

Translating Esotericism: German and Dutch

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German and Dutch are traditionally seen as belonging to the West Germanic language family. Modern German, referred to as *Neuhochdeutsch* (New High German), began developing out of *Frühneuhochdeutsch* (Early New High German) after 1500 and came into its own around the end of the thirty-year war in 1648. *Diets* or *Duits* was used as a generic umbrella term for the West Germanic languages; but during the sixteenth century, as the Dutch won their independence from Spain during the eighty-year war (“Union of Utrecht” in 1579, leading to the “Republic of the Seven United Netherlands” established in 1581), they began referring to their own language as *Nederlands* to distinguish it from the High German known to them as *Overlands* (a term that is no longer used today). Confusingly for English speakers, the modern words *German* and *Dutch* are translated in German as *Deutsch* and *Holländisch* (or *Niederländisch*), and in Dutch as *Duits* and *Nederlands*.

When we look at standard core vocabulary in the study of esotericism, we find that many German and Dutch terms are calques (e.g. “Esotericism” becomes *Esoterik* resp. *Esoterie*, “Occultism” becomes *Okkultismus* resp. *Occultisme*, or “Secret Knowledge” becomes *Geheimwissen* resp. *gebeime kennis*).¹ Translation is

1. For English readers unfamiliar with these languages, it may be useful to point out that in German (unlike Dutch), nouns are always capitalized and have grammatical genders indicated by the definite article: *der* (masc.), *die* (fem.), *das* (n.). E.g., “the man” is *der Mann*, “the woman” is *die Frau*, “the house” is *das Haus* (but confusingly, “the woman” can also be rendered by the neuter noun *das Weib*, corresponding in Dutch to the unambiguously pejorative *het wijf*). Furthermore, German has four cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative), resulting in

unproblematic in most of these cases, although one must be aware of subtle shifts of meaning dependent on context. For instance, “esotericism” has become part of normal academic discourse in English since the 1990s, and the same goes for *Esoterik* in German scholarship; but this development has no parallel in the Netherlands, simply because Dutch scholars of esotericism (in contrast to their German colleagues) are strongly oriented towards the anglophone world and conduct practically all their research and teaching in English. As a result, the Dutch *esoterie* still refers to popular esoteric literature for the general public and is often used by booksellers as a convenient label for their “spirituality” section, but has not become part of Dutch academic discourse. For scholars as for most of the wider public, it evokes vague associations with unserious or wishy washy “new age” stuff (what the Dutch call *zweverig*, floaty), but certainly not with a serious academic field of research or historical investigation.

Two other terms must be approached with some caution as well. German and Dutch share an almost identical term, *Wissenschaft* / *wetenschap*, to cover the entire domain of research from the hard sciences to the humanities; but English has no such umbrella term and therefore sharply separates *science* (for disciplines with explanatory ambitions such as the natural or social sciences) from *scholarship* or *scholarly research* (essentially for the historical disciplines that are concerned with hermeneutics more than with explanation, known in German as *Geisteswissenschaften* and in Dutch as *geesteswetenschappen*, sometimes also *menswetenschappen*, “human sciences”). As for the term *religion*: next to the German and Dutch calques *Religion* and *religie*, Dutch has an additional term *godsdienst*, which means literally “service of God” and is *not* equivalent to the German *Gottesdienst* (which specifically means a church service on Sunday). Thus the traditional standard term for the study of religion, *godsdienstwetenschap*,

twelve different combinations in the singular: masc. *der* / *des* / *dem* / *den*, fem. *die* / *der* / *der* / *die*, and n. *das* / *des* / *dem* / *das*. These cases affect the nouns themselves as well, e.g., masc. genitive *des Mannes*, etcetera. While Dutch does not have these complications, it has others, notably the entirely irregular use of the definitive articles *de* / *het*.

