



Research Study

The Secret Handshake of Dutch: How the Dutch Have Systematically Denied Access to their Language in the Caribbean

TERRI LYNNE BAKKER, Language Planning and Policy Coordinator: Saba and St. Eustatius, Saba Educational Foundation

ABSTRACT. Despite recent decades of intervention, the Dutch language remains inaccessible to the non-Dutch speaking populations of the Caribbean. Dutch colonialism ushered in multicultural development, yet also maintained Dutch as the *de facto* language of power. This article examines how the Dutch advanced their linguistic ideology throughout history and how currently, Dutch remains the language of exclusion and failure for the English-creole-speaking populations of Saba and St. Eustatius, maintaining European control over the public entities of the islands. This study analyses the relevant histories within the framework of historical persistence (Nunn, 2012) and identifies some of the underlying ideologies using ethnological methodology (McCarty, 2015), highlighting the dichotomy between the coloniser and the colonised. In sum, this examination points toward the Dutch people's reluctance to share their language with people of other cultures, preferring to maintain sole proprietorship of the language of power. Addressing this underlying dogma is vital to any attempts to equalise the language playing field for the islands' inhabitants.

RÉSUMÉ. La langue néerlandaise demeure inaccessible aux peuples non-néerlandais qui habitent les territoires colonisés antérieurement par les Pays-Bas, malgré les décennies récentes remplies d'interventions. Le colonialisme néerlandais apporta aux Antilles néerlandaises un ère de développement multiculturel, tout en gardant en place le néerlandais en tant que langue de pouvoir dans les faits. Le présent article cherche à comprendre comment les Néerlandais ont réussi à promouvoir leur idéologie linguistique dans cette partie du monde à travers l'histoire, et également la façon dont la langue néerlandaise est restée la langue de l'exclusion et de l'échec pour les gens des îles de Saba et de St. Eustatius, un peuple qui parlent un créole basé sur l'anglais. Le contrôle européen sur les entités publics est désormais maintenu dans ces îles. Cette étude analyse les histoires pertinentes dans le cadre de la « persistance historique » (Nunn, 2012). Nous identifions des idéologies qui sous-tendent la situation, à l'aide d'une méthodologie ethnologique (McCarty, 2015, tout en mettant l'emphase sur la dichotomie entre le colonisateur et le colonisé. Pour résumer, cette étude démontre que le peuple néerlandais refuse carrément de partager leur langue avec des gens issus d'autres cultures, choisissant plutôt de rester les seules et uniques propriétaires de la langue de pouvoir. Si l'on cherche à rendre plus équitable la situation linguistique aux Antilles néerlandaises pour les peuples colonisés, il faudra s'adresser à ce dogme.

Keywords: *language planning and policy, Dutch Caribbean, language inequality.*



"Perhaps we have become especially interested over time in uncovering the indistinct voices, covert motivations, embedded ideologies, invisible instances, or unintended consequences of language policy emergent in context."

~ (Hornberger & Johnson, 2015, p. 13)

INTRODUCTION

Caribbean policy under the Dutch seems to be guided by two opposing principles: the head and the heart, or the conscious and the subconscious. Intellectually, the Dutch are keen to guide, fund, support and aid their Caribbean counterparts, but under the surface, perhaps even unbeknownst to the Dutch themselves, dark currents of the vestiges of colonialism and discrimination run strong. This article arises out of the research and subsequent language planning and policy formulation which were meant to address the polemic surrounding Dutch education on the Caribbean islands of Saba and St. Eustatius, where students receive an average of twelve years of instruction in the Dutch language, yet very few ever achieve even a basic level of proficiency.

Saba and St. Eustatius, both *bijzondere gemeenten* or special municipalities (all translations in this article are by the author, unless specified otherwise) which currently form a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, are English lexifier creole speaking islands which have been dominated by Dutch colonialism since the 17th century. These two islands, located 32 km from each other in the Lesser Antilles, fall mostly under the shadow of their larger and more populous neighbour, St. Maarten, another English creole speaking island nation in the Dutch Kingdom. Saba and St. Eustatius have experienced a history of linguistic colonisation, from education systems in which the language of instruction, Dutch, is an unknown language for the students, to governmental, legal and judicial systems which operate in a language barely known by their residents, to an insistence on fluency in the Dutch language for governmental employment. Education in the European Netherlands should be an attractive option for island students, yet very few choose this path and even fewer are successful. What, for many Netherlanders, is a subconscious dedication to hegemonic sovereignty combined with a conscious veneration of their own public image has permitted the implementation of *de facto* Dutch language policies which institutionalise failure for the majority of students on the islands.

The reader is invited to explore two foundational arguments which are only briefly explained within the confines of this article: the first is Nathan Nunn's concept of historical persistence, elaborated upon both in his paper "Culture and the historical process" which appears in *Economic history of developing regions* (Nunn, 2012) as well as in "Historical development" in the *Handbook of economic growth* (Nunn, 2014). The second is the concept of Dutch colonialism and hierarchical citizenship highlighted by Guno Jones (2016) in his study "What is new about Dutch populism? Dutch colonialism, hierarchical citizenship and contemporary populist debates and policies in the Netherlands."



Culture and Historical Persistence

Nunn's question "Does culture even exist?" (2012, p. 111) is answered with empirical evidence demonstrating that "different societies make systematically different decisions when faced with the same decision with exactly the same available actions and pay-offs." This decision-making process is deeply ingrained and operates on a subconscious level. The next step in understanding the process of culture is understanding that past events permanently affect our norms, behaviour, and rules of thumb or heuristics. Boyd and Richardson (1985) recognised that societies can adopt different cultural beliefs, and that our emotions can and do evolve, but, in general, this is an extremely slow-moving process and spans long periods of time. This is what is termed *historical persistence* (Nunn, 2012, p. 109). The evolution of our cultural norms is like the movement of a glacier: just as imperceptible and just as forceful.

