

A Reference Grammar of

Dutch

with Exercises and Key

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	page	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>		ix
<i>List of grammatical terms</i>		x
How to use this book		xv
Didactic guide for beginners		xvii
List of entries		xx
List of tables		xxii
Reference grammar		1
Exercises		119
Key to the exercises		159
Appendix (List of common irregular verbs)		177
<i>Index</i>		181

1 Accents

Written Dutch has two types of accent: (i) the accute accent (´), (ii) the diaeresis (¨) which are used as follows:

1.1 The acute accent indicates emphasis. It is usually placed over the first vowel in the word (unless it is a capital letter) or over the first two vowels if they are identical¹



<i>een zéér moeilijke positie</i>	a VERY difficult position
<i>kom dus nú!</i>	so come NOW!
<i>nog vóór niet ná de oorlog</i>	BEFORE, not AFTER the war


Note that the accute accent is often used to distinguish the numeral *een* meaning ‘one’ from *een* meaning ‘a’:

<i>hij dronk alleen een glas wijn</i>	he only drank a glass of wine
<i>hij dronk alleen één glas wijn</i>	he drank only one glass of wine
<i>Ik heb een kind. Eén kind is genoeg</i>	I have a child. One child is enough

1.2 The diaeresis is placed over a vowel (most commonly *i* or *e*) in order to show that it is pronounced separately from the immediately preceding vowel in cases where the letters in question usually represent one vowel sound

<i>geïnteresseerd</i>	interested
<i>geëngageerd</i>	engaged/socially concerned
<i>tweeëntwintig</i>	twenty-two
<i>melodieën</i>	melodies

Note that in compound words (i.e. words made up of two or more words which can also appear independently), a hyphen is used instead of a diaeresis, according to the new Dutch spelling rules ( *Spelling*, , e.g. *Drie-eenheid* ‘Holy Trinity’, *na-afpen* ‘to ape’.

 Some words borrowed from French always occur with an accent, e.g. *café* ‘café’, *privé* ‘private’, *efficiënt* ‘efficient’, *à* ‘at’, as do a few Dutch words, e.g. *hé* ‘hey’, *hè?* ‘eh?’

An adjective is a word used to describe a noun or pronoun. In English and Dutch, it is that part of speech which may occur between an article and a noun, e.g. ‘the INTERESTING story’, ‘an EXPENSIVE wine’, although it may also be placed after a verb, e.g. ‘the story is INTERESTING’, ‘the wine is EXPENSIVE’, ‘she was BEAUTIFUL’. In Dutch, adjectives occurring before nouns often require a special ending. Consider the following rules:

¹ Some Dutch writers prefer to use a grave accent (˘) instead, particularly with the letter *e*.

Adjectives

2.1 Adjectives before nouns

(a) In Dutch, an adjective used before a noun takes the ending **-e***

<i>het interessante verhaal</i>	the interesting story
<i>de/een dure wijn</i>	the/an expensive wine
<i>deze/die grote zwarte hond</i>	this/that big black dog
<i>dit/dat kleine kind</i>	this/that small child
<i>mijn/jouw/Theo's laatste les</i>	my/your/Theo's last lesson
<i>nieuwe boeken</i>	new books

*Note that, when adding *-e*, one must observe the regular Dutch spelling changes, e.g. *groot* – *een grote vogel* 'a big bird', *stom* – *een stomme kat* 'a stupid cat', *lief* – *een lieve hond* 'a nice dog', *vies* – *het vieze varken* 'the dirty pig' (☞ *Spelling*).

(b) However, adjectives have no ending if they precede a SINGULAR NEUTER NOUN in an indefinite context: i.e. after *een* 'a', *geen* 'no/not a', *elk* 'each', *welk* 'which', *ieder* 'every', *menig* 'many', *veel* 'a lot of', *weinig* 'little', *zulk* 'such', *zo'n* 'such a'

EEN interessant verhaal	an interesting story
GEEN warm water	no warm water
ZO'N mooi gezicht	such a pretty face
ELK/WELK klein kind	each/which small child
VEEL/WEINIG vers brood	a lot of/little fresh bread

This also applies when the adjective is preceded by nothing (i.e. by no article or pronoun):

gezond eten	healthy eating
het is hard werk	it's hard work

Table 1. Summary of adjective endings

	COMMON GENDER		NEUTER	
	definite	indefinite	definite	indefinite
singular	-e de oude man	-e een oude man	-e het oude huis	-0 een oud huis
plural	-e oude mannen/huizen			