has gradually been replaced over the past decades by *religiewetenschap*, although this new coinage sounds slightly awkward to the Dutch ear. The term *godsdienst* is obviously grounded in the strong Calvinist tradition of the Netherlands, where “religion” could only mean “service to [the true, i.e. Protestant] God.” Even article 6 of the Dutch Constitution (1814/15), which protects freedom of religion, does not mention *religie* but still speaks of *godsdienst of levensovertuiging* (lit. “life-persuasion” or “conviction about life”: a concept that is perfectly normal in Dutch and is close to “worldview” in English).²

The terms *magic* and *sorcery* are roughly equivalent to the German *Magie / Zauberei* and Dutch *magie / tovenarij*. The former is used as the broader umbrella concept, without inherently normative connotations; hence scholars may use it as a neutral etic term, modern occultists as a positive emic term referring to their own practice, and opponents as a negative term for practices they reject as demonic or superstitious. By contrast, the terms for “sorcery,” *Zauberei* and *tovenarij*, imply a stronger focus on the actual activity of magical practice (unlike *Magie / magie*, they come from the verbs *zaubern* and *toveren*) and have subtle but somewhat flexible connotations of their own. Thus a *magiër* in Dutch might be an imposing figure who inspires respect for his hidden knowledge and mysterious powers and could be referred to in German not just as a *Magier* but also as a *Zauberer* (for instance, the children of Thomas Mann famously used it as a nickname for their father). In Dutch, however, the idea of a *tovenaar* is now restricted almost exclusively to the domain of children’s tales (while a stage magician is a *goochelaar*, a conjuror). This can have somewhat unfortunate effects in scholarly contexts: for instance the famous Greek Magical Papyri are known in German as *Zauberpapyri* (not *magische Papyri*), but the Dutch equivalent *Toverpapyri* makes them sound ridiculous already in advance — it evokes pictures of wand-waving old men with long white beards and pointy hats, not of serious real-life practitioners active in Roman Egypt. In passing, let’s note that Max

2. Hanegraaff, “Ayahuasca Groups and Networks,” 89–90 with footnotes 14–15.

Weber's famous notion of *Entzauberung* is known as *onttovering* in Dutch but as *disenchantment* in English. Finally, the names for magical practitioners are strongly gendered. A *Magier* / *magiër* is always male (the female *Magierin* in German would be possible in theory but does not actually exist, whereas in Dutch it cannot even exist in theory); but although rare, a female *Zauberin* is at least possible in German, like a *tovenares* in Dutch. In practice, however, a female magician or sorcerer will usually be perceived as a "witch," and in German and Dutch she will most likely be known by the equivalent terms *Hexe* and *heks*. The negative connotations of those terms have been reversed in modern and contemporary wicca or witchcraft, not just in English but in German and Dutch as well.

While "consciousness" and "soul" are rendered by calques in German (*Bewußtsein* / *bewustzijn*) and Dutch (*Seele* / *ziel*), the English "mind," "spirit," and "ghost" are all translated by one and the same word, *Geist* / *geest*, and interpreted automatically according to context. For instance, German readers understand, without having to be told, that Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* has nothing to do with "ghosts" or "spirits" of the departed; but when a *Geist* (or *geest*) is said to appear in a séance, clearly that is a "spirit" in the sense of a "ghost"; and no German or Dutch native speaker will ever think that the label *Geisteswissenschaften* / *geesteswetenschappen* (for what we call the Humanities in English) could mean sciences of spirits or ghosts. A particularly interesting case from the perspective of esotericism research is the term *Geisterwelt*, literally "world of spirits" (as in Goethe's *Faust: die Geisterwelt ist nicht verschlossen*, "the world of spirits is not closed"). German Idealists and Romantics who used it frequently during the decades around 1800 were well aware of its Swedenborgian backgrounds; but the common English translation "spirit world" already obscures the intended reference to a plurality of spirits; and modern philosophers frequently change the noun into an adjective, resulting in a "spiritual world" that no longer has to contain any spirits at all. This is a clear example of how modern intellectual culture tends to exorcize spirits or ghosts by means of translation.

