

Changes in professional terms in the Netherlands

Anglicisation and the neutralisation of gender

Marinel Gerritsen
University of Nijmegen/CLS

1. Introduction

During the 1980's many women embarked on professional careers in the Netherlands, at a time when Dutch only had terms for those professions that did not refer explicitly to women. This resulted in a heated debate on the nature of the terms that should be used to refer to the professions: should each profession use one neutral term that would include both women and men, or should each profession have two terms, one referring to men and the other to women? In this paper we will outline this discussion and the history of professional terms referring to women in Dutch (2). In addition, on the basis of a quantitative study, we will show that there has been a widespread tendency towards neutralization and that the Anglicization of Dutch has played an important part in this change (3).

2. Historical background

2.1 The need for professional terms for women

The fight against less gender-biased terms for professions in Dutch dates from the end of the second feminist movement. The start of this period in the Netherlands is marked by the appearance of Kool-Smit (1967), an article — entitled *Het onbehagen bij de vrouw* 'The discontentment of women', published in a volume with a number of articles about discontentment in the prestigious Dutch literary journal *De Gids*. She showed that in the year 1967 women were considered as secondary after men in nearly all sectors of life and she argued that the segmentation between women's and

men's professions had to be removed. Her article had an enormous impact on Dutch women and they tried to achieve this. The first — and of course most important — thing that had to be changed in Dutch society was that it had to be made possible for women to practise so-called men's professions and for men to practise so-called women's professions. A second aspect that had to be changed was a change in names for professions. Since some names for professions only referred to men (*timmerman* 'carpenter') and others only to women (*vroedvrouw* 'midwife') new names for professions had to be created.

During the first years of the second feminist movement professional terms were not an issue yet in the Netherlands. It was only in 1975 that Annie Romein-Verschoor, a historian and specialist in Dutch, published a comprehensive article about the second feminist movement in which she also paid attention to linguistic problems. Regarding terms for professions Romein-Verschoor (1975) observes a tendency in Dutch to indicate the biological sex of somebody who practices a profession in names for professions: a female psychologist is for example called a *psychologe* and a male a *psycholoog*. Furthermore, she shows that for some professions only female-specific terms exist, e.g., *verpleegster* 'nurse' while only male-specific terms exist for other professions, e.g., *loodgieter* 'plumber'. She wonders why it is so important to express the biological sex of the person who practices a profession in the name of a profession. Is that more important than other aspects such as age, experience? On the other hand she shows that when a so-called neutral term such as *arts* 'doctor' is used which refers to both women and men, people only have a male person in mind. She herself does not make any suggestions for change. As a linguist she understands very well that language is a reflection of society. She shows that gender bias in Dutch is largely a symptom of the inequality in Dutch society, but she also emphasises that this society is changing and that the Dutch language is behind the developments in society. She warns that the gender bias in Dutch might slow down the progress of women's liberation and states that it is therefore important to try to find solutions. As a linguist, she realises, though, that this is not easy to effectuate: "It is easy to protest, but to find solutions is difficult because language develops in its own way and is not determined by committees of linguists" (Romein-Verschoor 1977: 14).

2.2 The effects of a law

The discussion about the problem of gender bias in professional terms in Dutch was accelerated when the law of *Gelijke behandeling van mannen en vrouwen bij de arbeid* 'Equal treatment for men and women regarding labour' was established in 1980. In this law it was laid down that advertisements for the recruitment of personnel had to be formulated in such a way that it was clear that both women and men could

apply. Advertisements that did not state this clearly were legally forbidden. This law led to an enormous chaos in names for professions in personnel advertisements. Numerous solutions were created, some organisations only added v/m, which is the abbreviation of *vrouw* 'woman'/'*man* 'man' to the profession term. This resulted in amusing constructions such as (1), in which a name with a component that clearly indicates a woman, *-vrouw* and *-esse* got an addition that indicated that men could also apply. (2) is an opposite example: the terms of the professions include the components *-man* and *-is* that indicate men, with additions that show that women could also apply:

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) | <i>vroedvrouw</i> (m/v) | 'midwife (m/f)' |
| | <i>secretaresse</i> (m/v) | 'female secretary (m/f)' |
| (2) | <i>timmerman</i> (m/v) | 'male carpenter (m/f)' |
| | <i>secretaris</i> (m/v) | 'male secretary (m/f)' |

Others tried to solve the problem through constructions such as in (3), which is a combination of the male suffix, *-eur* and the female suffix *-ice*, or a complicated combination of *psycholoog* 'psychologist' and *psychologe* 'female psychologist'.

