Reframing Dutch Culture
Between Otherness and Authenticity

Edited by

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Chapter 11
Singing in Dutch Dialects: Language Choice in Music and the Dialect Renaissance
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The noise of motorbikes starting up blends seamlessly with the aggressive triplets of drums and electric guitars. After a few stirring oohs and aahs, lead singer Bennie Jolink launches into broad Achterhoek dialect: 'Oe-oe-oerend hard kwamen zie doar aan gescheurd/ oe-oe-oerend hard want zie had'n van de motorcross geheurd' (At full speed they raced up on their bikes/ at full speed because they'd heard about the motocross). These are the opening lyrics to Jolink's ballad about Bertus and Tinus, farmers' sons who, on their way home from the motocross where they'd had 'alderbastende gein' (a great time), crashed to their deaths on their Norton and BSA bikes. Jolink wrote the song in 1977, when such rude country sounds had never before been heard in popular music.

Oerend hard marked the breakthrough in the Netherlands that year for Jolink's band Normaal (Normal), with the help, it should be said, of some pretty remarkable publicity. Shots for the video clip of Oerend hard were taken in spring of that year on location in Hummelo, the village in the Achterhoek (a predominantly agrarian region in the east of the Netherlands) where the band hails from. Some more shots then had to be taken at the NOS studio in Hilversum, home to the national broadcasting center. The band came fully prepared. They had brought a hay blower to spread straw and confetti around the studio. They had also consumed substantial quantities of beer, and that morning had visited a cattle market in the Achterhoek, a fact that was still evident in Hilversum from the smell. A dispute broke out with the assistant floor manager, who had to sweep up the mess that Normaal made. Angry, she called the musicians 'peasants', whereupon Jolink called her a knakentemeier — Amsterdam dialect for a whore who turns a trick for the meagre sum of a knaak (two and a half guilders, these days about one euro). This incident was followed by a photo session in the dressing room, where a mirror came to grief. When the band finally left the studio, they almost ran down a uniformed gatekeeper who had signalled them to stop. All in all, this was more than enough to make national headlines the
next day with reports of vandalism, assault and attempted manslaughter (Ruerink and Manschot 1990; Palm 2005).  

Thus at the start of their career Normaal cultivated a wild image based around the themes of countryside, alcohol, sex and violence. When their manager, Joost Cartier, was concerned that the shots of a live performance for their next hit, Alie, would be too tame, he distributed half litre bottles of beer and encouraged the audience to spray it about, thereby establishing a tradition. Since then, much of the beer at Normaal’s performances – the band is still performing – is not consumed by the audience but disappears into the ground. Other fixed elements at gigs include the scattering of straw over the audience, and live mascots. The most popular mascot is Hendrik Haverkamp, a human beanpole. A metalworker by day, he wanders about in a smock and clogs during the performance, carrying a bucket of manure. When the band plays, the audience abandons itself to what they call haken, a lively kind of leaping about in a throng, chests bare, pushing and pulling, and engaging in vloertje beuken – mass stamping on the wooden floor. In theory, this behaviour is confined to the male members of the audience, but from time to time bare breasts also make an appearance. Especially in the early days, girls regularly stripped on stage, but things have toned down somewhat over the years. These days the venues even have a hok-free zone for older members of the audience.

This brief description serves to introduce one of the most successful Dutch dialect groups, as a prelude to a discussion of the phenomenon of dialect music. I will confine myself to the Netherlands, a country where dialects are dying out. Particularly in the urbanised Randstad area – the ring of cities that includes Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht – dialect is scarcely spoken any more. Although dialects still survive in the provinces outside the Randstad, the number of speakers is declining with each generation, albeit at a faster rate in some provinces than in others. At the same time, the blending together of local dialects is giving rise to ‘regiolects’. Such phenomena also apply to Frisian, which has the status of a minority language. Surprisingly, it is against this background that we observe in recent decades a remarkable rise in the number of singers and music groups using dialect. The website of folksong specialist Joop van den Bremen, which is dedicated to the singing in Dutch dialects, shows that there are over one thousand singers and groups in the Netherlands who sing in dialect.

From these many groups, I have selected Normaal as a case study. I wish to add a second, that of Ede Staal, a singer from Groningen who represents quite a different kind of dialect music. Both have had an immense impact, each in their own way.

Using these two case studies, I will discuss several models that could explain the rise of dialect music. These are the dialect renaissance, the musical construction of place, and language choice in music. Finally, I enquire whether a relationship exists between the extent to which a dialect is still spoken in a province and the popularity of music in dialect in that province.

