

Begging to be *goed*: Voicing discrimination in multilingual and multiethnic Netherlands

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Abstract

This paper explores political discourse on two public issues involving discrimination in the Netherlands, centred on the terms *Kutmarokkanen* and *Zwarte Piet*. The paper discusses the Bakhtinian polyphony of different ‘voices’ in the public debates surrounding these issues: the voices of those protesting because they experience discrimination, the voices of those defending or justifying it, the voices in the press or in academic discourse describing it, and the voices of the government and politicians. What are the terms used and the underlying concepts or attitudes? The argument presented in analysing these voices centres around the idea that the sharp moral distinction between *goed/fout* ‘good’/‘wrong’ in Dutch public consciousness makes it difficult for the Dutch people to look at themselves objectively and critically examine their own concepts of society and those of their fellow citizens with different backgrounds.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I want to begin to explore the many voices surrounding discrimination in my country: the voices of those protesting because they experience it, the voices of those defending or justifying it, the voices in the press or in academic discourse describing it, and an abstract moral voice.

Discrimination has been around as long as we can remember, and has received academic attention from time to time in the Netherlands (a key publication was Bovenkerk 1978); although less from linguists (an early exception was Muysken 1984). It has recently regained the public’s attention, albeit in a highly politicised way. Some of these debates should be viewed against the background of broader European or even global developments. However, they are locally structured; embedded in national traditions and involving (Dutch) language-specific vocabulary. That is why I limit my discussion to the situation in the Netherlands.

Since the topic is vast, I focus on two key terms used in these debates: *Kutmarokkanen* (lit. ‘cunt Moroccans’) and *Zwarte Piet* (‘black Pete’). Methodologically, I draw primarily upon a detailed analysis of some of the terms and concepts used in these debates. However, my argument requires an initial step in setting the context for my argument: morality, and the Dutch notions of *goed* ‘good’ and *fout* ‘wrong’. To briefly sketch the argument I would like to make,

much of the Dutch debate about discrimination is based on the implicit premise of a three-step reasoning process:

- (i) Discrimination is *fout*.
- (ii) I am *goed*.
- (iii) Therefore, I do not discriminate and need not reflect upon the language I use.

This is basically the same argument that the Dutch cultural analyst Gloria Wekker (2002) has presented in terms of cognitive dissonance.

I have kept the discussion that follows fairly parochial and Dutch, since my point is specific to the Dutch.¹ To do justice to the phenomena described here on a European or a global level would require an entire book or series of books. The paper finds its theoretical embedding of the issues discussed here particularly in Reisigl & Wodak (2001).²

Reisigl and Wodak (2001:xiii) differentiate between five types of strategies that can be distinguished in the critical discourse analysis of voices of discrimination in public discourse:

- (i) *Referential strategies*: how are targets of discrimination referred to?
- (ii) *Predicational strategies*: what is being said of them?
- (iii) *Argumentation strategies / fallacies*: what kinds of arguments are brought to bear on this issue (often fallacious)?
- (iv) *Perspectivization and framing strategies*: how are the statements framed?
- (v) *Mitigation and intensification strategies*: by what means are statements mitigated or intensified?

Here, I go one step further than Reisigl and Wodak (2001) do, in that not just one voice (in their case, that of the right-wing politician Jörg Haider) is analysed, but a series of different ‘voices’ in the public debates surrounding these issues: the voices of those protesting because they experience discrimination, the voices of those defending or justifying it, the voices in the press or in academic discourse describing it, and the voices of the government and politicians.

The juxtaposition of these voices leads to a polyphony or even cacophony of conflicting noises, which, in Bakhtin’s terms, becomes a single heteroglossic narrative. In the middle of it, the debates sound like a set of strictly opposing perspectives; but seen from a distance, these debates become more like a heteroglossic novel (Bakhtin 1981, 1994). In Bakhtin’s view, the power of good narratives comes precisely from the opposition between different voices, different types of speech. The different perspectives lead to a stratified diversity of voices, but, in the case to be discussed, are linked to the frame that the participants in the debate are overwhelmingly *goed*. It is high time to explore this notion of *goed* further.

¹ I have even ignored the parallel developments in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, which in many ways has its own dynamics, including the language struggle (*Taalstrijd*) with the French part of Belgium. It is also tantalizing to compare the Dutch situation to that of Germany, where the feeling of moral superiority, of being *goed*, is absent (and the tone of the debate is totally different); as well as to the situations in Austria and Switzerland. Muysken & Rott (2013) make a beginning in discussing some of the issues involved.

² These scholars are well-known to Christine Anthonissen, to whom this essay is respectfully dedicated. This essay owes much to Thomas Mijnders of the Stedelijk Gymnasium Johan van Oldenbarnevelt in Amersfoort, who, in just a few days as an intern, did many of the Internet searches and helped to organise my thoughts and the material.

2. *Goed and fout*

Even though only a minority of the population of the Netherlands acknowledges being religious and can be described as being Calvinist in denomination, Calvinism has played an important role in shaping the national consciousness. Part of this involves drawing rather sharp moral boundaries, in spite of the Dutch people's 'liberal' self-image. There is *goed*, and there is *fout*.

