THE VOLKSGEIST CONCEPT IN DUTCH LINGUISTICS
Issues and controversies, old and new

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1. Introduction

Almost one hundred and fifty years ago, in 1849, the first Dutch Linguistic and Literary Conference was held in Ghent, Belgium. In his opening address Dr F. A. Snellaert (1809-1872) argued that we should use every possible means to "strengthen the spirit of the people, and that we should fight those who worked against the development of the spirit of the people". One of the means of combat was language. As many nineteenth-century Dutch and Flemish linguists understood it, language was the mirror of this 'volksgeest', the expression of the soul of the people, and the relationship between the two reciprocal: by influencing the language one could influence the character of the people. This is the well-known thesis of the "Weltbild der Sprache": language, especially the mother tongue, has a certain influence and degree of impact on the "Weltansicht" of the speakers, and vice versa.

For the sake of brevity, I shall use the German term 'Volksgeist' throughout the remainder of this article as a technical term to indicate this concept, which, though rather obscure, has nevertheless attained a certain notoriety in our discipline. In this paper I would like to discuss two Dutch linguistic controversies which are connected by the underlying concept of Volksgeist. First, I shall discuss the case of Afrikaans, a language which is related to Dutch and is spoken in South Africa.

2. The Case of Afrikaans

In the second decade of the twentieth century a lively discussion concerning the South African language, the Afrikaans spoken by the Boers, took place in various Dutch periodicals. The main question seemed to confine itself to literary aspects: is it possible to achieve full-fledged poetry in this language? The debate, however, was to an important degree determined by linguistic views.

Compared to Dutch the grammar of Afrikaans looks rather simple. For example, verbs do not have finite forms. Present tense conjugation is limited to the stem of the verb. Furthermore, there is no gender, and there are no cases. It is true that Afrikaans words and phrases would coax a smile from many a Dutchman, since to Dutch ears the language sounds like a strange kind of Dutch. As the Minister of Internal Affairs Mr. Th. Heemskerk (1852-1932) put it in Dutch Parliament in 1909:

[In South Africa the Dutch race has developed on a new soil. It did so in accordance with ancient traditions, but under circumstances completely different from those under which we are living. It has not at all developed while in a centre of civilisation, as has been our case, but rather during a continuous fight against the powers of the wilderness. Thus, the people as a whole and the language spoken by this people have taken on a childlike character (emphasis added; Noordegraaf 1991: 275).]


2 The idea that Afrikaans is a simple language is very prevalent amongst the Dutch. However, "so-called simplification of certain aspects of the grammar [of Afrikaans] has been compensated for by new difficulties, not present in Dutch, in other aspects of the grammar" (Donaldson 1993: xvi).
Before 1880, the Dutch did not pay very much attention to South African affairs. Furthermore, the image of the Boers was rather negative. One Dutchman who, during the 1870s, travelled around Transvaal, one of the Boer republics, wrote in a most negative way about the Transvaal people. He called them cowardly, wicked, hypocritical, perjured, unreasonable, inhospitable, lazy, dirty, and ungrateful. And - what is significant in this context - the language they spoke, Afrikaans, was "the ugliest and most mixed dialect that ever existed" (Schutte 1986: 18). In one of the Dutch newspapers Afrikaans was characterized as "unmelodious", "weak" and "unmanly" (Schutte 1986: 232). It was not until 1880, after the onset of the First Anglo-Boer War (the "Transvaal War", 1880-1881), that the Dutch developed a sudden interest towards their South African "cousins"; and it is striking to see how quickly the image of the Boers changed from negative to positive.

After the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) a South African cultural movement had been striving towards the development and emancipation of the native language, Afrikaans. Finally, in 1925, it was recognized as an official national language on a par with English. That meant not only a political emancipation, but a cultural one as well, namely an emancipation from Dutch.