Case Study One: Normaal

Normaal was not the first band to make pop music in the Achterhoek. Like everywhere else in the Western world, young people there in the 1960s had enthusiastically embraced Anglo-American music – first rock and roll, and later the Mersey beat. This brought many changes to youth culture. Light music had always been the domain of ‘respectable’ artists, but now anyone could make music. Bands sprang up like mushrooms as countless young people got their hands on an electric guitar or a drum set. In Doetinchem for instance (a city in the Achterhoek), they included Leonor Lead, Les Aimants, The Blue Stars, Bob Group 99, Buzzgroup Act, Ginhouse, The Golden Strings, Internos, The Jibs, Jungle Rhythms, The Summits, Walther and the Rattles, Les Clochards, The Jacks, Ad Fundum, Changed and Denver. The names of all these bands speak volumes: there is not a single Dutch or Achterhoeks name. Old photos show jackets, white shirts and ties making way in the course of the 1960s for T-shirts and denim, with hair becoming longer and longer. In Doetinchem in 1966 – if we confine ourselves to this city for a moment – Beatclub Shabby was established; there people could dance and listen to music. There were three local radio shops where young people could go to buy singles and LPs. They could learn about the latest music through national pop music magazines like Tiney Tunes, Hitweek and Muziekparade, and through programmes like Tijd voor Teenagers on the radio and Top of Flop on television (Doppen et al., 2001).

It was in such an environment that Ben Jolink took his first musical steps in the early 1970s. He was still searching for what he wanted to do. As a student, he found the art academy in Hengelo most unappealing. In hip Amsterdam, a great future as a theatre set painter seemed to be beckoning him, but that turned out to be a great disappointment. As he would often say later in interviews, he may have looked pretty hip, but as soon as he opened his mouth, his Achterhoeks accent exposed him as a ‘peasant’ and people lost interest. The suffering inflicted by these incidents would have far-reaching artistic consequences. To vent his frustrations, Jolink began writing poems in Achterhoeks, which he regarded as his mother tongue. In the early 1970s. He was still searching for what he wanted to do. As a student, he found the art academy in Hengelo most unappealing. In hip Amsterdam, a great future as a theatre set painter seemed to be beckoning him, but that turned out to be a great disappointment. As he would often say later in interviews, he may have looked pretty hip, but as soon as he opened his mouth, his Achterhoeks accent exposed him as a ‘peasant’ and people lost interest. The suffering inflicted by these incidents would have far-reaching artistic consequences. To vent his frustrations, Jolink began writing poems in Achterhoeks, which he regarded as his mother tongue. In the early days, Normaal’s repertoire still consisted primarily of songs in English, but Jolink saw the light in 1975 during a pop festival in Lochem. After a couple of up-tempo numbers in Achterhoeks, which the audience already found quite unusual, he sang the Drieterije Blues at full volume: ‘Ik zat laatst te driel’en op de plee’ (Achterhoeks for ‘recently I was having a crap on the loo’; original text ‘Oh, my baby left me’). Things really took off. The crowd’s positive response made Jolink decide to sing only in Achterhoeks from then on. Using their own language was also perfectly in
keeping with the group’s wish to ‘normaal doen’ [act normally], a code of behaviour expressed in the group’s name.5

There are several dimensions to Normaal’s success. Firstly, the group is of immense significance for their own supporters; secondly, thanks to Normaal, the regional music culture of the Achterhoek has acquired visibility; and finally, the band has influenced popular music elsewhere in the Netherlands. Normaal’s supporters, or Anhangerschap, are made up of thousands of loyal fans, mainly farmers and others living in the countryside. For years, the Anhangerschapbode kept them abreast — in dialect — of the band’s ups and downs. The term ‘boer’ (peasant) was elevated to an honorary epithet, and the group’s populist lyrics expressed not only the ideals but above all the frustrations of the farming community. Verses like De boer is troef (farmers are trumps) and Ik bin maar ‘n eenvoudige boer ‘nlul (I’m just

5 The band was still singing mainly English-language covers when they came up with the name Normaal, after a lengthy search. Jolink later had this to say on the subject: ‘It was as if the name had been waiting for us. How often did we say to one another: Let’s just be normal?’ (Palm 2005: 111). The group first performed under the name Normaal in December 1974.

6 The name of this magazine contains a word play on the Graafschapbode, a regional newspaper. The word Anhangerschap itself is a pun, since anhanger means not only ‘follower’ or ‘fan’, but also a ‘trailer’— filled with straw or manure — pulled by a tractor.

a simple peasant) struck a chord with many. Inhabitants of the Randstad, EU rulings, environmental regulations and speed cameras came under attack, while funfairs, the pub, motocross, beer and generous country wenches were glorified. Normaal made themselves popular with this target group not just with words, but with deeds. They played benefit concerts for De Graafschap, the Achterhoek football club and for farmers whose herds were struck down by foot-and-mouth disease. Another fitting gesture was collecting motorbikes for African missionaries. In addition, Normaal’s numerous frats’n (pranks), devised with their distinctive sense of humour at their regular pub in Hummelo, went down well with their supporters.

