'n fonnie bisnis: Yankee Dutch

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Yankee Dutch is a dialect of Dutch spoken at one time in parts of Michigan and Illinois, particularly in Grand Rapids and Chicago. Yankee Dutch looks like a pidgin or creole, but it is neither: it is basically Dutch, but with American English words and expressions subtly stated in Dutch noises in the ratio of one American to two Dutch words. A variant, which is often miscalled Yankee Dutch, is the kind of "dialect humor" language associated with almost all immigrant groups – it survives in doggerel poetry written for church feasts, weddings, and other occasions among the immigrants and increasingly among their second- and third-generation descendants, who have no way of knowing that it is only American English sprinkled with a few Dutch expressions and delivered in a kind of stage-dialect: e.g., "Vel Yake, haf youse got en metch for mine cigar?" and the like. Genuine Yankee Dutch, at least the kind recorded by Dirk Nieland in his book *'n fonnie bisnis* (1929), is essentially Dutch in structure and largely in vocabulary.

But a bit about Nieland and his book might be appropriate. Dirk Nieland was an early 1900's immigrant from Sauwerd in the province of Groningen. He was the only child of Piet and Leifke Nieland. His book tells of episodes in the life of Loe Verluk, a resident of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Loe tells of "sonnieschoel pikkiniks," "femmelie troebels," and other joys and crises in the lives of Dutch immigrants to Michigan in the years 1900 to 1930, in a language uniquely adapted to express the mysteries and complexities of the immigrant life. The language is exquisitely constructed of standard Dutch grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, and phonetically expressed American English vocabulary. The episodes themselves are often poignant, but more often very funny. Nieland's ear was very accurate, and his nuances of the immigrant experience, especially the pro-

cess of adaptation and assimilation, are truthful and amusing, even sometimes brilliantly funny.

The language itself is interesting, especially in its status: it is not a pidgin or a creole, as so many recorded immigrant languages turn out to be. The *Third International Dictionary* (Webster) defines *pidgin* as "A form of speech that usu. has a simplified grammar and a limited often mixed vocabulary." *Creole* it defines as "A language resulting from the acquisition by a subordinate group of the language of a dominant group, with phonological changes, simplifications of grammar, and an admixture of the subordinate group's vocabulary." (McArthur 1992), stresses the matter of pidgin's simplified grammar; of *creole* the *Companion* describes that language as a nativization of a pidgin that has become the language of a whole community. Yankee Dutch has neither a simplified grammar nor phonological changes; its grammar is still fully that of Dutch and the only phonological changes are those relating to the phoneticization of the borrowed American English terms. It is, then, a distinct dialect of Dutch, in this instance a dialect not located in the land of the original tongue but in another part of the world, and subject to the conditions of the adopted culture and language. An analogy with Afrikaans is strongly suggested here, and perhaps with the varieties of English spoken in other areas of the world such as India, southeast Asia, and various islands of the Pacific and South Atlantic (e.g., Tristan da Cunha).

Nieland's version of Yankee Dutch, now almost extinct in real life, survives mainly in the form of his book *'n fonnie bisnis*. Speakers now in their nineties can be found, but shortly all will be gone, and the book shall have to be the only memorial to the language, read by fewer and fewer readers until finally it is merely a museum exhibit. .But at one time it provided great enjoyment for a generation of recent immigrants and their children, and readings of the stories were often held in church basements and private homes. The hearers saw themselves reflected in the lives of Loe and his circle, and were amused into acceptance of their lot.

But now a short survey of the book itself. It is offered as picture of the life and times of Loe Verluk, "peenter en dikkerator," of Grandrapis, a city in Michigan to which generations of immigrants, many from the Netherlands, have come to work in the furniture factories. Loe spends days painting houses, his evenings enjoying a cigar and conversations with his friends and family, and his Sundays either at church or at home eating and thinking and visiting. Now and then he takes a break: a "sonnieschoel pikkinik" or a fishing expedition into the "kontrie" with his friends Bik Nik de boetser (butcher) and Sikke Piet de eller (i.e., church

elder) But most of book is a series of observations on life, and especially the life lived by the recent immigrants in the culture that challenges their adaptability and linguistic skills. Their spiritual life remains largely what it had been in the "ol kontrie," for the church in the "Joenait Steets" still offers the old psalm-singing and long Dutch-language sermons, the old deference to preacher and elder, and the old *authority*. There are, however, new matters to think about: boys no longer follow their fathers' trades, and girls have more independence. Now and then a wife learns to assert her own authority; indeed, Loe's wife discloses an independent streak that at first startles him, then gains his approval. Hard work brings rewards, and the greatest boon of the new land is the opportunity to be one's own boss, which Loe finds much to his liking, for he is good at managing a business.