DUTCH COLONIALISM

The persistent impact of Dutch hegemony held sway to varying degrees on the two Caribbean islands under discussion in this article. St. Eustatius, more commonly called Statia by the locals, has had a long history with the Dutch and Dutch colonisation, whereas Saba, dubbed *isla inútil* (useless island) by the Spanish, saw minimal interaction with the Dutch. Saba is a volcano of 13km², whose cliffs plummet straight to great depths and offer no easy access by boats to the land. Saba saw a few Englishmen—its first European visitors—wash ashore from a shipwreck in 1632, a few Dutch settlers arriving around 1640 (who were expelled a few decades later by the English), and Irish and Scottish farmers, boat builders and fishermen who, along with a few enslaved people, formed the ancestry of the current population. The plantation economy could never take hold given the harsh geography, and class distinctions were relatively limited. The Sabans were primarily governed by local officials. From the early years of the Dutch *Gouden Eeuw* (Golden Age) until very recent times, Saba was primarily ignored by the Europeans. Thus the Dutch impact on the culture in terms of Nunn's framework may have been less encompassing than in the next case of Statia.

Statia, in contrast to Saba, became the crown jewel of the Dutch Caribbean. A big island according to Saban standards at 21km², Statia offered great geological advantages to the European traders arriving in the 17th century: a harbour free of navigational hazards which was directly approachable from the sea, easily defended from the high cliffs surrounding the sea, and a beach length of shoreline for storage of goods for trade. Statia also offered the early colonists a trade port free from yellow fever and malaria, killers which were rampant in many Caribbean outposts (Enthoven, 2012, p. 246). Statia offered little in terms of arable land, and the scarcity of water made a plantation economy difficult, but it was identified early on for its advantages for commerce.

Statia became such an important part of the Dutch empire that Statian culture evolved to mirror similar values in decision making as her coloniser. In Statian society, Dutch values held sway. Those values were predominantly in favour of the Europeans over the Statians, creating a social



dilemma which is still prevalent today. The Statians' access to power and freedom was embedded in their ability to act and think *Dutch*.

Dutch Heuristics

Dutch decision-making has developed along the lines of making choices which seem progressive, forward-thinking, and emblematic of Dutch goodwill, while the anchoring principles of those decisions are based in an adamant insistence on preserving the power and status of the ruling class. The following historical decisions highlight the heuristics which have governed the historical ideology of the Dutch nation.

The Dutch profited greatly from the commerce that prevailed under their system of free trade. This challenge to the Spanish and British system of mercantilism was an economic advantage for the Dutch, as it opened up Dutch ports to highly profitable commerce deemed illegal by many European powers. St. Eustatius had a particularly vital place in this enterprise, including Dutch profit in the trade of enslaved Africans. From a distance, the concept of *free* trade resonates in ways similar to *liberty* and *democracy*. The details, however, include illicit trade, contraband and a flexible view on legality. The motivating factor had far less to do with freedom, and far more to do with profit.

The doctrine of conversion is central in the teaching of the Reformed Church, and "enslavement of the infidel was justified in order to make him a Christian" (Sheeler, 1957, p. 67). Thus the foundations of the Dutch policies of subjugating the enslaved were rooted in theological, ethnic, and social arguments about their inferiority. An added bonus in converting the uncivilised African to the *one true faith* was the opportunity to teach the enslaved or formerly enslaved that they deserved their fate on earth—or at least were destined to endure it—but, if they were good, obedient, and submissive, they could earn their reward in the afterlife. It seems fair to say that saving the "barbaric infidels" gleamed in the Dutch treasure chest of altruism.

The concept of the Dutch as saviour appears to have gone far beyond the church doors. Pollman argues that the Dutch ideology of the saviour had evolved into "a curious enthusiasm for performing good deeds—these good deeds must be imposed on the poor and the oppressed, if necessary" (Pollman, 2000, p. 102). According to this view, in the War of Indonesian Independence (1945-1949), the Dutch could much more easily endorse a mission to the East in which they could play the hero, rather than face their role as colonisers battling oppressed indigenous populations fighting for their rights and their independence. The Indonesians' crushing defeat of their Dutch colonisers did not fit into the dominant Dutch ideology. The Dutch responded to this defeat by ignoring and silencing it, including the experiences of the returning Dutch troops, stunned by a bloody and violent war. Today most Dutch people do not understand their country's role in Indonesia.

This brings us to hierarchical citizenship as articulated by Jones (2016). I observe that over 70 years later, the Dutch continue to arrive on the islands of Saba and Statia in substantial



numbers, buttressed by their sense of mission to *fix* the islands and the islanders themselves. The locals, knowing they cannot flourish as independent nations of only 2000 and 3000 inhabitants, sigh deeply and are forced to endure the patronising salvation delivered to them by the European Dutch.

The doctrine of tolerance has a long history in the Netherlands. It has its roots in the wars with Spain in 1579. Boogman states:

The political elite in Holland revealed themselves, in the crisis years of 1572 and 1573, as masters in the art of compromise and accommodation [which] would later in the Dutch Republic become a characteristic feature of the entire political system. (1979, p. 379)

As a result of this approach, the majority of the regents in Holland were able to at least maintain, and in many cases, strengthen, their power. In 1848, the King of the Netherlands, in a supposed attempt to give the people more say in government, instituted a constitution which curtailed the powers of the king. This democratic constitution was a new and radical idea, and it still took a long time for the societies of Europe to grasp the meaning of representation for the people and by the people. In reality, this constitution most likely arose as an attempt to avert the political upheavals raging at that time across Europe and toppling the status quo. This revolutionary constitutionalisation of the kingdom set the stage for future independence for the colonies, but also foreshadowed an independence which would be subject to hidden motivations.

