

Flemish Words Made in Detroit, MI

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‘American Flemish’

Flemish immigrants to the U.S. brought with them their East and West Flemish dialectal varieties but also “a kind of linguistic diasystem or supra-dialectal variant [...] given the name Flemish or South Netherlandic” (Ostyn, 1972: 36). This supra-dialectal variant was made up of Netherlandic features, for instance lexical items and syntactic patterns also present in North Netherlandic, but also contained numerous South Netherlandic particularisms, items and patterns only used in Flanders. It was used for communication between speakers of different dialectal varieties but, since it was felt to be more formal, also as a written language. In the U.S., it acquired the characteristics of a transplanted language, adopting new items and structures resulting from sustained contact with American English and progressive language loss.

Ostyn (1972: 37) convincingly argues that this transplanted South-Netherlandic with its restructurings due to language loss and transference should be given a new name: ‘American Flemish,’ in keeping with the long-standing linguistic tradition of using the adjective ‘American’ to qualify immigrant languages in the U.S. (cf. ‘American Norwegian’ (Haugen, 1953)).

Gazette van Detroit

The study examines the lexical innovations found in the *Gazette van Detroit*, a Flemish immigrant newspaper founded in 1914. The corpus consists of issues published between May 1916 and February 1919.

The written brand of Netherlandic used by the Gazette’s editors and contributors corresponds in every respect to American Flemish. It features South-Netherlandic idiosyncratic expressions as well as ‘lexical innovations’.

Many of the lexical innovations respond to new communicative needs and often show signs of transference, i.e. an influence from American English. Several, however, do not name a new reality but seem to be due to language attrition, i.e. a decline or loss of mother-tongue skills.

The lexical innovations fall into the following categories: (1) loan words, (2) loan blends, (3) semantic loans, (4) loan translations, (5) (true) neologisms, (6) false semantic loans and loanwords



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Loan Words

Words of which both the form and meaning have been transferred to American Flemish. Spelling, pronunciation, and inflectional morphology may have taken on Netherlandic features.

Farm (Neth. boerderij)

TE KOOP

Eene schoone en welgelegen *farm*, 100 akkers groot. (*GvD*, 8 December 1916)

Rifel (Neth. geweer)

Den opstand begon, zegt de Echo Belge, door een slag van een *rifel* welke een der slaven op het hoofd kreeg van een duitschen soldaat [...]. (*GvD*, 15 December 1916)

Trench (Neth. Loopgraaf or South Neth. loopgracht)

[...] dan de Maandag moesten wij gaan *trenches* delven. (*GvD*, 8 December 1916)

Boorder (Neth. Grens)

[...] Belgen in dienst in den Michigan Nationale Guard aan de Mexikaansche *boorder*. (*GvD*, 8 December 1916)

Loan Blends

Hybrid compounds or derivations of which one part is taken from American English and the other from South Netherlandic.

Singel mannen (Neth. ongetrouwde mannen)

100 Beetwerkers Gevraagd

Singel Mannen of getrouwde met hunne Vrouw, huisgerief en woonste verzekerd. (*GvD*, 28 February 1919)

Spaar account (Neth. spaarrekening)

Iedere persoon zou moeten een *spaar account* hebben [...]. (*GvD*, 28 February 1919)

Near bier (closest Neth. equivalent: tafelbier)

BAN AAN *NEAR BIER* GEHEVEN

Verleden week kwam te Washington het officieel door den President getekend stuk toe, waarbij den ban aan graan voor het maken van *near bier* en andere zachte dranken wordt ontheven. (*GvD*, 28 February 1919)

Bathkamer (Neth. badkamer)

Om reden van vertrek te koop een schoon huis met 3 slaapkamers en *bathkamer* [...]. (*GvD*, 21 February 1919)



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Semantic Loans

A semantic loan is obtained when the meaning of an American English Word is transferred to a South Netherlandic word which is wholly or partly homophonous with the American English word but does not have the same meaning.

Mijl (mile; Neth. mijl; Belgian mijl = 5000 m.; American mile = 1609 m.)