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (3) | <i>directeur/trice</i> | 'male director', 'female director' |
| | <i>psycholo(o)g/e</i> | 'male and female psychologist' |

The Ministry for Social Affairs felt the need to intervene in this chaos and set up a committee called *Working Group Modification Names for Professions* that had to write guidelines for the use of occupational terms. The members were ordered to develop such terms that both men and women would feel addressed.

2.3 An analysis of professional terms for women and men in the year 1980

The *Working Group* first analysed the problem on the basis of the professional terms that were used around 1980. They showed that Dutch has two types of professional titles: terms that indicate the natural gender of the person who practises a profession and terms that do not. In the following we will deal with these two types of terms in sequence.

There are three categories of profession names that indicate the natural gender of the person who practices the profession.

In 4 examples are given of terms that have two variants with the same meaning apart from the biological gender that is indicated: a variant explicitly referring to women (first column) and a variant referring to men (second column) which is also used when the natural gender of the person who practices a profession is not known or when the term refers to a group of people with that profession which consists of men and women.

The second category concerns names that indicate a difference in natural gender and in meaning (5). In most of the cases the professional term explicitly referring to a woman (first column) refers to a job with a lower social status than the term not explicitly referring to a woman (second column). A *secrétairesse* earns far less than a *secretaris*. A *secretaris* very often has a *secrétairesse*, who works for him/her but a *secrétairesse* never has a *secretaris* who works for her. There is a clear difference in function and women who have the function of *secretaris* will never call themselves *secrétairesse*. The term *masseuse* is associated with a whorehouse, but the term *masseur* with a physiotherapeutic centre.

The third category consists of terms that either do not have equivalents referring to men (6a), or equivalents referring to women (6b), although the non-existent equivalents could exist from a morphological point of view.

(4) Terms	Terms referring	Translation
referring to women	to men/neutral terms	
<i>lerares</i>	<i>leraar</i>	'teacher'
<i>schrijfster</i>	<i>schrijver</i>	'author'
<i>actrice</i>	<i>acteur</i>	'actress/actor'
<i>componiste</i>	<i>componist</i>	'composer'
(5) <i>secrétairesse</i>	<i>secretaris</i>	'secretary'
<i>masseuse</i>	<i>masseur</i>	'masseur'
(6) a. <i>naaister</i>	* <i>naaier</i>	'dressmaker'
<i>werkster</i>	<i>werker</i>	'cleaning lady'
b. * <i>patatboerin</i>	<i>patatboer</i>	'chips seller'
* <i>timmervrouw</i>	<i>timmerman</i>	'carpenter'

For terms referring to women feminine anaphoric pronouns (*zij* 'she', *haar* 'her') are used. Terms referring to men are referred to with masculine pronouns (*hij* 'he', *zijn* 'his') also when the term refers to persons of which the natural gender is not known. When a term is used in the plural and refers to a group of men and women plural pronouns are used. These do not have a grammatical gender distinction in Dutch.

The type of terms that does not indicate natural gender consists of only one category: the so-called gender-neutral terms (7) which do not indicate the natural gender of the person who practises a profession. These are terms to which a suffix referring to women cannot easily be added. This is partly due to the fact that the addition of such suffixes would result in homonyms (for example *informatica* 'information science', *fysica* 'physics') or to names which are already in use for the wives of the men with the profession, as in *domineese* 'clergyman's wife'. Another reason why Dutch suffixes referring to women cannot easily be added to these names is that the names are often loan words.

(7)	Terms for women and men	Translation
	<i>dokter</i>	'doctor'
	<i>professor</i>	'professor'
	<i>consul</i>	'consul'
	<i>bediende</i>	'servant'
	<i>notaris</i>	'notary'
	<i>fysicus</i>	'physicist'
	<i>ingenieur</i>	'engineer'
	<i>dominee</i>	'clergyman'
	<i>informaticus</i>	'information scientist'

For these terms natural gender and grammatical gender do not correspond. The grammar of Dutch requires that one refers to these professional names with masculine pronouns (hij 'he', zijn 'his'), even when they refer to a woman. In practise, however, one uses the feminine pronouns (zij 'she', haar 'her') when a term clearly refers to a woman.

