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Language motivations and choices of Dutch L1 speakers attending English-language churches in The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The Netherlands is home to an increasing number of English-language churches. These churches are often established with an international audience in mind: however, interestingly, they also attract a large number of Dutch as a first-language (L1) speakers. This article investigates the language attitudes and language choices of Dutch L1 speakers attending these churches. It examines the religious considerations behind their language choices, and the influence a second language (L2) might have on their faith experience. The study shows that, while English is indeed permeating the religious domain of the Netherlands, Dutch is still used in many contexts. For example, a majority of the participants, while favouring English as the main language of the church service, preferred to pray in Dutch. We also found that ideologies surrounding the English language guided many of the participants' language choices. Lastly, the English language brought participants a sense of distance that aided discussions about their faith and prevented negative feelings associated with the Dutch language from interfering. This study adds to the discussion of the global spread of English and sheds new light on linguistic attitudes and choices in religious contexts.

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Introduction

Is the English language bringing people back to church? In the Netherlands, recent data suggest a plummeting trend of religious engagement and church attendance (Statistics Netherlands 2020). In particular, church denominations such as the Dutch Protestant Church (PKN)[1] and the Roman Catholic Church have been noticing a decline in church attendance since the second half of the twentieth century.[2] Nonetheless, so-called migrant or international churches,[3] which cater to specific ethnic, cultural, and linguistic communities, are growing in numbers, unlike the 'native' Dutch churches (Samen Kerk in Nederland, 2019). For example, in Amsterdam:

> The number of individuals attending one of the mainline Protestant churches in Amsterdam on Sunday is estimated at 2,500. The immigrant churches in Amsterdam are thought to draw about 24,000 attendants each Sunday. (Stoffels, 2008, 21, based on Euser et al., 2006, 40)

Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2022) recorded an increasing number of migrant churches with different linguistic identities in The Hague, one of the most multicultural and diverse cities in the Netherlands. Many of these churches did not have their own church buildings, but were hosted in schools, libraries, conference centres or people's private living rooms. Alberts and Tieken-Boon

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van Ostade (2022) revealed another fascinating aspect: in many churches where English was used as the main language of the service, a large number of first-language (L1) Dutch speakers attended the church as well. A striking finding, since despite the trend of secularisation, there is no lack of Dutch-language churches in The Hague.

The church leaders that were interviewed in Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2022) suggested several reasons for this phenomenon. The English language brings in a large variety of people with different linguistic backgrounds, as English is increasingly powerful in a globalised world, and used as the lingua franca in many contexts. Thus, the churches are filled with temporary inhabitants of the city, such as expats and students, who do not necessarily speak English as their L1. This international environment is attractive to Dutch church members. What is more, according to church leaders, the English language gave a new feeling to people's faith – they felt that English carried less religious 'baggage' than Dutch, mostly due to previous (negative) experiences in Dutch churches. This, in turn, led them to experience a lighter form of Christianity than they would have in Dutch. This raises the questions of what other linguistic attitudes these Dutch people have towards the English language, and in what religious contexts, apart from their church, they use English. Moreover, we are curious to find out what motivations they have for joining an anglophone church instead of a Dutch one. This article sets out to examine these questions. Before doing so, we will firstly give a brief overview of the status of English in the Netherlands and the emergence of English churches. We will then discuss the goals and main questions of this study and the methodology, after which we present our results, discussion and conclusion.

English in the Netherlands

Across social domains

The English language has had the status of a global language for several decades with its impact steadily increasing due to a variety of historical, geographical, economic and socio-cultural reasons (Crystal 2003; Mufwene 2010). On estimate, English is spoken as a first, second or foreign language by approximately 2,3 billion people – almost a third of the total world population (Crystal 2018, 115). The Netherlands has been number one on the English Proficiency Index – which measures English as a second language (L2) proficiency – for the last three years, and has remained in the top 3 since 2011 (Education First 2021). In a *Eurobarometer* survey, 90% of the Dutch people interviewed reported speaking English well enough to hold a conversation: the highest percentage of all European countries (European Commission 2012, 21). The use of English in the daily life of a Dutch person extends far beyond its usefulness for tourists and expats: in a monograph on English in the Netherlands, Edwards (2016) showed that the English language is omnipresent in the media, education and other parts of public life, and that it carries a high degree of prestige and status.