Education For All

When the Dutch lost the legal right to own and exploit the non-European descended populations of their colonies through coercive force, they maintained control by means of discursive force, through religion and just enough education so that the formerly enslaved could read the Bible. By reading the scriptures, the non-Dutch could access for themselves the church's domesticating messages of suffering and submission to authority in this life for redemption in the next. It is possible that literacy could potentially also provide them access to problematic texts which encouraged freedom of thinking, but in the closed circular system of religion and education, the church could denounce such texts as sinful, and discredit them.

Thus, education policy and practice which began to include the 'less desirable members of society', followed a very similar trajectory to that described in Guno Jones' hierarchy of citizenship (2016). Dutch political ideals of accommodation and compromise, whilst still maintaining the status quo, are clearly visible in the education system. Michael Merry and Willem Boterman, in their article "Educational inequality and state-sponsored elite education" (2020) lay out the history of the policies and practices designed to make sure that the highest levels of education in the Netherlands are reserved for preservation of the country's elites. Even when, often against all odds, diverse students manage to gain acceptance into the 'hallowed halls' of elite education, the cultural chasm that they encounter there leads those students to a profound disconnect. I have interviewed a number of young people from Saba and Statia who confirm



that this “hostile environment” (Merry & Boterman, 2020, p. 525) is very familiar to them. Even those with academic preparation and a high level of Dutch find that the only way to survive in this new environment is to completely reject their Caribbean identity and conform as much as possible to the norms of European Dutch society.

The *CITO Toets* (Central Institute for Test Development test) in this system becomes a Charon-like mechanism, guarding the entrance of the esteemed edifices of Dutch Academia. Everyone has the right to an education, but many are *more suited* for a vocational trade, which clearly falls short of the first-class education of the VWO (*Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs*: often translated as ‘pre-university education’ but which literally means ‘Preparatory Scientific Education’) and Gymnasium, similar to, but far more elitist and exclusive than the German Gymnasium (Merry & Boterman, 2020).

Holy Dutch

As argued by Edwards, our language is part of our identity (2013) and mutually propagates and creates culture. Even more than our history and geography, language and culture symbiotically feed each other. During the *Gouden Eeuw* (Golden Age) and the sovereignty of the GWC (Dutch West India Company) and VOC (Dutch East India Company) the Dutch gained power, prestige and vast economic holdings. Nevertheless, the Dutch language was still seen as a poorly spoken and bastardised form of German. Dutch is closely related to German, but diverged from it in the time of the *Lautverschiebungen* or consonant shifts (there were actually two phases), which began in about the third century of the Common Era and became cemented in the Germanic languages around the eighth century CE. The analysis of Germanic languages in later centuries eventually led to a major identity crisis for the Dutch.

Germanic languages are linguistically divided according to this consonant shift, which began in the area of southern Germany and Austria located in the Alps. The mountains, being tall, led to a designation of *high* to refer to that language, and *low* to label the form spoken in the north, the area at sea level. The Dutch are thus saddled with speaking a *low* form of the language, which no matter how well you know your linguistic geography, sounds less worthy than a *high* form. The connotations of these topographic distinctions infer a painful inequality (Geurts, 2019).

Another issue the Dutch language faced was the division between the vernacular and the official language. In the south, the area of *high German*, where the population was greater, cities grew up and the language of the people began to be used increasingly in official capacities, religious writings and in literature, such as the *Hildebrandslied*. The north, sparsely populated and with currently inhabited land still underwater, had few cities and extremely limited writing in the vernacular. This lack of written literature in a language tends to create an ideology of inferiority. Folk languages often carry a stigma of being less valuable than the elite, metropolitan languages (Geurts, 2019). As Geurts mentions in his article “Our pride is easily hurt,” *real* languages at



the time were French, High German and English, because these languages were used in literature, scholarship and the law. Dutch was *merely* a spoken language.

Very likely because of these situations, the Dutch had a deep-seated need to defend their language and elevate its status. Perhaps this is the origin of the myth of *Holy Dutch*. The 16th century Dutch humanist Jan van Gorp (Johannes Goropius Becanus) from Hilvarenbeek fabricated an intricate argument that Dutch was, basically, the language of Adam and Eve. Bechanus, by way of a number of fallacies of reasoning, concluded that Dutch was the oldest language in the world, which in his argument equalled the best. Despite his doctrinal shortcomings, Becanus' ideas satisfied a need for the Dutch people to elevate the status of their language, and gave rise to ideologies which wreak havoc to this day.

Neocolonialism Goes Underground

Having lost the war with Indonesia, the option of further Dutch humiliation in the Caribbean needed to be addressed and avoided. The same policies that worked in the sixteenth century—accommodation and compromise whilst maintaining the status quo—seemed to fit well into this new context. It would be better for the Dutch to be free of these troublesome colonial children, and the European Netherlands could push the agenda of independence for the colonies as a demonstration of their progressive thinking. Shields explains:

In the Hague, the revolt of May 1969 [at the oil refinery in Curaçao - a protest against overtly racist practices] troubled the new centre-left governing coalition, whose members grew concerned that the perpetuation of 'neo-colonial' ties would frustrate an increasingly progressive Dutch self-image and foreign aid policy agenda. (2016, p. 620)

Rumblings of independence across the colonies began, but most had their origin in en Haag. The Caribbean nations were pushed to become independent, and the gate to migration to the European Netherlands was being pulled shut.