GOEDE FARM TE KOOP

160 akkers gelegen langs de geplaveide baan, 6 *mijlen* van stad [...]. (GvD, 21 February 1919)

Vrij (free; Neth. Gratis)

Vrije schatting. (GvD, 28 February 1919)

Loan Translations

A word for word translation, an exact imitation in American Flemish of an American English compound or expression.

Zachte dranken (AE soft drinks)

D. C. FUNKE'S

IMPERIAL GINGER ALE en alle slach van *zachte dranken* (GvD, 28 February 1919)

Vrijheidslening (AE Liberty Bond or Liberty Loan)

NIEUWE *VRIJHEIDSLEENING*

Vanwege het Gouvernement wordt er openbaar gemaakt dat er in April aanstaande een nieuwe *vrijheidslening* zal gegeven worden. (GvD, 14 February 1919)

Droog stemmen (AE to vote dry)

Michigan *droog gestemd*

[...] Natuurlijk de drogen [...] zitten te juichen en te jubbelen van genoeg [...] (GvD, 17 November 1916)



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(True) Neologisms

Lexical innovation not resulting from language contact or language attrition.

True lexical innovation is very rare in the *Gazette van Detroit*. The only expression that I have found so far and that I believe should be classified as such is the compound *Belgische kerk*. This expression refers to *Our Lady of Sorrows*, the official church of the Belgian parish in Detroit. In the *Gazette* of the 1910s, this ethnic church, which like the Flemish saloons would have been an important centre of social interaction (Cook, 2007), is rarely or never referred to by its official name. It is its ‘nickname’, *Belgische kerk*, that tends to be used instead.

Belgische kerk

BELG OVERLEDEN

Maandag is Louis Pierremont, wonende aan 39 Tredway ave. alhier overleden, en is heden Donderdag in de *Belgische kerk* ter aarde besteld.

(*GvD*, 21 February 1919)

TE KOOP

Bij Firmin Beels [...] eene [...] flat, aan Meldrum ave. een blok zuid van de Belgische kerk.

(*GvD*, 14 Februari 1919)

False Semantic Words and Loanwords

Classification of lexical item rendered difficult by ‘ambiguous affiliation’.

Classification of selected items is sometimes rendered difficult by the phenomenon of ‘ambiguous affiliation’ (Clyne, 1987: 744). I have classified any such items as false semantic loans or loan words. A speaker of Netherlandic would classify these items as semantic loans or loan words, i.e. as transferences from American English, but they are in fact South Netherlandic dialectal or archaic items that are complete or partial homonyms of American English words with which they share their meaning. A good example of a false loan word is *achternoen*, which most speakers of Netherlandic would associate with the corresponding English noun *afternoon*, but which is instead a South Netherlandic dialectal item from West-Flanders

Achternoen (SN, particularly West-Flanders; AE afternoon; Neth. namiddag)

Zondag *achternoen* had eene schrikkelijke botsing plaats tusschen een tram en een automobiel aan Woodward en de 9 mijl Road.

(*GvD*, 1 December 1916)



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Conclusion

In the latter decades of the 20th century, the *Gazette van Detroit* became bilingual, carrying articles written in North-American English to accommodate those members of the community who no longer knew or used their heritage language. American Flemish, by then a dying ‘language’, was replaced by *Algemeen Nederlands*, the Dutch standard which is one of the official languages of Belgium. The decision by the *Gazette van Detroit* to adopt *Algemeen Nederlands*, a language in many respects culturally foreign to the North-American Flemish community, was a heart-wrenching one, as the excerpt below clearly demonstrates:

Some ‘wise-guys’ in Belgium have snidely remarked that the ‘Gazette’ writes archaic Flemish. Let’s say that the ‘Gazette van Detroit’ is written to be read and enjoyed by the Flemings in the United States and Canada [...]. Theirs is a simple Flemish. The Flemish of the immortal Guido Gezelle, Stijn Streuvels, Ernest Claes, Felix Timmermans. [...] They came with an elementary education, but that did not prevent them from reaching the top! [...] That [...] is the type who reads his ‘Gazette’ every week. He never reads your column nor does he care to read your super-duper, high faluting Flemish. He would not enjoy it anyway, but he thoroughly understands and enjoys his weekly ‘Gazette van Detroit’.

(Sabbe & Buyse 1960: 113-114)



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