From around 1900 on, there have been occasional references in the Dutch press to what was called "South African literature". In 1909 and 1910 various collections of poems by South African poets were reviewed. That meant the recognition of a literature which should be taken seriously. The central question that was raised then was: is it really possible to write good poetry in a language such as Afrikaans?

One of those who trumpeted negative views of South African poetry was the Dutch literary critic, Carel Scharten (1878-1950), a well-known man of letters. In his 1910 review of a collection of South African poems in the leading cultural periodical De Gids, he rejected once and for all the idea that it was possible to write good poetry in Afrikaans:

The Afrikaans (this peasant Dutch) is ugly [...] it is a disabled and mutilated and impoverished dialect, which sounds like the speech of someone who has a speech impediment. In this language no permanent art can develop into maturity. It is a deaf-and-dumb language that may occasionally have the charm of childish awkwardness (Scharten 1910: 538-539; cf. 1911: 32).

Scharten advised the Boer poets to use a simple, but pure form of Dutch, or to accept the English language, which could be spoken so pleasantly. In another article on spelling, one year later, he repeated his negative stance concerning that "threadbare language" (Scharten 1911: 34). In short, he considered Afrikaans an impoverished language; it had lost the characteristics of written Dutch, such as inflection, and it should be seen, therefore, as the end-product of a process of linguistic decay set in motion by the contact with savage peoples. It was clear to him that people used to expressing themselves with a rather simple language cannot easily elevate their intelligence to the genius of a European language. The uncivilized Boers would be better off to adopt a superior language in order to reach a higher level of culture. Thus Scharten in 1910.

Scharten's stance evoked a prompt response from the linguist Derk C. Hesseling (1859-1941), one of the most brilliant early creolists and an expert on Afrikaans (cf. Meijer & Muysken 1977; Smolansky 1993). He had published a book on Afrikaans as early as 1899. His curt reply entitled "The future of South African literature" (Hesseling 1910) commented on Scharten's statements. Hesseling was of the opinion that Scharten had not given any arguments to support his claims. It seemed, according to Hesseling, that Afrikaans was just being censured for its perceived lack of complexity and the simplicity of its grammatical system. Whereas Scharten did not believe that Afrikaans could develop autonomously with a fierce competitor like English, Hesseling expressed the belief that the Afrikaner poets could develop a full-fledged language, not by introducing inflectional forms or by affixing discarded verb endings, but by increasing the richness of their every-day vocabulary and of their literature.

Two years later, Cornelis de Vooys (1873-1955), professor of Dutch at Utrecht University, published an article on "South African Language and Poetry" (1913). He regarded the African people as an autonomous variety of the Dutch race. De Vooys admitted that many a Dutchman considered Afrikaans to be a corrupted form of Dutch. However, he said, "everyone who has ever reflected upon the evolution of language, must concede that Afrikaans is no more 'corrupted' Dutch than English is 'corrupted' Anglo-
Saxon”. He had noticed a pattern among developing languages of gradually losing a number of forms in order to meet all the needs of a society which was becoming more and more complex. Afrikaans was indeed fit to fulfill such demands. Moreover, De Vooyes claimed that Scharten's opinions were based on ignorance and prejudice. Obviously, he said, this distinguished author was misled by the biological metaphors he used, such as: "The Flemish language is blossoming so well because it has its roots in the rich Flemish soil, whereas Afrikaans has only the barren sand". Thus, the Flemish poets have become "excellent gardeners", while the Afrikaners have not been able to master the noble art of "language cultivation".

This figurative speech can easily be recognized as an example of the well-known nineteenth-century fondness for such metaphors. But there is another aspect to it that I would like to mention. Two years earlier, Hesseling had published a paper on "Language and Nationality" (Hesseling 1908). "In reflecting upon the characteristics of language", Hesseling wrote, "we very often tend to connect them to the characteristics of the people that speak the language; and then we try to deduce one from the other". Hesseling did not agree with this method. In his view, the slogan: "the language is identical to the people" had often been taken too literally. He criticized the "great scholar" August Schleicher (1821-1868) according to whom language is the best distinguishing characteristic. Hesseling did concede that there was some relationship, but maintained that it was very dangerous to draw conclusions concerning the character of a people on the basis of observations about their language (Hesseling 1908).