In the domain of education, the Netherlands has offered courses taught in English as early as the 1950s (Ammon and McConnell 2002, 97). As a subject, English is generally taught from primary school onwards, and in recent years, day-care organisations have also started to include English activities in their programme (Aalberse et al. 2021). Apart from teaching English, bilingual English-Dutch programmes are also available at primary and secondary education levels. In higher education, the Netherlands is reported to have the highest number of English-taught programmes compared to other European countries (Wächter and Maiworm 2014, 16). Already in the early 2000s was the Netherlands considered 'one of the most advanced countries in Europe concerning the integration of instruction in English in the national education system' (Ammon and McConnell 2002, 99). This resulted from a policy of internationalisation and a wish to attract more international students to Dutch institutions (98). The early and broad integration of English into the Dutch educational system is perhaps the most important reason that the Dutch level of L2 English is so high.

While the proficiency and uptake of other foreign languages in the Netherlands are slowly decreasing (Michel et al. 2021), English is growing in many domains of Dutch society – so much, that, according to Edwards (2016), English in the Netherlands should no longer be regarded a foreign language, but is increasingly moving into the domain of a second language (Kachru 1985). In speech, English is used as an identity marker: Dutch people, especially the younger generations, reported often code-switching to English and using English 'to sound better, to create an effect or to signal group membership by mirroring the people they interact with' (Edwards 2016, 96). English is also abundantly used in Dutch advertisements (Gerritsen et al. 2007). In the Dutch music industry, it is very common for artists to sing in English. What is more, the policy organisation Dutch Language Union (Nederlandse Taalunie 2010, 4) found that 59% of the Dutch people considered Dutch to be unsuited for some music genres. In recent years, however, sources report an increasing interest in Dutch-language music (de Roest 2020; Maas 2022; Knooihuizen 2020). With regards to user attitudes, Busse (2017) found, by means of a survey among Dutch, Bulgarian, German and Spanish students, that Dutch students most frequently mentioned the importance of English and that they liked English more in comparison to other foreign languages (572).

Although English has a high status in the Netherlands and is used in many different domains, Dutch is still regarded as a vital language and an important part of cultural heritage, while English 'provides access to the outside world rather than detracting from the Dutch mother tongue' (Edwards 2016, 100–101). While the media express concern over the spread of English (RTL Nieuws 2019; Jensen et al. 2019), research shows that Dutch people do not view it as a threat to Dutch (van Oostendorp 2012, 259). What is more, not everyone in the Netherlands likes having to use English in so many contexts: Edwards and Fuchs (2018) found some indication of an 'English fatigue' in their survey, where Dutch participants disliked having to use English more so than the German respondents. Thus, the relationship the Dutch have with English is complex, fascinating and a subject worthy of study.

English churches in the Netherlands

That English is also gaining influence in the religious domain is not mentioned in Edwards' (2016) otherwise extensive discussion. It is, of course, a relatively new development: although some of the English-speaking churches in Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2022) have been around for some time already, one as early as the sixteenth century[4], only in recent years did they start to attract a significant number of Dutch people. Other churches, such as Redeemer International Church and Crossroads, were established more recently mostly with the intention of catering to an international community, but they also started to draw in Dutch people. There are many more churches that use English spread around the Netherlands: a database set up by the organisation Samen Kerk in Nederland [Together Church in the Netherlands] (SKIN) of international and migrant churches in the Netherlands lists more than 350 churches where English is used as one of their languages (SKIN 2022). However, this also includes churches which only offer English translations, or where English songs are sung. [5]

Few studies have discussed the linguistic aspect of the popularity of these churches. Klaver's (2021) ethnographic study does examine the expansion of Hillsong Church, an English-language church present in 23 countries. A brief mention is made of the fact that the Hillsong service is fully in English in the Netherlands (and preferred so by the congregants, according to Klaver 2021, 36) whereas Hillsong Sweden is in Swedish and Hillsong France is in French. This suggests that the Netherlands deviate with respect to language choice. Rijken (2020) examined the growing number of Anglican choirs in the Netherlands. She noted the attraction of English as a liturgical language. Comments of participants in her study were mostly to do with the aesthetic quality of the English language as compared to Dutch, which was evaluated as 'more flat' and 'harsher' while English is 'more melodious' (Rijken 2020, 76–77). The English language also made the songs more mysterious, and gave them a sense of sacredness. Rijken (2020, 79) links these evaluations to English being an L2, as 'the non-native command of the English language is a quality

leading to openness for religion or religious-like experiences'. Rijken (2020, 83) concludes that 'the vernacular for liturgical language in the Netherlands is no longer self-evident'. This is a comment that warrants investigation from a sociolinguistic angle, as it raises the question of whether religion is yet another domain in the Netherlands where English is used.