Their fan base is not confined to the Achterhoek or to speakers of Low Saxon, the regional language varieties spoken in the eastern Netherlands and to which Achterhoeks belongs. Their ‘campaigns’, as Normaal called their tours, took them all over the Netherlands, at least to rural areas. Dialectal differences represented no great obstacle here. The audience could pick up the most important lyrics, perhaps not immediately during the performance but from LPs and CDs. What also came across was the all-important message — the fact that dialect was used instead of standard Dutch or English. The Achterhoeks spoken by Normaal therefore represents the ‘language of farmers’ in general. The contrast that Jolink and his kind liked to exploit is that of city versus country, of Randstad versus province. While they may have exaggerated this contrast, Normaal has undeniably strengthened feelings of self-respect among many a rural inhabitant. When the band performs, farmers celebrate ‘being farmers’. The group has created its own farming culture, with music in the lead role, music which is just as likely to be inspired by Chuck Berry and The Rolling Stones as by German oompah music.

This glorification of the countryside has an additional significance in the Achterhoek, the band’s own region. Normaal has played an invaluable role in promoting the region internally. It has taught young people that they needn’t be ashamed of their situation, behaviour or pronunciation; quite the reverse in fact — they can be proud of being farmers and Achterhoekers. At the same time, Normaal has paved the way for all kinds of bands to sing in Achterhoek dialects — bands like the popular Boh Foi Toch (which means something like ‘Heavens, what a world’), based around accordion player Hans Keupers. The band’s line-up includes two former members of Normaal, drummer Jan Manschot and guitarist Ferdy Joly, who once co-wrote Oerend hard with Jolink. Boh Foi Toch employs a milder idiom that Normaal, one that owes more to folk music and appeals to a more traditional sense of community — that of agricultural equipment associations and citizens’ militia. The group believes in doing things on a small scale: their first CD was distributed by 52 mobile grocery shops.

Besides Boh Foi Toch, there is still a handful of bands and singers who sing in Achterhoeks. Although most of these musicians cannot make a living from dialect music alone, a professional successor to Normaal — Jovink & de Voerdbietels — has since appeared. The first part of the name is a contraction of the names of the band’s founders, Hendrik Jan Lovink and Gijs Jolink (the latter is the son of Normaal vocalist Bennie Jolink). ‘Voerdbietels’ is a play on words, linking the name of The
Beetles, the symbol of international pop music, to voorderbieten (mangelwurzels), a symbol of the countryside. Lovink and the young Jolink may emphasise their points of difference from Normaal – Jovink does not speak up for oppressed farmers, nor scatter beer and straw about – but the parallels are unmistakeable: singing in Achterhoeks, a leaning toward rock and roll and a love of motocross. The band even organises its own annual music and motocross festival, Zwarte Cross (Black Cross). Like Normaal, they have a well-organised fan club, De Voederbieten, with their own magazine, the Bietenblad, and successful merchandising, as well as an impressive string of CDs.

It would be correct to say that Normaal has paved the way for a regional, Achterhoeks music culture. I should perhaps explain this in more detail. By using the Achterhoeks dialect, musicians stress the regional dimension of their music, the fact that they are rooted in the region. The fact that music is indeed viewed as part of the regional culture is evident in the fact that the Staring Instituut in Doetinchem, dedicated to preserving the traditional regional culture, has been home to the Poparchief Achterhoek Liemers since 2000. This is remarkable, given that in principle this archive documents all popular music made in the region – mainly in English, as the aforementioned list of Doetinchem bands suggests.

Of the dozens of acts currently active or since disbanded, I will mention only Vandenberg, the Achterhoeks/Twents hard-rock group, with vocalist Bert Heerink, which achieved worldwide fame with Burning Heart in the early 1980s and toured internationally. But it is singing in dialect, with the emphasis accorded to regional roots by Normaal and their successors, which has given popular music in the Achterhoek its own unique character. Thanks to Normaal, the commonly perceived gap between ‘traditional’ and pop culture has been effortlessly bridged, at least in the Achterhoek.

Normaal has been important not just for music in the Achterhoek, but for Dutch popular music as a whole. There is no doubt that Normaal has contributed to pop­in-je-moerstaal (singing in your mother tongue), and especially to adapting one’s mother tongue to the demands of Anglo-American rock music. This was no easy matter at first. There were no successors to Peter Koelewijn’s big rock-and-roll hit Kom van dat dak af (Get down off that roof) in 1960. The Dutch-language singer Boudewijn de Groot may have achieved success with literary songs, but his genre was more folk and chanson than rock. However, it was precisely through dialect, by being able to express his own emotions, that Jolink managed to create a convincing synthesis of American rock music and Achterhoeks, his mother tongue. The year 1977, when Oerend hard came out, has proven to be a turning point in Dutch-language pop music. That was the year in which the Flemish Raymond van het Groenewoud had a hit with his pop album Nooit meer drinken. The following year, Ernst Jansz set up Doe Maar, whose reggae and Dutch lyrics reached unprecedented heights in popular music in Dutch.