Scharten did draw such conclusions. In 1916, he published a review of a collection of poems by a Jewish poet, Jacob Israël de Haan (1881-1924), a lawyer who was also known as a member of the 'Signific Movement' in Holland (cf. Schmitz 1990: 135-188). It is clear from this review that Scharten made crucial use of the Volksgeist concept. He started off by declaring his dislike of Jews and went on to argue along the following lines: In the purest sense of the word, the real poet is, in a manner of speaking, the singing soul of his people; therefore, he can never be a foreigner, and thus never a Jew. As Hebrew is a dead language, a Jewish poet can only express himself in a borrowed Romance or Germanic language, a language which, in itself, has a character and a sound that is in essence different from the sound and the character of his Jewish soul. Thus, the Jews among the great poets of the world are few and far between (cf. Scharten 1917: 30-31).

In the same vein, Scharten criticized a Dutch Jewish writer who "seems to wrestle with our Dutch". If he was to write in a Semitic language of his own, then his ideas would flow out clearly and easily. And of another Jewish author he asked:

[…] does his language resound immediately in our heart, reecho as the language with which we are so familiar? No. We do not feel at home in this language. It is a perfect strange house that we enter […] everything unfamiliar is at first almost sickening to us (Scharten 1917: 31-32).

Scharten’s conclusion was clear. In his opinion authors of Jewish origin would never be able to write in "pure Dutch". Thus, Scharten was convinced that the differences between the works of Jewish authors in Holland and their non-Jewish colleagues could be traced back to "descent and character".

I think that the parallel with Afrikaans is clear, and that the Volksgeist concept was also the basis for his negative stance on South African poetry. For the Jewish poets, however, there was no future. There was hope for the Afrikaners, who were, after all, a Dutch race: the only thing they had to do, was adopt another, non-corrupted Germanic language.

How can we place the discussion of the suitability of Afrikaans as a cultural language within a linguistic framework? As I see it, the linguistic orientation of both Hesseling and De Vooyes gives us the clue. The representative works of the 1890s include Jespersen's Progress in Language which appeared in 1894 and by its very title announced its opposition to the doctrine of linguistic decay. The virtue of a language is

\[ \text{3 In a footnote Hesseling (1908: 18n) quoted the following passage from Schleicher's Über die Bedeutung der Sprache für die Naturgeschichte der Menschen (1865): "Ein Deutscher kann wohl einmal im Haupthaar und Prognathismus es mit dem ausgesprochensten Negerkopf aufnehmen, eine Negersprache wird er aber vom Hause aus niemals reden".} \]
measured by its efficiency, that is, its ability to express the greatest amount of meaning with the simplest mechanism (Jespersen 1894: 12-13). Both Hesseling and De Vooys belonged to the circle involved with the "revolutionary" periodical, *Taal en Letteren* ('Language and Letters', 1891-1906), where Jespersen's book was received with much enthusiasm. In *Taal en Letteren*, Hendrik Logeman (1862-1936) published an abstract from Jespersen's book under the title "Decay or development of language?" (Logeman 1895), and in the same volume Roeland A. Kollewijn (1857-1942) published a Dutch adaptation of a part of Jespersen's book under the title "Word order and case endings" (Kollewijn 1895). It was Jespersen's theory which was applied to Afrikaans by the *Taal en Letteren* linguists. In fact, in his book *Language* Jespersen (1922: 364-365) also claimed the superiority of "African Dutch" to "European Dutch" as a case of "progressive evolution".

