English as the lingua franca of Europe: a Dutch perspective

Geert Booij

1.   Introduction

In this article,. I will discuss the position of English as an international language, as a lingua franca in Europe. I will do this from the perspective of a non-native speaker of English, and this is indeed the most relevant perspective if we want to discuss the question 'which English for Europe?', because it is non-native speakers who know and experience what kind of problems they encounter in using English.

This summer I spent two weeks on the island of Sicily, and visited the Etna region. To my pleasant surprise, I found a village Linguaglossa on one of the slopes of the Etna, and this reminded me of the fact that bilingualism is a very old and wide-spread phenomenon in Italy and in Europe in general, and has enriched the life of Europeans for many centuries. The word *linguaglossa* is thus similar in flavour to the compound *Eurotaal* coined by professor Sergio Scalise as the name of the Bologna conference held in October 2000 on the language situation in Europe, a compound of which the head *taal* is the Dutch word for 'language', whereas the first part *Euro-* is a pan-European root.

2.   The Dutch perspective

The Netherlands is one of the countries in Western Europe (together with Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) in which English has a very dominant position as a foreign language, and is developing into a real second language. English is a compulsory subject at school, and in 1986 it was introduced into the last two years of primary education. It is therefore hard to find purely monolingual speakers of Dutch under the age of 50 (De Bot et al. 2000). However, this does not mean that they all have a good command of English, a point to be discussed in detail below.

Some secondary schools are even bilingual or have bilingual streams. These bilingual streams are not primarily meant to serve the needs of foreign children, but are explicitly meant for Dutch children raised monolingually at home, in order to enhance their chances for an international career.

Why is English so popular in the Netherlands? The obvious general cause is its status of international language, of lingua franca across the globe. We know why and how English has acquired this status (cf. Crystal 1997). One important factor is certainly that English does not belong to a particular country, is not owned by a country. In this respect, English differs from French, a language that is strongly associated with one country and its culture, France. Ownership is also the main factor in the decreasing importance of Afrikaans, the daughter language of Dutch spoken in South Africa in that country. Although it has more native speakers (of which the majority is non-white) than English in South Africa, Afrikaans is the symbol *par excellence* of apartheid, and hence, the younger generation prefers to use English.

A more country-specific factor that explains the strong position of English in the Netherlands is the very open attitude towards the Anglo-Saxon culture, which has been reinforced by the Second World War. German, once the first foreign language of the Netherlands, and more closely related to Dutch than English, has far fewer speakers in the Netherlands than English, and to my regret this number is still diminishing. English is still felt as the language of the liberators, even by people born after the Second World War. This attitude towards German is of course very deplorable. A second factor is that Holland is a small country, very much dependent on international trade, and hence knowledge of foreign languages is crucial. Since long, there has been a number of Anglo-Dutch firms such as Shell and Unilever, whose language of internal communication has always been English, and in recent years many Dutch companies have become big investors in the United States, e.g. Ahold, originally a chain of supermarkets, and Aegon, a financial conglomerate. Ahold possesses more supermarkets in the USA than in the Netherlands.

3. Functions of English in the Netherlands

English is used in a number of domains: internet, job market, industry and trade, and very strongly in advertisements and commercials, apparently also because the use of English has snob appeal.

In education it is used at universities at the graduate and postgraduate level, in particular to accommodate foreign students who do not speak Dutch. It is also the language in which most doctoral dissertations are written. In this respect, the Netherlands differ from most other West-European countries which require dissertations in the native language. Dutch universities require the dissertation to be written in Dutch, German, French, or English, but in practice at least 80 % of the dissertations are in English (almost 100 % in the natural sciences and in linguistics). Nowadays, one has to adduce specific reasons for writing a dissertation in Dutch, English is the default language choice.

TV is an important source of contact with English because foreign language programs are not dubbed but subtitled. About 40-60 % of the programs on Dutch spoken channels are in English. In addition, a number of English language channels are available on the cable (BBC 1 and 2, MTV, Discovery Channel, National Geographic, etc.)

Note, however, that we cannot characterize the Dutch language situation as one of diglossia because there is no stable division of labour between Dutch and English in the different societal domains. For instance, the dominant language of education at the universities is Dutch, not English. When some years ago, the Dutch minister of education proposed to teach a substantial part of the curriculum in English instead of Dutch, this raised a storm of protest in parliament and society. But there are a number of English curricula. For instance, the University of Utrecht has a University College with a curriculum taught in English, and the agricultural university of Wageningen has decided to teach in English as much as possible..