2.2 The rules given in 2.1 also apply to adjectives standing alone which refer to a noun mentioned before

<i>ik heb een grote auto en jij een kleine</i>	I have a big car and you have a small one
<i>ik heb een mooi gezicht en jij een lelijk</i>	I have a pretty face and you have an ugly one

2.3 Adjectives used after a verb have no ending

<i>het verhaal is interessant</i>	the story is interesting
<i>de auto is groot</i>	the car is big

2.4 EXCEPTIONS: The following types of adjectives never take an -e ending

(a) Adjectives ending in -en


<i>het gestolen geld</i>	the stolen money	<i>het stenen huis</i>	the stone house
<i>de open deur</i>	the open door	<i>een dronken man</i>	a drunk man


(b) Some adjectives of foreign origin

<i>de lila jurk</i>	the lilac dress	<i>nylon kousen</i>	nylon stockings
<i>de beige trui</i>	the beige sweater	<i>sexy mannen</i>	sexy men

(c) *links* 'left' and *rechts* 'right' often have special forms in -er prefixed to nouns

<i>de linkerkant</i>	the left (hand) side	<i>het rechterbeen</i>	the right leg
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 In more formal styles of written Dutch, whole phrases can be used as adjectives and are placed before a noun. In these cases, the last word of the phrase takes the ending (where necessary), e.g. *het **door krakers bewoond-e** huis* 'the house inhabited by squatters', *de **gisteren door de politie gearresteerd-e** inbrekers* 'the burglars arrested by the police yesterday' (*literally* 'the by squatters inhabited house', 'the yesterday by the police arrested burglars').

 In some cases, the -e ending may be absent in set phrases or in particular stylistic contexts which cannot be adequately captured by a rule: for instance, when referring to the innate characteristics of (especially male) human beings preceded by *een*, e.g. *een **groot, indrukwekkend** man* 'a great, impressive man', or when part of a proper name or fixed expression with *het*, e.g. *het **centraal** station* 'the central station', *het **publiek** bestel* [non-commercial Dutch TV].

3 Adjectives derived from other words

In English, adjectives may be derived from nouns, verbs, or other adjectives by the addition of specific endings, e.g. HAIR-Y, DRINK-ABLE, BLUE-ISH. In Dutch, the situation is similar, e.g. *mannelijk* 'manly', *drinkbaar* 'drinkable', *groenig* 'greenish'; yet, as there is usually no simple one-to-one correspondence between the Dutch and English endings, it is difficult to set out hard and fast rules for adjective derivation in Dutch. On the whole, each adjective must be learnt individually, although it may be helpful to foreign learners to identify the most common adjective-forming endings in Dutch. The following are given as a rough guide only:

3.1 Common adjective-forming endings

(a) -elijk (or sometimes -lijk²) is a very common ending added to nouns and verb stems. It sometimes corresponds to English '-ly'

<i>mannelijk</i>	masculine/manly	<i>schriftelijk</i>	written
<i>vrouwelijk</i>	feminine	<i>geldelijk</i>	monetary
<i>vriendelijk</i>	friendly	<i>sterfelijk*</i>	mortal

² The *e*-less variations -lijk and -loos tend to be used after words ending in an unstressed syllable, e.g. *jammerlijk* 'miserable', *ouderlijk* 'parental', *ademloos* 'breathless', and words ending in a long vowel (written as two vowels) followed by *l*, *r* or *n*, e.g. *natuurlijk* 'natural', *persoonlijk* 'personally', *doelloos* 'aimless'.

Adjectives derived from other words

*Note that the verb STEM is the infinitive minus *-en* with the necessary spelling changes (⇒ *Spelling*) and is identical to the first person singular present form, e.g. *sterven* 'to die' – (ik) **sterf** '(I) die'.

(b) *-ig* is mostly added to nouns (and occasionally to adjectives) and often corresponds to English '-y'

<i>harig</i>	hairy	<i>sappig</i>	juicy
<i>rozig</i>	rosy	<i>gelukkig</i>	happy
<i>handig</i>	handy	<i>blauwig</i>	bluey/blueish

(c) *-baar* is added to verb stems* and often corresponds to English '-able'/'-ible'

<i>eetbaar</i>	edible	<i>eerbaar</i>	honourable
<i>drinkbaar</i>	drinkable	<i>bewijsbaar</i>	provable
<i>houdbaar</i>	maintainable	<i>benijdbaar</i>	enviable

*See * above.