All in all, Loe is clearly well able to confront the problems that all immigrants faced, and he is especially good at adjusting to the psychological and spiritual troubles inherent in spiritual kingdom and world . The book ends with Loe's visit to the preacher, in some trepidation, only to find that the preacher is "'n fain feller" after all. A local committee has visited Loe regarding his alleged "ondiesent" behavior, so Loe visits the dominee to hear from him an explanation. Loe reports the dominee's words:

> De Kemittie was alleen maar bij mij geweest om de kompleen (complaint) van Maart en Brammetje in te vestegeeten (to investigate) om de beide saais (both sides) van de storie te hooren. En hij wist nu wel, zei hij, dat er geen riezen was om met de kees te persieden (proceed). 0, of kos, hij heeft 't ook nog 'n luddel bit ingerobd (rubbed in) dat alle piepel rielie meer sieries belangden te zijn, (should be more serious) en dat ze zoo moesten leven dat er geen kik over gereesd kon worden (should live so that there can be no complaint), maar dat was zijn doetie als minnester, he? Daar was niks de metter mee. Nosurrie, hij is 'n fain feller, hoor! En hij lijkt 'n jook (joke), aigis, want toen ik wegging (went away) en handsjeekte (shook hands) met hem, pookte hij mij in de ribs en zei dat hij sjoer was dat ik later wel keervolder (carefuller) wezen zou met moensjain (moonshine whiskey) en met al zulke monkiederij (monkeyshines). Ik zei (said): "Joebet, dominee." En toen ben ik met 'n hoollat iezier fielen (a whole lot easier feeling) weer hoom gegaan (*'n fonnie bisnis* 160)

Loe is at peace at the end, when he philosophizes over losing the race for election to the office of deacon:

> Wel, om 'n lange storie kort te maken, toen het vootkounten (counting of votes) gefinnist was, had ik juust een-en-twintig voots minder (less) als mijn pardner en ik was dus niet gelekted (elected). Dat was wel toebed, maar ik heb 'n aidie, joeno, dat latse piepel gedacht hebben, dat een jaap voor eller mij beter fitte en daarom zal ik maar studdie aan een beetje fiekeren (figuring) aan de nekste leksjen (election). (171)

The secondary characters, some of whom are named above, play their roles as foils to Loe but do not undergo development, as does Loe, though his development is slight, for his character is formed well before the stories begin (this subtly corresponds to the pattern established by Loe's immigration – he brought not only his body but also his whole cultural and spiritual complexity with him; his only forming in the new country is linguistic, and even here his conservatism is manifest.) The setting is nowhere made very explicit, although the readers in Grand Rapids would recognize the place – they all lived in it, or in a similar place, such as the south side of Chicago. The concerns and interests of the characters, brought to focus in Loe's adventures and musings, are also authentic to the place and time: Many of the people of Granrapis talked like Loe, had adventures like his, and had the same outlook on life. Loe is representative, then, of an era which is now past but which flourished for a brief period from 1900 to 1930 or 1940 in Grand Rapids, Chicago, and in smaller pockets elsewhere. The key to understanding both Loe and his milieu lies in his language, and to that we now turn in more detail.