The communities of the Dutch Antilles and Suriname were painted as "victims of Dutch citizenship." The movement of Surinamese Dutch to the Netherlands in 1975 (an exodus which provided the only way for the Surinamese population to maintain their Dutch citizenship) was represented as constituting "irreparable uprootedness," while South America and the Caribbean were represented as the "proper socio-cultural habitat for Surinamese Dutch citizens" (Jones, 2016, p. 611). "Dutch political debates on Suriname demonstrate how a seemingly progressive political agenda of decolonisation became connected with an exclusionary citizenship agenda" (p. 605). The colonised could not rise above their social status and be permitted to assimilate: "all efforts of the colonialist are directed towards maintaining the social immobility, and racism is the surest weapon for this aim" (Memmi, 1957, p. 74).

This section has outlined a history of supposedly enlightened developments during the Dutch colonial period and detailed their impacts. We have seen how free trade empowered the



enslaver, how the doctrine of salvation was used to reinforce notions of inferiority, and how myths of tolerance and democracy promoted an exclusionary education system. Ways in which a sense of linguistic inferiority and a humiliating colonial war contributed to a defensive and exclusionary mindset were also examined. In the next section, I turn to the direct impacts of these developments on the acquisition of the Dutch language on Saba and Statia.

DUTCH AS THE LANGUAGE OF EXCLUSION AND FAILURE

In the 18th century, the *lowly* status of Dutch brought about a need for the Dutch to elevate this primal part of their identity, even to the level of holiness. Another concern for the Dutch was that no one was learning their language, likely as a consequence of its perceived status and the lack of literature in the language. French and German were international languages used across Europe and beyond, yet almost no one spoke *Nederlands* beyond the Dutch borders. This might normally have represented a setback for the public image of Dutch, but, as I theorise, in the spirit of a typically Dutch spin, the Dutch re-imaged this status issue as a result of other populations not having the capacity to learn Dutch. This concept seems to hold steady to this day. Dutch is the most closely related language to English, and, grammatically and syntactically speaking, is really quite easy to master. It is very reasonable for speakers of other languages, especially Germanic languages, to acquire and speak Dutch proficiently. Yet the Dutch cast their own language as “The European Chinese,” impossible to pronounce (“*zeg maar* [say] ‘*Scheveningen*’ en ‘*Schiphol*’), and a language that no one beside the Netherlanders will ever really be able to learn. Language learning websites explode with chats about learning the Dutch language, where most comments discuss the impossibility of getting a Dutch person to speak Dutch with you if you are just learning the language, as well as observations about the Dutch need to exaggerate how difficult it is to learn their language.

In order to maintain the myth of language complexity and unlearnability, I feel the Dutch need to uphold the exclusionary practice of not speaking their language with outsiders. This is a flagrantly offensive ideology which, in my experience, never seems to even warrant a second thought: the Dutch are doing everyone else a favour by speaking to them in English, right? The vastly pervasive, and, as quoted above, universal unwillingness to share the Dutch language, is spun as the Dutch being helpful and polite to foreigners. I maintain that, whilst most of the Dutch do believe they are being helpful to foreigners, they are guided by a deep-set, less generous and possessive, ideology.

Those who do master Dutch are viewed as prodigies or geniuses who have managed to unlock the secret code. Foreigners are constantly warned that they will never have any luck learning the language. I propose that this ideology runs deep in teachers, administrators, and Dutch bureaucrats, who never actually expect Caribbean children to have any success in learning their language.



Language of Instruction

The Dutch colonists had a strict policy of exclusion regarding education in the Dutch language. The Dutch believed the enslaved workers were unworthy to be educated, to be treated like Dutchmen, or to be allowed access to their language. As a result, Dutch was reserved for the white colonisers, and creoles became the lingua franca on the islands: Papiamentu on Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire, and English Lexifier Creoles on St. Maarten, Saba and St. Eustatius.

The Dutch were adamant to maintain the *purity* of their language, i.e., adamant to repel any influences from the *non-Dutch*. Authorities in Aruba in the late 19th century lamented that “not even the Dutch children raised in Aruba were learning to speak Dutch correctly” (Wagner Rodriguez, 2014, p. 142). In the late 19th century, there was an expansion of access to formal education, allowing those of *lower status* to be educated. The Dutch reaction to this was to require the Dutch language to be used in all official government proceedings and to implement education policies that recognized Dutch as the sole, valid medium of instruction. Once a public commitment to the value of *education for all* developed, the hierarchy was maintained by allowing only those who spoke *pure, correct, or true* Dutch to have access to higher education. This maintained the status quo power structure on the islands, and severely limited infiltration by Antilleans into Europe.

In recent decades, the Dutch government has demonstrated a public commitment to providing instruction in the mother tongue of the students, in line with a resolution adopted at the 30th Session of UNESCO’s General Conference in 1999 (30 C/Res. 12), which supports the use of at least three languages in education: the mother tongue(s), a regional or national language and an international language. Nevertheless, the ingrained hierarchy is still clearly visible on the islands. On Curaçao, the language of instruction has been changed to Papiamentu, the regional language, in many primary schools. Thus dedication to the UNESCO ideal of instruction in one’s mother tongue is shining bright at the surface: however, students still sit the EFO examination at the end of the primary school, which examines their achievement in Papiamentu, Dutch and Mathematics. Students who pass the Dutch section may continue to schools designed to prepare them for university level education, but even students who pass the Papiamentu and Mathematics sections with flying colours, but fail in Dutch, are sent to vocational education schools. Only four out of the 60 primary schools on the island regularly send students to continue to the higher tracked schools, and those are schools whose main populations consist of children of European Dutch nationals (H. Senior, personal communication, February 24, 2020). The Dutch language is the gatekeeper, and the status quo is upheld.