4. Is English threatening Dutch?

Although the position of English in the Netherlands is pretty strong, as we saw above, it does not mean that it is a real threat to Dutch. It mainly affects Dutch at the lexical level, the number of English borrowings is enormous. Dutch is much less puristic than German, as illustrated by words such as *computer* and *printer* which have native counterparts in German (*Rechner, Drucker*), but not in Dutch.

Afrikaans is also more puristic than Dutch: it has the words *rekenaar* and *drukker* for computer and printer respectively. The term *hard disk* which is translated as *Festplatte* in German, is translated as *harde schijf* in Dutch, clearly a loan translation because the Dutch adjective *hard* does not have the meaning that it is supposed to have in *harde schijf* (non-removable, fixed disk). Although there are of course people who complain about the influence of English on Dutch, there is in fact a very stable situation because Dutch grammar incuding phonology is not affected at all by English. The situation can be summarized as follows: "English has a very strong position in the Netherlands, but it is part of a structure of multilingualism in which it has its own place and function, leaving ample space for both the national language, other foreign languages and migrant languages" (De Bot et al. 2000.). The strong position of Dutch can also be concluded from the fact that for immigrants who want to take their place in Dutch society, the acquistion of Dutch is an absolute necessity. Results from large scale interviews (De Bot & Weltens 1997) also show that most native speakers of Dutch do not experience the strong position of English as a threat to their native language. This stands in sharp contrast to the opinion of some writers in daily papers who do think that Dutch is threatened by English (De Bot & Weltens 1997). Fishman (1990: 356) explicitly raised the question why Dutch is not threatened by English, and why Dutch parents never consider educating their children in English unless one of the parents has another native language. The answer is that, just like English gives access to international culture and the world at large, Dutch gives access to Dutch culture, society, and history. In short, there is a division of labour between these languages that has resulted in a stable situation in which the existence of Dutch is not threatened at all, although the lexical stock of Dutch is affected. For instance, the following words are all verbs in Dutch, with the Dutch inflectional morphology (the infinitive ending is *-en*):

(1)   aerobiccen 'to do aerobics', afkicken 'to kick the habit', blind daten 'to have a blind date', breakdancen 'to do breakdance', browsen 'to browse', cocoonen 'to cocoon', computeren 'to use the computer', cruisen 'to cruise', downloaden 'to download', inloggen 'to log in', mailen 'to e-mail', shoppen 'to go shopping'

The fact that alle these verbs obey the Dutch inflectional rules, makes clear that it is not the rule system that is affected by English, but only the lexical stock, which is adapted to Dutch. In other words, the very intensive form of language contact between English and Dutch does not erode the grammatical system of Dutch.

Some people interpret the use of English loan words as linguistic imperialism from the side of English, but this seems to me to be a completely unwarranted position. It is not the speakers of English who impose their vocabulary on speakers of other languages, but it is the speakers of other languages that choose to use English words. The addition of English loans boosts the availability of different forms for different meanings. For instance, the English loan verb *mailen* in Dutch can only be used for electronic mail. Thus, it reminds us of the use of French words in English since 1066, creating pairs such as *sheep - mutton, calf - veal*, and *cow - beef* which made it possible to distinguish between the animal and the corresponding meat.

This kind of bilingualism also creates additional possiblities of playing with words. An example is the use of billboards with an advertisement for women's underwear with the brand name Sloggy. The billboard shows the bottoms of five women sitting in a row, dressed in Sloggy pants. The advertisement itself carries the word *billboard*, a pun on the fact that the Dutch word for 'buttock' is *bil*. Such jokes are only possible in a well-established form of bilingualism.

The openness of Dutch to the English vocabulary has the obvious advantage that the two languages share a substantial part of their lexical stock. That is, the non-puristic attitude of speakers of Dutch makes it easier to acquire the vocabulary of the second language, English.

Let us compare the situation in the Netherlands to that of France. Again, large scale interviews reveal that most speakers of French do not consider the increasing use of English and English words as a threat to their native language (De Bot et al. 2000). Yet, the Académie Française and the French government take very strong action against English words, with only limited effects. For instance, the daily paper *US Today* of May, 1, 2000 featured an article 'E-words are tough for France to swallow' in which the actual use of internet words in an internet café in Paris is compared with what has been prescribed by the Académie Française:

(2)   *académie Française*   *Cyber Café*

        la toile   le Web

        message électronique   e-mail

        la jeune pousse   le start-up

        option sur titres   les stock options

        module d'extension   le plug-in

        les fouineurs   les hackers

        causette   le chat

        localisateur universel   le URL / l'adresse

It is clear that the French grammatical system is not affected at all by the use of English words, and that the average French speaker has no problem with borrowing English words. Even in French, speaking of *le weekend* is normal, and already years ago Renault advertised with *le car*, a special edition of the Renault 5 type.

