

# Separated by a Common Translation? How the British and the Dutch Communicate

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**Summary.** The British and Dutch share a long naval-, war- and medical history, in good times as well as bad. Their language has a common Germanic origin, but the English people may use special ways to express values or opinions, from which the sometimes paradoxical meaning is not always clear to the other party. Particularly with the Dutch, renowned for their directness, this may cause confusion. We provide a comprehensive set of expressions, each with paired interpretations, to foster Anglo–Dutch cooperation. *Pediatr Pulmonol.* 2011; 46:409–411. © 2010 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

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**Editor's Note:** *From time to time (Canadian translation = rarely or never) I feel it is important to publish an article that will further international relationships and clarify scientific discourse. The following paper is an example of such a publication. It is quite clear that in certain parts of the world hockey seems to have been supplanted by the sinking of ships and football.*

—Victor Chernick

## INTRODUCTION

The British and Dutch share a long history, in good times as well as bad. In the Anglo–Dutch wars, Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter played a major role as a skilled Dutch admiral as did his famous British counterpart Admiral Robert Blake. Nowadays the Royal Navy and Royal Dutch Navy still cooperate together at high level in the Flag Officer Sea Training. Our health systems differ, but also share common ground: the Dutch equivalent of the National Health Service is a compulsory health insurance system for everyone. British and Dutch doctors meet in conference and on other occasions; scientific articles are written together and reviewed by both nationalities. Medical care is strongly influenced by centuries of development of cultural beliefs and ideas, as has been beautifully written up by (the deceased) Lynn Payer.<sup>1</sup> Differences between the two nations exist in many areas, although for the outside world the Dutch and the British seems to get along quite well. Despite the differences in the success or otherwise of their respective football teams,<sup>2</sup> the Dutch and British have a lot in common besides the weather. The medical communities of both countries have a significant profile in preclinical and clinical research. Language- and cultural differences

may play an important role at conferences and in the process of submitting and reviewing articles.

The aim of this article is to improve mutual understanding during these professional and social encounters as well as in the writing and reviewing process of scientific articles. We hope to show that the provision of a comprehensive set of expressions, each with paired interpretations, fosters Anglo–Dutch cooperation.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In-depth interviews with Dutch expats and their British employers on common expressions and their meanings resulted in “misunderstandings” that were checked and cross checked for meaning and interpretation. In the following years these expressions have been tested on multiple occasions. Editorial comments and those of

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**TABLE 1—Translation Guide Social**

What the British say	What the British mean	What the Dutch understand
I hear what you say	I disagree completely	He <sup>a</sup> accepts my point of view
You must come by for dinner sometime	Just being polite; Goodbye!	He will invite me for dinner in the course of time
Very interesting	I don't agree	He likes my idea
With the greatest respect	You must be a fool	He respects me/my view
I'm sure it's my fault	It's your fault!	It is his fault
That is an original point of view	You must be crazy	They like the idea
I almost agree	I don't agree	He almost agrees
You'll get there (eventually)	No way you will make it	Encouragement to go on
I'll bear it in mind	I won't do anything about it	He will use it when appropriate
Could we consider some other options	I don't like your idea	He is still in the process of thinking
I would suggest	Do it as I want you to	An open suggestion
By the way	The primary purpose is	Not very important
Perhaps you could give this some more thought	Don't do it, it's a bad idea	Consider possible road blocks
Quite good	A bit disappointing	Quite good
Not bad	(very) good	Average or poor

<sup>a</sup>Where "he" is mentioned "she" can also be read.

reviewers of medical scientific articles were picked out by the authors on the basis of suspected paradoxical meaning and discussed among the authors.

## RESULTS

The results from the in-depth interviews and reviewers and editorial comments are posted in tables with the expression itself, its meaning and how it might be understood by non-British citizens. Although we share a rich history and ideas, there are nevertheless often cases where the communication between the two nations is not as straight forward as might be expected. This is clear from reading Tables 1 and 2 for social encounters and the reviewing process respectively.

## DISCUSSION

From these study results it is clear that the British use of language often causes confusion among the other

nationalities. English people may use special ways to express values or opinions, from which the sometimes paradoxical meaning is not always clear to the other party. Particularly with the Dutch, renowned for their directness, this may cause confusion.

We hypothesize that the differences may well have their origin in the gentlemanlike, polite nature of the British (according to the Dutch authors) or their utter dishonesty (the British version). It has been shown that British gentleman-like behavior is often even maintained in disastrous circumstances such as the sinking of the Titanic (April 15th 1912), where British nationality overall (corrected for class of travel) resulted in lower probability of survival ( $P=0.01$ ) compared to other European nationalities and US citizens.<sup>3</sup> Time is of importance however, and a more slowly sinking ship may lead to a different view: the Titanic sank in 2 hr 40 min, the Lusitania in just 18 min; the latter leading to more selfish behavior.<sup>4</sup>

**TABLE 2—Translation Guide: Professional (Review Process)**

What the British write	What the British mean	What the Dutch read
Please consider	Do it or forget it	He <sup>a</sup> leaves it up to me
I have a further suggestion	Take it or leave it	He leaves it up to me
The method described is rather original	Bullshit	It's a good method
I have a few preliminary suggestions	I strongly suggest you to follow my suggestions	Don't change anything until final suggestions have been made
Reads well	Really good	Average
I am somewhat disturbed by the methodology	I am crossed	He is not feeling too comfortable about it
With all due respect	You don't know what you are doing, I have a better suggestion (polite disagreement)	With the greatest respect
A few issues that need to be addressed	A whole lot needs to be changed	2–3 issues need rewriting
An issue that worries me slightly	A great worry	A minor issue
I am sorry we have to reject your paper on priority grounds	Your paper sucks	My paper nearly made it
I am sorry to disappoint you on this occasion	I could not care less	He is sorry

<sup>a</sup>Where "he" is mentioned "she" can also be read.

This guide may helpful not just to British and Dutch medical doctors, but also to native speakers from other European languages and even those using American-English or Australian-English. Both Dutch and English have developed from the Germanic languages [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language)]. This can be illustrated by the conjugation of verbs (present/past/past participle): “eten/at/geeten” and “to eat/ate/eaten.” Nevertheless, the possibilities for misunderstandings are numerous, as we show in Table 1 for social encounters, and in Table 2 for the scientific review environment. As a rule of thumb, most Dutch people are less used to playing with the language as the British. This contrasts with the much greater levels of Dutch footballing schools.<sup>2</sup> Both may be just as true for German, Spanish, and other European nationalities. However, eloquence on the football field and in the use of language seem to be two different things. This guide should at least help people to get to grips with the latter. The former we will leave for another year when we can all talk about football again without the relative recent memory of a world cup.

### Background and Contributions

Prof. A. Bush is the 2008 Jonxis medallist; his prize lecture “Asthma: Problematic, Difficult, and Therapy Resistant—the Brompton experience” in 2008 was

completely eclipsed by BR’s presentation of some of these ideas. NR developed Table 1 of the translation guide on the basis of her work with Dutch expats.<sup>5</sup> BR has tested elements of this translation guide on different occasions with British medical doctors, which always resulted in a good laugh as these elements are generally believed to reflect the true meaning. The naval inspiration results from fulfilling the military service as a ships doctor for the Royal Dutch Navy, where Dutch and British doctors did get along well. AB added even more intercultural flavor to the translation guide and reviewed the English. The reference to football was initiated by the World Cup tournament in July 2010.

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