This study

Studies on language choice in religious institutions are often conducted in multilingual societies, where the decision for one language over the other is not entirely straightforward. This may result in people joining a church, or establishing a church, in their LX. Adams and Beukes (2019), for example, examined an English-speaking Pentecostal congregation in Soweto, South Africa. In multilingual South Africa, English has been dominant in the public sphere, including the domain of religion (Adams and Beukes 2019, 1). Influenced, in part, by the style of worship in American Pentecostalism, the church in Soweto conducts church services mainly in English mixed with indigenous African languages – even though only 2.34% of the population in Soweto speaks English at home (Adams and Beukes 2019, 7). Churches with a completely different linguistic identity than the language of wider communication in a region are often migrant churches, which, as mentioned earlier, mostly attract specific linguistic and cultural communities; for example, Dzialtuvaite (2006) discussed a Lithuanian Catholic church in Scotland, and Barrett (2017) Japanese churches in Western Canada. Finally, missionaries have adopted different practices over the centuries, including learning indigenous languages in order to preach the gospel (Zimmermann and Kellermeier-Rehbein 2015; Adams, Allen, and Fish 2009; Brown 2009) as well as using the international language English for exactly the same aim (Mooney 2010).

In the present study, we examine churches that have chosen English as the main language of service in a society where Dutch is the dominant language, and yet they are distinct from the types of migrant churches often discussed in the literature as they do attract a high number of Dutch L1 speakers. The churches are situated within a protestant tradition with limited use of liturgical language. For example, Redeemer International Church (Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2022) regularly invites speakers to go up on the stage and share a personal story, a prophecy, a prayer or a Bible verse with the congregation. The activities of these churches are not limited to Sunday morning: there are also regular events outside of the service, like seminars, children's activities and Bible study groups and believers are encouraged to continue their religious experience at home, by means of personal prayer and meditation. These types of interactions are of interest, as they require the congregants to use English in more informal settings. The churches we have chosen for this study represent a variety of denominations, such as Evangelical, Protestant Reformed, Presbyterian and (neo-) Pentecostal.[6]

The mention of the pastors in Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2022) of linguistic baggage inspired us to briefly highlight the connection between language and emotion. In general, linguistic research suggests that L1(s) are more likely to be experienced as more emotional than later-learnt languages (LX) due to the different contexts of learning and the memories attached to words (Dewaele 2022; Pavlenko 2005). This is interesting in the context of contemporary churches, in particular (neo-)pentecostal churches and in those that emphasise the importance of the Holy Spirit[7], as emotion is an important part of the church experience and the relationship with God is personal, intimate and loving. This relationship with God extends far beyond the environment of the church, but continues at home in personal prayer and in community with others (Althouse and Wilkinson 2015; Klaver 2015, 2021). In Anglican churches, believers also experience the music and the language of the church service as something that evokes emotions (Rijken 2020). In short, it is impossible to separate emotion from the religious experience. It is thus intriguing that L1 Dutch churchgoers attend a service in L2 English.

While research indeed suggests a higher degree of emotionality in L1 as compared to an LX, this is not set in stone and can change depending on the circumstances. Dewaele (2015) examined the inner speech and emotional inner speech of 1454 multilinguals, and found that, in general, multilinguals preferred their L1 for emotional inner speech: however, this could shift when an LX

becomes increasingly embodied and internalised. Migration, consuming media in an LX, and intense exposure to the language in other aspects of life can also contribute to a stronger emotional reaction (Dewaele 2022). Intriguingly, sometimes an LX can be used as a tool to avoid certain connotations attached to the language. This is dubbed the 'emotional-detachment effect' (Cook and Dewaele 2022). This effect, in which a later-learned language provides distance to talk about emotionally charged experiences, most commonly manifests itself in code-switching to the other language (Cook and Dewaele 2022). In Cook and Dewaele (2022), three LGBTI refugees and victims of torture explained how they used English to discuss their traumatic experiences. Due to the distancing effect of English, they were able to 'bypass the linguistic/cultural obstacle and make progress on [their] therapeutic journey' (Cook and Dewaele 2022, 135). Thus, while an L1 is found to be, in general, more emotional, there are various ways and contexts in which the emotionality can change or where a less emotionally-laden LX is preferred.