2.4 Recommendations and reactions

On the basis of the above analysis of professional terms around 1980 the *Working Group Modification Names for Professions* wrote guidelines for the use of occupational terms, which were published in the brochure "Gevraagd" (cf. Werkgroep 1982). They recommended to use so-called neutral terms — names that could be used for both women and men — and they advised to use the terms in the second column in (4) and (5) and the terms in (7). For the terms in (6) they suggested new neutral forms, for example *timmer* for *timmerman*, *huishoudelijke hulp* for *werkster* or formations with neutral suffixes such as *-kracht* and *-wacht*. The choice for neutralisation was motivated as follows:

- In line with Romein-Verschoor (1975) they stated that it was not important to know the natural gender of a person who practises a profession.
- In the long run, sex differentiation in professions would not be present any more and many women would practise professions that were hitherto mainly performed by men. As a consequence the problem of only thinking of a man when perceiving the neutral term would disappear.
- If other professional titles would be introduced for women than for men, it was very likely that a differentiation in function would occur soon: the names referring to women having a lower social status than the names referring to men. We have seen that this had already occurred (cf. (5))
- When no neutral term was available, the term for men was chosen because that was the most prestigious term.

- When neutral terms were used it was not necessary to introduce important new — sometimes difficult to pronounce — variants such as *hoogleerkracht* ‘professor’, *schrijffpersoon* ‘author’ in the Dutch language.
- The choice of neutral terms is in line with the change in the Dutch language, which shows a decrease in both the number of suffixes that can be used to derive feminine personal nouns from masculine personal nouns and the productivity of some suffixes (Brouwer 1985).

These guidelines resulted in an avalanche of reactions in newspapers, radio and television and also from linguists. The discussion centred around three issues:

1. New formations such as *timmer* were considered to be ridiculous. Both laypersons and linguists were convinced that they would never gain a firm foothold in Dutch. The criticism in newspapers, columns and so on mostly dealt with this problem: how to find neutral alternatives for the terms in (6).
2. Some linguists (Van Alphen 1983; Huisman 1985) argued that the terms that were advised were not neutral at all, but only referred to men. Since not many women had practised professions yet such as *componist*, *secretaris*, *consul*, *dominee*, *minister*, *notaris*, people would only have a male person in mind when reading the personnel advertisements. They would not understand that the advertisements were also addressed to women. They advocated sex-specific names for professions. Every name for a profession should have an equivalent for women. If such a name was not present in Dutch, it had to be created. Examples are given in (8). Their solution was highly inspired by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: the structure of a language influences how the language user categorises the world around him or her. By using professional terms that clearly referred to a woman it would be clear for language users that women are also able to practise that profession.

(8) Terms for women	Terms for men	Translation
<i>hooglerares</i>	<i>hoogleraar</i>	‘professor’
<i>loodgiester</i>	<i>loodgieter</i>	‘plumber’

3. Adriaens (1982) shows on the basis of analyses of personnel advertisements in Dutch speaking Belgium and in the Netherlands that two tendencies are present: a tendency to use sex-specific terms for professions and a tendency to use so-called sex-neutral ones. An indication for the latter is the decrease in number of productive suffixes referring to women. Indications for the former are that some other suffixes referring to women were used more frequently and that gender distinction in the plural terms were introduced that until then did not have such a distinction: *assistent* and *assistente* both have the plural *assistenten*, but a special plural for women *assistentes* was increasingly used. He does not dare to say which tendency will win in the long run.

In the end neither the guidelines of the Working Group Modification Names for Professions nor the proposals of the group headed by Ingrid van Alphen and Joke Huisman have become official guidelines. The discussions in the first half of the eighties were so vehement that no decisions could be taken.

3. Changes in the use of professional terms: Neutralisation

The discussion about sex-specific or neutral terms for professions has been going on now for over 20 years and no solution has been found. However, the advertisements for the recruitment of personnel have not disappeared. How do organisations nowadays solve the problem? Adriaens (1982) stated that the future would show whether the tendency to use neutral terms or the tendency to use sex-specific terms would win. In order to try to get an answer to this question we have made an analysis of variation and change of professional terms in personnel advertisements in 1989 and 1999. The data for 1989 are from Snijders (1989). She studied the names for professions with a middle and high classification in *de Telegraaf* of April 8 and 16 1989 and of *Intermediair* of April 7 1989. We studied similar advertisements in *de Telegraaf* of August 21 1999 and of *Intermediair* of June 17 1999. Snijders found 225 advertisements for professions with a middle and high classification. Ten years later we found 573 of such advertisements. The difference between 1989 and 1999 is the result of an increasing labour shortage during the last decade. It is difficult for companies to find employees.