On the English lexifier Creole speaking island of Saba, the local community took matters into its own hands and changed the language of instruction to English in 1986. Sabans applaud this change. Most who went through the prior system suffered from issues of self-esteem and frustration. Nevertheless, Sabans are proponents for multilingualism and want to learn Dutch. The students express an interest to learn, and frustration that they never gain proficiency. Following intensive studies commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, St. Eustatius made



the change to English as the language of instruction in 2015. This is a positive change, and supported by all but the most vocal advocates for the status quo. However, most Statians now lament that Dutch is no longer learned to a proficient level, and most would like to see some level of bilingual education.

Desired Outcomes for Language Planning and Policy

The Dutch government and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) are dedicated to improving education on the islands, and improving the levels of Dutch. In order to reach goals set by, among other agreements, the Education Conference of 2011, the OCW have poured a great deal of energy, time and funding into solving the problem, commissioning an intensive project of Language Planning and Policy development for Saba and for St. Eustatius. Unfortunately, it appears that those commissioning the project of language planning and policy on the islands also don't have a full understanding of what that means. The OCW desires to have someone determine the necessary achievement levels at particular mileposts in the education system, help to devise an examination to test that system, such as the CITO *toets* in the European Netherlands or the EFO test in Curaçao, and determine the sanctions for students not reaching those levels. I observe that these requirements maintain the exact pattern of elitism and exclusion in education that has existed, and exists to this day, in the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean.

In my view, the purpose of language planning and policy development should be to serve the interests of the students and their communities, so that the expressed goal of the projects on St. Eustatius and Saba is to identify the underlying ideologies of the islanders and the European Netherlanders, examine these beliefs, identify areas of inherent bias in order to plan a more egalitarian approach, define hopes for the future, and turn these hopes into practice.

WHY CAN'T THE STUDENTS ON THE ISLANDS LEARN DUTCH?

In the first section of this article, I examined the historical persistence which has led the Dutch to specific cultural heuristics. At this point, it is important to also examine the culture of the islands to best understand the cultural dynamics at play.

Caribbean Heuristics

Saba, the *isla inútil*, whose inhabitants have mostly been isolated and ignored, has become a home for those who have learned to be successful despite incredible odds. With no harbour for landing boats, the Sabans built steep stone steps to the sea, carried all cargo, including a piano, up and down those steps, built boats and lowered them over the cliffs to launch. When the Dutch determined no road could be built on the steep slopes to connect the few villages, the Sabans studied road engineering and built their own road. This shows that Sabans are capable and very hard-working; it appears that they want to just get on with things and get the job done. The former Saban harbourmaster, after watching a crashed plane sink outside the harbour while waiting in vain for a Dutch decision to launch a rescue, summed up the Saban mindset, "We



don't need no overleg." [*overleg* = deliberation, consultation] (Mulder, 2018, p. 21). Dutch bureaucracy, a revolving door of experts deliberating the issues, and a lack of measurable action appear to be at great odds with the Saban spirit.

Sabans are annoyed that employees are brought in from Bonaire or Curaçao to occupy administrative positions on their island due to Dutch language requirements. Most Sabans want to have access to all positions based on a variety of qualifications, rather than having to comply with an inflexible insistence on competence in one specific language. Not only do Sabans have qualifications that would allow them to fill such positions, they also feel they do not need interference from transient Dutch meddlers and prefer to take matters into their own hands. However, Sabans also *want* to learn Dutch. They value multilingualism as well as the relationship they have with the Netherlands. They want to learn Dutch because learning another language is never a bad idea and it could be useful and provide opportunities as well.

St. Eustatius was a former powerhouse for the Dutch West India company, and has experienced wealth and prosperity as part of the Dutch nation. Statians have a broad and cosmopolitan understanding of the world. Their island was once at the crossroads of the Caribbean, and in deed their language developed as a result of the need for communication during a period of intense and multicultural trade. At the same time, the Statian population was founded on the backs of enslaved Africans. Statia, from its founding, was developed into three distinct sectors, geographically, economically, and socially. The countryside was the territory of the enslaved populations, the Lower Town the domain of the middle-class merchants, and the Upper Town the realm of the white, ruling, Dutch-speaking oligarchy. Economic and political life was dominated by a few Dutch families. It was almost impossible to gain admission into this closed elite circle (Enthoven, 2012, p. 248), although many Statians still tried to emulate Dutch culture to the best of their ability in order to scramble a bit higher in society. Dutch was the language of the Upper Town, and long after the emancipation of the enslaved, the language divide has continued the system of discrimination.

Statians are adamant that they should learn Dutch. They feel a far more passionate force at work than do Sabans. Given their historical situation, Dutch has always been the mark of power and success for Statians. Statians are strong and capable people, but they recognise that the Dutch language holds a key to advancement and acceptance in the inner circle. On Statia, most Dutch nationals are primarily long-term residents and form an integral part of the community. Interestingly, a person of European descent on Statia is assumed to be Dutch or at least have proficiency in the language.

Dutch Language on the Islands

Language, along with faith and ethnic ancestry, form the pillars of sovereignty, and the Dutch seem keen to hold on to that sovereignty, no matter how their actions may appear on the surface. A pervasive Dutch ideology, one that is ever-present in the minds of the residents in the European Netherlands, is that of autochthony and allochthony. These pervasive terms



present a “racialised idea of true Dutch-ness” and imply that “in the end, there is a core original Dutch nation that is as such entitled to the full fruits of Dutch citizenship” (Jones, 2016, p. 613).

Again, with an understanding of the Dutch dedication to their public image, we can see that they will admit that racism is *passé*. However, “linguicism has taken over from racism as a more subtle way of hierarchizing social groups” (DeGraff, 2019, p. x). DeGraff points out that the Dutch, with an ingrained acceptance of autochthony and the core Dutch nation, find it a simple shift from racially based apartheid to an obsession with preserving the *purity* of the Dutch language and maintaining linguistic apartheid.

