

English and Dutch Contrasted: Discourse, Grammatical and Rhetorical Differences in Sentence Structure

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Abstract

With English being the international language of communication, many Dutch texts that are aimed at an international readership are now produced in English. The quality of these English texts and the extent to which the English used is influenced by the writer's native language is a much discussed topic by both linguists and language professionals. This raises questions about whether there are indeed essential structural differences between such closely related languages as English and Dutch, and, if so, what the main differences are on a grammatical, rhetorical and discourse level.

To gain insight into the differences in sentence structure between English and Dutch, a self-compiled 300,000 word corpus consisting of four different genres has been annotated on both a discourse and a grammatical level. Sentences have not only been segmented into discourse units, where punctuation marks have been considered to play an important role in marking unit boundaries, but the syntactic realisation of these units has also been annotated. This makes it possible to uncover recurrent sentencing patterns in both languages, to relate such patterns to rhetorical design and to investigate the extent to which different patterns may be related to syntactic differences in the two language systems involved.

This paper will present the main results of this corpus study. It will show how sentences are typically structured in English and Dutch and what the main differences are between these two languages in this respect. In addition, it will consider what the influence is of genre on sentence structure.

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