5. Problems for English as a second language

The strong position of English in the Netherlands does not mean that there are no problems. First, speaking a second language always creates an asymmetry between a second language speaker and somebody speaking English as his/her native language. It appears that native speakers of English are not always aware of this asymmetry which may annoy non-native speakers. The attitude of the native speaker towards the non-native speaker may even be condescending (Trifonovitch 1985), and Trifonovitch proposed to remedy this situation by a number of measures that can be summarized as follows:

- Students should not only be exposed to the model of English presented by their teacher; it is important for them to also listen to other varieties of English;

- It is imperative to be able to detect and accept various cultural styles of speaking English and to notice different styles of written English as they exhibit the cultural background of the speaker or writer;
- "It is extremely important for non-native speakers of English to abandon their inferiority complex and to realize that English now belongs to the world, and not to an élite group only";
- "… the native speaker of English must slowly begin to replace his linguistic chauvinism with an attitude of linguistic tolerance" (Trifonovitch 1985: 215).

The idea to change attitudes is more realistic than the optimistic, but unrealistic view expressed by Crystal (1997: 14). In this book on global English, Crystal discusses the disadvantage for the non-native speaker of English, and then remarks:

> "However, if proper attention is paid to the question of language learning, the problem of disadvantage dramatically diminishes. If a global language is taught early enough, from the time that children begin their full-time education, and if it is maintained continuously, and resourced well, the kind of linguistic competence which emerges in due course is a real and powerful bilingualism, indistinguishable from that found in any speaker who has encountered the language since birth."

Crystal then concludes that "there is noting inevitable about the disadvantage scenario" (p. 14), but does realize that there are many ifs to be fulfilled before the disadvantage has disappeared. In the meantime, let us take a more realistic approach, and see how we can diminish the disadvantage.

In this connection the situation of Dutch speakers of English is very relevant. As pointed out above, the fact that English is so widely used does not mean that there are no serious problems. Ringeling (1997) has pointed out that Dutch pupils in secondary education and university students tend to overestimate their skills in English, partly due to their lack of awareness of the importance of register choice and level of politeness. For instance, Dutch speakers of English do not make enough use of phrases such as *please* and *thank you*. They also have problems with English intonation, since

Dutch intonation is much flatter. The interference problem is also pretty strong (cf. Burrough-Boenisch 1998). So we need language training which takes the differences of this kind between English and native language seriously. In particular speaking English in different settings (telephone conversation, business negotiations, presentations, etc.) needs a lot of training in order to reduce the disadvantage problem. On the other hand, it also requires a particular non-condescending attitude from the side of the native speaker of English, as pointed out above.

Native speakers should be made more aware that their specific English accent might cause problems of understanding for the non-native hearer of English. There is quite a number of British and American accents of English that are pretty hard to understand, and it is my impression that native speakers are very often not aware of the problems they create by their particular way of pronouncing English. Interestingly, it appears that an increasing number of students from Southern Europe prefer the Netherlands to Great-Britain for their university exchange program because the Dutch variety of English is easier for them than the high variety used in English universities (de Bot et al. 2000)

The problem of understanding certain accents is a global problem, and it was phrased as follows by Mikie Kiyoi, a Japanese excutive, in the *International Herald Tribune*, 3 november 1995 [source: McArthur 1998. 211]

> "I sincerely believe there exists a cosmopolitan English - a lingua franca, written or spoken - that is clearly different from what native English speakers use unconsciously in their daily life. […] Dear Anglo-americans, please show us you are also taking pains to make yourselves understood in an international setting".

This problem is also noted by Crystal (1997: 135), and by Ammon (1999).

In this connection it is useful to remind you of the Bologna-declaration, signed in 1999 by the Ministers of Education of most European countries, in which they promise to introduce a pan-European university system with a bachelor degree and a master degree. The idea behind this declaration is to make it easier for European students to change university, for instance, to first get a BA degree in their native country, and subsequently an MA degree in another European country. At

present, Dutch universities are working hard to introduce this system by September 2002. It is quite obvious that the success of this attempt to boost European integration in the area of education and science very much depends on common knowledge of a pan-European lingua franca, and English is the only serious candidate for that position. Hence, what we need is the following.