Where does Scharten's position originate? I think it was simply an age-old battle fought on new ground. Dutch nineteenth-century linguists held an unfavourable opinion of the French language, a negative feeling which had been something of a topos from the sixteenth century on. As Matthias de Vries (1820-1892), a leading Dutch linguist and lexicographer and a follower of Grimm and Schleicher, once put it: "the internal life" in the Romance languages has become "benumbed" in the consciousness of the people, this in contrast with the living and flourishing Germanic languages (Noordegraaf 1985: 437-438). De Vries's criterion was morphology, and as French has no case system, he was convinced that it was unquestionably inferior to a Germanic language, such as Dutch. And so the French nation must be inferior to the Dutch. The *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* ('Dictionary of the Dutch Language'), founded by De Vries in the 1850s, has as one of its mottos: "Language is the soul of the nation, it is the nation itself". It is obvious that the concept of *Volksgeist* was very much alive in De Vries's Romantic school. It was the literary critic Scharten who applied the concepts of this Dutch philological school to the discussion on Afrikaans.

3. The Dutch Spelling War (1893-1947)

In Jespersen's *Progress in Language* we find an explanation of the idea of language decay that haunted our linguistic forefathers: This idea, said Jespersen, is merely based upon "grammar-school admiration".

People were taught to look down upon modern languages as mere dialects, and to worship Greek and Latin; the richness and fulness of forms found in those languages came naturally to be considered the very *beau idéal* of linguistic structure. To men fresh from the ordinary grammar-school training no language would seem respectable that had not four or five distinct cases and three genders, or that had less than five tenses and as many moods in its verbs. Accordingly, such poor languages as had either lost much of their original richness in grammatical forms (e.g., French, English or Danish) or had never had any (e.g., Chinese), were naturally looked upon with something like the pity bestowed on relatives in reduced circumstances, or the contempt felt for foreign paupers (Jespersen 1894: 9-10; cf. Logeman 1895: 273 n.2).

Jespersen's explanation sounds reasonable enough, but it does not satisfy me completely. At any rate, I feel that it is only half the answer.

The other half is to be found in the perpetual struggle to achieve linguistic cultivation. From the beginning of the nineteenth century on, Dutch linguists have stressed the necessity of studying the native language. On the one hand, they considered the language of a people to be a true depiction of its character. On the other hand, they deemed the cultivation of the mother tongue of crucial importance, as it should contribute to improving the character of the people, to upgrading their civilisation, and to

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4 Actually, it was Logeman, who after reading the original Danish *Vorlage* of this work drew it to the attention of the London publishing house Sonnenschein, suggesting that an English version of this important book should be prepared. It appears that it was on his initiative that Jespersen's *Progress* was written (cf. Logeman 1895: 265).
In a debate in the Royal Netherlands Academy in the 1850s the philosopher and linguist Taco Roorda (1801-1874) had argued that Dutch never had had any inflexional endings, not even in the Middle Ages, and he consequently had pleaded for a reform of the Dutch spelling system. His 'heretical' stimulating their national awareness. And it was especially language as a focus of national awareness that played a major role in critical political situations, when the independence and the native character of the Dutch state had to be emphasized, vis-à-vis Germany for example.

The idea of a mutual relationship between language and the national character is the assumption underlying the optimistic view that it is possible to improve society through language cultivation. More than twenty years ago, Christmann (1981) aptly called this procedure a "praktische Anwendung" of the well-known Weltbild hypothesis. In my study of Dutch text books on purism I found that Christmann's thesis clarified certain matters.

Now I shall try to link up the two ideas just mentioned and apply them in the rest of my paper. On the one hand we have what Jespersen called "the very beau idéal of linguistic structure" (Jespersen 1894: 10), a linguistic optimum as it were, and on the other hand we see a sincere desire among linguists to elevate the people to a higher level of civilisation. I think this idea will suffice to explain Scharten's advice to the Boer poets to write in Dutch.

