

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES - LINGUISTICS

LOGICS OF TEN INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

7. DUTCH AND THE POLDER

Want indien men de zelfstandigheid eindig stelde, zo zou men in haar natuur ten deel het wezentlijk te zijn (Existere) ontkennen Negare); 't welk ongerijmt is. (Original spelling) For if we supposed the stand-by-itself, we would partially deny nature itself the essential-nodal being; which is absurd (not rhymed, without rhyme or reason). Spinoza, Ethica, Proposition VIII

7A. The language

Russian showed us that some languages are in close relation with their environment. On this occasion, we quoted Dutch alongside Arab. The 'nederlands' is the language of the Nederlanden, of the low-countries (Brel's Pays-Bas), those of the Dutch Belgium and the Netherlands in the literal meaning. There, in a constant fight against the nourishing and inviting sea, a sea that also submerges, human groupings were called upon to sustain physical performances while they were working on to a very precise social integration; dykes and Polders are no laughing matter. There, the dream is still a reality, even with the mystics.

The Dutch language closely fits this situation. In its diction and in its texts, it creates a rubbing to one's body, to objects and to other bodies in a contact that is sometimes frontal and sometimes gratingly elbow-to-elbow, which contrasts versus the subtle endosomics of Russian.

7A1. Phonosemics

Therefore, in the Germanic common fund(s), which is already consonantal from the start, the language of Spinoza, Rembrandt and Van Eyck privileged robust consonants, and amongst the latter, the very scraping opened gutturals: 'GH' at the initial, 'KH' in final, through which the speaking body projects from a solid within towards a solid without while comforting its grip on the ground. The final occlusive is always voiceless (p-t-k), avoiding the affectation of the 'd' of the English 'god', and the phonemics subtleties of the opposition 'god/got'; if you say 'GHod' instead of 'GHot', it is unusual, but we will understand 'God', and it will not be held against you; in such a realism, the correct pronunciation, like every orthodoxy, has very little credit. The 'r' is richly rolled, the initial 'h' is strong; the 'w' is blown like in English, but

without the sophisticated detour of ‘wh’ (in ‘Water Whitman’). Correlatively, vowels are not very bursting, and many are reduced to the neutral sound, the English ‘murmur vowel’, that we shall write ‘i’: ‘vergemakkelijken’ (making easier) is almost said ‘v_irGH_imak_il_ik_i(n)’. However, these neutral vowels remain solid, and the diphthongs, instead of making the vocal emission float as with English, fill it out: rijk (rèik, rich, kingdom), ‘vrouw’ (vra ou, woman), tuig (teuiKH, tool).

In summary, pronouncing correctly ‘Rembrandt van Rijn’, ‘Bruegh_il’, ‘Rub_ins’, ‘V_irmeer van Delft’, ‘GHeert van Veld_i’, and especially the ‘GH’ and ‘KH’ that catch the central ‘oa’ of Van Gogh (GH-*oa*-KH) in a pincher movement, is already taking a decisive step in the comprehension of the previously-cited painters. Similarly, saying Amsterdam with Brel’s accent, hence with the ‘tir’ framed by ‘am’-‘am’, following the same structure as GH-...-KH, is already understanding the canal-avenues, the ‘grachten’, which also sound GH-...-KH. The divergence with French is well rendered by the opposition between the exclamation ‘Volontiers’, whose phonation is almost ceremoniously bowing, and its Dutch counterpart ‘Graag!’, where, to express the adhesion, the most compact of consonants, ‘GH-KH’, also compress the most compact of vowels, ‘a’.