Dutch is not spoken in everyday life in the communities on the islands. This reality, however, seems to have developed into the European Dutch need to draw a sharp distinction which confines the Caribbean Dutch language learners to their own category. The Taalunie, founded as a result of the governments of the Netherlands and Belgium signing the Nederlandse Taalunieverdrag in 1980, has been tasked with “stimulating knowledge of the Dutch language and its correct use.” When discussing Dutch language and language education, I have seen that educators respect the Taalunie as the foremost authority on the Dutch language. The division referred to above subjects language learners to a distinction among: 1) first language learners (NT1), 2) second language learners who are immersed in an environment where Dutch is the language of interaction (NT2), and, 3) second language learners who are not immersed in an environment where Dutch is the language of interaction (NVT–Dutch as a foreign language.) This division, in my opinion, is not only unnecessary, but leads toward a hierarchy of citizenship. The Taalunie defines this distinction as follows:

Een vreemde taal leer je immers anders dan je moedertaal waarbij de verschillende vaardigheden in een andere volgorde en snelheid gaan dan in de moedertaal. Bovendien zijn vanzelfsprekendheden in de moedertaal niet automatisch vanzelfsprekend in de vreemde taal. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan: ‘ik loop, ik liep, ik heb gelopen’, maar ‘ik koop, ik kocht, ik heb gekocht’. Als Nederlands je moedertaal is, doe je dit automatisch, als Nederlands een vreemde taal is, is dit niet logisch.

Een vreemde taal leer je anders dan je moedertaal. Bij vreemdetaalverwerving gaat het vooral om functioneel taalgebruik. (de Visser-Lemstra, 2021)

[After all, you learn a foreign language differently from your mother tongue, whereby the different skills are taught in a different order and speed than in the mother tongue. Moreover, things that are taken for granted in the mother tongue are not automatically taken for granted in the foreign language. For example, think of: 'I walk, I walked, I have walked', but 'I buy, I bought, I bought'. If Dutch is your native language, you do this automatically; if Dutch is a foreign language, it doesn't make sense.

You learn a foreign language differently than your mother tongue. Foreign language acquisition mainly concerns functional language use. *Author's translation.*]



In my experience, teachers are predominantly disengaged from current research, and in the Caribbean, this disengagement borders on ignorance, even ignorance that such questions as to how students best learn another language can be researched at all. However, de Visser-Lemstra, along with colleagues from the SLO (Nationaal Expertisecentrum Leerplanontwikkeling or the National Expertise Centre for Curriculum Development) who wrote the learning strands defining the Dutch language lessons for the Dutch Caribbean, should be well versed in the ongoing debates regarding language learning vs acquisition (Krashen 1987) or implicit vs explicit learning (Bialystok 1979, Ellis 2005). New research continues to add fodder to the discussion, but nevertheless, there is a general consensus on best practice that has moved away from the model still prevalent in the Dutch classrooms on Saba and Statia, namely to follow a grammar-based syllabus in which students memorise, practice and repeat a grammar rule, all with minimal spoken interaction in the target language. "Language learning" is measured by how closely a student can replicate those memorised grammatical patterns. Input and output are rarely meaningful and almost never in Dutch. As Ellis concludes (2011), whilst acknowledging the continuing debate, "there has been a growing consensus over the last twenty or thirty years that the vast majority of our linguistic processing is unconscious, its operations tuned by the products of our implicit learning" (p. 39). This understanding of learning through exposure to real language in use currently has no place in the national learning strands from den Haag or the Dutch classroom on Saba or Statia.

Secondly, de Visser-Lemstra's conclusion that a *foreign language learner* uses language for functional purposes is borne out by Dr. Jim Cummins' research on BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) (Cummins, 2008.) Basic social communication is the sort of language initially acquired by new learners. Where de Visser-Lemstra deviates from Cummins' well-supported and well-accepted research is in her conviction that a *foreign language learner* can never move beyond the level of functionality. Cummins clearly demonstrated that language learners can acquire higher levels of CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) after several years (often defined as 5-8 years) of learning the language, given the appropriate academic language level input. Additionally, he argues that bilingual children eventually can have higher levels of language proficiency in both their languages when compared to their monolingual classmates. De Visser-Lemstra's work, which is the backbone of all language learning in the Caribbean, assumes no more than an output level of BICS for all students, even if those students study Dutch for twelve years.

De Visser-Lemstra's philosophy is echoed by many in the Caribbean. In my experience, the teachers of Dutch hold firmly to the idea that Saban and Statian children are simply incapable of reaching a proficient level of Dutch language, and therefore these teachers maintain low expectations. Twelve years of learning functional language, such as buying an item in a shop, does not lead to challenging and exciting lessons. The students on Saba and Statia have told me that they are terribly bored with their Dutch lessons and regret that they cannot advance in their level of language proficiency.



Dutch teachers

I observe that many school administrators on the islands hold a deeply ingrained view of dedication to the purity of the Dutch language. Dutch teachers are recruited from the European Netherlands, since the administrators want the students to learn only the *correct* forms of Dutch. The Dutch spoken in Suriname, accepted by the Taalunie (n.d.) as an admissible variety of Dutch, is not afforded the same status in hiring practices. When questioned, these administrators can only cite a few lexical or syntactic variations between the two varieties, but are utterly convinced that they are right in their conviction that only speakers from the true, core Dutch nation should be hired. There are Dutch teachers from Suriname on the islands, but they are often the second-choice candidates, even though they are more likely than European Netherlands to become invested long-term in the local community.

Moreover, given the small scale of the islands, one person in power in education who has a personal conviction that learning Dutch is unimportant—or impossible—for the students can definitively block all reform to a failed system.

