blaman is now changing into a serious appraisal of her as a modernist author (cf. Goedegebuure 2001) Hella Haasse, who was often overlooked, gets a noteworthy amount of recognition for her oeuvre these last few years. How can this be explained? What has happened in the Netherlands during the Nineties?

The two most important causes seem to me to be the following ones. Firstly, much gender research into Dutch literature has been published, and this is by now influencing academic views. This leads to new judgments on female writers, periods, movements, and the hierarchy of female and male writers. Secondly, cultural research is replacing literary research, a change that can also be seen at the Universitas Indonesia. Cultural studies is boom-

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<sup>7</sup> This was no special Dutch problem; the same gender bias in the Fifties existed, for example, in Germany (cf. Vogel 2002).

ing. For this reason, the status of literature is diminishing. Besides, literature has the problem that other media like television, the internet and video are getting more and more important. This double loss of status has an effect we also find in other professions: women are entering, men are leaving. Nowadays, women already produce a little over one third of Dutch literature (in the Fifties, they produced one fourth). Another effect is that literature gets less interesting for men, so there is less competition and women are praised more easily.

Does this mean that everything has turned out for the better? Are contemporary female authors not discriminated against any more? No, this is not the case. As I pointed out already at the beginning, the Dutch still have gender norms and gender problems. These are not only found in society, but also in language and in literature. On the one hand, old convictions die hard. Female writers are still often forgotten or negatively judged. On the other hand, their growing number and their growing success have created fresh opposition. In this opposition, we can discern two familiar gender mechanisms: setting apart women writers as a group, and giving them a low literary status.

How does this process work? I will start with two quotes. One important article (Bukman and Dings 1995) about the success of female writers begins as follows: "Fiction written by women tops the bestseller lists nowadays. Tessa de Loo and Donna Tartt even managed to sell 200.000 copies. Why is women's literature such an outstanding success?" Another well-known Dutch journalist (Haveman 1999) writes: "In contemporary literature, the ladies come first. Women's books become more and more important." These articles, and many other texts discussing recent Dutch women writers, resemble each other in some ways (cf. Vogel 2001b).

Firstly, we find a frequent use of the notion 'women's book', whereas the notion 'men's book' is seldom found. The unequal effect is that women writers are presented as a special group; men writers are suggested to be the 'normal', 'general' writers.

In the second place, in many texts an astonishment about the success of female writers is expressed, whereas nobody writes about the success of male writers. In this way, male writers and success are suggested to be a normal combination, which can be taken for granted. Female writers and success, however, are presented as a strange, unusual combination, that has to be explained. This is peculiar, as Dutch literature in the nineteenth and twentieth century has seen many very successful women writers. Therefore, the combination of women and success is nothing new. Nevertheless, because of their gender norms people still seem to have difficulties with the fact that women can be just as or more successful than men.

The third common point is lengthy arguments as to the reasons for the success of female authors. These mostly start with the statement that their success cannot (only) be attributed to the high quality of their books. Obviously, because of their gender norms, many people also are unable to ac-

cept that women just produce very good books and that the combination of women and quality is a normal one. Most reviewers and essayists claim that female writers are so successful because of their simple 'women's themes' such as female friendships, female solidarity, everyday life and relationships, which would be attractive for the many female readers.<sup>8</sup> In this explanation, the books of female writers appear as being not too difficult or experimental. Naturally, this is the well-known gender idea that women would write on lightweight themes and would not be innovative. The female readers, moreover, are presented as amateurs who do not have much literary taste, which also is a gender topos. On the other hand, there is no discussion about male authors and their 'men's themes'. Again an unequal effect is thereby produced: the men are suggested to write high-quality texts about 'general' themes. In addition, evidently no-one doubts the taste of male readers.

All in all, a considerable hierarchical difference is built up between male and female writers and the quality of their books. In spite of the changing times, we still find the occurrence of many gender norms that also existed in the Fifties. In modern Dutch society it is still difficult for women to obtain prestige and power, and we see the same in modern Dutch literature.