As stated before, Loe's language is neither a pidgin nor a creole. What then is it? It is a dialect of Dutch. Usually dialects are thought of as settled in the country of their origin, but there is no reason why a dialect cannot begin in another land, provided conditions are right. And these are the conditions in which Loe, and hundreds of other residents of Grand Rapids who shared his language in the period, developed their dialect. First of all, most of the speakers of Yankee Dutch had emigrated from the province of Groningen, and they continued to use that strong dialect for at least a generation after they arrived . The language dialect known as Yankee Dutch began, then, in a linguistic enclave that included speakers of a strong dialect with its many associations, who had the self-assurance of people bonded by ties of language, culture, and religion and folkways. It was strong enough to prevail, although the second condition now appears: it had to absorb terms that were local and not to be found in the transported, parent language, terms first encountered as sound, not graphic symbol. And of course all the wage-earners had to become somewhat fluent in the language of the adopted country, so they learned it, stumblingly, often from an earlier wave of immigrants themselves imperfectly grounded in the new language. And gradually the new *vocabulary*, but not the syntactical structure, of the new language, American English, replaced the old, and it even supplied portmanteau words and phrases (like Loe's word of greeting, "piezelmietje"(i.e., "pleased to meet you," but suggesting "piece of meat")). Then one should add another condition: the human urge to dominate invades even pious Christian communities, and where all are

poor, at least for a few years, linguistic dominance will survive until economic and social dominance finally arrive. So the incorporation of American English vocabulary into the native dialect went on apace, and within a generation or two Yankee Dutch became the language of the tribe, although not for long, for the young went off for further education and some of the older immigrants worked assiduously at acquiring an almost accent-free American English (Dirk Nieland himself spoke a highly inflected and rich English, although it was a bit old-fashioned, for his models were James Fenimore Cooper, James Branch Cabel, and H. L. Mencken).

One of the most interesting features of Loe's language is its flexibility. When need arises, he can speak "English" with the best of his coevals, including his wife, who speaks not Yankee Dutch but strongly accented English, as in the following excerpt, which recounts Loe's son's stomachache and the treatment for it:

> Mijn wijf was kreezie.
>
> "Ja, der joe hev don it nou," hallerde zij (she hollered), terwijl ze kwiek water op de stoof poet voor een hatwaterbeck (hot-water bag) op Henkie zijn stommerik.
>
> "Joe wanted mijn poer luddel Henkie toe lurn een treed. En nou joe lurn him arriddie (already) toe git de peenters kollik (colic). 0, wat sell ai doe. 0,0,0!"
>
> "Och,"" zeg ik, "peenters kollik. Wat joe token ebout. Ik been peenter geweest voor jaren en 't heeft mij nooit gebadderd (bothered). En de kid heeft ieven niet gepeent (painted), oonlie maar wat gepeest (pasted). No, aiteljoe wat het is. 't Is geen peenters kollik, but pleen en simpel eppel (apple) kollik. Hij heeft toe muts eppels gehad."
>
> Maar mijn wijf hoorde mij niet. Zij was all bizzie met Henkie, die nog alletaim hallerde. Zij robde (rubbed) hem de stommerick, en zei maar over en over egan: "No, mijn booi, of joe git better, joe nevver, nevver wil bie 'n peenter, hoor. Nevver, nevver!" (29-30)

An even more revealing episode involves Loe's "Kompetieter," Baanie (Barney, originally Berend), who tells Loe about meeting the manager of a business who might need some painting. Just after talking in Yankee Dutch to Loe, Baanie says, "Wel, ik ken de mennesjer poediegoed en toen ik in zin offis kwam, zeg ik: 'Hello, Jim, hou goos it'?' '0 fain, Baanie,' zegt hij, 'zit doun.' Wel, ik ging zitten en hij handigde mij een nais ten-center sigaar. 'En nou, Baanie, wat joe want,' zegt hij." Baanie knows how to shift from Yankee Dutch to American English, and does so without difficulty, though not without a strong accent. Loe can shift too, but he prefers Yankee Dutch, and when forced to speak "English" he gets out of the situation as quickly as he can.