The almost constant length of vowels, even when neutral, confirms the solidness of the grasping, like in French and in German (so called ‘long’ and ‘short’ vowels are more “closed” and “opened”). But the tessitura is much tighter, right up to the roar of swearwords: ‘God verdoeme! God verdomme!’. As for the accent, nowhere amongst European languages does it mark the support so much. While the English speaker climbs to the higher octave (in ‘extraordinary’, ‘magnificent’, but also in the banal ‘indeed’), while the German enjoys stridencies on one same note (‘Das ist das wichtigste!’), while Danish coos, while the Italian takes courage by raising his voice and by gliding, the Dutch speaker lowers the tone and takes to the ground. Moreover, through the game of morphology, it is frequent that the support, which usually affects the first syllable of the *isolated word*, or rather the unique syllable of the root, as with Germanic languages, is situated within (sometimes even in the middle of) the *phonetic group*, which in turn takes the form of a funnel (light-muffled-light), another modality of the converging and compressing structure that we have just encountered with the form of GH-...-KH: ‘getuigen’, ‘vertrouwen’, ‘gebaren’, bewijzen (in consideration of affixes); ‘de waarde’ (in consideration of the article); ‘de vrienden’ (in consideration of the article and the plural). The accentual funnel can warm up with this reduplication ‘mijn beste vrienden’ (my dear friends). Amongst all the languages that we have envisaged here, Dutch is possibly the only one to have an accent of intensity in the full and rigorous sense of the term.

7A2. Syntax

The morphology of the noun and of the verb is of the same substantial mind. In an immediate realism, why should we burden ourselves with cases, with the exception of a genitive in some composed ‘Vrijheid<s>laan’, ‘avenue <of> ‘the freedom’? The verbal prepositions and affixes suffice to almost everything. Still according to the same substantialist party, the substantive is eloquently known as ‘zelfstandig naamwoord’ (word-of-noun supported-by-itself) and it maintains the three Indo-European genders, masculine, feminine, neutral, whose determination is much more tolerant than in French (still the loathing for dogmatism). Germanically, we encounter many compounds, but the latter are never too long (no excess

anywhere). The Dutch translation of the French 'dentifrice' (toothpaste) is 'tandpasta', not the German-style 'Zahnreinigungsmittel'. The etymology is present, as with other Germanic languages, but does not have the deflagrating force that it harbours in German.

The syntax confirms the substantialist depth by exploiting firmly the nesting disposition of the Germanic mechanisms. Hence, the subordinate has the form: subject + complement + verb. And the main phrase follows the inversion, verb + subject + complement, every time that the sentence begins with something other than the subject of the main. An adverb may even come in between a pre-nominal phrase. To the French 'Maintenant j'en suis intimement persuadé' corresponds the 'Nu ben ik er vast van overtuigd', where 'nu ben ik overtuigd' ('now am I persuaded') in turn clasps 'vast' (firmly). As is expected in a very immediate realism, mentalist modes are not much marked: there is hardly any subjunctive. The determiners (adjectives, some complements) are Germanically placed before the determinatum, but never in packs like with English; and 'van' (the French 'de') is frequent, still for a want of robust evidence. The 'phrasal verb' instead of remaining grouped as in English, ('to go on', 'to sort out') can often be separated ('afscheidbaar'), meaning that it sends back the affix to the end of the proposition, however long the latter may be, confirming the nesting, clasping structure.

7A3. *Semantics*

In turn, the semics of words evokes unparalleled densities. For instance, 'wezen', which we translate per essence. The German corresponding, 'Wesen', also designates what characterises and distinguishes something. But we do feel that, for German, the essence consists in ways of being, and 'Wesen' also means 'manners': this should feed sensitive dialectics, whether of Fichte or Hegel. At the opposite, the Dutch 'Wezen' puts forward not ways of being, but being itself, being as a compact centre, as a nucleus ('kern'). These two orientations, the first more determinative, the second more ontological, confirm each other in 'verweszen'- 'verwesen' that is adjoined by the Germanic prefix 'ver', which marks every type of transformation (accomplishment, destruction, deviation, inversion etc). However, German understands 'verwesen' in the sense of decomposing and of administering; it is another case of determinations. The Dutch understands 'verwezenlijken', 'verwezenlijking' as 'put-into-being', in an action whose ontological ('ontologizing', 'enheading' force) does not find an equivalent in the French 'effectuer' or in the English 'realizing', or in the German 'ausführen, verwirklichen, realisieren'. The nodal grasping finds confirmation in the substantive, 'substantie', which also designates a nucleus 'kern', or the raw matter, while the German corresponding 'Substanz', only has a philosophical use, almost quotative. The contrast is fundamental. On the one hand, the infinite and infinitesimal plurality and plurification of the monads of Leibniz. On the other hand, the solidity, the 'all in one piece' of the substance of Spinoza.