It is very difficult to find qualified *language acquisition* teachers of Dutch from the European Netherlands. Most teachers are used to teaching children whose mother tongue is Dutch. These teachers may be eager and keen, but they have no training to teach Dutch as an additional language, formerly referred to as *second language* or *foreign language*—both terms which are currently understood as being inaccurate and disparaging. Additionally, these teachers receive little to no guidance in teaching language acquisition once on the islands. As a demonstration of their lack of training in second language acquisition practices, most teachers rely on grammar drills, worksheet exercises, textbook explanations and computer practice. There is virtually no spoken interaction for students. Some teachers will try to speak Dutch, but then give up when students answer in English or not at all. There is no systematic approach to teach spoken proficiency.

In my experience, teachers hired from the European Netherlands follow the same pattern as most Dutch employees on the islands: they come for the *adventure* and the nice weather. They are not committed to the island, and those who fulfil even a two-year contract to the end are very few. The culture shock often drives them away quickly. This creates a revolving door of teachers. Additionally, since there is no appropriate curriculum, each new teacher who arrives starts the learning process from point zero. Students lament that they are forced to learn the same material over and over and never advance.

Teachers from the European Netherlands seem more likely to hold the ideology of the core nation, the dedication to Holy Dutch, and the tiered view of citizenship. I have heard many Dutch teachers on the islands say, in some form or another, that Caribbean children are simply not capable of learning Dutch. The same essentialism that justified enslavement appears to fill the gaping chasms in the efficacy of teachers, curricula or programs.



Experts from the European Netherlands arrive in constant droves and waves to *fix* the poor Caribbean teachers. They ask the teachers to do additional work, make changes, attend extra meetings, and then these experts disappear back to Europe, never to be heard from again. The next month a new expert arrives and the cycle begins anew. I see this as a clear demonstration of the 'Dutch as saviour' attitude, and the island teachers, particularly locals or those who do stay for any length of time, are frustrated, devalued, and disillusioned.

Dutch materials and curriculum

In the past, Dutch materials were simply shipped across the ocean, and students had to learn about ice skating on the canals, tulips, and commuting on the train. Even the examinations were culturally biased. Since this is a visible and obvious discriminatory practice, the Dutch government and other organisations, such as the Taalunie (n.d.), are working to create materials that are more oriented toward life in the Caribbean. Many of these materials do seem to also offer progressive and pedagogically sound learning methods. These materials often attempt to include characters who are more representative of Caribbean children, even to the extent—as is my own experience—that all pictures used in testing on the islands must be of black children. Only when there is no other option may a white child be included. This imperative seems to lend credence to the Dutch educators' dedication to be progressive. However, the dedication to appear inclusive becomes a clearly defined command with only one available box to tick. Positive initiatives, but they still function as superficial bandages on an extensive ideological wound.

The Dutch government, along with the islands, appropriately decided that the language of instruction should be the children's mother tongue, or at least a language that is similar, rather than Dutch. But at that point, the pendulum swung in the exact opposite direction, and Dutch was determined to be a foreign language. This is an outdated and biased term, and has fed into an absolute dumbing down of the entire program, as is discussed above.

Rather than viewing Dutch language acquisition as an integral part of a multilingual society and curriculum, the knee-jerk reaction was that, if Caribbean children cannot master their entire curriculum in the Dutch language, then the expectations should be lowered to absolute minimal levels. I would argue that this makes sense in view of the ideology of maintaining Dutch as the language of power. In the one system, students were faced with impossible levels of Dutch and most—those with no *Dutch core nation* connections—failed miserably. The flip side, the vision of Dutch as a foreign language, means that the Dutch language can still be the gatekeeper to power, because the students learn Dutch at such low levels, and with such low expectations, that they will never be able to actually do anything in the language.

Currently, there is no actual Dutch curriculum on the islands. The Dutch experts will disagree, pointing out that there are *leerlijnen* (learning strands) written by the SLO—at considerable levels of investment in terms of time, energy and money—for all levels of Dutch instruction. In my view, these learning strands do not demonstrate an understanding of current knowledge and practice in the field of language acquisition, and are, in effect, simply a list of activities that



students should perform (act out a role play to buy an item of clothing in a store) This adherence to the functionality, or BICS, offers little opportunity for students to advance their language proficiency, and maintains extremely low expectations. The very pinnacle of expectation for students, after 12 years or 1300 hours of study, is that they should be able to order a meal in a restaurant and mention a food allergy they have. Any language acquisition teacher should be able to ensure students' success at this task after a few months of study in the language. None of the Dutch experts see any issues with the current learning strands and see no reason to change them or develop a more challenging program.

IS THERE A WAY FORWARD?

In this paper I have argued that throughout their history, the Dutch promoted a certain public image and either camouflaged or ignored any evidence to the contrary. In my view, there is very little understanding among Dutch people about their past offences. They cannot see that their *hidden agenda* (Shohamy 2006) of limiting the level of exposure, challenge and expectations of the Saban and Statian students to Dutch language acquisition is a form of linguisticism. We cannot judge history based on current ideologies and understandings, but this article is not concerned with assigning blame. The ideal is to find breakthroughs and opportunities for growth. It is impossible to heal wounds that are not acknowledged.

"It is evident that there can be no meaningful resolution of problems without a profound analysis of the complex historical, political and social factors which caused them in the first place" (Faraclas et al., 2013, p. 112). The goal of the language policy for each island is to initiate open, honest conversations about the situation. Faraclas, Kester, and Mijts' example of such a dialogue on St. Eustatius shows us a road that we can follow. These difficult discussions, while uncomfortable and even threatening, "can play a pivotal role in healing community divisions by prying community members loose from ... [counterproductive] discourses and bringing them back to their own common interests based in their own experiences" (Faraclas et al., 2013, p. 112).