(d) *-s* is the most common ending used to denote nationalities and to derive adjectives from place names

<i>Iers</i>	Irish	<i>Nederlands</i>	Dutch
<i>Engels</i>	English	<i>Amsterdams</i>	from Amsterdam
<i>Schots</i>	Scottish	<i>Berlijns</i>	from Berlin

(e) *-vol*, *-eloos* (or sometimes *-loos*²), *-achtig*, and *-vormig* often correspond to English '-ful', '-less', '-like', and '-shaped' respectively

<i>hoopvol</i>	hopeful	<i>boomachtig</i>	tree-like
<i>nutteloos</i>	useless	<i>leraarachtig</i>	teacher-like
<i>gedachteloos</i>	thoughtless	<i>peervormig</i>	pear-shaped

Note that, when deriving most adjectives, one must observe the regular Dutch spelling changes, e.g. *haar* – *harig*, *sap* – *sappig*, *man* – *manneⁿlijk* etc. (⇒ *Spelling*). The addition of *-achtig*, however, does not require any spelling changes, e.g. *boomachtig* (not *X bomachtig*).

3.2 When negating adjectives in Dutch, it is common to use the prefix *on-* which generally corresponds to English 'un-'

<i>onaardig</i>	unpleasant	<i>onbewijsbaar</i>	unprovable
<i>ondrinkbaar</i>	undrinkable	<i>ongelukkig</i>	unhappy

3.3 Past and present participles may also be used as adjectives (⇒ *Perfect tense*, 48.1(b) and *Present participles*, 54.2(a))

<i>gereserveerd</i>	reserved	<i>lopend</i>	running
<i>opgewekt</i>	cheerful	<i>slapend</i>	sleeping



Other adjective-forming endings are *-matig*, which is added to nouns to give the meaning 'with respect to / in relation to' and is particularly common in more formal styles of Dutch, e.g. *regelmatig* 'regular', *planmatig* 'according to plan/planned', and *-zaam* which is usually added to verbs to give the meaning 'inclined to', e.g. *spaarzaam* 'thrifty', *werkzaam* 'industrious'.

4 Adjectives used as nouns

In Dutch, many adjectives can be used as nouns:

- 4.1** To define human beings by physical or emotional characteristics, in which case an -e ending is used

<i>blind</i> – <i>de blinde</i>	the blind person / the blind one
<i>blond</i> – <i>de blonde</i>	the blond(e) / the blond(e) one
<i>bang</i> – <i>een bange</i>	a frightened person

These nouns have common gender (i.e. take *de*) and form their plurals by adding -n

- 4.2** To refer to an unspecified thing in sentences such as ‘the nice thing is . . . / the strange thing is . . .’, also using an -e ending

<i>het leuke</i> is . . .	the nice thing is . . .
<i>het interessante</i> is . . .	the interesting thing is . . .
<i>het leukste</i> is . . .	the nicest thing is . . .
<i>het ergste</i> is . . .	the worst thing is . . .

These nouns are always neuter (i.e. take *het*)

- 4.3** After words like *iets/wat* ‘something’, *niets* ‘nothing’, *veel* ‘many’, *weinig* ‘few’ when referring to things, in which case an -s ending is used

<i>leuk</i> – <i>iets leuks</i>	something nice
<i>slecht</i> – <i>niets slechts</i>	nothing bad
<i>lekker</i> – <i>veel lekkers</i>	many tasty things

5 Adverbs

An adverb is a word used to describe a verb or an adjective. In English, adverbs usually take the ending ‘-ly’, e.g. ‘he sings BEAUTIFULLY’, ‘he was EXTREMELY stupid’. In Dutch, adverbs are usually identical to adjectives, e.g. *het weer is slecht* ‘the weather is bad’, *hij zingt slecht* ‘he sings badly’. However, unlike adjectives (☞ *Adjectives*), they never take an -e ending:

<i>Ruud speelt heel goed</i>	Ruud plays very well
<i>een ongelofelijk vieze kamer</i>	an incredibly dirty room
<i>een indrukwekkend grote keuken</i>	an impressively large kitchen
Contrast: <i>een indrukwekkende keuken</i>	an impressive kitchen

In Dutch there are, roughly speaking, five ways of translating English ‘all’:


- 6.1** *alle* usually occurs before nouns

<i>alle</i> STUDENTEN moeten hard werken	all students must work hard
<i>alle</i> WINKELS zijn dinsdags open	all shops are open on Tuesdays

- 7.2** Apostrophes are also used before the noun plural ending *-s* after words ending in a vowel other than *-e* and after abbreviations

<i>wij zijn collega's</i>	we are colleagues
<i>zij houdt niet van baby's</i>	she doesn't like babies
<i>er staan drie pc's op kantoor</i>	there are three PCs in the office

Contrast: *zij zijn meisjes*, *ik houd van films*, *er staan drie computers op kantoor*.