Moreover, this goes beyond the case of 'wezen', and it is indeed the whole Dutch vocabulary that has a tendency to centre, concentrate, and gather, instead of disseminating. In other words, the semantic proliferation is as reduced as it is prosperous in German or in English. We can see this in the perception of affixes. In current English or German dictionaries, prefixes ('be-', 'ver-', 'ent-', etc.) give way to particular and rich entries. To the contrary, a Dutch dictionary like the Van Daele does not allow any. Everything takes place as though a prefix, when it is inseparable ('onafscheidbaar'), should become one with the word, should take in its

weighing, its global insistence, whilst in English it results in logical games, and in German to dialectic, phenomenological, psychoanalytic games.

We must then gather the semic, morphologic, and phonic characters that we have noted up to now to understand the extraordinary massiveness of Dutch words that implicate the speaker himself, such as 'getuigen' (testify), 'vertrouwen' (having trust in), 'beslissen' (deciding). Or still, the 'houden' of the 'Ik Hou' ('je tiens' - 'I hold') of William of Orange, that is only translated into French by adding 'bon' ('je tiens bon' - 'I hold on'), and whose entire coalescence is unveiled in 'houden van', literally 'taking from', which is a lot more adhesive than French's 'tenir à', as we read in *the Diary of Anne Franck*: 'Nu is mijn eerste wens na de oorlog, maak me Nederlander! Ik houd van de Nederlanders, ik houd van ons land, ik houd van de taal, en wil hier werken.' (It is my first wish that after the war, I should be made Dutch! I care for the Dutch, I care for our country, I care for the language, and I want to work here). In French and in English, this will sound hollow and grandiloquent. In its original version, the 'houden van' elbow-to-elbow and 'dichter bij' (more closely close), is the lateral corresponding of the frontal 'verwezenlijking'.

Therefore, there is nothing in this rough density that goes to the oral scraping, nothing opposing that the spelling is strictly phonetic, as in Spanish, but without the accentuation, which is generally obvious ('it is not necessary to make four passes when you can score in two passes', says the Bordeaux football trainer, a Dutchman). And the horizontal solidity obviously excludes the capitalizing of substantives in the German manner. The gestures that accompany the language are relatively rare, but, when the Dutch mime, they do it with the same immediacy and the same participation of every limb of their body than of their words. Evidently, the generalised 'verwezenlijking' goes hand in hand with a crudeness that excludes any half-tone. In French, because of the latent abstraction of terms, even concrete, we can say and write, for instance, that sexual copulation comprises a mortice and tenon relation. For the sheer discomfort of translators, the formula, if it were literally transposed into Dutch, would be so brutal that it would be a misinterpretation.

However, every language, being inadequate in what it expresses, needs a certain rate of sliding, of fleeing, of subtlety. Where can we find them here without contravening to the structure of the language? We shall keep in mind five main resorts. (1) The overabundant use of diminutives, '-je, -tje, -ke': 'will you hold my hand', gives us 'geef me een handje' (will you give me your little hand). (2) The insertion of short elements devoid of imperious function, like the 'eens' (once); hence the incongruous 'une fois' of Brussels-dwellers marked by bilinguism. Incidences such as 'zie je' (you see?) or 'weet u' (you know?) are so frequent that there is even a special name for them: 'stopwoorden' (stop words = mots d'arrêts). (3) The sliding of the intonation in the English manner, particularly in Holland. (4) The simpering of the intonation in the French manner, particularly in Belgium. (5) The massive borrowing of foreign words that are pronounced more or less with their native accents, and that are in no way related to an inbred poverty of the vocabulary, since Dutch has the same common fund as German, even if it does not allow itself long compounds.

The flirt with French, which reached its paroxysm in the Dutch 18th century, deserves a special mention here. Here like everywhere else, from London to Moscow, this type of mannerism ensures social marking. But there is more. English has the (Shakespearian) convenience and power of composing the semantic resources of Germanic languages, which

are mobilising and universalising, and the Romanic languages, which are legal and universalising. For the Dutch language, borrowings to French were a means of participating to the same benefit. The seduction was made stronger that the Dutch speaker shares with the French speaker the taste for the evidence of the language, in contrast with English or German, less straightforward.

7B. Cultural consonances

This system was not to feed many musical creations, except in the 15th century, in the moment of the so-called French Flemish polyphony. The latter was particularly dense and thick, to the extent that its depth was sometimes compared to that of oil painting. However, the 15th century conveyed an extraordinary pictorial production, both in quantity and in quality.

