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A Language Lost: The Case of *Leeg Duits* (“Low Dutch”)¹

Abstract

Few readers will be surprised to learn that the Dutch language was still used in North America after the year 1664, when governor Petrus Stuyvesant had to surrender the Dutch colony of Nieuw-Nederland (New Netherland), including the city of Nieuw Amsterdam (which later on became New York), to the English. Less widely known is the fact that spoken Dutch remained in use far longer than people generally assume, continuing into the first decades of the twentieth century, when its very last speakers died. The production of literary texts in this American variety of Dutch appears to have been fairly limited. From a linguistic perspective, it is interesting to see how the Dutch language in the United States developed into a variety in its own right, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This much later variety, known as “Leeg Duits” or “Low Dutch” was definitely not a creole dialect, as some scholars have thought it to be. Such considerations invite comparison with another language descended from a form of “colonial Dutch”: Cape Dutch or Afrikaans.² I have selected a number of topics that are relevant to the study of Low Dutch, which are presented in a more or less chronological order. First, I focus on the “discovery” of “Leeg Duits,” (*i.e.* the variety of Dutch spoken by the descendants of the former seventeenth-century Dutch immigrants) by travellers. Subsequent topics to be addressed include a bilingual textbook, the pivotal and sociohistorically interesting role of the Dutch Reformed Church in linguistic matters, and the various types of Dutch that were current in the eighteenth century. After sketching the provenance of the peculiar term “Leeg Duits,” I discuss the sole undisputed research report to be based on field work with Low Dutch informants. Low Dutch

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- ¹ This article is a revised and expanded version of parts of a paper presented at the 12th conference of the *Internationale Vereinigung für Germanistik*, Warsaw 30 July — 7 August 2010. The theme of the conference was “Vielheit und Einheit in der Germanistik.” All quotations in Dutch have been translated into English.
 - ² In 1993, David L. Gold suggested that the traditional comparison of European Dutch with Afrikaans should be supplemented by comparing it with “New Netherland Dutch.” This was “a subject crying out for attention” (*cf.* Rosenstein 1993: 227, 237). *Cf.* Buccini 1996 for a discussion of “New Netherland Dutch, Cape Dutch, Afrikaans.”

remained recognisable as a variety of Dutch till until the bitter end, so to speak. “Tenacity” appears to have been one of the salient features of Low Dutch, which to be sure is certainly extinct by now.³

Keywords: Leeg Duits, Low Dutch, dialect, Dutch Reformed Church.

1. Fact and fiction

“*Dis de lange dai en me leven*” (“This is the longest day in my life”), says a worried Angelica Schuyler, when as she anxiously awaits her daughter Elsie. The date is autumn 1778, and the American War of Independence has been going on for several years. “The Bloody Brant,” a notorious Indian chief and an ally of the English, is advancing with his cruel warriors to the region where the Schuylers and their neighbours are living, viz. the Kaatskill Vlatts, an area northwest of New York City and southwest of Albany. The passage just quoted can be found in *The Dutch dominie of the Catskills* (1861) by the Scottish—American minister David Murdoch (1823–1899). In this voluminous historical novel, the smart and pious Elsie Schuyler still speaks “the vernacular Low Dutch of the region where she lived” (Murdoch 1861: 36). Many more specimens of this “vernacular Low Dutch” are found in the text. Examples include the phrases *goede vrowe*, *verborgenheid*, *teeken vuur*, *lamishie*, *suuker kuppe*, *tooverd*, *mene kinderken*, as well as a host of quotations from the so-called *Statenvertaling*, the renowned Dutch Authorized Version of the Bible from 1637.⁴

This linguistic layer of Murdoch’s novel is definitely not fiction.⁵ Many years after the English had taken power in the colony of Nieuw-Nederland (*Nova Belgica*), a variety of Dutch was still spoken in several regions. Furthermore, sermons based on the *Statenvertaling* could still be heard in many of the

3 I shall leave the American Dutch of the “Second” of “New Immigration,” (i.e. the language spoken by the nineteenth-century Dutch immigrants and their descendants), out of consideration here. For more information about Low Dutch and its development, see Buccini 1995 and van Marle 2001. The latter article focuses largely on the last phase of Low Dutch in the early twentieth century. The reader should be aware that, in the learned literature, various terms are used to denote the Dutch language in North- America, depending upon the regions and the periods. In this contribution, I use the general term “Leeg Duits.”

4 A book by the American author Jephta R. Simms (1807–1883), *History of Schoharie County* from 1845, contains several Low Dutch phrases. In an episode set around 1780, someone is asked what to do with a seriously wounded man: “[he] unblushingly replied in Low Dutch: *Laat de vervlukten rabble starven!* [Let the damned rebel die!]” (Simms 1845: 352). Another phrase in Low Dutch to be found in this book reads as follows: “When asked what had happened, he replied in Low Dutch, (as kindly rendered by a friend at my elbow) *ick donk de duyvel is op de solder, de veri [veren] vliegen so rondt dat ick niet sien con* [I guess the devil is in the attic, the feathers are flying around in such a way that I cannot see anything]” (Simms 1845:405). It is difficult to determine the extent to which these phrases are fact or fiction.

5 In an historical novel from 1890 about the Mohawk Valley, in upstate New York, where many Low Dutch people used to live, in which, just like in Murdoch’s work, the story is set in the last quarter of the eighteenth centuryB, the narrator, Douw Mauverensen, is presented as an old man of Low Dutch descent. Reflecting upon his mother tongue, he observes: “This language [Low Dutch], which I have lived to see almost entirely fade away from use, was even then [ca. 1760] *thought to be most probably the tongue of the future of the colony*” (italics added). Unfortunately, this well-written and well-researched novel, *In the Valley* by Harold Frederic (1856–1898), provides hardly any specimens of the vernacular Low Dutch spoken by ordinary farmers and shopkeepers.

Dutch Reformed churches in America, as can be gathered from statements by travellers of that time. A few examples of such testimonies may suffice here.