My story will start in the Second World War. Powerless in the face of the ruthless – and surprisingly successful and efficient – capture, deportation, and subsequent murder of the Netherlands' Jewish population by Nazi commands, which formed part of the German occupying forces, the Dutch did not manage to save their compatriots. Did they look away? Were they cowardly? Not interested? Too much entrenched in bureaucratic practices?

The relatively few individuals that resisted the occupation and tried to save Jewish lives are labelled *goed*; and those few individuals that lent their support to and overtly collaborated with the occupiers are labelled *fout* (wrong, mistaken). The majority that simply muddled along during this terrible period liked to think of themselves as *goed*, with greater or lesser ease. Since 1945, this *goed/fout* distinction has shaped public discourse and functioned as a moral compass (in Dutch: *moreel ijkpunt*) for evaluating political stances or potential/imagined stances in hypothetical future contexts. The standard question is: what would you do if somebody asked for shelter in your home from some occupying force? If you are *goed* – and everyone would like to think of themselves in this way – you would provide shelter.

Goed and *fout* have remained part of public discourse. If in Britain you say "She did not have a good war", you mean "She experienced terrible things which have affected her ever since". In Dutch, *Hij was goed in de oorlog* means something very different: "In resisting, he made the right moral choices".³

Thus, there was a lingering sense of guilt counterbalanced by the desire to be and remain *goed*. In addition, there was a sense of victimhood after the deprivations, particularly during the last war years. This balance did not stop the Dutch from entering into a colonial war soon after 1945 to prevent Indonesia from gaining independence. These war activities were termed *politieonele acties* 'policing actions' to stress their legitimacy and incidental nature. The violence and atrocities committed in this period did not really affect the self-image of the Dutch people. A sense of loss of wealth, as in the expression *Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren* ('Indonesia lost, disaster born'), and victimhood (due to the suffering of the Europeans that spent years in camps run by the Japanese occupying forces) prevailed.⁴

The subsequent post-war years, roughly 1950–1980, were a period of increasing prosperity and stabilization. There were few large conflicts in which the Netherlands was directly engaged, economic growth allowed poorer citizens to advance economically without major losses to the

³ As I am writing this, the newspaper (NRC, February 19, 2015, C6) carries a story with the headline *Foute kunst* 'wrong (or bad) art'. It is immediately clear to everyone that this is about art from WWII. The Dutch puppet government under occupation bought a surprising number of artworks from Dutch 'grey' or *fout* artists. These were locked up, and only now, after 70 years, has an Arnhem museum dared to exhibit a selection of these *geaarde* 'rooted, connected to the earth' artworks. Some of them are surprisingly good, according to the review. Of course, abstract art, which was *Entartet* 'uprooted, unrooted' in Nazi ideology, was not represented in the collection.

⁴ Until this moment, it has proved impossible to really study and document these *politieonele acties* for what they were; on a national level or together with Indonesian historians.

wealthier citizens, and the environment was not yet an issue. In short, it was easy for most people to be, or at least to feel, *goed*. Bad things happened, but they were a *ver van mijn bed show* ('a far from my bed affair'), to use an expression coined much later. First, of course, there was communism; and then in the 1960s and 1970s there was the Vietnam war, dictatorial regimes in South America, and increasing tensions in apartheid South Africa. There were many poor people in the world, but there was consensus or hope that *ontwikkelingshulp* ('development aid') would remedy this in the foreseeable future.

The Dutch *knipperlichtrelatie* ('light off and on', to use another more modern expression), or love-hate relationship, with the Afrikaans-speaking population of South Africa requires a separate essay or book. There was great enthusiasm for the Boer cause in the Anglo-Boer war; subsequent feelings of fraternity during the period 1935–1980, indignation about apartheid and some support for the African National Congress (ANC) in the 1970s and 1980s; followed again by new curiosities and loves in the post-apartheid period. Suffice it to say that none of the bad things linked to the apartheid regime posed a threat to the Dutch feeling *goed*.⁵

This sense of comfort has changed. A first intimation were the Balkan wars. The Dutch were engaged as a peace-keeping force, but their half-hearted commitment – partly the result of an unclear command structure without real teeth – did not prevent the Bosnian Serbian forces from coldly executing 8,000 Bosnian Muslims meant to be under Dutch protection. The Serbians involved – Milošević, Mladić, and Karadžić – could easily be labelled as *fout* (and were subsequently brought to trial at the International Tribunal in The Hague); but what about the Dutch? Were they cowards after all, just like they feared they were in the Second World War? Were they *goed*? I think many people doubt this. But could they have acted differently?

The Balkan wars were the beginning of an era of new moral complexities. Conflicts which had been perceived as something far away suddenly seemed closer to home. The argument I want to make is that the Dutch tradition of 'begging to be *goed*' (to paraphrase Antjie Krog's (2009) book title) has made it difficult to deal with these new complexities. Complex social problems are automatically reduced to purely moral problems, and are then avoided or trivialized; and this has paralyzed the Dutch people's resolution and impeded adequate self-reflection. In what follows, I illustrate this with reference to two issues debated in the Dutch public domain: *Kutmarokkanen* and *Zwarte Piet*.