First, we need concerted efforts of native and non-native speakers to further develop a global variety of English that is not linked to a particular English speaking country and that can be used everywhere. For instance, it would be good to further develop an international lexicon that is easily accessible, and in which the lexical differences between the different Englishes of the world are neutralized as much as possible. A first step in this direction is the creation of dictionaries that focus on the usage of global English, and inform us about what is reasonably acceptable. An example of such a dictionary is Todd & Hancock (1986). In the preface to this dictionary, the authors state that their dictionary

"adopts the position that English belongs to all those who have learnt to speak it, and that established regional varieties, whether spoken natively or not, have as much legitimacy as British, American, or Australian dialects of the language" (p. iv).

Of course, I do not mean that we have to lower our standards with respect to correct spelling and correctness of phrasing, but to inttroduce a more sophisticated standard of correctness. We may, for instance, consider the option to allow words that do not exist in this international English, but are in accordance with the word formation rules of English. For instance, nominal compounding is a productive process of English and allows for vast numbers of semantically transparent complex words. For instance, it would make sense to introduce or allow for the compound *money machine* to be used instead of *cash dispenser* (British), or *teller machine* (American), *money machine* being the most obvious and transparent word. Such coinings are quite normal in the area of English for special purposes, in developing systematic terminologies, and this technique might be used in developing global English.

Second, we should not use the British RP model of pronunciation of English as the standard in training in Europe, but instead allow for variation, and make use of those varieties that are easily accessible to a wide range of non-native speakers. It may be very worthwhile to investigate which varieties of spoken English are most widely accessible, to native and non-native speakers alike..

Third: we should make native speakers of English more aware of the problems for non-native speakers of English, amd let them also become bilingual, with a competence in international English besides their native variety of English.

A more radical idea is the proposal by Randolph Quirk to develop a lingua franca that he calls Nuclear English in which certain complicated grammatical patterns of English are avoided (Quirk 1985). For example, he suggests to simplify the English tag questions, which are indeed notoriously difficult for non-native speakers into the general tag *is not it*. This is in fact the form that the tag takes in Dutch (*is het niet*), and we know that the English variant is considered as difficult: Dutch speakers make many mistakes against the English rule. Another area that Quirk mentions as an area where non-native speakers have problems is that of the modal verbs with their complicated patterns of polysemy. As far as Dutch speakers of English is concerned, Quirk's observation is undoubtedly correct. Here, he suggests to avoid the simplex modal verbs, and to use the unambigous periphrastic constructions instead.

I think that it is possible to develop such a nuclear English in which a number of recurrent problems in the use of English are avoided. It does not mean that we really have to develop a completely new variety of English, but rather that we develop our competence of English in such a way that we know how to avoid notoriously difficult constructions. It is my impression that this is already the implicit strategy of many non-native users of English: 'use constructions that you know to be simple and transparent'. This means that global English is simply a kind of restricted code, a variety of English that still relates to national varieties such as British or American English, but does not have the ambition to use the full range of existing constructions and words. Stylistically, international English will thus be less rich than the national varieties, but it will suffice as a means of international communication, in particular if it will also have a restricted lexicon, and allows for the coining of new, semantically transparent complex words.

Native speakers of English sometimes exhibit a condescending attitude in this respect. For instance, Schwenter (2000), a review of a Dutch dissertation written in English, remarks:

"Finally, a rather unfortunate feature of the book is that it often appears to be written in a kind of (Dutch-English?) interlanguage. While this is interesting from a linguist's perspective, it sometimes distracts attention away from the content." (Schwenter 2000: 926).

Although it might be true that in this particular case there are real and serious flaws, it would be helpful if linguists with English as their native language would show some awareness of the difficulties that linguists have to face who are non-native speakers of English when uttering such judgments.

Crystal (1997: 137) also suggests that a new *World Standard Spoken English* might arise. As he observes, there is already a kind of Euro-English, the kind of English used in Brussels by diplomats of the different European countries. This kind of non-native English might develop into a global English that is easily accessible to everybody. The specific properties of this kind of English deserve further inspection, and might then be used in language courses.

In this way it may be possible to develop Euro-English as the lingua france for the whole of Europe, a language that will function as the new Esperanto, and that I propose to call *linguaglossa*. You will understand why.

Vrije Universiteit, Faculteit der Letteren

De Boelelaan 1105

1081 HV Amsterdam

booij@let.vu.nl

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Summary

English is the most important second language of the Netherlands. It is used in many societal domains. Although there are many English loan words in Dutch, English is not really threatening Dutch because the grammar of Dutch is not affected by this openness with respect to English. In this respect, the

attitude towards English in the Netherlands is different from the official attitude a country like France. However, even for Dutch speakers of English, the latter language remains a second langauge, which creates an asymmetry between native and non-native users of English as a lingua franca in Europe. Therefore, British English should not function as the international norm, and the development of a really global English is called for.