One particular area of mother-tongue music in which Normaal has blazed a trail is what is known as dialectpop or boerenrock. Successful bands like De Kast from Friesland and Skik from Drenthe are musically indebted to Normaal. Although Rowwen Hèze, the successful band from North Limburg, employs a different idiom (Tex-Mex), the whole idea of a party band with strong regional roots is very reminiscent of Normaal. Like Normaal, De Kast (who incidentally sang mainly in Dutch but who became a national sensation with a handful of Frisian songs) and Skik, Rowwen Hèze’s success went far beyond the borders of the provinces. Their northern Limburg dialect is not actually all that incomprehensible to other Dutch people, nor is Skik’s Drente dialect. Moreover, Rowwen Hèze has adopted the shrewd practice of singing the chorus in standard Dutch, so that non-Limburgers can sing along too.

Case Study Two: Ede Staal

Dialect music is a phenomenon that goes much further than pop bands like Normaal, Rowwen Hèze and Skik, although these are the best known. Most dialect music is less a question of solid rock-and-party music by professional bands than of amateurs and semi-professionals who make nice music with nostalgic lyrics for a somewhat older audience from their own province. For them, Normaal with its wild performances was hardly a shining example.

The most interesting representative of this quieter type of dialect music is Ede Staal from Groningen. In 1982 Staal, a keen gardener, had written the waltz Mien toentje (My garden), the theme tune to the weekly gardening programme on Radio Noord, which at that time served the whole of the northern Netherlands (the provinces of Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe). The song is about Staal’s dwarf French beans that fail to come up, the sparrows eating his strawberries, the new potatoes that are doing poorly and the lettuce that has bolted. This blend of self-irony and love of gardening – the soil, the farm, the countryside – was a huge success, especially since it was sung in Gronings. Although being on the way down, this dialect was still inherently associated with the countryside and the province as a whole. The then 41-year-old Staal, an English teacher by profession, had been writing songs for his own amusement, often no more than fragments and usually in English, but also in French, Danish and East Frisian. At the request of others, he had translated one of his English songs into Gronings. The tape caught the ear of an employee at Radio Noord, an inveterate Groninger who immediately recognised Staal’s artistic potential and asked him to write a signature tune for the gardening show. Mien toentje made Staal the Groningen folk singer, although he avoided performing wherever possible. It was not until two years later that a record came out with four songs in dialect, followed a few months later by an LP thatchalked up unprecedented sales for a regional product.

Shortly afterwards, Staal underwent a major operation for lung cancer. In the last year of his life, he hosted a weekly radio show on Sunday mornings featuring stories in dialect in which he played the role of a Groningen farmer for whom modern life was moving just a little too fast – a tongue-in-cheek take on his own lifestyle. A

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Figure 11.2  Ede Staal (left) during a recording session for Omroep Noord, ca. 1982

Photo: Fieke Spoel.

second LP concluded the short-lived career of this talented man whose fame would continue to grow after his death in 1986, reaching almost mythical proportions. That was certainly the case in Groningen, but Staal also attracted attention nationwide thanks to a documentary (1996) and the film *De Poolse bruid* (1998). Set in the Groningen countryside, the film lays bare the emotions of a taciturn farmer by means of Staal’s song ‘t Hooge Laand [a region in Groningen], in which ‘clay becomes music’. The song can be regarded as a northern equivalent of Jacques Brei’s *Mijn vlakke land*. 8

Staal himself also corresponded to the stereotype of the closed northerner. The only videotape that exists of his rare performances shows a shy, awkward man in a somewhat scruffy jacket singing his songs from a metal music stand. This lack of affectation undoubtedly contributed to his success. His songs zero in on a fundamental ‘Groningenness’, singing the praises of the landscape, the houses behind the dyke, the old days—all in the language of that area and of bygone days. Although Staal grew up speaking Dutch, and had picked up dialect from his surroundings, dialect was the critical factor in his breakthrough. His Groningen dialect may not have been flawless—it was a bit of a hotchpotch in fact as he had lived all over the province, picking up its various linguistic peculiarities—but it was still recognisable to every speaker of dialect. His lyrics also dealt with dialect and dialectal differences. In addition to these regional themes, he expressed general human sentiments like love and the transience of life.

As I have already stated, there have been many singers like Ede Staal who have sung simple songs in dialect, but Staal’s literary talent has never been surpassed. His lyrics and interpretations impart an authenticity that raises him above his own province and dialect. Although Staal sang in Gronings, he embodies the quintessence of regionalism. He went to the heart of ‘the regional’, or rather, to the most characteristic part of someone, himself, who slowly sees his familiar rural environment yielding to the modern age. Dialect is a point of reference for the familiar, and is at the same time the medium in which such people can express their feelings. Non-Groningers too recognise this essence, which is why Staal’s songs have been translated into Frisian, Limburgish and Flemish by singers who themselves have nothing to do with Groningen or Gronings.

