



THE LOVE NETHERLANDS GUIDE N. 011

Dutch Sayings & Proverbs

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In 1559 Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted a single crowded village scene and packed more than a hundred Dutch and Flemish proverbs into it - a man banging his head against a brick wall, another throwing roses before swine, someone literally hanging his cloak to the wind. That painting, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, survives today in Berlin, and it tells you something true about the language: the Dutch think in pictures, and they have been collecting these sayings for a very long time. This is Guide 011 in The Love Netherlands Guide series.

Spreekwoord, Gezegde or Uitspraak?

Dutch draws a line that English tends to blur. A spreekwoord (proverb) is a complete, fixed sentence carrying a general truth - "De appel valt niet ver van de boom" (the apple does not fall far from the tree). A gezegde or uitspraak is a figurative phrase that bends to fit your sentence, like "de kat uit de boom kijken" (to watch the cat out of the tree), meaning to hold back and see how things develop. Language bodies such as the

[Nederlandse Taalunie](#), the cross-border organisation that sets the official spelling for the Netherlands and Flanders, and the advice service [Genootschap Onze Taal](#) keep these categories tidy, and most Dutch speakers will correct you if you call a gezegde a spreekwoord.

Bruegel's Painted Encyclopedia

Bruegel's panel, sometimes called The Blue Cloak after its central image of a wife draping a blue cloak over her husband (she is deceiving him), is held by the [Gemäldegalerie](#) within Berlin's Staatliche Museen. Scholars have identified roughly a hundred separate proverbs in the one composition, many of which are still in daily use. Several that look baffling in English remain crystal clear to a modern Dutch speaker: "met het hoofd tegen de muur lopen" (to run head-first into a wall, to attempt the impossible) and "twee vliegen in één klap" (two flies in one swat - the exact equivalent of two birds with one stone).

Why So Many Sayings Are Wet

A country shaped by dikes, polders and the sea leaks that fact into its idioms. "Het water staat hem aan de lippen" (the water is up to his lips) means someone is in deep trouble; "ergens geen zee van maken" warns against making a sea out of a small thing. Fish turn up constantly too - "als haringen in een ton" (packed like herrings in a barrel) for a crowded room, and "een vreemde eend in de bijt" (a strange duck in the ice-hole) for an outsider. The folklorists at the [Meertens Instituut](#), a KNAW research centre that studies Dutch language, dialect and everyday culture, have long traced how geography and trade seep into this imagery.

Apples, Eggs and Monkeys

Everyday Dutch leans on the farmyard and the market. If something is cheap you bought it "voor een appel en een ei" (for an apple and an egg). When a secret finally surfaces, "nu komt de aap uit de mouw" - now the monkey comes out of the sleeve, a phrase thought to date from travelling performers who hid a trained monkey until the trick's reveal. To make polite small talk is to chat "over koetjes en kalfjes" (about little cows and little calves). And a formidable, outspoken person - often a woman, in the original sense - is said to "haar op de tanden hebben", to have hair on the teeth.

Rhyme, Humour and the Modern Street

Not every expression is centuries old. Dutch loves a throwaway rhyme, and "helaas pindakaas" (literally "unfortunately, peanut butter") is a playful way to shrug off bad luck - nonsense that scans, nothing more. The language also prizes bluntness: "met de deur in huis vallen" (to fall into the house with the door still in your hand) describes getting straight to the point without preamble, which many visitors recognise as Dutch directness in action. New coinages keep arriving, and editors at reference publishers such as [Van Dale](#) track which ones stick.

Where to Look Them Up

If you want to go deeper, two resources stand out. F. A. Stoett's classic 1901 reference *Nederlandsche spreekwoorden, spreekwijzen, uitdrukkingen en gezegden* has been fully digitised and is free to read through the [Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren](#). For the living language, the [Instituut voor de Nederlandse Taal](#) in Leiden maintains the scholarly record of Dutch vocabulary. Even the [Rijksmuseum](#) in Amsterdam is worth a mention here: its collection of genre paintings is riddled with the same proverbial scenes Bruegel loved, from tipped-over jugs to broken eggs.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Bruegel's "Netherlandish Proverbs" hangs in a Dutch museum. It is in Berlin, at the Gemäldegalerie, not in the Netherlands - a surprise to many who go looking for it in Amsterdam.

Myth: "Helaas pindakaas" is an ancient proverb. It is a modern rhyming quip with no deeper meaning; the peanut butter is there only because pindakaas rhymes with helaas.

Myth: A spreekwoord and a gezegde are the same thing. In Dutch they are distinct categories - a proverb is a fixed, standalone sentence, while a gezegde is a flexible figurative phrase folded into your own sentence.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the most common Dutch proverb a visitor will actually hear?

You will quickly meet "doe maar normaal, dan doe je al gek genoeg" (just act normal, that's crazy enough already), a near-national motto about not showing off, and the market phrase "voor een appel en een ei" for anything bargain-priced.

Do Dutch and Flemish proverbs differ?

They overlap heavily, since both are governed by the shared standard of the Nederlandse Taalunie, but Flanders keeps some older or regional expressions, and a few words carry different everyday connotations on each side of the border.

Can I use these sayings without sounding odd as a learner?

Yes, in moderation - Dutch speakers warm to a well-placed "twee vliegen in één klap". Start with a handful you fully understand, and check the figurative meaning on a reference site like *Onze Taal* before deploying one, as a mistranslated idiom lands very differently from how you intend.

Official websites mentioned

Nederlandse Taalunie: taalunie.org

Genootschap Onze Taal: onzetaal.nl

Gemäldegalerie: smb.museum

Meertens Instituut: meertens.knaw.nl

Van Dale: vandale.nl

Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren: dbnl.org

Instituut voor de Nederlandse Taal: jvnt.org

Rijksmuseum: rijksmuseum.nl