In the years 1748–1751, Peter ("Pehr") Kalm (1716–1779), the distinguished Finnish-Swedish explorer and botanist, travelled widely through North America. In June 1749, he visited Albany, NY and provided an extensive description of its Dutch character. Among his other observations, he remarked: "The inhabitants of Albany and its environs are almost all Dutchmen. They speak Dutch, have Dutch preachers, and the divine service is performed in that language. Their manners are likewise quite Dutch" (Kalm 1964: 343–344).⁶

In 1784, the Dutch aristocrat Carel de Vos van Steenwijk (1759–1830) also paid a visit to Albany. His findings appear to confirm those of the famous Swedish scholar. Having left the city on Saturday 29 May 1784, Van Steenwijk noted in his travel account: "In and around Albany most people speak Dutch [...]. It appeared strange to me to observe that the Dutch language is spoken here so well, for although a few words are corrupted, there are various places in the Netherlands where it is spoken not much better" (de Vos van Steenwijk 1999:171). A few years later, in 1786, the well-known American lexicographer Noah Webster (1758–1843) attended church in Albany and he reported the use of Dutch sermons. It is further interesting to note that, in 1788, the Albany *dominie* (pastor) Lambertus de Ronde (1720–1795) translated the American Constitution, which had been drawn up the year before, into Dutch. According to van der Sijs (2009: 34–35), "[t]his translation was published by the city of Albany and, thanks to this translation, the Constitution received such strong support from the older male population that the state of New York came to accept it."

Some forty years later, another Dutch tourist visited the eastern part of the United States: the Reverend Gerardus Balthazar Bosch (1794–1837), a minister on the isle of Curacao, one of the Dutch Antilles. In the year 1826, Bosch made a "summer trip [...] to the Falls of the Niagara." His travel report contains various observations about the use of the Dutch language, which was that at the time was still spoken in several regions of the former colony of New Netherland. According to his accounts, Bosch, who was an interested language observer, was truly struck by the fact that Dutch had survived in North America for so long. "When we travelled from *New-Yorck* to the *Niagara* in a boat or a wagon," he reported, "people always wished to join our party as soon as they heard us talking in Dutch." In Albany, he heard "ordinary people converse in Dutch in the streets, and the same happened at the bridge at *Scenectady* [Schenectady], 28 miles north of Albany," which was as far as "the colony of the *Hollanders* in the state of *New-Yorck* had once stretched out" (Bosch 1827: 275).⁷

Bosch's opinion about the language spoken around Albany was not very positive. The *Nederduitsch* spoken in that area, which was later to be called "Albany Dutch" (cf. Shetter 1958: 244), was "very bad, uncouth and coarse, and contaminated with many wrong expressions." In Hoboken, New Jersey, however, the situation was much better. Spending a fortnight in Hoboken in October 1826, Bosch could hear Dutch being spoken every day. He once encountered a farmer from the nearby village of Hackensack, in Bergen County, who could not speak any English at all. Upon his return to New York, he expressed his amazement at "the commonness of the Dutch language." He was promptly advised to walk around at the

6 A Dutch translation of Kalm's travel account appeared in Utrecht in 1772.

7 The colony of New Netherland was located in the Middle Atlantic region of what is now the United States and comprised all of the territory of New Jersey, the eastern parts of New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware and the western part of Connecticut.

market and “indeed, at several occasions I heard our mother tongue spoken there; it was used by farmers from the North River [the Hudson].”

Bosch fostered no illusions regarding the survival of this language, expecting that “before the first half of this Age has passed,” the language would disappear completely. “At any rate,” the sober-minded Bosch added, “our language will, on the whole, not lose a great deal with it.” He pointed out various signs of a near “language death:”

Since one and a half century (from 1665 onwards) the *Nederduitsche* [Dutch] Colony in *North America* has been under foreign rule, while no new colonists did arrive. *Books written in that language are not to be found* (italics added); the present generation does not remember the Dutch schools anymore; even Dutch preaching, which in the beginning of this Age was still practised at three or four places, has become completely obsolete nowadays; moreover, the language has been brought into contempt [...], but in spite of this the *Nederduitsch* continues to be the language spoken in so many villages among the families up to now. (Bosch 1827: 276)

Bosch thus emphasizes that the language he had heard, existed only as a *spoken* language. Note that on the one hand he observed the Dutch spoken in Albany (and its surrounding area) and in the so-called “Mohawk Valley” region of upstate New York, as well as in Bergen County, New Jersey. In the twentieth-century literature, these “dialects” of Low Dutch were called *Mohawk Dutch* and *Jersey Dutch* or *Bergen County Dutch* respectively. Note that there was also a distinct “sub-dialect,” which was spoken solely by Blacks. Prince (1910: 460) observed that “the negro slaves of the old settlers used an idiom tinged with their own peculiarities.” According to one of his informants, it was called *nêxer dâuts* (lit. “negro Dutch”), but although Prince provided only a few examples. I shall not go into this matter here, however interesting it may be (cf. van der Sijs 2009: 41).⁸

Bosch expected rapid decline of Low Dutch did not take place. In 1854, one could also be informed *in patria* about the remarkable fact that, in the cities of New York and Albany,

[...] many Dutch words have become incorporated into the common speech. In some of the inland villages of Dutch origin, the inhabitants still use the language of their fathers; and there are even individuals who never spoke any other (Bartlett 1848: xv; cf. Bartlett 1854: xviii).

When Murdoch’s novel *The Dutch dominie of the Catskills* appeared in print, in 1861, there were still children growing up who learned to speak the “vernacular Low Dutch.” This must have been the very last generation to receive “Leeg Duits” (“Laag Duits” or “Laeg Duits”) by birth. James Storms, who was born in New Jersey in 1860, was one such a native speaker. “As late as the 1860’s the northern part of Bergen County” he noted, “Jersey Dutch was the prevailing and natural form of speech in many homes of the older residents when there were no strangers present. English, on the other hand, was a labored and difficult form of expression for them, and only used when they mixed with the outer world” (Storms 1964: introduction). Storms left a glossary of the so—called “Jersey Dutch,” as he considered himself to be the “last surviving person in my section” who was able to compose such a list. He died in 1949; his vocabulary appeared in print as late as in 1964.⁹ His younger brother, John C. Storms (1869–1962), “was perhaps the

8 Cf. the remarks by James Storms (1964: introduction): “Even colored people, for the most part children of slaves, without education, were proficient in the use of Jersey Dutch and had enough knowledge to converse in either.”