Table 1 shows the occurrence of professional terms in headings of personnel advertisements in 1989 and 1999. Four types could be distinguished:

- Terms referring to men or used when the natural gender of the person who practices a profession is not known which have a counterpart explicitly referring to women: *medewerker* vs. *medewerkster* ‘co-operator’ (cf. (4))
- Neutral terms: *arts* ‘doctor’ (referring to men and women) (cf. (7))
- Terms explicitly referring to women: *secretaresse* ‘female secretary’ (cf. (5))
- Mixed forms referring to men and women: *medewerk(st)er* ‘(fe)male co-operator’ (cf. (3))

Table 1 clearly shows that in both periods of time terms referring to men and neutral terms predominate in the headings of most advertisements: 98% of the headings has such a term. Terms referring to women and mixed forms occur only rarely. These data show that those who advocated the use of neutral terms in the beginning of the eighties seem to have won.

A closer inspection of the real neutral terms such as *arts* gives us insight in how speakers of Dutch have realised the neutralisation. In Table 2 we have made a

Table 1. Professional terms in headings of personnel advertisements in 1989 and 1999

	1989 N = 225 advertisements	1999 N = 573 advertisements
Terms referring to men/neutral terms	104	243
<i>Medewerker</i>	46%	42%
Neutral terms	117	323
<i>Arts</i>	52%	56%
Terms referring to women	0	6
<i>Secretaresse</i>	0%	1%
Mixed forms	4	1
<i>Medewerk(st)er</i>	1.7%	0.2%

distinction between the two types of real neutral names for professions that we found in our data: Dutch names and English names. We regarded names as English names if the word did not occur in Dutch. Names that could be both English and Dutch, for example *accountant* or *supervisor*, were considered Dutch, except when they occurred together with an English word, for example *people supervisor*.

Table 2. Dutch and English neutral professional terms

	1989 N = 117 terms	1999 N = 323 terms
Dutch	47	63
<i>hoofd</i> ‘head, <i>arts</i> ‘doctor’	40%	19%
English	70	260
<i>Engineer, director</i>	60%	81%

Table 2 shows an decrease in the use of Dutch neutral terms between 1989 and 1999 and an increase in the use of English neutral terms ($\chi^2 = 19.56$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). English terms were not only used more frequently in 1999, but also many new English names were borrowed. Apart from the terms found by Snijders in 1989, we also found: *designer, developer, director, employee, floor broker, market maker, marketeer, officer, professional, researcher, technician, telemarketeer, telesales, trader*. In order to be able to use neutral professional terms the Dutch take resort to English. This tendency is in line with the Anglicisation of Dutch society that is observed by many linguists and laymen. English is used in an increasing number of domains (business, science, school, advertising) and Dutch words are increasingly ousted by English words (for example *stomerij* by *dry cleaning*, *uitverkoop* by *sale*)

(Gerritsen, Korzilius, Van Meurs en Gijsbers 2000).

The very frequent occurrence of professional terms referring to men and neutral terms in the headings in advertisements indicates that the neutralisation tendency is taking place. The question is whether the people who wrote these advertisements considered the terms to be neutral, referring to both men and women. We can expect that when they have some feeling that the terms do not refer to both men and women they will indicate in another way that women are also meant. In our data we found four different ways to express that an advertisement was meant for women too:

- Adding *M/V* (meaning *Man/Vrouw* ‘man/woman’) after the term
- Using the pronouns *hij/zij* ‘he/she’ or *zijn/haar* ‘his/her’ as anaphoric pronouns in the text of the advertisement
- Adding a female-specific term in the text of the advertisement, for example *kandidate* ‘female candidate’
- Explicitly asking women to apply.

Table 3 shows how often these ways of indicating that women are meant occur in advertisements with terms referring to men and neutral terms (type *medewerker*, *leraar* (cf. (4)) and type *arts*, *dokter*, *director* (cf. (7)) in the headings.