3. *Kutmarokkanen*

Upcoming social-democrat politician and Amsterdam family doctor Rob Oudkerk⁶ broke the ice in 2002 by publicly using a very pejorative *K*-word, a prefixed noun (*kut* 'cunt') with the ethnic label *Marokkanen* (Moroccans). This prefix had not yet been used in this way in public discourse with respect to Moroccan Dutch people, although it was very common in private conversations.

⁵In fact, the Dutch found it easy to interpret the clandestine actions of the ANC (secret messages, attacks, sabotage) in terms of *verzetsfilms* ('resistance movies') they had seen about the Dutch in the WWII period, and thus to identify with something that they wished to have been part of themselves.

⁶His rise in politics was nipped in the bud because he bragged to a woman columnist at a function about his cocaine use and visits to prostitutes. Rapid publication and media exposure made him definitely *foute boel* ('wrong goods').

It should be borne in mind that ethnic groups in the Netherlands are generally labelled using the national origin of their ancestors (a referential strategy in Reisigl and Wodak's framework, with immediate predicational implicatures):

Molukkers (came from Ambon and the surrounding islands in Indonesia around 1950)

Surinamers (came from Suriname primarily in the period 1960–1975)

Antillianen (came from Aruba and Curaçao, islands in the Antilles part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, over the last 50 years)

Marokkanen (came particularly from northern Morocco since 1970)

Turken (came particularly from Anatolian Turkey since 1970)

No matter how many generations of an immigrant group have lived in the Netherlands (the most extreme case are the *Portugese Joden*, who had to flee Portugal in 1492 because of the Spanish Inquisition), they are labelled by their country of origin. This betrays a rather essentialist view of identity: it is viewed as something fixed in terms of the geographical origins of one's ancestry, no matter how long one has been away. However, these terms are justified in public discourse in terms of 'ease': "Of course we know that a *Marokkaan* does not literally live in Morocco, but to say *Marokkaanse Nederlander* ('Moroccan Dutchman') is deemed such a politically correct mouthful that it sounds stupid".

This use of bare ethnonyms goes together with the quasi-technical term *allochtonen*, used to refer to people with immigrant ancestry. This term means literally '[from] another earth', as opposed to *autochtonen* '[from] the same earth'. It started out as a bureaucratic term, and I think few people now realize how its continued use for *n*th-generation immigrants fixates people in their otherness (another predicational strategy). These terms are important because they also stress that the key properties of the people thus denoted are their roots in other lands and their non-Dutch cultures, rather than the circumstances in which they live in the Netherlands.

Yet another key term in Dutch discourse about immigrants is the opposition *wit/zwart* ('white'/'black'). The general terms *wit* and *zwart* are applied not to people, but to schools and neighbourhoods. Thus, a classroom is *zwart* if, say, more than 20 or 30% of the pupils have an immigrant background. The terms have something to do with skin colour, but not very much, since migrant status (even from light-skinned countries such as Turkey) is the key here. These terms and their common use in any kind of register (including 'neutral' newspaper articles) highlight an invisible line drawn through the social fabric between two kinds of people.

While other groups are also a topic of discussion from time to time, in public discourse, a key target of public indignation are immigrants with a Moroccan background. The context in which they were referred to by the politician Oudkerk was their visibility in police statistics regarding street crime and neighbourhood disturbances. The standard image of *Marokkanen* involves groups of young males with short hair who cause a nuisance, act aggressively, and want to steal your wallet or smartphone.

There are endless theories regurgitated about the reasons for this supposed behaviour – anthropological, psychological, and social – which I cannot go into right now. There is also a growing discussion about how justified these stereotypes are, and about the role of the police in their interactions with these supposed criminals. Key elements in many discussions will be presented below.

Recently, another component has been added to these stereotypes. These *Marokkanen* do not only bother you in the street and want to steal your wallet: they also want to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State to commit atrocities. Thus, the debate about street criminality has become embedded in, linked to, and confused with a discussion about Islam in general.

What ties together the alleged criminal profile and the claims about terrorism is the profound wish for immigrants to not be distinguishable from non-immigrants, which is generally phrased in terms of “integration”.

I try to list and discuss some of the key words used in the debate in terms of a number of actors, each with a different voice. In the schema, I have separated policymakers from politicians; but in practice, this turned out to be impossible. Policy and politics are too much intertwined.



