

Dutch vs English: What can the DACC archives tell us about language shift?

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Migration and language shift often go hand in hand. When large numbers of Dutch people emigrated to Australia in the decades following the Second World War, they faced choices about adopting English and maintaining their Dutch language. Although individual experiences varied, Dutch as a home language declined significantly within the migrant community, with English becoming dominant for many families within a generation. This rapid shift was one of the factors that contributed to Dutch migrants being seen as “ideal immigrants”. In this article, we take an exploring look at language shifts through the archives of the Dutch Australian Cultural Centre (DACC).

A brief background

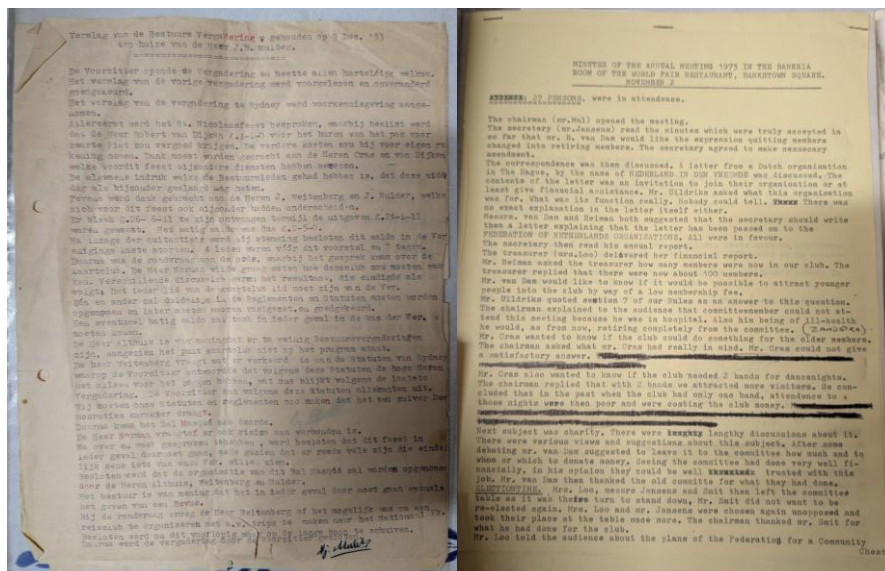
Dutch people have been migrating to Australia for many years, but the largest groups arrived in the aftermath of the Second World War. In peak year 1952, approximately 16,000 Dutch migrants arrived in Australia. Census data show that by 1961, around 102,000 people born in the Netherlands were living in the country. This group of Dutch migrants was mostly seen as “ideal immigrants”. They were predominantly white, many were Protestant, and they often brought valuable skills with them. Culturally, they were considered compatible with the Anglo-Australian majority. Both the Netherlands and Australia also strongly encouraged assimilation, with learning English regarded as an important part of becoming integrated into Australian society.

Unfortunately, between 1933 and 1976, there were no language related questions in the Census questionnaire. In 1976, however, of 92,110 Dutch migrants living in Australia, only 64,767 spoke Dutch at home. This decreased to no more than 48,000 people in 1991. The Census data thus show a decline in the use of Dutch at home over time. These figures illustrate a broader shift towards English in the later years. However, they cannot tell us everything about how this change unfolded in everyday life in the early years of migration, or how it affected the organisations that brought Dutch migrants together.

What can the DACC archives tell us?

Alongside finding their place in Australian society, Dutch migrants sought out one another through the many Dutch clubs and associations established across the country. These organisations often centred on traditions such as folk dancing, singing and religious activities. The DACC now holds archival material from many of these organisations. Stored in Chester Hill, the collection includes meeting minutes, membership records and correspondence.

While Census data provides a picture of language use in the home, these archival documents offer an opportunity to explore language use in writing and outside of home. For this initial exploration, the minutes of meeting from the Netherlands Society in NSW (Box 13: 1944 - 1982), the Netherlands Society of Bankstown (Box 80 + 82: 1953 - 1978), the Sunrise Choral Society (Box 108: 1962 - 1977), and the Catholic Dutch Migrant Association (CDMA) (Box 112: 1961 - 1965) were investigated.



Minutes of meeting 1953 (left) and 1973 (right) of the Netherlands Society of Bankstown.

Even a first look reveals interesting findings. The minutes and correspondence show considerable variation between organisations. For example, the Netherlands Society of NSW continued to keep its minutes in Dutch, while the Netherlands Society of Bankstown and the Sunrise Choral Society both made their switch to English minutes of meetings in 1973. The CDMA made this transition even earlier, with its minutes in English from September 1962. This suggests that the shift from Dutch to English did not happen at the same pace across the different Dutch communities in Australia. Even among organisations serving a similar community (both the Netherlands Societies), written documents remained in Dutch, while others switched to English in the 1970s.

These differences raise more questions. Why did some organisations switch to English much earlier than others? Did the transition coincide with changes in leadership or membership? Did Dutch expressions or ways of writing persist after organisations switched to English? More time needs to be spent analysing the extensive archive to find first insights into the questions stated above. For now we know that the DACC archives offer a valuable resource for investigating not only when Dutch gave way to English, but also how this

transition unfolded within the organisations that helped shape Dutch community life in Australia.

This article is based on an initial exploration of the DACC archives as part of an internship.

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- * This article was written as part of an internship arrangement between het DACC and the University of Amsterdam.

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