Dutch Immigrant Language: Maintaining One's Cultural Identity

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First of all, I should mention that this presentation is based mostly on my own experience as a non-native speaker in this country, and on what I have observed in, or heard from, others in similar situations. Moreover, I should point out that I am in general very much interested in language and that my academic degrees are in French literature and linguistics. So, allow me to make some comments on what happens to people who leave one linguistic community (their native language) and enter a new language domain.

People leave their native country for all kinds of reasons and under all kinds of circumstances. Of course, in the 19th century and the early part of this century, massive numbers of people arrived in this country and they often came as members of rather large groups, or they joined relatives or friends who had come earlier and who were already part of an ethnic community. In recent years, that situation applied perhaps also to people from South East Asia or to Mexicans, but not to the Dutch, except shortly after World War II. I, for example, came by myself because I married an American, and that is a fairly typical situation. I almost certainly knew a lot more about the English language than most of my compatriots who came 100-150 years ago, and I arrived in a civilization that, despite the many differences, also has much in common with the country that I left. Moreover, I was privileged right from the beginning: I came as a student, and then found a good job. I never encountered any material hardship. Nevertheless, the move was, and after 28 years continues to be, an event with enormous consequences, and one of the major reasons why I say this is that I have been obligated of course to adopt English as the language that I use every day, from morning till evening. However fluent I may be in English, it will always be at best "near native," not "native," and that is, I think, a terribly important distinction. A Dutch acquaintance of mine, back in North Dakota, where I lived for 20 years prior to my move to Indianapolis, once told me a story that summarized the situation in which many immigrants find themselves. After many years in the U.S. he returned to the Netherlands for a visit. On more than one occasion people there commented on his Dutch which didn't sound quite "normal" anymore, even though they had no problem understanding each other. This man replied that here in the U.S. people made the same remark about his English, which was certainly adequate but had deficiencies and lacked the natural quality of a native speaker. He thought it was a funny story and yes, in a sense it was. But I really found it sad also because an obvious conclusion is that this man cannot fully express himself in English, and cannot do that anymore in Dutch either. I recognize that this notion of "fully expressing oneself" is a rather vague one. After all, within a group of native speakers, whatever language we are talking about, people reach different levels of proficiency, and sometimes that level is not very high. Moreover, no one person can claim to know his/her native language completely. Yet, native speakers - even those who are not terribly competent linguistically - have vis-à-vis the immigrant the advantage of expressing themselves in the language in which they grew up and in which they, almost from the day they were born, learned about the culture that is dominant in their country. This leads to another important observation: You don't speak a language in isolation, but in a cultural context, and however

much you may learn as an immigrant about that culture, it isn't yours. Native speakers can make terrible mistakes, especially as far as grammar is concerned. Yet, they are members of a group that we can also join, but in which our place will always be different, even if our command of English sometimes is much more advanced than that of some native speakers. Quite frankly, that's frustrating. As a linguist I know things about the history of the English language (and even more about the history of the French language) that most native speakers of these languages don't know; yet, I can never have the same place in the "group" that they have.

Language is one of the most important tools that we have to express ourselves. It's not the only one - there are all kinds of non-verbal means of communication - but one doesn't get very far without language. Language helps in a large measure to shape one's cultural identity, and what often happens to immigrants is that they lose part of their native cultural identity without being able to replace it with a new cultural identity. So you end up being neither fish nor fowl (to use a cliché), or to use a Dutch phrase, je zit tussen de wal en het schip. Perhaps I exaggerate, precisely because of my interest in language and the importance that I attach to it, and it is perhaps a professional deformation that causes me to feel pity for immigrants who perhaps don't "suffer" at all from what I'm trying to point out. But it's not just a matter of being an "outsider" because one has an accent. Accents are superficial indicators and don't matter much, unless they are so strong that they make communication impossible. [People are, however, very sensitive to accents and often draw the mistaken conclusion that you don't know the language very well yet. Some people start speaking more slowly or more loudly to "help" you understand them, or they assume that you are ignorant about their country (e.g., "San Diego is a large city in California. Have you heard of it?")]. What is serious and a little sad, I think, is that immigrants often lose contact with the culture and the language in which they grew up and cannot fully make up for that loss.

I recognize that most people are not linguists, are not really interested in language, take their own language for granted, use it as a practical tool, and don't think for a second that they can indeed lose control over that tool, or in other words, that they can become less fluent in their native language than they presently are. Americans in particular, I think, cannot imagine that they might ever find themselves in a situation where they might "lose" part of their language and part of their identity as Americans. That's probably because English is such a dominant language all over the world and because the notion of emigrating from the U.S. is a thought that's completely alien to almost all Americans. But whatever most people may think, one's native language is both a fundamental part of who/what your are and cannot be taken for granted. Another frustration is that even if as an immigrant you try very hard to remain fluent in your native language, you meet enormous obstacles because you don't speak that language any longer in a natural setting. At least two factors are important: You speak your language, say Dutch, in isolation. Even if there are other Dutch people around and/or you still speak the language at home with your family, there aren't enough people to form a truly diverse linguistic community. As I pointed out earlier, no one person can claim to know a language completely, and whether we realize it or not, we constantly need and "use" other native speakers to maintain or even improve our command of the language. There's no way I can use Dutch in every situation of my daily life here in the U.S., even if I were surrounded by many fellow Dutchmen. Moreover, and this is the second important factor, language constantly changes. Most people don't realize this, or recognize it only very superficially with regard to a few words that are "in"

or "out" at a particular time. But change is infinitely more pervasive than most people think, not just in English or in Dutch, but in every language that's used actively. Most immigrants cannot keep up with these changes, precisely because they live in another country, and what frequently happens is that individuals, or groups of immigrants, speak a kind of Dutch that is no longer considered entirely "normal" by those in the "homeland." Other factors play a role: It often becomes increasingly tempting to transfer grammatical patterns of the new language to the native language, and more frequently, to use isolated words from the new language in one's native language, especially when there is no perfect equivalent for that word in the latter.

So what's an alien to do? What can you do to remain a "normal" member of your first linguistic community and how can you keep, as much as possible, your identity as a member of the culture in which you grew up? The answers are probably obvious, and they are limited. You have to read as much as possible in your native language, and what you read should be as diverse as possible and should, for example, include both current news items and fiction. (In regard to current news items, the internet is creating an entirely new situation allowing people who used to be "out of touch" to have daily access to newspapers and other sources of information "back home.") But more than anything else, you need to speak and write the language in its most natural setting.

I come to the end of my brief presentation, and now I should confess that I put it together primarily to justify my frequent visits to the Netherlands! When I was little, I sometimes listened on Saturday afternoon to an Englishman who taught an English course for beginners on the radio (his name was James Brotherhood, I believe). In an interview he once said that in order to remain fluent he absolutely had to go back to England several times a year. I was 10 or 11 at the time and thought that that was complete nonsense. How could you ever have to practice your own language? Now I know better or course, and I, too, travel several times a year to the Netherlands where, I hope, nobody will ever point out to me that my Dutch is "funny."