9 It is interesting to add that, in May 1941, Dr Guy Sumner Lowman Jr. (1909–1941) made a transcription of Storms’ English and Low Dutch speech within the framework of the field research being done for the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and*

last person in the region who could speak Jersey Dutch with any fluency" (Talman 1977: 264), although he never attained his brother's level. It is thus safe to conclude that the "vernacular Low Dutch" survived for a remarkably long time, although by the end of the nineteenth century, it was in active use in domestic circles only around Albany, NY, (in particular, in the Mohawk Valley), and in the northernmost part of New Jersey. "Tenacity" thus appears to be one of the most striking features of the Low Dutch language (cf. Bachman 1969: viii, De Jong 1978: 227, Buccini 1995: 259, van Marle 2001: 80).

Notwithstanding their undisputed language loyalty, it is obvious that, under English rule, a number of Dutch speakers, (in particular in the cities), deemed it increasingly necessary to be able to converse in English. They wished to keep up with their English-speaking compatriots in terms of political and socioeconomic status. Several sources offer a glimpse of the way in which the desired command of the dominant colonial language was acquired.

2. A language aid for Dutch people: Francis Harrison's *De Engelsche en Nederduytsche School-Meester* (Nieuw-Jork 1730)

In 1785, Alexander Coventry (1766–1831), a Scottish immigrant who was to become a famous upstate physician, wrote in his diary that "the farmers who came from the country [...] spoke in a different language called low Dutch. [...] The Low Dutch understood, and could talk English, though generally pronounced the "th" as if "d" or "e." But the language spoken by the well-bred was good English" (cf. Cohen 1992: 150). Obviously, by this time, most of the Dutch inhabitants of New York State were bilingual, as Cohen concludes (1992: 151). Unfortunately, we are not very well informed about the way in which the Dutch immigrants had learned to master English as a second language.

The first and only grammar written for Dutch-speaking inhabitants of North America was published in "Nieuw-Jork" in 1730 by the renowned printer and bookseller William Bradford: *De Engelsche en Nederduytsche School-Meester*, or, in its English title, *The English and Low-Dutch Schoolmaster*. The author of this bilingual book was Francis Harrison (1693/4–1735), who (according to the title page) was a "School-Master, in Somerset-County, in New-Jersey, America." Through his publication, he aimed to achieve "The better Instructing of the Netherlands and the Dutch inhabitants of this Northern part of America in the English Tongue." The title page also states that, with the help of this book, "the English may also learn to Spell, Read, and Understand and Write Low-Dutch." This work can therefore be characterized as a bilingual aid for Dutch learners of English and vice versa. The book's structure is traditional and synthetic, starting with the "letters" and proceeding to a chapter on syllables, which comprises almost half of the book. The reader is provided with many lists of words that consist of one or more syllables. One highly practical section contains a variety of prayers and sample letters. This is followed by an "abstract of English grammar," and the entire work concludes with a "table of Names, Dutch and English."

Harrison's book provides little in the way of concrete insight into American Dutch as it was used in written or spoken form around 1730. Despite his claim in "To the Reader" that he had never had "any Grounds [...] to the like purpose from which I might receive any furtherance or help herein," Harrison

Canada. Lowman was a trained linguist; his phonetic transcription of some three hundred Jersey Dutch words and phrases was used by Shetter (1958), Bachman (1980) and Buccini (1995).

drew extensively from seventeenth-century sources published in patria.¹⁰ By far the most important source for his book was *Anglo-Belgica. Engelsche en Nederduytsche Academy* or *The English and Netherdutch Academy* (Amsterdam, 1677), a book for an English and Dutch readership written by English expatriate Edward Richardson: (1617–c.1677) over 80 percent of the content of *De Engelsche en Nederduytsche School-Meester* is literally the same as Richardson's work, which was published half a century earlier and which also features the term "Low Dutch." In short, almost the entire content of Harrison's work is taken from seventeenth-century sources. The most influential grammar in the Netherlands at the time was the *Nederduitsche spraakkunst* ("Dutch grammar"), written by the reverend Arnold Moonen (1644–1711). It was a bulky grammar that was published in 1706 and reprinted until the mid-eighteenth century. There is no evidence, however, that this work ever influenced *De Engelsche en Nederduytsche School-Meester*. The fact that contemporary grammarians from the Netherlands were seeking to construct a standard written Dutch language, whatever the status of their endeavours may have been, does not appear to have been a point of reference for a schoolmaster in Somerset County.

Be that as it may, Harrison's work is a unique document on second-language learning. It does not, however, reflect language use among the Dutch in North America in the early eighteenth century. It simply contains seventeenth-century written language from the Dutch Republic. Nor can the process of language change be extrapolated from the book, as its rules of Dutch pronunciation do not constitute a reliable reflection of what was customary in New Jersey in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the very fact that a bilingual book such as Harrison's was published, indicates that there was a need for such a work in 1730, and it tells us something about the ongoing process of linguistic accommodation in which the speakers of Dutch were involved.