Figure 1: *Kutmarokkanen*

Politicians/policymakers

Of course, politicians differ in their terminology, but in the Netherlands, the political spectrum is mostly divided between a supposedly ‘neutral’ centrist position, and the right-wing, overtly xenophobic position voiced by politician Geert Wilders. The following terms appear in the debate:

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Polarisatie</i> ⁷	Polarization	A major political concern is, of course, social harmony.
<i>Integratie</i> ⁸	Integration	Integration is taken to be assimilation in the discourse: if only people with immigrant backgrounds would just assimilate!
<i>Marokkanenprobleem</i> ⁹	Moroccan problem	In xenophobic discourse, the focus is on ‘honesty’: just acknowledge that Moroccans are a problem.
<i>Cultuur van haat</i> ¹⁰	Culture of hatred	Muslims are often identified with hatred: ‘they’ hate ‘us’ (the West, non-Muslims).
<i>Minder Marokkanen</i> ¹¹	Fewer Moroccans	Wilders’ call for ‘fewer Moroccans’ in an election night speech may well lead to his conviction in the near future.
<i>Immigratie</i> ¹²	Immigration	Limiting immigration will also help ‘those who are already here’ to assimilate more rapidly. Further immigration only causes more non-integration, which is <i>fout</i> .

The general public and the media

The discussion on this topic in Internet fora etc. is vast and cannot possibly be presented here. As in many other countries, social media function as a garbage belt for discriminatory statements. Below are some of the milder statements:

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Minderheid</i> ¹³	Minority	The term “minority” is neutral but implied here is that minorities should also be modest in their claims. They should not determine what the tone of the debate must be.
<i>Negatief</i> ¹⁴	Negative	Moroccans have a generally negative image.
<i>Slecht beeld</i> ¹⁵	Bad image	Idem

⁷ “Rutte noemde het een ‘negatieve verklaring’ die elke grond mist, die Nederlanders beoordeelt op basis van hun godsdienst en die polariseert.” (*RTL Nieuws* 18/10/2014)

⁸ “We zijn tegen polarisatie en voor integratie.” (*RTL Nieuws* 18/10/2014); “Marokkanen kunnen beter integreren als we niet de deur openzetten voor nog meer immigratie.” (*NU.nl* 14/05/2014)

⁹ “Degene die dan nog zegt dat we geen Marokkanenprobleem hebben, die snapt er helemaal niks van.” (*RTL Nieuws* 18/10/2014)

¹⁰ “We hebben hier een cultuur van haat geïmporteerd.” (*RTL Nieuws* 18/10/2014)

¹¹ “Willen jullie meer of minder Marokkanen in jullie stad en in Nederland? Het antwoord van de zaal luidde: “Minder, minder, minder!”” (*NOS* 19/03/2014)

¹² “Het beperken van de immigratie is ook goed voor de mensen die hier al zijn. Marokkanen kunnen beter integreren als we niet de deur openzetten voor nog meer immigratie.” (*NU.nl* 14/05/2014)

¹³ “De grens van wat wel en wat niet gezegd kan worden over minderheden wordt niet bepaald door minderheden.” (*NRC Handelsblad* 3/02/2015)

¹⁴ “Als Marokkanen al in het nieuws komen, is het vaak op een negatieve manier.” (*Trouw* 04/11/2002)

¹⁵ “Er is door de constante focus op de problemen die een klein gedeelte van de Marokkanen veroorzaakt, een heel slecht beeld ontstaan.” (*Trouw* 04/11/2002)

<i>Allochtoon</i> ¹⁶	Immigrant	The negative meaning arises here through reference to the title of a TV program about criminals who are identified as sought by the police.
<i>Uitzetting</i> ¹⁷	Eviction	Constant allusions to the idea that people of Moroccan descent, Dutch citizen or no, should be sent back to their <i>thuisland</i> 'home land', the term from the apartheid era.

Academics

Academics have been most engaged in the debate about culture versus social circumstances to explain the behaviour of delinquents of Moroccan descent. Four kinds of circumstances are often alluded to.

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Straatcultuur</i> ¹⁸	Street culture	In academic discourse, there is often an allusion to a 'street culture' as a de-ethnicised umbrella term for modes of behaviour.
<i>Netwerken</i> ¹⁹	Networks	'Negative peer networks' are called upon to explain delinquent behaviour.
<i>Uitsluiting</i> ²⁰	Exclusion	Some researchers see a role for processes of exclusion and denigration to explain the behaviour involved.
<i>Discours</i> ²¹	Discourse	Recent studies also point to the role that everyday narratives play in shaping the behaviour of immigrant groups and the reactions to this behaviour.

Targets of discrimination

So far, the voices of the targets of discrimination within the Moroccan Dutch community have been relatively muted.

¹⁶ "“Allochtonen gezocht” op tv kan elke dag wel uitgezonden worden.” (*Geenstijl* reaguursels 23/09/2012)

¹⁷ “Die Marokkaanse tyfsgastjes [*sic*] oppakken, 5 jaar de cel in en de complete familie het land uitzetten.” (*Geenstijl* reaguursels 23/09/2012)

¹⁸ About sociologist Iliass El Hadioui: “De straatcultuur is volgens hem de primaire bron van ellende. Hij benadert overlastgevend gedrag van Marokkaans-Nederlandse jongeren vanuit een meer sociologische invalshoek. In zijn analyse voert hij aan, dat juist de mismatch tussen de straatcultuur met de school- en de thuiscultuur veel meer aanknopingspunten biedt om het overlastgevend gedrag te verklaren.”