Interestingly, the Dutch *verlichting* has three entirely different meanings: the light that illuminates a room (e.g. *elektrische verlichting* for “electrical light”), the eighteenth-century phenomenon known as the Enlightenment, and a spiritual experience of internal “illumination.” By contrast, German uses entirely different words here: *Beleuchtung* (suggesting light that shines upon an object or surface), *Aufklärung* (literally “clearing up”) and *Erleuchtung* (“illumination”). Hence a classic German monograph about esotericism during the period of the *Aufklärung* (the Enlightenment) was titled *Die Erleuchteten* (the enlightened or illuminated ones).³ Such a combination would be highly confusing in English but is unproblematic in German, while still making it possible to discuss the contrast between two radically opposed perspectives on “enlightenment.”

Translating the English “imagination” into German can be tricky and confusing, because next to the calque *Imagination*, we also have two specifically German coinages. *Vorstellungsvermögen* means the capacity for mental representation that allows us to synthesize sensory data and “place them before us” (*vor-stellen*) as perceptual wholes; but *Einbildungskraft* means our power of seeing mental images of things that are no longer present (perceptual memories), or creating entirely new mental images and forms. Interestingly, the untranslatable verb *einbilden* means something close to *in-formation* in the sense of impressing ideal forms or images into some receptive medium; but of course, this meaning has been completely overwritten by our common understanding of “information.” In Dutch, the standard term for “imagination” is *verbeelding*; if taken literally, it suggests the process of transforming something into images, and as such it has no direct German equivalent. By contrast, *inbeelding* has clear connotation of delusion – that is, of imagining things that aren’t really there. As such, it is almost identical with *fantasie* (German *Phantasie*).

Finally, the adjectives “Western” / “Eastern” are translated into Dutch by the calques *westers* / *oosters*; or as *westelijk* / *oostelijk* if the meaning is purely spatial

3. Frick, *Die Erleuchteten*.

or geographic without cultural connotations, similar to the German *westlich* and *östlich*. The translation of “oriental” as *oriëntaals* has become increasingly rare, but “Orientalism” is rendered unproblematically by the calque *Oriëntalisme*, and while one might expect to encounter *occidentaals* for “occidental,” in fact no such word exists. In poetic and Romanticizing contexts since the nineteenth century, “the East” and “the West” were often referred to as *het morgenland* en *het avondland* (German: *das Morgenland* and *das Abendland*, as in the famous 1918/22 volume by Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*) – the land where the sun rises in the morning, and the land where the sun sets in the evening.

These nouns were never used to create adjectives in Dutch, in marked contrast to German, where *morgenländisch* and *abendländisch* remain the standard translations for “Eastern” and “Western” (as in Dutch, *orientalisch* does exist as a possible alternative, but *okcidentaalisch* does not). It follows from the above that “Western esotericism” (adopted originally from the French *l'ésotérisme occidental*) is always translated into Dutch as *westerse esoterie*, implying a cultural rather than a geographical understanding of “the West” – to speak of *westelijke esoterie* in Dutch would sound very odd, suggesting something spatial like the “west wing” of a building. Although the same is true for the German equivalent *westlich*, we sometimes (although rarely) encounter the expression *westliche Esoterik* in modern scholarship, but much less frequently than the alternative *abendländische Esoterik*. Perhaps because of subliminal associations of this terminology with Romantic-orientalist conceptualizations and agendas, it seems that most German scholars (beginning with the pioneering work of Monika Neugebauer-Wölk and her collaborators since the 1990s) prefer to avoid the problem altogether, by simply skipping the adjective.⁴

Summing up, while some interesting areas of tension exist between standard English vocabulary in the study of esotericism and its equivalents in German and Dutch, one must conclude that translation is on the whole rather unproblematic between these three languages. From one perspective, this could

4. Neugebauer-Wölk, *Aufklärung und Esoterik* (three volumes: 1999, 2008, 2013).

be seen as good news, as it makes communication easier. But from another perspective, it reinforces the basic point that scholarly discussion in this field is vulnerable to an unconscious eurocentric bias, ingrained in the very languages that are lucky enough to translate into English with relative ease.

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