**The Renaissance of Dialect**

It was not in 1977 or 1982 that the vernacular was first discovered as an artistic medium. As early as the nineteenth-century, Frisian had been used in Friesland to shape regional sentiments. Poets like Eeltje Halbertsma (1797–1858) composed songs in Frisian, often to classical melodies by Mozart and Mendelssohn. And they too were part of a tradition, a fact of which they were perfectly aware. In the seventeenth century, people wrote and sang in Frisian, in particular Gysbert Japicx, a schoolmaster from Bolsward, who is regarded as the founding father of Frisian literature. At the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century, priests, teachers and other intellectuals elsewhere in the Netherlands began to write songs in dialect, as well as regional novels and plays. It has always been the provincial elite who were the first to regard the life of ordinary people as something of value and who discovered and developed dialect as an artistic medium. Strangely enough, the ordinary country people who used dialect in everyday life actually sang mainly in Dutch. Dialect had almost no written tradition, or rather, this existed only among a small portion of the elite. Until the first half of the twentieth century, the song sheets or cheap song books sold by travelling musicians contained Dutch lyrics, and this is how they were sung by ordinary people (Grijp 1996, 92–93; Roodenburg 2000).

All the same, people did sing in dialect throughout the twentieth century, albeit on a very limited scale and almost inaudibly for the Randstad audience in the west of the country. This latent tradition was reactivated in 1982, when Radio Noord played *Mien toentje*. Staal’s exceptional talent, combined with other factors, explains why his songs suddenly caught on. One factor was the growing regional consciousness in reaction to the advancing unification of Europe—in the Netherlands and beyond, the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) was seen as an ominous moment—and general globalisation. With national borders losing their importance, people began to look more to their own region. Moreover, they realised that the countryside was radically...
between people from Groningen, Limburg, Drenthe and Friesland vis-a-vis the national state in which they live is decidedly less tense than in the case of these to have Frisian recognised as an independent minority language. But secession was manipulated. Stoke's idea has been fruitfully applied to ethnic groupings with contemporary, international influences makes dialect music a good example of glocalisation, with dialect being the ideal means of definitively appropriating new international music styles. There is a marked preference for country styles that have gained international recognition, such as American country, Tex-Mex, Cajun, as well as European 'oompah'.

Dialect Music and the Musical Construction of Place

In the preface to Ethnicity, identity and music. The musical construction of place (1995), Martin Stokes argues that music is an important tool for shaping ethnic identity and for constructing a 'place' in the sense of a geographical, cultural and/or social co-ordinate. Music is therefore not so much a reflection or expression of underlying cultural and social patterns, as ethnomusicologists and anthropologists have assumed, but a means by which identities can be actively constructed and manipulated. Stokes's idea has been fruitfully applied to ethnic groupings with identifiable folk-music traditions, like the Scottish, Irish, Catalans and Basques. It can perhaps also be applied to Dutch dialect music, although this does not properly equate with the examples of ethnic folk music just mentioned. Firstly, the relationship between people from Groningen, Limburg, Drenthe and Friesland is less tense than in the case of these other minorities. We do not readily speak of the Groningen, Limburg or Drenthe 'people'. At most, some Frisians think in these terms; after all, they once fought to have Frisian recognised as an independent minority language. But secession from the Netherlands or the introduction of a Frisian passport is generally viewed as twaddle. Labelling people from Groningen, Limburg, Drenthe and Friesland as 'ethnic groups' comes across as rather contrived; it is more appropriate to speak of regional groups. Another difference from Stokes' ethnic folk music is that there is no typically Groningen, Limburg, Drenthe or Frisian style of music. For that matter, there is not even a typically Dutch style, in either classical, popular, or folk music. As I have said, Dutch dialect singers adapt international styles. It is dialect that lends regional music its individual character, together with the frequent use of subjects with a regional flavour. For this reason, and bearing in mind that the political and musical context differs from that of ethnic/regional music in other countries, we would expect music – in combination with dialect – to be an appropriate vehicle for articulating regional identity in the Netherlands.