¹⁹ Citing sociologist Frank van Tubergen: “Marokkanen zijn weliswaar oververtegenwoordigd in de criminaliteit, maar niet vanwege hun religie of cultuur, of omdat deze jongeren (of hun ouders) geboren zijn in Marokko. De oorzaak ligt in de lage sociaal-economische status, het hoge aantal broers en zussen, en de negatieve peer networks.”

²⁰ Citing street corner worker Saïd Bensallam: “Hij benadrukt hoe gevoelens van tweederangsburgerschap en uitsluiting in het onderwijs en op de arbeidsmarkt net zo van belang zijn in de bestrijding van “het probleem” als de harde aanpak van rotjochies die overlast en criminaliteit veroorzaken.”

²¹ Citing Jacomijne Prins: “In dit onderzoek wordt gekeken hoe publieke en politieke discoursen hun uitwerking hebben op de manier waarop Marokkaans-Nederlandse jongeren betekenis geven aan hun positie in de Nederlandse maatschappij. De nadruk ligt hierbij op de rol van verhalen.”

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Onveiligheid</i> ²²	Insecurity	There is a widespread feeling of insecurity and fear, given the barrage of negative comments.
<i>Angst</i> ²³	Fear	Idem
<i>Racisme</i> ²⁴	Racism	In public protests, racism and discrimination are invoked, but these claims are widely contested in the public debate. Notice that the term is used on a forum called the ‘Allochtonia Republic’.
<i>Discriminatie</i> ²⁵	Discrimination	Idem, and an appeal that discrimination can affect anyone: “We are all Moroccans”.

It may well be that the debate about young people of Moroccan descent will take a different turn in the coming years, although it is hard to predict which turn this will be. Since Oudkerk made his ill-fated public remark, the number of talented artists, musicians, actors, politicians, and entrepreneurs with Moroccan backgrounds has increased dramatically, and hopefully the debate about *kutmarokkanen* will soon be something of the past. However, the stridency with which this term has been used, and the broad social consensus about the essential justice of the characterization, call for reflection.

4. *Zwarte Piet*

Quinsy Gario is a performance artist from the Caribbean island of Curaçao. In 2011, he initiated a protest at the annual parade where *Sinterklaas* (St. Nicholas) was arriving in full regalia, with a whole boatful of *Zwarte Piet* servants, in the ancient city of Dordrecht. Gario, who was wearing a T-shirt stating *Zwarte Piet is racism*, was promptly arrested. Why were the authorities so sensitive?

St. Nicholas was bishop of Myra in southern Turkey, and he was safely buried there in 342 or 352 CE. He is revered as a *kindervriend* ‘children’s friend’, and celebrations are held on his alleged birthday, December 6, in parts of north-western Europe, including the Netherlands. St. Nicholas (also known as *Sinterklaas*) comes with his white horse and visits all the homes, hospitals, schools, department stores, etc., and distributes presents to children, after sternly admonishing them to be *goed* or *zoet* ‘sweet’.

For every Dutch child, there are two phases in growing up: the phase during which you ‘believe in *Sinterklaas*’ (*in Sinterklaas gelooft*), and the phase during which you are sadder but wiser, and know that this Saint on a white horse is a paid, dressed-up actor, volunteer, or uncle. Now that belief in the traditional God of the earlier period has become something of the minority only, secularized adults’ wish for their children to believe in something is greater than ever. It

²² “Zij signaleren ‘een sterke groei van gevoelens van onveiligheid, onbehagen en angst’ in hun gemeenschap.” (*Geenstijl* nieuwsbericht 17/11/2014)

²³ “Zij signaleren ‘een sterke groei van gevoelens van onveiligheid, onbehagen en angst’ in hun gemeenschap.” (*Geenstijl* nieuwsbericht, 17/11/2014)

²⁴ ““Wij zijn allemaal Marokkanen!” Kom morgen demonstreren tegen racisme en discriminatie!” (*Republiek Allochtonie* 21/03/2015)

²⁵ ““Wij zijn allemaal Marokkanen!” Kom morgen demonstreren tegen racisme en discriminatie!” (*Republiek Allochtonie* 21/03/2015)

is also interesting to see that children in families with an immigrant background also come to believe: being ‘Dutch’ also means having once believed in *Sinterklaas*.

Sometime in the early 19th century, during these celebrations, St. Nicholas (*Sinterklaas*) came to be accompanied by a servant (*knecht*) of African descent on his annual visits to Amsterdam patrician merchant homes. Recall that this was still the era of slavery (which was formally abolished in 1863), and some of the families visited by *Sinterklaas* and his servant probably owned slaves in far-away Surinam. In any case, the iconography of the *knecht* (whose name gradually came to be settled on as *Zwarte Piet*) was that of an African child slave, a personage that had been common in the background of portraits of rich families in previous centuries. In fact, the person playing the role of *Zwarte Piet* was a blackfaced young person dressed up as a child slave. Currently, *Sinterklaas* and *Zwarte Piet* are almost inseparable in their public appearances.