A closer look at the linguistic discussions in early twentieth-century Holland would show us that those debating for and against Afrikaans were also involved in the battle concerning the simplification of Dutch spelling. Some of Scharten's remarks on Afrikaans can be found in a paper on the problem of spelling, inauspiciously entitled "The Problem of Orthography. The Dangers of Simplified Spelling to the Dutch People and the Dutch Race" (1911). We also see Hesseling's prompt response to Scharten's paper (Hesseling 1911). And De Voovyys, too, was for many, many years involved in the lingering spelling war. Their polemics form an episode in the Dutch spelling war, which took place from 1891 till 1947, and the question is why it took more than half a century of controversy to legalize certain changes in the Dutch spelling system.

As is well known, including on the basis of orthography, conclusions were drawn concerning the character of a people. For example, in the Vorschule der Ästhetik (1804) by Jean Paul Richter (1763-1825) we find the remark that the manner of writing of the English word I, with a capital, can be deduced from the arrogant, egocentric character of the English. It is not surprising that booklets written around the First World War contain similar statements in a more exaggerated form. As further discussion of that trend is beyond the scope of this paper I will confine myself to the matter of Dutch spelling.

I will not discuss the intricate details of Dutch orthography here, but will make some, hopefully useful, introductory remarks. As it happened, it was in 1891 that Dr Roeland A. Kollewijn, an Amsterdam teacher who had been trained in Leipzig, published his paper, "Our difficult spelling: a proposal for simplification". His message was clear: Primary school teachers, more than any other educators, stood to gain a great deal of time for real language education if the written language was made to correspond with the spoken language. That would involve eliminating a lot of dead weight from the traditional orthography, which had been established in the 1860s as part of the work on the Dictionary of the Dutch Language by Matthias de Vries.

The year 1891 also witnessed the publication of the first issue of Taal en Letteren. This periodical had set itself the task of propagating the new linguistic methods, as put forward in particular by the Junggrammatiker. Kollewijn had joined the editors on the understanding that this new journal would enable him to propagate his views on spelling. Among the theses put forward by the men of the Taal en Letteren movement, we find the slogan: 'Language is sound, not a written or printed symbol'. However trivial this thesis may seem, at a time when natural speech was primarily regarded as a degenerate form of written language, there was a glaring need to proclaim that language is essentially everyday speech. In other words, Taal en Letteren stressed the priority of spoken language over that of written language. First and foremost, language is something natural and individual, not something cultural or a supra-individual code to be inculcated by the schoolmasters. So, when spoken language is given the priority, the written language must follow, a process which calls for spelling reform. This implied among other things, that since spoken Dutch no longer possessed a real case system, this system should be abolished in the written language, which had kept it alive more or less artificially.5

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However, the relationship between spoken language and spelling was not perceived by everyone in the way Köllewyn’s followers did. During one of the numerous debates on spelling in the Dutch Parliament, this time in 1909, the former Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), once a professor at the Vrije Universiteit at Amsterdam where he had taught many subjects including linguistics, put forth his views on the subject. First, he quoted a French dictionary:

*la langue c’est la forme apparente et évidente de l’esprit du peuple.* This is a most accurate statement [...] language is stuck to the life of the people and emerges continually from the life of the people.

And speaking of spelling, if we were to compare language to a living body, then spelling would be nothing but the skin, and skin is not pasted to the body nor is it moulded after a model and then put on it, but spelling springs from life itself, from the blood and muscles (Noordegraaf 1991: 275).

In the subsequent historical overview he gave on that occasion Kuyper emphasized that when the spirit of the people had altered, the spelling had also changed. I must admit that in fact Kuyper’s conceptions are not very well defined, neither in this speech in Parliament nor in his other papers on this subject. But what I would like to point out is that from the quotation I just gave it appears that to Kuyper, spelling was not “merely a way of recording language by way of visible marks”, as Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) put it later on. Like many an opponent of simplifying spelling he was of the opinion that changing the Dutch orthography would mean changing the Dutch language. Thus, in Kuyper’s view, simplifying spelling would also have consequences for the degenerating *Volksgeist*, such as indolence, dullness and superficiality. I think that is the reason why the battle pro and contra a simplified spelling system dragged on for so many years: there were moral and ethical values at stake.