So-called ‘Dutch’ and ‘Flemish’ painting is an art of the matter, ‘materia prima’ in the scholastic sense, whose status below any determination violently struck Antonin Artaud faced with Van Gogh (*Vincent Van Gogh, suicidé de la société*), Jean Genet faced to Rembrandt (*What remains of a Rembrandt torn into regular little squares, is thrown into the loos*), Samuel Becket faced to Bram (Abraham) Van Velde (*The World and the Trousers*). But it is also, very often, a painting of pure geometry right up to strict non-figuration, with Saenredam and Piet Mondriaan, or still, in the “De Stijl” group: the names of ‘Rotterdam’ and ‘Amsterdam’ evoke the dyke (dame), the name of the Den Haag evoke the hedge.

Combining the two aspects, Vermeer triggered a matter-order, or rather a substantially arrested matter-light, contemporary of Spinoza. In the same way, because of their preliminary white background and their figures that push each other from the back with the former and curve towards the back with the second, Bosch and Bruegel produced a graphic and luminous painting from-behind and of-for-within. Van Eyck is the most compact painter of human history: compactness of graphics, compactness of brilliance. Right up to the Holland ‘little masters’, the rooms within the room, the door opening onto the door, like also, in still lives, the fruit within the fruit, the game within the game all repeat the nesting structure that is activated by the syntax and phosemy of the language. However, we shall make a distinction between painters from the North, more static, protestant, and with strict morals, with the painters from the South, who are more turbulent, catholic, and whose morals are more accommodating.

In architecture, these simultaneously singular and collective speakers have produced facades that were different each time (for the autarky of the individual) but according to a communal calibre (for the community adhesion), contrasting with the anarchic calibre façadism that we find in the cultural *no man’s land* of Brussels. ‘Fitted’ Mondrian kitchens have been designed, and the few rectangular planks of the chair dated 1917 by architect Rietveld remain the most decisive declaration of the group De Stijl, the springboard and mentor of Bauhaus.

Of course, there is little or no political ideology. There is no need for ‘socialism’, or even of a ‘declaration of human rights’ for society or the enterprise to be egalitarian and take care of everyone. The word ‘burgerij’ (bourgeoisie) does not designate an abstract state, but the collection of well-established individuals, ‘welgesteld’ practicing an intense local organisation

(localising) (attentive picking up of dog mess by the superclean vans of the ‘Hague poo’, the ‘Haagse Kak’), but by respecting, almost exalting the radical independence of everyone. No ‘little’ bourgeois, at least not in the North. Every Bourgeois is middle class by its being, by its ‘wezen’, even if he is ‘provo’, or hooligan or mad, since the *Ship of Fools* and *Dulle Griet*. One understands nothing of realism if one has not measured its familiarity with common madness, meaning with Ruysbroek, Erasme, Bosch, or Bruegel.

The commercial enterprise bears the same face. If it mistrusts pretentious projects, it spontaneously envisages long-term strategies. The colonisation of Indonesia yesteryear and the globalisation of Philips today demonstrate that the apparently short-sighted, limiting ‘verwezenlijking’ (painter Vermeer did not leave Delft) can go a long way. New York, which was New Amsterdam in a first while, vouches this in the Dutch names of the ‘Bowery’ (bawjri), de Harlem (harlɪm) et de Brooklyn (brouklɪn). And let us not forget Peter Stuyvesant, the Flying Dutchman, whose take-off still inspires today the ascending diagonal of all its advertisements.

With this speech and this graphic, literature is by no means mediocre, but it lacks the dimension of painting, except during the middle ages, whose realism, fantastic for its reality, was in communion with the structure of the language, both in *Reinaert de Vos* (Reynard the fox) and in Ruysbroek’s moderate mysticism. Even during the Renaissance, when Erasmus writes and thinks his *Encomium moriae* (praise of folly) and his *Ratio verae theologiae*, we could not understand the European fascination that his pantagruelism exerted (‘Father, I said, I would even say mother (...); the little that I am and everything that I can be worth, I have received it from you only’, writes Rabelais to him) if we do not follow, from line to line, the breeding of the *Reinaert* and of the ‘common life’. The Huizinga of *Homo ludens* would not contradict us.