Another language aid for Dutch-speaking people, comprising more than one thousand pages, may have been the well-known two-volume. *A large dictionary English and Dutch, in two Parts: wherein each language is set forth in its proper form; the various significations of the words being exactly noted, and abundance of choice phrases and proverbs intermixed. To which is added a Grammar, for both Languages, or in its Dutch title Groot woordenboek der Engelsche en Nederduytsche taalen: Nevens eene Spraakkunst derzelve*, composed by Willem Séwel (1654–1720), a prolific author from Amsterdam. This book saw various reprints in the Netherlands (1708¹, 1754⁵). A copy of the third edition (Amsterdam 1735) of this work was recently discovered among the family possessions of an elderly American citizen in Amsterdam, NY, whose ancestors had brought it from the Netherlands when emigrating to North America long before. There are also other clues that indicate that this voluminous work was once popular among Dutch immigrants in the eighteenth century, although more research remains to be done on this topic.

The influence of English was profound, particularly given that many Dutch families had been more or less bilingual for several generations before they shifted completely to English. One of the factors that may have contributed to the persistence of the (Low) Dutch language, however, is the privileged position that it occupied for many years in the Dutch protestant churches that still could be found within the territories of the former colony of Nieuw Nederland.

¹⁰ For details see Naborn 2002.

3. The Dutch Reformed Church and the Great Dutch Language Schism in the eighteenth century

Under English rule, the *Nederduits Hervormde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church) was the single unifying institution of colonial Dutch-Americans. When the English took over the colony in 1664, assurances were given that the Dutch Reformed Church would be allowed freedom from English control and that it would be permitted to continue under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the *classis* of Amsterdam. Consequently, the Dutch “had the right to worship publicly according to their own customs and church discipline” (De Jong 1978: 49). The complex developments and the manifold problems experienced by this protestant church in the subsequent periods will not be discussed here. De Jong’s 1978 extensive study on *The Dutch Reformed Church in the American Colonies* is a rich source of information on this subject, also with regard to questions of language.

Following De Jong, I would like to emphasize that the Dutch language continued to be the exclusive medium of “the pulpit in most Dutch Reformed Churches until the early nineteenth century” (De Jong 1978: 67). As I pointed out before, the persistence of Dutch in North America is partly due to this ecclesiastical connection. For orthodox Protestants, it was hard to believe that the God of their forefathers had spoken anything else but Dutch.¹¹

In accordance with the prevailing Dutch Church Order, all ministers to be employed in North America had to be examined and ordained in patria by the *classis* of Amsterdam. As a rule, therefore, their ministers were trained in the Netherlands and, in divine services, they used the official Holland Dutch, *Nederduits(ch)*, and continued to preach from the renowned Dutch *Statenvertaling*, which dated from 1637. In 1760, twenty-three Dutch Reformed ministers were in active service. Around 1768, with regard to the training of Reformed ministers in North America, it was remarked that “a lector to teach the Dutch language would help keep it in active use as much as possible” (Naborn 2011, 1: 186), although nothing ever came of the appointment of such a lecturer. In several places, Dutch preaching was actually continued until the first decades of the nineteenth century.

It is interesting to note that, in the eighteenth century, many ministers were writing books and publishing their sermons, nearly all in Dutch. Most of these works were published in the former colony, although some were published in the fatherland. In 1763, *dominie* Lambertus de Ronde was the first to publish a book in English on the Heidelberg Catechism (De Jong 1978: 121). Be that as it may, we do have a substantial corpus of texts written in Dutch and published in North- America. I nevertheless doubt that we can draw any valid conclusions concerning the development of the Low Dutch language based on the work composed by these ministers. These works were written in the “high” variety of Dutch: the official *Nederduitsch* and I therefore leave these books out of consideration here.

For the sociohistorical linguist, it is useful to know that a host of ecclesiastical records and reports can still be found in various local archives in North American. Most of these documents were composed in the North American written variety of Dutch, a practice that continued until the end of the eighteenth century. The records are part of a vast corpus of documents that now awaits digitalisation.

11 As early as 1572, the notorious Antwerp linguist Goropius Becanus (1519–1572/3) had defended the thesis that Dutch was the language spoken in the Garden of Eden. I doubt, however, whether many Dutch churchgoers were aware of Becanus’ etymological evidence.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, it is not surprising to note that the “Bible Dutch” that was used in church and was regarded as the purest form of Dutch (Rice 1924: 70, Hamlin 1990: 137) had become increasingly removed from the vernacular Low Dutch that was spoken by ordinary people. “The mid-eighteenth century was a kind of watershed in the general use of the Dutch language in the colonies” (De Jong 1978: 216) – it was a true language schism. For example, in 1753, the following was noted in a New York City paper:

There is a *vast Difference* between understanding the common *barbarous Dutch spoken* in our Families, and the studied and ornamented Style of the Pulpit. The Generality of our People, that are well enough acquainted with the former, are almost totally ignorant of the latter (*cf. De Jong 1978:218*).¹² [*italics added*]

The autonomous development of spoken Low Dutch, a major shift away from “pure” Holland Dutch in the critical years 1750–1780, was often regarded as a “debasement” (De Jong 1978: 218) or as a normal part of the formation of a creole dialect (Cohen 1992: 151). From a linguistic point of view, these opinions are not correct.

We may further conclude that the active use of the official “Nederduitsch” as a church language was coming to an end in the last decades of the eighteenth century, particular due to the increasing influence of English on all aspects of society. For this reason, the Reverend Eilardus Westerlo (1738–1790) became “the last of the Dutch-speaking dominies in Albany,” a city that had been known as Beverwijck in Dutch colonial times (*cf. Naborn 2011*). It is only fair to say that we know hardly anything about the characteristics of the “common barbarous Dutch” of the eighteenth-century, as mentioned above. The only reliable data we have regarding spoken Low Dutch were recorded as late as 1910. A host of written material is available, however, dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is interesting to note that, in the years to come, large quantities of similar data will become available in a digital form for further research by linguists and historians.

Currently, however, only one serious study is available that addresses the older, “Colonial,” period: Gehring’s 1973 doctoral dissertation on *The Dutch Language in Colonial New York*. This work investigates the (written) Dutch language of the Mohawk and Upper Hudson region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During his research in the period 1968–1973, Charles Gehring (*1939) collected over 200 pages of Dutch documents, which he used as a corpus. He concluded that “the amount of surviving documents seems inexhaustible” (Gehring 1973: 4).