Language Choice in Music

However, the question remains as to whether the articulation of regional identity is in fact what dialect music is striving for. Rather, it would appear that musicians want to express their personal identity with the help of dialect as a collective given. We see this if we ask them about their reasons for their 'language choice in music', as I have called it. Language choice refers to the choice a musician – a singer, producer or composer – makes of a certain language, prompted say by commercial or symbolic considerations. That choice can turn out differently for different genres (for a general theory of language choice in music, see Grijp 1995a; also Berger and Caroll 2000). The choice is often an unconscious one: a singer usually follows the dominant language of the repertoire to which he or she is attracted. For popular music, this has been English since at least the 1960s. In the Netherlands, no more than about ten percent of popular music is presented in Dutch, at least via the radio. Nevertheless, roughly half of Dutch popular artists who make the charts, including many singers active in mainstream music, sing in Dutch (Grijp 2003). Pop singers who sing in their own language, however, are making quite a conscious choice. In general, there is a well-considered switch from English to the singer's own language. We see this in the explanations singers themselves give (Rutten 1995). The Lau, singer/guitarist from The Scene, expressed it as follows: 'My English lyrics were always very contrived (...). In fact, everything was wrong with them, (...) I can express myself much better in Dutch.' Or Bob Fosko from the Raggende Manne: 'From the moment that I switched over to Dutch lyrics, I noticed that I was able to inject emotion into my music.' Or Pascal from the rap group Osdorp Posse: 'I found that I could express much more of myself in my own language: I could tell the story more from my own experience.' And Huub van der Lubbe from De Dijk: 'I could suddenly say what was on my mind and what my concerns were. I finally had the option of making it all more personal.' For all these Dutch singers – and more such sentiments have been documented – it is true to say that although they have a good command of English, they themselves do not feel that this helps them to get to the heart of things when they write lyrics.

Language Choice in Music
When a singer switches from English to Dutch, there are perceptible changes not only in the singer, but also in the audience. At least, that was Huub van der Lubbe’s experience: ‘There was an added extra, people could follow us all of a sudden.’ And vice versa. When Erik Mesie began singing in English, he noticed a difference in the audience: ‘The disadvantage of English lyrics was that they considerably increased my distance from the audience during performances. Because people can’t actually understand them. And I was used to being able to tell from the audience’s reactions what they thought of the lyrics. I really missed that.’

Dutch dialect singers, who – like their audience – all speak perfect Dutch, tend to place a slightly different emphasis when explaining their choice of language. The Brabant singer Gerard van Maasakkers began singing in English before switching to Dutch, which he found ‘too high-flown’ and so moved on to Brabants. ‘I could express my emotions much less powerfully in Dutch’, he explained. Later, when he felt that nostalgia was starting to gain the upper hand, he went back to Dutch, but with an accent ‘from here’. Since then, he switches between the two languages. Jan Ottink, from the Achterhoek, formulated it as follows: ‘You can’t get anything across in English because it’s not your language and because people only half understand it. At the same time, clichés are less of a problem, simply because this language has not yet been used very often for pop music. You have to create your own tradition.’ Jack Poels from the group Rowwen Hèze, who initially sang mainly in English, says: ‘People who know us say that our faces always lit up when we started singing in dialect. That made us stop and think.’ This tallies with Bennie Jolink’s discovery of dialect as the language for singing, as described above. It was the audience’s response that made him decide to sing in Achterhoeks – the language, says Jolink, in which he thinks. Ab Drijver, the singing journalist from Drenthe, has quite a different point of view: he sees it as a ‘justification’ of the fact that his father only spoke dialect, and for that reason counted for little in society. In his view, his language choice contributed to the emancipation of dialect (Grijp 1995b).

It is conspicuous that those who sing in Dutch or in dialect do not mention national or regional identity or pride about their own origins as determining their choice of language. At least, no-one cites this reason in so many words. The most decisive factor is their ability to express themselves as effectively as possible, together with the audience’s response. If there is a collective feeling among dialect pop singers, it is one of solidarity with the farming community or the rural population in general, rather than an awareness of their own district. Thus with his lyrics Bennie Jolink was able to transform the farming community’s sense of inferiority into a self-awareness that is celebrated during Normaal’s concerts, not only in the Achterhoek but throughout the country. The ‘other’ is solely the West, the Randstad, which brings modernisation and uniformity to the countryside.

This is particularly true of the pop and rock sector. For luisterlied singers like Ede Staal (the luisterlied is the Dutch equivalent of the chanson), the choice of language has not been enquired into to any great extent. But here too, the lyrics seldom if ever bear traces of rivalry with or hostility towards other provinces; instead, they lament technological change, the restructuring of the landscape, tourism and the loss of village communities and dialect.

Dialect music does play a role, however, in the conscious construction of identity by regional stations. In theory, each province in the Netherlands has its own regional station. For these stations, dialect music is an excellent means of highlighting a region’s profile, while at the same time offering entertainment that people with little or no understanding of dialect can also enjoy. Various regional stations have put out compilation CDs of dialect music. Although most of these stations broadcast in Dutch, they nevertheless devote several hours a week to regional issues in dialect (only on Omrop Fryslân (Radio Friesland) is Frisian predominantly spoken). These few hours usually feature dialect music, which is why many dialect singers have been ‘discovered’ by their regional station, as the example of Ede Staal demonstrates. Conversely, most dialect singers are of little interest to the national radio in Hilversum, while regional radio offers them their ideal audience.