Let me focus for a moment on the case system. The aim of discarding the cases in written Dutch did not square with the ambition of those language guardians who were striving for the *beau idéal*, the optimum of linguistic structure as sketched by Jespersen (1894: 10). Written language should even serve as a model for the spoken language. As one linguist once had argued: restoring the simplified case system in spoken Dutch would profit our civilisation and morality (cf. Noordegraaf 1991: 274). In other words, such a restoration would have a most beneficial effect on the spirit of the people. Thus, as Scharten concluded, a simplified spelling system is nothing but a serious threat to both the Dutch people and the Dutch race.

And here we see the re-emergence of the nationalistic theme. The contemporary spelling system was also an embodiment of national values and a symbol of national unity. Everywhere in the Netherlands the same written language was used, even though there was still no uniform standard of spoken Dutch in the first decades of the twentieth century. Spelling both synchronically and diachronically marked the unity of the Dutch nation. Consequently, Scharten remarked: We should not adopt a simplified spelling system for the sake of the Afrikaner people. Furthermore, the classical spelling system functioned as a binding element with regard to politics (the natives in the Dutch colonies could use the same spelling as the people in the mother country did) and with regard to culture (both Dutch and Flemish literary authors could publish their works in one and the same spelling). Moreover, the current spelling regulations guaranteed unobstructed access to older writings, so that the national feeling could be kept alive and strong.

Following the same current of thought the spelling controversy was also used to separate the good Dutchmen from the ‘bad’ ones. Note some telling statements by the Nazi-author, ‘Dr’ Alfred A. Haighton (1897-1943), who had bought his doctor’s title at some obscure Californian university:

> [...] the predilection of the Reds for corrupting the spelling together with the impoverishment of the language inevitably resulting from it [...] must be seen as the expression of their anti-national views had evoked a sharp response from Matthias de Vries and several other traditionally minded scholars of Dutch (cf. Noordegraaf 1990). It does not surprise, then, that the linguists and schoolmasters associated with *Taal en Letteren* saw Taco Roorda as a forerunner in their battle against the dominance of the written language.
tendencies (Haighton 1928: 424).

When the spelling is corrupted, the language is removed from its ancient roots, one takes away its suppleness and flexibility, and the vehicle of thought is impoverished. Small wonder that the very people who are hailing the new spelling indecency are international Jews, communists and other people without fatherland (Haighton 1942: 95).

Moreover, *Volk en Vaderland*, the journal of the Dutch national socialist party, claimed in 1942 on the occasion of the death of the former leader of the reform movement, Roeland A. Kollewijn, that it was only "miserable people" who did not honour and love their own language. In Dutch the word "ellendig" was used, which etymologically means 'from out of the land, not in the fatherland'. In other words: spelling as a shibboleth.

4. Concluding remarks

The *Volksgeist* concept has haunted Dutch linguistics for quite some time. Dutch nineteenth-century linguists considered it their solemn duty to be good patriots, and some of them thought the best way for them to do so was by contributing to the improvement of the language, and thus to the improvement of the Dutch *Volksgeist* - a clear and precise definition of which was never actually given. The optimal language was a language with a proper case system. I think that these ideas had become rather common among many Dutch intellectuals as well.

According to this yard-stick the Afrikaans spoken by the Boers was a degenerate language, which had regressed to a primitive state due to long-standing contacts with savage peoples. If the South African poets wanted to bring forth truly good poetry they would have to switch to a different language, a task which they were capable of accomplishing because they were of Germanic ancestry. As Scharten told his readers, Jewish poets could not, for as they belonged to a different race, they were extraneous to the spirit of the people.

As many people saw it, the proposed simplification of Dutch spelling meant an attack on national values, a corruption of the *Volksgeist*. Therefore, the current spelling system should be defended at all costs.

Once more, I think we should conclude that linguistics cannot be done separated from value judgements and that the linguist must be aware of the possible implications of his professional statements.

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