Gehring discussed phonological, morphological and syntactic aspects of this language variety, while also paying due attention to loanwords. With regard to these various fields of research, Gehring seeks to demonstrate the extent to which the English language had affected that to which what referred as “New Netherland Dutch.” He documents examples of vocabulary borrowing and loan blends, especially in legal terminology, exemplified by *coerthuijs* (courthouse). He also documented changes in phonology (Dutch *vijf* > *vive*), in morphology (for example, English plurals were introduced) and syntax (English word order).

A methodical *caveat* is in order here. People in Albany, Schenectady or New York who were capable of writing letters in Dutch would generally have had a relatively good command of their language. Thus,

¹² Many anecdotes are in circulation regarding the incomprehensibility of the Style of the Pulpit, a religious code to be understood by insiders only. *Cf. Kenney 1973: 8 nb. 1.*

Gehring’s data are thus relatively one-sided, in that they necessarily reflect the language of a specific group of Dutch-speaking people, as van Marle (2001: 86) rightly observes.

In addition to the pure “Bible Dutch” of the church and the “common Barbarous Dutch” spoken in the families, we thus have a third coordinate: a written species of Dutch that was probably still relatively similar to Holland Dutch—Gehring assumes that, among the first and second generation Dutch settlers, the *schrijftaal* (written Dutch language) had been retained (1973: 61)—but that gradually gave way to spoken forms. As noted by van Marle (2001: 86), the difference between the spoken and the written language had probably already become quite strong by the second half of the eighteenth century.

The next question thus concerns the extent to which the written data reflect the language that was spoken at the time. Even more interesting, perhaps, is the question of whether the trends documented by Gehring continued in the nineteenth century. In other words, did the increasing influence of English have more drastic consequences for the language structure and the lexicon of Low Dutch? Cohen (1992: 151) concluded that the developments that Gehring described with regard to the structural changes in the written language applied to the Low Dutch spoken around 1900. Cohen’s conclusion was based on the data concerning spoken Dutch that had been intentionally gathered in 1910 from and by some of the last native speakers of the colonial dialect in New Jersey. It is in these materials that we encounter the first written occurrence of the rather peculiar term “Leeg Duits.” After a brief description of the provenance of this term, I return to the question I raised above.

4. On the origin of the term *Leeg Duits* (“Low Dutch”)

In 1910, the American linguist John Dyneley Prince (1868–1945) noted the following phrase coming from an elderly informant, “old Mrs. Bartholf”: *önze tâl äs lêx däuts en hælliz äz Hôl-läns* (“our language is Leeg Duits and theirs is Holland Dutch”; cf. Prince 1910: 459). We may thus assume that the term *Leeg Duits* was quite common in the spoken language of the nineteenth century.¹³ In fact, the earliest written attestation I have been able to trace, is contained in Prince’s well-known 1910 article. What exactly is the origin of this rather unusual term? The secondary literature advances two hypotheses.

In his unpublished *Introduction to Low Dutch Dictionary*, Van Cleaf Bachman (1980: 2–3, cf. 1983: 14) remarks that the *provenance* of the term *Leeg* (*Läg* or *Laag Duits*) is not certain.

In the colonial period the descendants of the New Netherlanders were often called the “Low Dutch” by their English neighbours to distinguish them from the “High Dutch” or Germans. It might reasonably be supposed that “Low Dutch” was here a direct translation of *Leeg* (*Läg*) *Duits*, except for the fact that the English term is more likely a translation of *Nederduits*, a word which appeared prominently in the name *Nederduyts Hervormde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church) [...].

Why did not the Low Dutch speakers of the late nineteenth century refer to their language as *Nederduits*? The writer (viz. Bachman) has seen no direct evidence for the use of the word *Leeg* (*Läg*) *Duits* before the nineteenth century.

With regard to the naming of this language variety, Bachman refers back to the seventeenth century. He deems it probable that the term *Leeg Duits*

¹³ Mrs. Lavinia Bartholf, *née* De Groot, now of Paterson, but formerly of Red Mill, Bergen County, N.J. (Prince 1910: 460). Given the age of Prince’s other informants, I assume that she was born between 1830 and 1840.

was coined early in the colonial period to distinguish the lowly patois of the Dutch-American farmers from the cultured *Nederduits* of the ministry. Low Dutch as a dialect self-consciously distinct from *Nederduits* may thus extend well back into colonial times (Bachman 1980: 3; 1983: 14).

According to Bachman, therefore, the term had existed as early as the seventeenth century, although it was recorded much later. As I have already pointed out, Prince's glossary (1910: 476) is the only work to contain the following lemma: Law: *lêx*: *lêx dâuts*, Low Dutch. N. *laag*.

In her recent book *Cookies, coleslaw and stoops*, however, Nicoline van der Sijs provides an interesting alternative scenario. She rightly remarks that, in British-English, *Low Dutch* was traditionally used as the rendering of *Nederduits* ("Netherdutch," later on "Nederlands"), and she suggests the following development:

The definition of *Low Dutch* in American English probably was narrowed to mean "Dutch spoken language in the US," as opposed to the *High Dutch* "Hoogduits" of the Germans, the *Pennsylvania Dutch* for the spoken German of Pennsylvania, and the *Dutch* or *Holland Dutch* for Dutch in Europe. (van der Sijs 2009: 28)

The progression towards the formation of *Leeg Duits* is thus as follows. Speakers of *Leeg Duits* learned "[i]n the course of the 19th century [...] the English term *Low Dutch* for their language and translated it back into Dutch as *Leeg Duits* or *Laag Duits*." As argued by van der Sijs, the term *Leeg Duits* "was not found before the end of the nineteenth century, whereas the term *Low Dutch*, used to indicate the spoken Dutch language in the US, is much older" (van der Sijs 2009: 28).