But let us conclude with the striking case of Spinoza, in this 17th century of painters. In summary, after what we have seen, it is hardly surprising that a Jew of Portuguese origins living in Amsterdam and the Hague and working as a glass polisher and reading Descartes, and furthermore the exact contemporary of Vermeer de Delft, should have traced the dykes of the metaphysical polder that the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* represents, where beatitude stems from the acquiescence of the adequately grasped essence of what is within-one. ‘Acquiescence’ (quiescere ad, resting to-towards-in) was recognised by the Littré to translate the Spinozian *acquiescentia*. However, if we read the Latin text of the *Ethica*, how can we not be disturbed by the fact that this acquiescence, which exerted such fascination on Flaubert, seems to elude from largely formal concepts, such as ‘substantia’ and ‘attributum’, or concepts that are rather flat, like ‘existere’?

So, it is useful – even necessary – to remember that Spinoza learned Latin rather late, when he was around twenty, and that he continued to think in his mother tongue. This was not the case, let us remember, of the Descartes of the *Meditationes*, a formidable Latin writer, or even of mathematician Pascal who apologises for switching into Latin to be better understood in a letter to Fermat. So, in the presence of annotations in Dutch, both short and decisive, of the Latin version of the *Ethica*, we note that the timid ‘substantia’ (the quality of being below) is in fact a ‘zelf-stand-ig-heid’ (quality of what stands by itself), which is phonically and also semantically more massive than the German ‘Selb(st)-stand-ig-keit’. That the cold ‘attributum’ (attributed to) is an affair of ‘toe-eigen-ing’ the Germanic ‘eigen’ (own) being much more

intimate than its Latin counterpart, without mentioning that it is here the verbal substantive (-ing), and not of the noun (-nis). That the banal 'existere' (sistere-ex) of Latin is 'het wezenlijk te zijn', with the nodal, nuclear strength that we recognised to the 'wezen', and not a simple 'bestaan' (fact of being).

And in this way, once the three massiveness and autarkies hiding behind 'substantia', 'attributum', 'existere' have been weighed, the famous introductory definition of the *Ethica* ('Per causam sui intelligo id cuius essentia involvit existentiam...') acquires the absolute density that allows it to engender all the dykes of propositions, demonstrations, scholium, corollaries right to the final 'acquiescence' through 'adequate ideas'. Particularly that, from an annotation on the second page of the *Ethica*, 'natura' is put in relation with 'des zelfs natuur', where the Germanic 'zelf' is a lot denser than the Latin 'ipsum' or the French 'soi-même'. A half Dutch, half Jewish follows without false note, where everyone pushes his advantage as far as possible and at the lesser possible cost, without complex, the universal order being recognised for what it is. Is it even here that ontology engenders ethic, or is it the opposite? The fact is that Spinoza titled *Ethica* the most ontological (the most 'radical') ontology.

Dutch as a philosophical language? In any case, not like German, which triggers historical dialectic, transcendental analysis, phenomenology and psychoanalysis, because of its etymological volcanism, that we do not find here. This language is too much good sense to feed the pretension of a philosopher to explain everything: Spinoza's 'ideae adaequatae' do not explain everything, but they lay a foundation; closer to us, we shall compare the solid and dull *De Vrouw (The Woman)* of naturalist F.J.J. Buytendijk to the brilliant and specious *Second Sex* of Simone de Beauvoir. On the other hand, could Dutch not be theological, of a specific theology that would simultaneously be intense and ordinary (we should like to use the word secular)? The question arises when we follow the path of Ruysbroek, Erasme, Spinoza and some of today's theologians. A Beguine convent theology or a theology of 'brothers (sisters) of common life'. Not without some sharp kicks, strongly diagnosed by Claude Louis-Combet.

Balzac set *La Recherche de l'Absolu* in this shinning interior of the almost Flanders France. We shall continue to think of it as we dream, more than of the alchemist Van Helmont, of the pendulums and light undulations of Huygens, of the animalcules of Van Leeuwenhoek, and of the osmotic mutations and pressures of plants with De Vries. Dutch painter De Kooning has been the most complete master of American art between 1950 and 1980.

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Translated by Paula Cook

Note:

The reference reader of this study was Wim De Geest, professor and faculty dean at the UPSAL.