Some closing observations: first of all, what of Nieland and Loe? They are not identical, of course-no author is entirely his fictional character. But the similaritiesare interesting. Both were immigrants, both tackled the huge problem of survival in a foreign culture with its difficult language, and both were pioneers of a sort (Loe, of course, representatively, not individually). Loe's – that is, Nieland's-language had not really been heard before, or perhaps only in bits and pieces, until Nieland organized it into a coherent representation of the way people spoke and felt and thought for a brief moment in a particular place. He works through his hero, Loe, to express truly the culture of a tough and vibrant people, facing odds that were partly due to the new country , but also to the culture they brought with them, and in Nieland's and Loe's view, especially the rigid structures of the church (which makes Loe's reconciliation with the dominee all the more significant). In Loe the "luddel feller" speaks, against the powers that classically and historically have kept him down: church and society, and the hypocrisy that both generate against their wills. Loe, like Nieland, sees through the powers and gently exposes them, yet he is in no way programmatic about it: it's merely that he has seen all, knows all, absorbed all, adjusted, and eventually forgiven. And the new language is vibrant with such meaning in ways that neither the language of the "ole Kontrie" nor the language of the new country could possibly have supplied. In Loe the linguistic is the vehicle of the social and the religious; conservative, the language enables Nieland to fix his time and place. Yet language and the culture were changing even as Loe spoke; he is the last as well as the first.

And the funniest. Loe is unconsciously funny; he doesn't know that his locutions are funny to bilingual speakers of either Dutch/English or English/Dutch. His fun does not consist of one-liners, or setup jokes, or highly exaggerated characterizations. And certainly the fun does not reside in mere mispronunciations – the main fare of so many dialect writings purporting to reflect the speech of immigrants to an English-speaking culture. Loe's fun is in the reflection in his mind, expressed in his exquisite fabrications, of the culture in which he has been placed and in which he must survive and even thrive. He has heard his fellow Americans say, often, so as to establish authority of statement, "I tell you...." Loe's phonetic system (Nieland's of course) makes that out to be *aiteljoe*. Another passage illustrates his remarkable ability to adapt to the new language:

> Laif is toch maar niet zoo iezie (easy). Spesjel de peenters hebben d'r een tuf taim En ik mijzelf nog wel het tufste. Ik ben nog niet zoo'n lang taim oon bos (my own boss) en heb dus een hool lat troebel met kompetieters (competitors). As ik oeen luddel jaap fieker (figure on a little job), zijn er joezelie (usually) wel vier of vijf anderer fiekers in. En dan moet je't poedie kloos (pretty

close) doen om een jaap te krijgen. In dat wee zit er niet'n lat monnie (in that way there's not a lot of money in it), maar oonlie juust'n diesent livven (just a decent living) (35).

And another - Loe is in "troebel":

Nou heb ik al weer troebel. En dat komt omdat piepel (people) niet priesjeten wat ze zelf niet doen kunnen (do not appreciate what they themselves cannot do). Aiteljoe, 't is notting als jellesie (jealousy). 'n Proffert (prophet) wordt niet geannerd (honored) in zijn eigen kontrie. Dat's de troeblel (111).

Then follows a sad tale of misunderstanding and recrimination from other people, but in the end Loe is comforted by the dominee, and all is well, as it always is for Loe and for others like him. The humor is low-key and mainly embedded in the remarkable linguistic adaptation, but the general air of Loe and his kind is kindly, tolerant, and often graceful.

The humor heals over all the pain of being a stranger in a strange land, trying hard to become fluent in a strange tongue, but in the end triumphant.

Sources cited

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Śmieszny interes: jankeski holenderski

Jankeski holenderski jest odmianą holenderskiego używaną w stanach Michigan i Illinois, szczególnie w Grand Rapids i Chicago. Jest to właściwie język holenderski, z amerykańsko-angielskimi elementami leksykalnymi. Wymową zbliżony jest do holenderskiego i na jeden amerykański przypadają w nim dwa wyrazy holenderskie.

Nazwa *jankeski holenderski* jest też odnoszona do "dialektalnego humoru", którego używa się w poezji tworzonej z okazji świąt kościelnych, ślubów i innych uroczystości. Cieszy się on niegasnącym powodzeniem wśród potomków (w drugim i trzecim pokoleniu) holenderskich emigrantów, którzy nie zawsze zdają sobie sprawę, iż jest to właściwie amerykański angielski, okraszony tylko holenderskimi wyrażeniami i traktowany jako rodzaj scenicznego dialektu.

Prawdziwy jankeski holenderski, a przynajmniej jego odmiana zapisana przez Dirka Nielanda w książce *'n fonnie bisnis* (1929) jest strukturalnie i leksykalnie językiem holenderskim.