Up until the moment of Gario’s arrest, there had always been disbelief on the part of foreign visitors about this strange habit of blackfacing, and there had been mild protests from within the Caribbean-origin community in the Netherlands. However, since Gario’s arrest, there has been a debate about this issue that grows and diminishes every year as December’s *Sinterklaasavond* (the St. Nicholas holiday) approaches or recedes again. Again, I will discuss the different voices in the *Zwarte Piet* debate.

The vehemence of the debate has several causes, I think. First of all, it is assumed to be perilous for the debate to be carried on openly while new generations of children are meant to believe in *Sinterklaas* and *Zwarte Piet*, which, as stated, is something urgently wished for. Secondly, *Sinterklaas* has become an icon of Dutch national identity at a time when national identities are being threatened or at least questioned in a time of European unification and globalization.²⁶ *Sinterklaas* and *Zwarte Piet* are an integral part of a nationalist narrative. Again, different voices may be heard within the debate.



Figure 2: *Zwarte Piet*

²⁶ There is also resistance, for instance, against the mounting commercial pressure to introduce Santa Claus and the associated Christmas iconography. Store owners feel they can make more money at Christmas time than in early December, since in late December Christmas bonuses have been paid to people with salaries.

Policymakers

Policymakers originally tried to ease the debate, but with a view towards maintaining the tradition. Three main arguments for preserving the status quo were offered.

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Traditie</i> ²⁷	Tradition	The first reaction of policymakers is an appeal to tradition. As the centre-right prime minister Mark Rutte phrased it: <i>Zwarte Piet is zwart</i> ('Black Pete is black'). Traditions are claimed to be outside of the political arena, something 'of the people'.
<i>Cultuur</i> ²⁸	Culture	The second reaction is an appeal to the protection of national culture.
<i>Kinderfeest</i> ²⁹	Children's festival	A third reaction is that it is something for children, and hence not a political issue.

In trying to quash protests against *Zwarte Piet* (to protect children's tender souls from disillusionment), we see active attempts at censorship; trying to silence the anti-*Zwarte Piet* voices (see e.g. Anthonissen's (2008, 2009) discussion about censorship and self-censorship), and trying to remove a particular voice. Speaking generally, in the Netherlands, it is not voicelessness but rather a cacophony of too many voices that is the problem, but somehow the anti-*Zwarte Piet* protests struck a raw nerve. There is also some self-censorship: speaking out against the *Zwarte Piet* tradition has to be done with finesse (see below).

Politicians

Soon after 2011 there was more political debate, and some parties went along with the intent of Quinsy Gario's protest. This led to a classical left-right split, although along cultural lines rather than traditional socio-economic lines.

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Achterhaald</i> ³⁰	Outdated	Tradition yes, but it is outdated in our modern multiethnic society.
<i>Racisme</i> ³¹	Racism	Yes, there is racism here.
<i>Terugkeer naar de slavernij</i> ³²	Return to slavery	Sometimes the debate is framed in terms of a return to slavery.
<i>Negatieve stereotypering</i> ³³	Negative stereotyping	Human right groups talk about negative stereotyping.

²⁷ "Van bovenaf opleggen hoe tradities gevierd moeten worden past bij een dictatoriaal regime en niet bij een vrije samenleving." (AD 15/9/2014)

²⁸ "De wet is bedoeld om "onze cultuur te beschermen"." (AD 15/9/2014)

²⁹ "Het is een kinderfeest. Dit heeft niets met racisme te maken." (AD 15/9/2014)

³⁰ "De traditie is achterhaald." (NRC 14/5/2014)

³¹ "De figuur van Zwarte Piet is een uiting van racisme die bestreden moet worden via het onderwijs." (NRC 14/5/2014)

³² "Ze zei dat het Sinterklaasfeest neerkomt op een "terugkeer van de slavernij"." (NRC 14/5/2014)

³³ "Donderdag oordeelde de bestuursrechter in Amsterdam dat Zwarte Piet "een negatieve stereotypering is van zwarte mensen"." (NRC 14/5/2014)

<i>Sociaal probleem</i> ³⁴	Social issue	However, it is argued to be a social issue, rather than a political one (says the leader of the left-wing Socialist Party), and hence something politics and the legal system should stay out of.
<i>Sinterklaas niet statisch</i> ³⁵	<i>Sinterklaas</i> not static	Reformists have an agenda of gradually transforming <i>Sinterklaasavond</i> ‘St. Nicholas’ Eve’ with a different kind of <i>Piet</i> , either rainbow-colored or otherwise distinguished.
<i>Zwarte Piet racistisch noemen gaat te ver.</i> ³⁶	Calling <i>Zwarte Piet</i> racist goes too far, but ...	Some social democrats want to bring the different parties in this debate together.

Academics

Academics have largely stayed away from this debate, particularly because it is thought of as sensitive. There has been a bit of work on the history of *Zwarte Piet* and earlier folkloric traditions.