The Relationship between Speaking and Singing in Dialect

In 2000 I drew up a map of dialect music in the Netherlands showing the numbers of groups and singers per province based on Van den Bremen’s website referred to above (Grijp 2001). The larger the circle on the map, the more dialect groups and singers are, or have been, active in the province in question. Most singing in dialect occurs in the provinces of Limburg and Friesland, with the least in Utrecht, North and South Holland and Flevoland. The latter comes as no surprise. Very little dialect is spoken in Utrecht and the two provinces of Holland – in fact, only in the north of North Holland and in a few fishing and market-gardening villages in South Holland. Moreover, the Hollands dialect most closely resembles standard Dutch, which is derived from it. Although the province of Utrecht does not historically belong to Holland, these days it is part of the Randstad. The province of Utrecht is also largely urbanised, and local dialects have virtually died out. Flevoland is quite a different matter. A thinly populated province made up of land that was impounded in the twentieth century, it does not have its own dialect. To sum up, very little dialect is spoken in these four provinces, which would appear to explain the almost complete absence of music in dialect there.

Can the popularity of dialect music generally be explained by the extent to which dialect is still spoken in a given province? A problem here is the scarcity of reliable numerical data on the speaking of dialects, in part because it is difficult to establish the extent to which different individuals speak dialect. Nevertheless, a
A sociolinguistic study from 1998 into children's school performance in relation to their dialect background (Driessen and Withagen 1998) appears to me to be very useful. Although this is an attitudinal study (only the speakers themselves were asked if they believed they spoke dialect/Frisian), within that limitation nuanced figures were obtained for each province. For example, the study established the extent to which not only school children but also their parents had Dutch as their spoken language (see table A). This could vary enormously between the two groups. Parents often raise their children in Dutch because they think that speaking dialect at home has a negative impact on their children's school performance.

As a measure for dialect/Frisian speaking for each province, I began with the mean scores of the parents and children for Dutch. I then turned that score around—that is, I deducted it from 100%. The result is the percentage of the population that speaks dialect/Frisian; this is shown in the right-hand column of table A. The ranking shows the provinces where the most dialect/Frisian is spoken—Limburg and Friesland (53.6% and 52.3% respectively)—at the top, and the provinces with the lowest number of dialect speakers—South Holland and Utrecht (between 1 and 2%)—at the bottom.

We can compare these figures with the number of dialect singers/groups (or acts) observed at about the same time (table B). Limburg has more than twice as many such acts as Friesland (475 and 197 respectively), whereas dialect is spoken at about the same rate (53.6% and 52.3% respectively). Since Limburg has almost twice as many inhabitants as Friesland, it is more accurate to take into account the number of inhabitants per province. The right-hand column in table B shows the number of acts per 10,000 inhabitants—more than 4 in Limburg, 3 in Friesland, 2 in Groningen, 1.5 in Drenthe, etcetera. And indeed, this largely corrects Limburg's huge musical predominance over Friesland (a ratio of almost 5:2), although a predominance still remains (more than 4:3). The ranking of the provinces in table B is determined by the number of acts per 10,000 inhabitants.

If we place the two tables alongside one another, the province rankings are very similar, although there are small variations. North Brabant and Groningen have somewhat more dialect groups than we might expect on the basis of current dialect use: these provinces rank two places and one place higher respectively in table B than in A.

All in all, singing in dialect appears to be reasonably in step with the degree to which dialect is spoken. This is not particularly surprising. On the other hand, we might also expect that it is precisely those provinces experiencing the greatest dialect loss that would produce the most dialect music. Concern for the rapidly disappearing dialect would then be translated into greater musical 'rescue activity'. This is not the case, however. Working from table A, if we deduct the percentage of children who speak dialect from that of their parents, we see that the largest dialect loss occurred at the end of the twentieth century in the provinces of Drenthe and Overijssel (36.2%...
North Brabant
North Holland
TABLE B
240
Limburg
Provinces
Zeeland
Utrecht
Gelderland
Overijssel
Groningen
Drenthe
Friesland
South Holland
North Brabant
TABLE 11.2 Ranking of Dutch provinces according to number of acts per
10,000 inhabitants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>Acts</th>
<th>Inhabitants</th>
<th>(TABLE A)</th>
<th>Mean % dialect speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acts</td>
<td>per</td>
<td></td>
<td>Provinces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limburg</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>1,136,695</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>Limburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friesland</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>642,977</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>Friesland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groningen</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>575,072</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>Groningen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drenthe</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>483,369</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>Drenthe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeeland</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>379,978</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>Zeeland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Brabant</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>2,411,359</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>Overijssel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overijssel</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>1,109,432</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>Gelderland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelderland</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1,972,010</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>N. Brabant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utrecht</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,171,292</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>N. Holland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Holland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2,591,035</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>Utrecht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Holland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3,458,381</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>S. Holland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and 27.9% respectively). However, these provinces do not have a higher than average number of dialect groups – on the contrary.

