

Transcript - Dutch words in the English language

Speakers of English and Dutch owe more to each other than they imagine. The languages have enriched each other with words from one language crossing over into the other. These borrowed words, or 'loanwords' as they are often called, can tell us a lot about the circumstances in which speakers of English and Dutch encountered each other. I would like to mention some common words that were taken over into English from Dutch. As these words were taken over, they were adapted to the English sound system, and it is interesting – and to English speakers often comical – to hear them pronounced in the original. I would like you to have go at pronouncing them in Dutch so that you can learn something not only about the history of the English language but also about Dutch phonology (the technical word for what I have earlier called 'sound system').

I am going to focus today on words that tell the story of the trading relations between the two countries. If you look at them on a map, you will see that the Netherlands and Flanders, which is where Dutch is spoken today, are only separated from England by a small stretch of water – and since in the days before motor-vehicles the seas and rivers were what motorways are today – it was easy to trade goods by boat, so a lot of Dutch-derived words in English are to do with trade and shipping.

A very old word, already established in English in the early 13th century is *pack*, which originally meant a bundle of things wrapped together for transport. *Pack* comes from the Dutch word 'pak'. Notice that when I say that in Dutch ('pak') the [p] is not aspirated – it is not like English 'puh' – so to English ears it sounds a little more like 'bak'. (I know this to my cost: I have often had letters addressed to me as Mr 'Butter' rather than Mr Putter!). Other nautical words that we already find in English in the fifteenth century are *freight* (cargo of a ship) from Dutch 'vracht' – *keel* – a flat-bottomed boat often used for carrying coal, from Dutch 'kiel', and one of my favourites, *skipper*, the captain of a ship but now also the captain of a football team. That comes from a word the English find it very difficult to pronounce properly, the Dutch word 'schipper': to pronounce the Dutch begin with an 's' and then do a velar fricative (or pretend you have a throat disease).

In the Early Modern period this pattern of borrowing nautical words from Dutch continued. The word for 'pirate', *freebooter*, is from the Dutch 'vrijbouter', and is first found in English in 1570. The word *boom* (meaning a long spar) is from Dutch 'boom' (meaning 'tree' or 'plank'). My last nautical word for today is *yacht*. If you ask yourself why that word is spelt so strangely, with <cht> at the end, the answer is that it comes from the Dutch word 'jacht' – again pronounced with one of these velar fricatives that English speakers cannot cope with – so the English deleted it altogether in pronunciation but not in spelling. The Dutch word 'jacht' means 'hunt, chase', and it is a shortening of 'jachtship', a fast ship that is good at chasing others.

Let's end with a little digression to celebrate that fine Dutch sound [χ] – because we owe our word *gas* to it. It was the 17th-century Flemish scientist Jan van Helmont who coined the word. Jan van Helmont discovered that the air is full of all kinds of gases, oxygen, carbon dioxide: he imagined a swirling mass of vapours and called these vapours *gasses*. Why? Because he modelled the word on

the Greek word *chaos*, which in the original Greek (and still in Dutch today) is pronounced [χaos], giving us the Dutch word 'gas' and English 'gas'.