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Clash tussen groepen</i> ³⁷	Clash between groups	Trying to sociologise the debate as a culture clash.
<i>Verandering (van traditie)</i> ³⁸	Change (of tradition)	Advocates attempt to contribute to a gradual transition to a <i>Zwarte Piet</i> -less <i>Sinterklaas</i> celebration.
<i>Niet genoeg meeveranderd</i> ³⁹	<i>Zwarte Piet</i> ’s appearance hasn’t changed enough to keep up with other social developments	Recognition of the links with earlier stereotypes from the period of slavery, but suggesting that this is just superficial; a kind of mitigating strategy in Reisigl and Wodak (2001)’s terms.

General public

It is on social media and in discussions in the general public that the strongest debate about the presumed racism of *Zwarte Piet* is found. This has resulted in furious reactions directed at

³⁴ “Het is van de samenleving en niet van de overheid”; “Ook SP-fractie leider Emile Roemer vindt dat het aan de mensen is en niet aan de politiek” (*AD* 15/9/14); “[M]aar dat dit een zaak voor de samenleving is.” (*NU.nl* 4/7/2014)

³⁵ “Net als Rutte benadrukte Asscher dat “het sinterklaasfeest niet statisch is.”” (*NRC* 14/5/2014)

³⁶ “Asscher heeft begrip voor mensen die zich door de figuur van *Zwarte Piet* gekwetst voelen, maar vindt het “veel te ver gaan” om de knecht van *Sinterklaas* een racistisch verschijnsel te noemen.” (*NRC* 14/5/2014)

³⁷ “Dat de emoties over *Zwarte Piet* nu ineens zo hoog oplopen, komt doordat er een enorme culturele clash tussen ‘de outsiders’ en ‘de insiders’ is ontstaan.” (*AD* 24/10/2013)

³⁸ “En veranderingen in het gekoesterde sinterklaasfeest zijn best mogelijk, legt Douwe Wieggersma van Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht uit”; “Een levende traditie verandert dus wel, maar niet van het ene moment op het andere.” (*AD* 24/10/2013)

³⁹ “Maar, vindt Magry, het uiterlijk van *Zwarte Piet* is ook onvoldoende meeveranderd met de maatschappij.” (*AD* 24/10/2013)

Quinsy Gario himself, and in a website with over 340,000 signatures affirming that *Zwarte Piet moet blijven* ‘Zwarte Piet must stay’.

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Graai Piet</i> ⁴⁰		No literal translation possible, but means something like ‘money-grubber’, but with the <i>piet</i> part meant as a kind of joke. <i>Zwarte Piet</i> throws around sweets when he visits, which children then grab and gather from the floor. Gario once dared to ask for an artist’s fee when asked to perform at a cultural event.
<i>Kinderfeest</i> ⁴¹	Children’s festival	Again the argument that it involves children, and so it has to remain outside the domain of public debate
<i>Klootzak van het Jaar</i> ⁴²	Asshole of the year	The audience of a popular radio station elected Quinsy Gario as the asshole of the year, with an overwhelming number of votes.
Hitler ⁴³		A newspaper links Gario to Mugabe and then to Hitler, because Gario had said something positive about Mugabe’s policies. Again, the typical way of ending a debate in the Netherlands: returning to the ultimate <i>fout</i> person.

Targets

I think what upset people was that the group complaining about *Zwarte Piet* used ‘big words’, and tried to situate this seemingly innocent local children’s festival within a larger international context.

⁴⁰ “Rog noemt Gario op Twitter een “graai Piet”, omdat jongerenafdeling CDJA had gezegd dat Gario veel geld vroeg om naar een debat over Zwarte Piet te komen.” (NOS 19/11/2014)

⁴¹ “Want dit prachtige kinderfeest moet blijven en voor iedereen!” (Facebookpagina, Petitie)

⁴² “Quinsy Gario “Klootzak van het Jaar”. Anti-zwartepietenactivist Quinsy Gario is door de luisteraars van 538 uitgeroepen tot Klootzak van het Jaar. Dat heeft dj Ruud de Wild bekendgemaakt. Er is massaal gestemd, meldt 538. In totaal zijn bij de radiozender meer dan 80.000 stemmen binnengekomen.” (18/12/2014)

⁴³ Popular newspaper *De Telegraaf* heads “Anti-Zwarte Piet activist bewondert dictator” for Gario saying: ‘Robert Mugabe’s credit for his decolonialization and anti-apartheid fight must really overshadow what he’s done since.’ *De Telegraaf* headed the sub-section “Hitler”, suggesting Hitler \diamond Mugabe \diamond Gario. “Anti-Zwarte Piet activist Quinsy Gario heeft bewondering voor de Zimbabwaanse dictator Robert Mugabe. Dat zei Gario op zijn Twitter-account. Gario schrijft: “De eer voor de strijd van Robert Mugabe tegen dekolonisatie en apartheid zou datgene wat hij sindsdien heeft gedaan, moeten overschaduwen.” (30/1/2015)