The term *Leeg Duits* was apparently used first in Flanders, just after the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ It was coined by a Flemish translator, Fr. Prosper de Vynck (1674), who sought to have his translated work "speak *Leegh-Duytsch*,"¹⁵ using expressly the spoken Dutch vernacular of the county of Flanders. He thus contrasted this low-level, common and simple language to the *Neer-duydsche taele*, the more or less official Dutch language. It is therefore evident then that *Leegh-Duytsch* is definitely not a synonym of *Ne(d)er-Duytsch*, as is also clear from the end of the translator's introduction (cf. Noordegraaf 2010 for details). Although a connection with the Dutch spoken in North America has to be made (cf. Viane 1977), there is a convincing parallel with Bachman's argumentation: in this case as well, *Leeg Duits* is contrasted with *Nederduits*, in order to indicate the common vernacular.

It is a well-known fact that, in a very early stage, Flemish people had been involved in the affairs of the colony of *Nova Belgica*. It is not yet clear whether any relationship can be identified between their arrival and the introduction of the term *Leeg Duits* in North America. In the latter case, we should be willing to accept that, for centuries, this originally Flemish term had belonged solely to the oral language and that it had experienced a sort of underground existence. Note that American sources always use the ambiguous term *Low Dutch*, even when it is obvious that *Leeg Duits* is meant; as far as I have been able to establish, these sources never use the Dutch term. The phrase quoted from the American historical work mentioned in Note 4 reads as follows: "when asked what had happened, he replied in Low Dutch, (as kindly rendered by a friend at my elbow) *ick donk de duyvel is op de solder, de veri vliegen so rondt dat ick niet*

14 Cf. *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal. Aanvullingen*. Tweede deel. Doppen-Midgetgolf. 's-Gravenhage: Sdu Uitgevers 2001, 4361–4362.

15 *soo heb'ick my ten lesten, om dees ende meer ander redenen [...] ghevanghen ghegheven, ende ghepoocht den Boeck Leegh-Duytsch te leeren spreken* (italics added), (cf. Noordegraaf 2010: 4).

sien con.” In my view, this phrase is intended as authentic *Leeg Duits* rather than as a representation of the proper *Nederduits*. When consulting American sources, one should thus be careful to distinguish between “Low Dutch” as the British-English translation of “*Nederduits*” and as the American-English translation of “*Leeg Duits*.”

5. Speaking Low Dutch around 1910

dä prâte älle hâr dâuts än di tait; lêx dâuts

(“they all of them spoke Dutch at that time—low Dutch”)

Mrs. Lavinia Bartholf in 1910 (Prince 1910: 467)

In the first decade of the twentieth century, a number of American linguists drew attention to the fading Low Dutch language. They did so in the context of a general development in contemporary linguistics both in the USA and in Europe: the increasing interest on dialects and creole languages. The American Dialect Society was founded in 1889, including amongst its objectives “the investigation of the spoken English of the United States and Canada, and incidentally of other non-aboriginal dialects spoken in the same countries.” Its findings were published in the Society’s official organ of the Society, *Dialect Notes* (1890–1939), in which an important publication on Low Dutch was to appear.

In 1908, William Henry Carpenter (1853–1936) published a paper in the journal *Modern Philology* entitled “Dutch contributions to the vocabulary of English in America. Dutch remainders in New York State.” It comprised a glossary with an extensive introduction. In the final section of his article, Carpenter pointed out “that there are also Dutch-speaking old colonists living upstream along the Hudson river in Albany and also in Schenectady County,” as noted by the Dutch linguist Jac. van Ginneken (1913: 289). As remarked by Carpenter himself:

The Dutch influence, once paramount through the great part of the territory settled and occupied by the Dutchmen and their descendants, is now but a fading memory that in many places has wholly vanished. The parts of the country under consideration that have best kept the traditions of the Dutch language are Albany and Schenectady counties, where some few people of the passing generation still speak their version of what was once the mother-tongue of their ancestors. The oncoming generation, however, knows no Dutch, here or elsewhere in this region, to speak it, and through this whole territory, with the exception of scattered words, it will soon have entirely disappeared and have become but a fact of history. (Carpenter 1908: 15–16)¹⁶

These remarks may have prompted a colleague of Columbia University to demonstrate that people elsewhere (*i.e.* in New Jersey) were also continuing to use “their version of what was once the mother-tongue of their ancestors.” This colleague was John Prince, a multi-talented American linguist.

John Dyneley Prince (1868–1945) managed to combine a career as a professor of linguistics at Columbia University with a political and diplomatic career, which included the vice-governorship of New Jersey and ambassadorships to several European countries. Although he had specialised in Semitic and

¹⁶ Carpenter was born in 1853, viz. in Utica, which is in *upstate* New York. Utica is situated in the Mohawk Valley region, less than 100 miles West of Albany and Schenectady. We may therefore assume that Carpenter is describing his own observations and that he had actually been witnessed conversations in nineteenth-century Mohawk Dutch.

Slavonic, he had also been motivated to document two dying languages near his home: the Minsi Indian dialect, and the Low Dutch of Bergen and Passaic Counties. A true polyglot, Prince was remembered by the Adirondack Indians “as a man who could talk their language better than their fathers could.” His biographer points out that Prince had “a truly uncanny ability [...] for listening to any person speaking in any language and answering in exactly the same dialect and with the same enunciation” (Manning 1945: 224). It is therefore not surprising then that Prince was able to converse in fluent Dutch with a later colleague of his at Columbia University, to wit the Dutchman Adriaan Barnouw (1877–1968). “Whenever I have the pleasure of meeting him we converse in Dutch,” Barnouw (1969: 163) testifies.

It seems fair to say that his article on “the Jersey Dutch dialect” is a milestone in the study of Low Dutch. It provides the very first description of the variety that was actually spoken in New Jersey at that time. “So far as I know, no other philological treatise has appeared on this subject,” Prince noted in 1910, quite correctly. The Columbia professor stated that, during the period 1892–1910, he had heard many persons using “this echo of an almost forgotten period” (Prince 1910: 460).