Table 3. Indications that women are meant in personnel advertisements with terms referring to men and neutral terms in the headings in 1989 and 1999

	1989 Terms refer- ring to men/neutral terms	1989 Neutral terms	1989 Total	1999 Terms referring to men/neutral terms	1999 Neutral terms	1999 Total
Addition of <i>M/V</i>	80 77%	77 66%	157 71%	109 45%	91 28%	200 35%
<i>hij/zij</i> or <i>zijn/haar</i>	No data	No data	No data	26 11%	56 17%	82 14%
Addition of female-specific	No data	No data	No data	1 0.4%	–	1 0.2%
Explicit Men- tion	No data	No data	No data	21 9%	9 3%	30 5%

Table 3 shows an decrease in the use of the addition of *M/V* between 1989 and 1999 ($\chi^2 = 81.75$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$) In 1999 35% of the terms referring to men and

neutral terms had an addition *M/V*, whereas this was 71% in 1989. This is an indication that these neutral terms are increasingly considered to refer to both women and men. Regarding the other ways that can be used to express that an advertisement with such a term is also meant for women, we only have data for 1999. The data of Snijders from 1989 could unfortunately not be analysed in a similar way. Our 1999 data show that the anaphoric pronouns *hij/zij* occur relatively frequently, that is to say, in 14% of the cases, but it is not very often that it is stated in the description of the candidate that a woman is meant. Moreover, women are neither often asked to apply explicitly. In 58 % of all advertisements with a heading referring to a man and a neutral heading ($N=566$) of the 1999 corpus we did not find any of the four strategies to indicate that the advertisement is also meant for women. On the one hand this can be interpreted as a sign that the terms referring to men and the neutral terms are considered to be neutral. The fact that in the Van Dale of 1999 (Van Dale 1999: xviii) is stated for the first time that when nouns such as *arts* 'doctor', or *blinde* 'blind person' which have the grammatical masculine gender refer to women, feminine personal nouns such as feminine pronouns (*zij* 'she', *haar* 'her') may be used supports this line of thought. On the other hand we doubt whether terms referring to men and neutral terms are considered to be neutral indeed. Psycholinguistic studies in the line of Braun (1998) are needed to discover whether terms such as *medewerker* 'co-operator' and neutral terms such as *arts* 'doctor' are considered to refer to both women and men indeed.

References

- Adriaens, Geert. 1982. "Vrouwelijke beroepsnamen in evolutie." *Forum der Letteren* 23: 1–17.
- Braun, Friederike et al. 1998. "Können Geophysiker Frauen sein? Generische Personenbezeichnungen im Deutschen." *Zeitschrift für Germanistische Linguistik* 23: 265–283.
- Brouwer, Dédé. 1985. "Hoe vrouwelijk is een hoofd?" *De Gids* 148: 105–115.
- Gerritsen, Marinel; Korzilius, Hubert, Van Meurs, Frank and Gijsbers, Inge. 2000. "English in commercials on Dutch Television: Frequently used, but not understood and not appreciated." *Journal of Advertising Research*.
- Huisman, Joke. 1985. "Over verschil in gelijkheid en gelijkheid in verschil." *De Gids* 148 (9/10): 777–783.
- Kool-Smit, Joke. E. 1967. "Het onbehagen bij de vrouw." *De Gids* 130 (9/10): 267–282.
- Romein-Verschoor, Annie. 1975. "Over taal en seks, seksisme en emancipatie." *De Gids* 138 (1/2): 3–36.
- Romein-Verschoor, Annie. 1977. "Over taal en seksisme." In *Een zee van golven*. eds. Agnes Verbiest & Anne Van Zande. Nijmegen 1995: VITA: 11–15.
- Snijders, Gina. 1989. *Bent u die kandidaat (M/V)? Een onderzoek naar aanspreekvormen in personeelsadvertenties*. Leiden: Rijksuniversiteit Leiden.

- Van Alphen, Ingrid. 1983. "Een vrouw een vrouw, een woord een woord. Over de gelijke behandeling van vrouwen en mannen en de konsekventies daarvan voor beroepsbenamingen in het Nederlands." *Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies* 14: 306–315.
- Van Dale. 1999. *Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal*. 13th ed. Utrecht/Antwerp: Van Dale Lexicografie.
- Werkgroep Wijziging beroepsnaming. 1982. *Gevraagd. Aanzet tot een discussie over het wijzigen van den beroepsbenaming in het kader van de wet gelijke behandeling mannen en vrouwen*. Amsterdam/The Hague: Uitgave Ministerie von Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid en de aktiegroep Man Vrouw Maatschappij.