It is too early to know whether these gender judgments are repeated in later reception phases, as it has happened with the literature of the 1950s. Nevertheless, one bad sign is *Nederlandse literatuur in een notendop* ('Dutch literature in a nutshell', 1999) by Portegies and Rijghard, an overview of Dutch literature. On the last page it is stated that, in the 1990s, we find many women writers who are selling very well. In this instance, emotive qualities balance out any stylistic or structural imperfections" (p. 126). Here, Portegies and Rijghard repeat the idea that many female writers are only successful because of emotive themes that appeal to a big public. It is implied that therefore their books are not high literature. This suggestion is made explicit in the statement that their books lack stylistic and structural qualities.

It can be concluded that, as far as gender issues are concerned, Dutch culture is in many respects not so progressive as one might think or hope. Finally, it could be asked if the often dismissive view on women, their status and their capacities is due somehow to Dutch women themselves. As regards literature for instance a common view in the Netherlands is that the female writers themselves are the problem: if they would write and behave differently, they would have the same chances as the men and get equal treatment. In the Seminar Gender and Literature at the Universitas Indonesia (April 2002), the same opinion turned out to prevail in Indonesia.

Would it really help if women wrote differently? No, it seems to be unlikely that this would make any difference. We have seen that people, be-

<sup>8</sup> The Netherlands, just as several other Western European countries, has already since a long time more female than male readers of fiction.



cause of the gender norms in their heads, read books by women in a too limited and negative way, just as they read books by men too positively. This means the heads should be changed, not the books.

Would it help if female writers *behaved* differently? It is often said that they should be more active, more assertive, be true literary leaders. This seems to be more plausible. It is quite obvious that the traditionally correct behaviour for a woman—remaining silent, being modest and self-sacrificing etc.—does not get her very far as an author. She will have readers, but she will seldom enter literary canon. However, the reverse behaviour does not get her very far either, because she will get so-called 'gender norm conflicts'. A gender norm conflict is a conflict between the behaviour of a woman (or a man) in reality, and what a community expects of both sexes and what it regards as correct feminine (or masculine) behaviour. An illuminating example for such a conflict is the Dutch female poet Elly de Waard (cf. Andeweg 1998).

Elly de Waard did all the right things to get a place in literary canon. She founded a literary movement, *De Nieuwe Wilden* 'The New Savages', at the end of the 1980s, she presented her poetry as innovative, she made literary statements and conspicuous public appearances. Nevertheless, although De Waard's poetry was also *read* by the literary community as innovative, her manner was judged negatively. She was said to be too aggressive, too masculine. This was not helped by the fact that De Waard openly presented herself as being lesbian, although in the Netherlands discrimination on the grounds of sexual preference is constitutionally prohibited and the Dutch like to see themselves as very tolerant in homosexual matters. De Waard—being at the same time female, homosexual and a strong, self-confident personality—was not accepted. *De Nieuwe Wilden* are now forgotten, whereas a male movement, *De Maximalen* 'The Maximals', founded in the 1980s by just as strong, self-confident persons, has entered literary canon.

This means again that the gender judgments people have in their heads are the real obstacle, not the women themselves. In other words—and this is true for the Netherlands and for Indonesia—we should concentrate on our views of women and men, on gender norms in our cultures and on gender problems in cultural policy. This also implies that it is too simplistic to say the men are guilty, or that they always block women consciously. Gender norms are part of a culture as a whole and therefore—often unconsciously—produced by men and by women. The books quoted above illustrate this point. The *Van Dale* dictionary is made by both sexes. The most recent publication on feminine and masculine professional names, De Caluwe and Van Santen (2001), which did not signal any real gender problems in the *Van Dale*, is written by a man and a woman. Elsbeth Etty, the essayist and reviewer who thinks that women writers nowadays are not really discriminated anymore, is a woman. Our cultures are structured by gender norms which, sadly enough, afflict the views of women as well as men.

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