I believe that the Sabans and Statians are eager to build even more inclusive multilingual and multicultural societies, and Dutch can play an integral role in those societies. There can be a world beyond colonialism and neo-colonialism, and hopefully the kinds of discussions and approaches advocated for in this article can be among the first steps in that direction.

REFERENCES

- Bialystok, E. (1979). Explicit and implicit judgements of L2 grammaticality. *Language Learning*, 29, 81–103.
- Boogman, J. C. (1979). The union of Utrecht: Its genesis and consequences. *Low Countries Historical Review*, 94(3), 377-407. <http://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.2114>



- Boyd, R., & Richardson, P. J. (1985). *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*. University of Chicago Press.
- Cummins, J. (2008). BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction. *Encyclopedia of Language and Education, 2nd Edition, 2*, 71–83.
- DeGraff, M. (2019). Against apartheid in education and in linguistics: The case of Haitian Creole in neo-colonial Haiti. In D. Macedo (Ed.), *Decolonizing foreign language education: The misteaching of English and other colonial languages* (pp. ix-xxxii). Routledge.
- de Visser-Lemstra, M. (n.d.). (rep.). Nederlands als vreemde taal in de Caribische, meertalige omgeving (Ser. Sensibiliseringsmodule NVT).
- de Visser-Lemstra, M. (2021). Gelijke Kansen voor Caribische Leerlingen: Nederlands als vreemde taal in het Caribisch gebied. *Levende Talen Magazine, 6*, 16–21.
- Edwards, J. (2013). *Language and identity: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2005). Measuring implicit and explicit knowledge of a second language: A psychometric study. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 27*, 141–172.
- Ellis, N. C. (2011). Implicit and explicit SLA and their interface. In C. Sanz, & R. Leow (Eds.), *Implicit and explicit language learning* (pp. 35–47). Georgetown University Press.
- Enthoven, V. (2012). That abominable nest of pirates: St. Eustatius and the North Americans 1680-1780. *Early American Studies, 10*(2), 239-301.
- Faraclas, N., Kester, E. & Mijts, E. (2013). *Language of instruction in Sint Eustatius: Report of the 2013 research group on language of instruction on Sint Eustatius*. [Report to the Ministry of Education of the Netherlands, The Hague].
<https://repository.uantwerpen.be/docstore/d:irua:1076>
- Geurts, A. P. H. (2019, June 25). Our pride in language is easily hurt. High road to culture in Flanders and the Netherlands. <https://www.the-low-countries.com/article/our-pride-in-our-language-is-easily-hurt>
- Hornberger, N. (2015). Selecting Appropriate Research Methods in LPP Research: Methodological Rich Points. In F. Hult & D. Cassels Johnson (Eds.), *Research methods in language policy and planning: A practical guide* (pp. 9-20). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Jones, G. (2016). What is new about Dutch populism? Dutch colonialism, hierarchical citizenship and contemporary populist debates and policies in the Netherlands. *Journal of Intercultural Studies, 37*(6), 605-620.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2016.1235025>
- Krashen, S. D. (1987) *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Prentice-Hall International.
- Lichtman, K., VanPatten, B. (2021). Was Krashen right? Forty years later. *Foreign Language Annals, 1*–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12552>
- McCarty, T. L. (2015). Ethnography in language planning and policy research. In F. Hult & D. Cassels Johnson (Eds.), *Research methods in language policy and planning: A practical guide* (pp. 81-93). Wiley Blackwell.
- Memmi, A. (1957). *The colonizer and the colonized* (H. Greenfield, Trans.). Earthscan Publications.



- Merry, M. S. & Boterman, W. (2020). Educational inequality and state-sponsored elite education: The case of the Dutch gymnasium. *Comparative Education*, 56(4), 522-546. <http://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2020.1771872>
- Mulder, N. (2018). Stories of autonomy on non-sovereign Saba: Flipping the script of postcolonial resistance. *Etnofoor*, 30(1), 11-28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26469011>
- Nunn, N. (2012). Culture and the historical process. *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 27(1), 108-126. <http://doi.org/10.3386/w17869>
- Nunn, N. (2014). Historical development. In P. Aghion & S. Durlauf (Eds.), *Handbook of Economic Growth* (Vol 2) (pp. 347-402). Elsevier.
- Pollmann, T. (2000). The unreal war: The Indonesian revolution through the eyes of Dutch novelists and reporters. *Indonesia*, (69), 93-106. <http://doi.org/10.2307/3351278>
- Sheeler, J. (1957). Methods for control of the negro ... Mind, soul and body. *Negro History Bulletin*, 21(3), 67-69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44215293>
- Shields, C. (2016). Dutch imperialism in the Caribbean. In I. Ness & Z. Cope (Eds.), *The Palgrave encyclopedia of imperialism and anti-imperialism* (p. 621). Palgrave MacMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91206-6>
- Shohamy, E.G. (2006). *Language policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches*. London: Routledge.
- Taalunie (n.d.). *Feiten en cijfers*. Taalunieversum. Retrieved September 18, 2020, from <http://taalunieversum.org/inhoud/feiten-en-cijfers#zeslanden>
- University College London. (2022). Geschiedenis van de Nederlands Taal. *Nederlandse Taalunie*. Retrieved August 30, 2022, from https://www.ucl.ac.uk/dutchstudies/an/SP_LINKS_UCL_POPUP/SPs_dutch/history/page_s/nt.html
- Wagner Rodriguez, C. A. (2014). Caribbean language education policy and planning: A comparative analysis of three island case studies. In N. N. Faraclas, R. Severing, C. Weijer, L. Echteld & W. Rutgers (Eds.), *Creole connections: Transgressing neocolonial boundaries in the languages, literatures and cultures of the ABC-islands and the rest of the Dutch Caribbean* (pp. 139-172). University of Curaçao/University of Puerto Rico.