 Apostrophes are also used with expressions such as *'s morgens* 'in the mornings', *'s middags* 'in the afternoons', *'s avonds* 'in the evenings', *'s nachts* 'at night' (☞ *Time*, 69.2).

8 Articles: usage

An article is a word used to limit a following noun, e.g. 'A man', 'A horse', or give definiteness to a following noun, e.g. 'THE man', 'THE horse'. Generally speaking, there are two types of article in English and Dutch: the indefinite article 'a' (Dutch **een**) and the definite article 'the' (Dutch **de** or **het** depending on the gender and number of the following noun, ☞ *Gender*). As a rule, articles in Dutch are used in the same way as in English. However, there are some cases in which article usage differs in the two languages. Below is a list of contexts in which the use of the article in Dutch differs from that of English:

8.1 Een 'a' is omitted in Dutch

- (a) When the verb is *zijn* 'to be', *worden* 'to become' or *blijven* 'to remain' with nouns denoting a profession or nationality/place of origin

<i>hij was TANDARTS</i>	he was a dentist
<i>John is ENGELSMAN</i>	John is an Englishman
<i>ik wil ZANGER worden</i>	I want to become a singer

When these nouns are preceded by an adjective, however, *een* is used:

<i>hij was een SUCCESVOLLE tandarts</i>	he was a successful dentist
<i>John is een TYPISCHE Engelsman</i>	John is a typical Englishman
<i>ik wil een BEROEMDE zanger worden</i>	I want to become a famous singer

- (b) Usually after *als* 'as' immediately followed by a noun³

<i>ALS kind was hij erg stout</i>	as a child he was very naughty
<i>ik beschouw hem ALS broer</i>	I regard him as a brother

- (c) Commonly after *zonder* 'without'

<i>hij is ZONDER vriendin aangekomen</i>	he arrived without a girlfriend
<i>ik woon in een huis ZONDER tuin</i>	I live in a house without a garden

³ Yet not when *als* means 'like', e.g. *hij gedraagt zich als een kind* 'he behaves like a child'.

8.2 *De/het* are omitted in Dutch

(a) With musical instruments after *spelen* 'to play' and *leren* 'to learn'

<i>hij speelt heel goed</i> GITAAR	he plays the guitar very well
<i>ik leer</i> FLUIT <i>spelen</i>	I am learning to play the flute

(b) Before dates when a month is specified (⇒ *Days and months*, 18.2(a))

<i>hij komt (op) maandag 15</i> MEI	he's coming on Monday, 15 May
<i>het is zeventien</i> NOVEMBER	it's the seventeenth of November

8.3 *De/het* are used in Dutch

(a) Before certain abstract and collective nouns

de MENS <i>wordt bedreigd</i>	mankind is under threat
de WETENSCHAP <i>maakt vooruitgang</i>	science is making progress
de NATUUR <i>verandert steeds</i>	nature is constantly changing

(b) With meals

het ONTBIJT <i>is klaar</i>	breakfast is ready!
<i>je bent net op tijd voor</i> de LUNCH	you're just in time for lunch

(c) With seasons

<i>ik houd niet van</i> de WINTER	I don't like winter
<i>in</i> de ZOMER <i>gaan wij naar Spanje</i>	in summer we're going to Spain

(d) With the names of streets, squares, bridges and parks

<i>hij woont in</i> de REMBRANDTSTRAAT	he lives in Rembrandt Street
<i>ik zag hem in</i> het VONDELPARK	I saw him in (the) Vondelpark

(e) With the names of languages after *in* 'in' and *uit* 'out (of), from'

<i>hij zong in</i> het ENGELS	he sang in English
<i>het boek werd uit</i> het GRIEKS <i>vertaald</i>	the book was translated from Greek

(f) After the prepositions *boven/over* 'over' and *onder* 'under' followed by a numeral

<i>zijn vrouw is</i> BOVEN de veertig	his wife is over forty
<i>het is</i> ONDER de tien gulden	it is under ten guilders

8.4 In Dutch, it is usually necessary to repeat the article for each noun

de jongens <i>en</i> de meisjes <i>speelden</i>	the boys and girls were playing
de man <i>en</i> de vrouw <i>stonden te praten</i>	the man and woman were talking
<i>geef mij</i> een kopje, een schoteltje, een lepel <i>en</i> een suikerpot	give me a cup, saucer, spoon and sugar-bowl

Note that this also applies to demonstratives ('this, that' etc.) and possessive pronouns ('my, your' etc.), e.g. **die** jongens *en* **die** meisjes 'those boys and girls', **mijn** hond *en* **mijn** kat 'my dog and cat'.