This dialect, *lêx dâuts* or ‘low Dutch’ is still known, with more or less thoroughness, to over a hundred persons, but these are so scattered that they but rarely find anyone to converse with. The younger generation has lost the language and few young people care to try to learn the idiom of their grandparents. Fifty years ago, however, this was the common vernacular over most of Bergen County and in many places in the adjoining county of Passaic. (Prince 1913: 307)

When preparing his 1910 article, Prince relied primarily on four main informants, all of whom were above the age of seventy years. One of these informants was a Negro. The inclusion of a number of words and expressions from this Negro informant provides some information concerning the *nêxer dâuts* (“Negro Dutch”), which was still spoken by a small colony of coloured people in Prince’s day. His article comprises a detailed description of the sounds of Jersey Dutch and a concise exposition of its grammatical relations; the English-Jersey Dutch glossary comprises 664 words, some of which are complemented with brief sentences. A number of additional sentences are presented in other paper by Prince. Although these works constitute the most important corpus for the study of Low Dutch, it is relatively modest, at least according to modern standards.

Note that Prince failed to provide a precise description of the intonation, which he describes simply as *curious* and *jerky*, and he did not inform his readers about “the marked singsong tone of voice” in Jersey Dutch that has been so intriguing to other students of Low Dutch. Moreover, Prince ventured to present a number of linguistic comparisons between Holland Dutch and Jersey Dutch, although the correctness of some of his conclusions could be debated.

Be that as it may, this study was very well received in the Dutch linguistic circles of its time. It prompted the Leiden professor D.C. Hesseling (1859–1941), a distinguished Dutch creolist and afrikanist, to ask his New York colleague for a more extensive Jersey Dutch text than the isolated phrases and sentences that could be found in the 1910 glossary. Consequently, in 1913, “gratifying the curiosity and the interest he had aroused in the Netherlands” (Shetter 1958: 243), Prince sent a free narration of the well-know parable of the Prodigal Son from one of his most reliable informants, Matthew Hickes, “*aetat*. 77.” Rendered into spoken Jersey Dutch, Luke 15: 11–32, reads as follows:

En kâäd’l [a man] had twi jòngers; de êne blêv täus; de andere xöng vört f’n häus f’r en stât [to make his fortune]. Hâi wâz nît tevrêde täus en dârkis tû râknî ârm. Hâi doğti ôm dât täus en z’n vâders pläk. Tû zâide: âk zâl na häus xâne. Mâin vâder hât plânti. En tû de vâder zâg’m komme, hâi xöng [went]

äut en müten'm en boste [kissed] z'n zön en tû brot'm in h'm häus. Tû zâide te de kâäd'l, de xjehürde hânt [the hired hand]: nâu xân en slâxt het kâal'v en tû nâ dât xân en nôd de büre [neighbours] en komme met mâin en wâi zâl nâu en fist hâbbe. Mâin zön wât v'lôre [lost] wâs âs nâu ôm täus. Nâu zâle wâi en xûje dânbâr tât hâbbe.

Tû de âuster [oldest] zön zâid: je dên nît zô för mâin. Äk blêf täus bâi jâu en jâi nôut mâkte xîn super för mâin en dôze xöng vört en spandêrde al z'n xält. Nâu kommt hâi ôm ârm. Nâu mâkt je en fist — en x'rôte super — för höm, dât jâi nôut dên för mâin. Tû de vâder zâi: äk bân blâit; äk bân dânbâr [glad] dât mâin zön nox lêft en äz täus in xjezonthâit.

[A man had two sons; the one stayed at home; the other went abroad from home to make his fortune. He was not content at home and therefore then he became poor, He thought about it at home and his father's place. Then said: I shall go home. My father has plenty. And when the father saw him coming, he went out and met him and kissed his son and then brought him into his house. Then said to the man, the 'hired hand': now go and kill the calf and the afterwards go and invite the neighbors and come with me and we shall now have a feast. My son who was lost is now again at home. Now we shall have a good thankful time. Then the oldest son said: you did not so for me. I stayed home with you and you never made any supper for me and this one went away and wasted all his money. Now he comes back poor. Now you make a feast – a great supper – for him, which you never did for me. Then the father said: I am glad; I am thankful that my son still lives and is at home in health].

I would like to emphasize that, for a contemporary Dutch native speaker, living some 350 years after Peter Stuyvesant, this specimen of Jersey Dutch is quite easy to follow (at any rate, my students had no problems), and the same may be true of a seasoned Germanist as well. This seems to corroborate Buccini's claim that “the core of the dialect remained to the bitter end [...] recognisably Dutch” (1996: 38).

The text from the gospel of Luke was immediately published in a well-respected Dutch scholarly periodical, while in the same year Prince was tactically appointed as a foreign member of the prestigious Leiden *Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde* (Dutch Society of Letters, founded in 1766). Prince had apparently promised to send more linguistic data to Leiden, including a specimen of a text in Negro Dutch. “As soon as more texts are available, it will be the right moment to draw conclusions with regard to the history of the forms and of the words of Jersey Dutch [...],” an optimistic Hesseling (1913: 306) noted. Pending the publication of the results of Prince's further investigations, it was apparently deemed unnecessary to send a Dutch linguistic research team to New Jersey in order to conduct field work among the last speakers of Low Dutch. It is definitely to be regretted that, at least to my knowledge, Prince never managed to dispatch any further transcripts of his Low Dutch conversations with elderly Jersey informants to his Dutch colleagues.

6. Discussion

For reasons that will become clear, I do not attempt to present a description of the grammar and the lexicon of Low Dutch contained in the publications by Prince.¹⁷ The question I would like to advance now is as follows.

¹⁷ Van Marle's (2001) analysis of Low Dutch is based mainly on the two studies by Prince.