Term	Gloss	Comments
<i>Racisme</i> ⁴⁴	Racism	Comments are not needed here, I think.
<i>Discriminatie</i> ⁴⁵	Discrimination	
<i>Slavernij</i> ⁴⁶	Slavery	
<i>Kolonialisme</i> ⁴⁷	Colonialism	Many protesters have a Caribbean background, and view the relationship between the Netherlands and their territories of ancestral origin as colonial.
<i>Uitsluiting</i> ⁴⁸	Exclusion	

Dutch political debates tend to end in compromises, which feed into people's positive self-image of being *goed*.⁴⁹ In all likelihood, *Zwarte Piet* will gradually disappear from the *Sinterklaas* tradition over the next few years and be replaced by another figure, as more and more people shift to a perspective in which this blackface servant is seen as discriminatory. However, it is striking that this has created such a stir, and that the very idea that a blackfaced *Zwarte Piet* could be racist was offensive to the 'good' self-image of the majority of the Dutch.

5. Discrimination

I have illustrated two debates about possible discrimination in terms of the vocabulary used in these debates. This has been done against the background of the frame that, basically, the Dutch are *goed*, and hence do not discriminate, which allows for a sharp tone in public discourse.

As a researcher on multilingualism and language contact, I have always stressed, as have most of my colleagues, that contact between speakers is increasing, and hence multilingualism and contact-induced change is increasing too. In the multilingualism literature, this contact is viewed as positive: multilingualism research generally adopts what is now called a 'cosmopolitan' stance.

All over the world, however, nationalist or xenophobic positions are being increasingly adopted at the same time that sensitivity to racism is growing. This can be related to different factors.

⁴⁴ "Zwarte Piet is Racisme campagne streeft naar een Sinterklaasfeest dat saamhorigheid viert, zonder racistische bijmaak en zonder uitsluiting."; "Zolang de uiterlijkheden die refereren aan het Nederlandse verleden van slavernij en kolonialisme nog steeds bestaan en getolereerd worden, blijft Zwarte Piet racistisch en zal kritiek op de figuur blijven bestaan." (Facebookpagina, Zwarte Piet is Racisme)

⁴⁵ "Door het instellen van hoger beroep tegen de uitspraak van de Amsterdamse bestuursrechter in de zaak Zwarte Piet en zijn voornemen om de negatieve stereotype van de zwarte knecht in vier jaar tijd af te bouwen, laat burgemeester Van der Laan zien dat hij zich niet bekommerd om het leed (veroorzaakt door racisme en discriminatie) van zwarte burgers in Amsterdam en in het rest van het land." (Facebookpagina, Zwarte Piet is Racisme)

⁴⁶ "Zolang de uiterlijkheden die refereren aan het Nederlandse verleden van slavernij en kolonialisme nog steeds bestaan en getolereerd worden, blijft Zwarte Piet racistisch en zal kritiek op de figuur blijven bestaan." (Facebookpagina, Zwarte Piet is Racisme)

⁴⁷ "Zolang de uiterlijkheden die refereren aan het Nederlandse verleden van slavernij en kolonialisme nog steeds bestaan en getolereerd worden, blijft Zwarte Piet racistisch en zal kritiek op de figuur blijven bestaan." (Facebookpagina, Zwarte Piet is Racisme)

⁴⁸ "Zwarte Piet is Racisme campagne streeft naar een Sinterklaasfeest dat saamhorigheid viert, zonder racistische bijmaak en zonder uitsluiting." (Facebookpagina, Zwarte Piet is Racisme)

⁴⁹ Often these compromises are framed in terms of Dutch political culture as a 'polder' culture. The polders required compromises between the conflicting interests of different groups of inhabitants – farmers, fishermen, city folk – since otherwise they would be overrun by the sea.

One is how people generally react. It is hard to make strong claims about human nature, but it is probably fair to say that many people are automatically more comfortable with people close to and very similar to themselves than with people who are very different. In our modern world, we are increasingly confronted with people not very similar to us. A natural response is to withdraw into separate communities, and if that is not possible, to Live Together Apart (the opposite of Living Apart Together), as Bennis, Extra and Muysken (2002) tried to show in *Buurt in Beweging*. Proximity does not always lead to real interaction beyond the functional level; many modern cities harbour coexisting but rather separate communities.

In addition, we find that economic stress and the increasing deprivation of lower income groups in contemporary economies in both richer and poorer countries feed into xenophobia and discrimination. Again, the effects of this are seen worldwide, and are certainly not limited to the Netherlands or its neighbouring countries. These effects cannot explain everything on their own, however.

What is special about the Netherlands is the naïve arrogance that comes with the feeling of being *goed*, of moral superiority; an arrogance that has blinded many otherwise reasonable people to the fact that their voicing of the issues involved in discussions about ethnicity is very discriminatory. This is all the more striking, since many of these voices of discrimination are not accompanied by real economic hardship, as in some other countries where xenophobia rages and is strengthened by economic hardship, as in Greece since the Euro crisis and in some Eastern European countries that have difficulties adjusting to the EU market forces. Assuming oneself to be *goed* stands in the way of self-reflection and acts as a shield of moral invincibility.

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