BOTH: Dutch equivalents



There are numerous set expressions and idioms in which article usage differs in Dutch and English. Some common examples are *naar de stad/naar de kerk* 'to town / to church', *in de stad/in de gevangenis* 'in town / in prison', *op straat/op tafel* 'on the street / on the table', *op kantoor* 'in the office'.

9 Blijven

The Dutch verb *blijven* 'to remain' can be combined with another verb (in the infinitive) to express a continuous or repeated action:

<i>de kat blijft naar de muis</i> KIJKEN	the cat keeps looking at the mouse
<i>blijft u maar</i> ZITTEN!	please remain seated!
<i>de Jehova's getuigen bleven</i> BELLEN	the Jehovah's witnesses kept ringing
<i>Piet is de hele nacht blijven</i> WERKEN	Piet carried on working all night

In this type of construction, *blijven* behaves like a modal verb (☞ *Modal verbs*, 40.2).

10 BOTH: Dutch equivalents

In Dutch there are three ways of translating English 'both' (compare *ALL*, 6.1–6.3):

10.1 beide occurs before nouns

<i>beide</i> JONGENS <i>spelen voetbal</i>	both boys play football
<i>beide</i> OUDERS <i>zijn vrij streng</i>	both parents are fairly strict
<i>beide</i> FILMS <i>waren erg grappig</i>	both films were very funny

It can also stand in for nouns that have been omitted (unless the nouns in question refer to human beings, ☞ 10.2 below):

<i>was de FILM beter dan het BOEK?</i>	was the film better than the book?
<i>nee, beide waren even goed</i>	no, both were equally good

10.2 beiden can be used to replace nouns referring to human beings. It is more common in written Dutch than in spoken Dutch

<i>verdient M.H. meer dan J.F.? -</i>	does M.H. earn more than J.F.? -
<i>nee, beiden verdienen f9.000</i>	no, both earn 9,000 guilders

10.3 allebei is a less formal alternative to beide and beiden. It is particularly common in spoken Dutch and is often used to translate English both of them/us/you. It occurs after nouns and pronouns and follows the verb

<i>de FILMS waren allebei saai</i>	the films were both boring
<i>zij waren allebei saai</i>	both of them were boring
<i>komt Jan of Geert vandaag?</i>	is Jan or Geert coming today?
<i>zij komen allebei</i>	both of them are coming

Capital letters

Table 3. The three translations of BOTH

beide		jongens	spelen		voetbal
beiden			spelen		voetbal
	de	jongens	spelen	allebei	voetbal

11 Capital letters

In written Dutch, capital letters are generally used in much the same way as in written English. Note, however, the following differences:

- 11.1** The words *meneer* 'Mr' and *mevrouw* 'Mrs/Miss' are not written with a capital letter, unless they begin a sentence

*ik kom met meneer van Lenthe
een brief van mevrouw Zuidema*

I'm coming with Mr van Lenthe
a letter from Mrs Zuidema

- 11.2** Capital letters are not used with the names of days and months, unless they begin a sentence (⇒ *Days and months*)

- 11.3** As in English, capital letters are used at the beginning of sentences and with proper nouns. Note, however, the following points

(a) when expressions of time beginning with 's appear at the beginning of a sentence, it is the letter after 's which is capitalised

*'s Woensdags ga ik zwemmen
's Avonds gaat hij meestal uit*

On Wednesdays I go swimming
In the evenings he usually goes out

(b) when the combination *ij* is capitalised, both letters are affected

de Noordelijke IJszee

the Arctic Ocean

12 Colloquial Dutch

Dutch has quite a few grammatical constructions and features which are characteristic of the informal spoken language. They tend not to be written, unless the style of writing is particularly informal or is meant to represent everyday spoken Dutch. Some common ones are:

- 12.1** Unstressed pronouns (⇒ *Personal pronouns and Possessive pronouns*)

(a) The unstressed personal pronouns 'k (*ik*), ie (*hij*), 't (*het*), 'm (*hem*), ze or d'r (*haar*)

*'k heb 'm niet gezien
'k heb d'r niets gezegd⁴*

I haven't seen him
I haven't told her anything

⁴ Note that the *d* in *d'r* is mostly not pronounced.