It is conspicuous, also according to the corrected count, that considerably more dialect music is made in Limburg than in Friesland. Might the strong regional consciousness be a factor here? To my knowledge, no comparative research has been carried out into this question, but I would hesitate to call Limburgers more chauvinistic than Frisians. A more likely explanation is the role of dialect music within these regional cultures as a whole. Carnival is an extremely popular festival in Catholic Limburg, turning the province completely on its head once a year. Almost all songs played and sung at that time are in dialect. There is also a carnival song contest, with entries from across the province. Carnival, with its songs in dialect, makes a major contribution to the expression of the Limburg identity (Wijers 1995). Van den Bremen’s survey of dialect music does not include bands that only perform during carnival, but the influence of carnival on the day-to-day music culture in Limburg is obvious.

Carnival is scarcely celebrated in predominantly Protestant Friesland. Consequently, that particular breeding ground for music in Frisian is absent, which could help to explain the quantitative difference between the provinces. On the other hand, music in Frisian is qualitatively more diverse. For example, operas, choral music and classical songs have been composed in Frisian (Algra et al. 1996), something which is not at all the case with Limburgish. As I have said, the Frisian elite has devoted itself to a ‘national’ culture since the nineteenth century, which can explain such elitist musical expressions in Frisian. In Limburg, the elite tended to dedicate itself to what we call ‘folk culture’. Evidently, classical music does not fit this concept, with only operettas being performed in Limburgish. But also within popular dialect music the range is broader in Friesland than in Limburg. For example, there is the folk/pop music of Twarres, a Frisian-language duo that topped the national charts in 2000 with their tender song Wêr bisto (Where are you?). In 2006 Nynke Laverman caused a sensation with fados sung in Frisian. Earlier, French chansons were sung in Frisian, for example, by Douwe Heeringa with songs by Jacques Brel (1989).

Conclusion

This chapter has shown something of the renaissance of dialect music in the Netherlands since the late 1970s. Rock singer Bennie Jolink from Normaal and ‘troubadour’ Ede Staal represent the main archetypes, although in terms of musical style the dialect music landscape is quite varied. A general explanation for this popularity is the rise of regional consciousness in response to globalisation processes and to the changing nature of the relationship between the nation state and Europe. A more specific explanation lies in the dialect renaissance: when a dialect threatens to disappear, people realise its value and seek to raise its status by writing, preaching and singing in dialect, forms of expression that were traditionally reserved for the standard language, the written language. The success of dialect music can also be explained through the contemporary, international music styles it employs. Thus we can interpret dialect music as a special form of globalisation – an attempt to preserve the local culture, in this case, the local or regional language, by combining it with global music styles.

These efforts have been facilitated by a democratisation of the technology required, with the rise of regional stations clearly contributing to the growth of dialect music. For radio stations, this music was a means of shaping the regional identity from which they derived much of their raison d’être. They offered artists an ideal platform. Remarkably, however, none of the singers to our knowledge has ever mentioned regional identity as the motivation behind his or her decision to sing in dialect. For the artists, it was primarily a desire for a personal style and an effective means of expressing themselves that prompted this decision, together with the positive response of the audience. For Ede Staal, this led to an awareness of being rooted in his own region, in his case the province of Groningen. By drawing his listeners’ attention through his lyrics to the beauty of the Groningen language, Staal tapped into a rather dormant ‘Groningen-feeling’ among many of them. Staal’s poetic ability to activate a nostalgic, regional consciousness was shown to possess a supraregional quality when it was successfully transposed to other regions – in other words, when his songs were translated into other dialects. Something similar
occurred with the considerably more aggressive Normaal: with his undeniable demagogic talent, vocalist Bennie Jolink expressed a deeply-rooted 'farmer feeling' that was understood far beyond the borders of the Achterhoek. He transformed the sense of inferiority felt by rural youth and older people into a collective pride about being farmers, which was celebrated exuberantly at Normaal's concerts. Regional rivalry is barely - if ever - an issue for Staal, Jolink and other dialect singers. The contrast between countryside and city, the Randstad region if you like, does play a key role, however. Staal and Normaal have given the countryside a voice.

The diversity within dialect music applies not only to the many genres used by the singers - rock, blues, country, Tex-Mex, schlager, chanson, luisterlied - but also to the differences between regional music cultures. Here I am of course referring to quantitative differences. For the first time, an attempt has been made here to establish the extent to which the presence of dialect music, expressed in numbers of singers and bands, is linked to the level of dialect speaking in a province. The conclusion to be drawn from the tables is that these figures run fairly parallel. In other words, the more frequently a dialect is spoken in a given province, the more it tends to be sung as well.

We can also observe qualitative differences between the regions, for instance between the multifaceted Frisian-language musical culture, with its classical genres, and the dialect music of Limburg, which is nourished by carnival. What is still needed, however, is an in-depth comparison of regional dialect music cultures.

References


Ruerink, D. and J. Manschot (1990), Wat is Normaal? Amsterdam: Loeb.