As we have seen, Gehring's (1973) study documents a number of changes in seventeenth- and eighteenth century Dutch that had emerged (whether partly or largely) under the influence of English. Did Low Dutch continue to change during the nineteenth century, and, if so, to what extent? Moreover, can the results of this process actually be found in the spoken corpus composed by Prince in 1910 and 1913? On the one hand, because of the increasing influence of English, the trends indicated by Gehring could have been expected to manifest themselves at increased speed. On the other hand, in the early part of the nineteenth century, the Dutch language had retreated to the more isolated rural areas, where the influence of English influence was less pervasive, as illustrated by the account of the Reverend Bosch's encounter in 1826 with a farmer from the village of Hackensack, in Bergen County, who could not speak English at all.

As I have stated before, Cohen (1992: 151) ventured to conclude that what Gehring had shown "about the structural changes in the written language of the seventeenth and eighteenth century was also true about these spoken dialects," referring to Jersey Dutch and Mohawk Dutch. In my opinion, however, the matter is more complicated, and not only because Gehring's findings concerning the earlier written language cannot simply be put on a par with the data published by Prince, as rightly noted by van Marle (2001: 86).

Allow me to draw a brief comparison with another language descended from a form of colonial Dutch: Cape Dutch or Afrikaans.¹⁸ Only in the course of the nineteenth century did "Kaapsch-Hollandsch" (Cape Dutch) eventually evolve into a structurally distinct language, a fully-fledged sister language of Holland Dutch (*cf.* Deumert 2004). As early as 1914, Hesseling compared Low Dutch "to the Afrikaans language," concluding "that the peculiarities of the fading idiom (*viz.* Low Dutch) points to a provenance from the Southern part of our fatherland and that *the lesser degree of change*—although the settling of the Hollanders in America is older than that in South Africa—can be explained by the less intimate contact with a harbour- and slave language such as the Malayan-Portuguese of the Southern hemisphere" (Hesseling 1914: 55; *italics added*).

Comparing Cape Dutch ("Afrikaans") to Low Dutch, Deumert (2004: 140) noted that "[l]arge-scale morphological loss [...] is a general feature of extraterritorial varieties [...]. Reinecke [...] reported inflectional loss [...] for New Jersey Dutch." She continued:

Although New Netherland Dutch shows clearly signs of morphological reduction, the process was never completed [...]. Buccini (1992) summarized the linguistic situation in New Netherland Dutch as follows: "While inflection was reduced ... the reduction was largely phonologically motivated: *the principle remained until the end*" (Deumert's emphasis).

With regard to syntax Bachman (1980: 11) pointed out the following:

This syntactical change was not usually accompanied by simplification and regularization of verb forms, as has occurred in Afrikaans. Compare Afrikaans *ek het gekry*, *hy het gekry*, with Mohawk Dutch *ek hev gekrege*, *hy hee gekrege*. In this respect Low Dutch is more conservative than Afrikaans, though it lost contact with Holland Dutch before Afrikaans did.

Whereas Cape Dutch (Afrikaans) found its definitive shape only at the end of the nineteenth century (*cf.* Deumert 2004), nineteenth-century Low Dutch changed at a much slower pace, thus showing "its remarkable conservatism," as Buccini (1996: 38) once observed.

18 Cf. Gold 1993, Buccini 1996.

Before defending the hypothesis that, due to various circumstances, Low Dutch had largely become stabilized by the end of the eighteenth century, I should like to revisit the materials assembled in Prince 1910 and 1913. Prince relied primarily on four informants, who provided him with 664 words and 136 mostly short sentences. Can these data provide clear insight into the language changes taking place in Low Dutch from the end of the eighteenth century onwards?

I should like to add that scholars disagree regarding the extent of English influence and its consequences. Based on the corpus compiled by Prince, van Marle (2001: 92) concludes that English bore a heavy influence on Low Dutch (“the body of Low Dutch is Dutch, and manifestly so, but in my view the soul of Low Dutch was clearly on its way to becoming English”), whereas Buccini (1995) argues that the English influence was largely limited to the lexicon and more superficial aspects of the grammar and phonology.

Although I cannot go into detail, the data provided by Prince demonstrate the difficulty of making anything conclusive statements regarding phonetics and phonology (*cf.* Shetter 1958: 244). Several possible English influences can indeed be identified in the context of the morphology of the verbs. As stated by van Marle (2001: 95), the field of syntax presents a clear case for the English influence. For example, Gehring found that written materials from the eighteenth century contained a number of sentences with an English word order. It is evident, however, that not all of van Marle’s examples of English influence are warranted by the 1910 and 1913 corpus. On the whole, Prince’s data are neither sufficient nor clear enough to provide a satisfying answer to the various questions advanced by those interested in “colonial linguistics.”

What actually happened following the Great Dutch Language Schism of the eighteenth century? In the absence of more data regarding the last phase of Low Dutch, “it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions” (van der Sijs 2009: 48).

7. Concluding remarks

For the interested reader, I should like to mention that the literature contains more additional Low Dutch sources other than those that I have been able to address explicitly in this paper, including the writings of the notorious American amateur linguist Dr. L. G. van Loon (1903–1982), as well as the intriguing nineteenth-century (?) *Notebook* by his grandfather, Walter Hill (1856–1926), who was a teacher in the Mohawk Valley. I have refrained from discussing these potential sources, as specialists are currently debating their linguistic value and their authenticity. I shall return to this matter on another occasion.

As has become clear in this paper, further research into the vicissitudes of Low Dutch will demand that we have a much larger quantity of language data at our disposal. Fortunately, a major project is expected to commence soon at the Meertens Instituut in Amsterdam. The institute plans to establish a vast digital corpus of American Dutch from all periods, both colonial and post-colonial. Within a few years, it will thus be possible to consult the previous findings of our colleagues and to test new hypotheses concerning the *true* development of Low Dutch.

I am personally anxious to know how “old Mrs. Lavinia Bartholf” actually pronounced her famous statement “*önze tâl äs lêx däuts en hælliz äz Hôl-läns*” (“our language is low Dutch and thiers is Holland

Dutch”) in her conversation with professor Prince. Even with the help of an extensive digital corpus on Low Dutch, however, I am afraid we will never know.

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