Our main questions for this study are the following: If these churches indeed attract many Dutch people, do they use English in all religious contexts? For example, is the use of English limited to the church service, or does it extend to other settings? What motivates L1 speakers of Dutch to join an English church? How does this impact their religious experience? Are there specific religious considerations involved in their language choice?

Methodology

The present paper results from a larger study conducted in 2021, which was twofold: firstly, we examined twelve different churches and conducted interviews with church leaders. The second part of the study consisted of a survey distributed among members of five churches. The survey will be described in 'Survey' and the participant characteristics and their general use of English in 'Demographics and general use of English'.

Survey

As the target group had not been studied before, we chose to include both open and closed questions. The survey began by explaining the topic of the survey and asking for consent to use the participant's data anonymously. It also included the option to withdraw from the study at any time.[8] Questions 1–2 asked whether the participant was a member of an English-speaking church, and where the church was located. Questions 3–7 were meant to gauge the participants' linguistic background and their general use of English and Dutch in different contexts. This was done to ensure that only L1 speakers of Dutch were selected for the analysis. Questions 8–15 concerned general attitudes towards English and Dutch. 16–21 covered language preferences in different religious domains, 22–33 the attitudes towards the use of Dutch or English in church, 34–39 were open-ended questions, and finally, 40–44 covered demographic questions. The closed questions were meant to provide a quantitative overview of the linguistic choices and practices of Dutch L1 speakers in English churches. The open questions were more explorative and meant to uncover attitudes and motivations, and observations linked to religion and spirituality. General demographic information and information about the linguistic background of participants were also obtained. For the purpose of this article, we discuss the answers to questions 16–21 and 34–39.

The five English-language churches participating in the study distributed the survey via their (social) media channels. This yielded some responses, but not so many, which is why we also started recruiting people, and additional churches, through Facebook. Many of the churches we approached were quite active on social media and posted frequently. We messaged people who had interacted with one of the churches' posts and asked them to fill out the survey or send the survey to their friends and family who also attended the church. 99 questionnaires were completed. Participants who were not L1 speakers of Dutch were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a total number of 95 responses in our dataset.

Demographics and general use of English

53 of the participants were female (55,8%) and 42 were male (44,2%).[9] The mean age was 42, with 45 participants (47,4%) under 40 years old, and 50 participants (52,6%) over 40, representing two sociolinguistic generations (Smith-Christmas and Smakman 2009). The overall education level of the respondents was strikingly high, with 85% having finished higher professional education or higher (university and PhD). This suggests that the general profile of Dutch people who are attracted to English churches is highly-educated. This was corroborated through the interviews discussed by Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2022), where several interviewees mentioned that the church attracted mostly highly-educated people. One of the interviewees even mentioned that, if they were to have an international church in Dutch, the dynamics would have been different – they would attract more lower-educated people.[10] However, the high number of highly-educated people in this survey might also be due to self-selection (i.e. highly-educated people were more inclined to fill out the survey). The participants' characteristics also indicate a high level of English proficiency (mean 7,8 out of 10) and a proclivity to spend time abroad. Most participants did not use a lot of English outside the church environment (Questions 3-7). Table 1 gives an overview of the participant characteristics.

Results

In this section, we discuss the answers to questions 16–21 and 34–39 in detail. As the survey was in Dutch, questions and answers have been translated into English. In 'Language choice in religious contexts', participants' linguistic choices in varying religious contexts will be discussed. The sections 'Reasons to join an English church' and 'The importance of language in religious experience' focus on the open-ended questions.

Language choice in religious contexts

By means of a forced-choice question, participants were asked which language they preferred in a given religious context. We chose to use a forced-choice question, as we expected that participants may otherwise opt for the neutral option (Adams and Beukes 2019). As well as indicating their linguistic preference, participants were given the option to give their reasoning behind this choice.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Measure	Number $n = 95$
Number of female/male participants	53/42
Mean age in years (SD; range)	42 (14,7; 19-77)
<40	45
40	50
Mean self-assessment of English proficiency	7,8 (1,5;2-10)
Years at church	
1 year	3
1–2	6
2–3	14
3–4	10
4–5	5
5 years	57
Education level	
Secondary education or lower	5
Junior College Education	9
Higher Professional Education	37
Bachelor's or Master's degree at university level	39
PhD	4
Unknown	1
Abroad for longer than 3 months?	52 (54,8%)

They were also given the option for 'other language', as some people spoke more than two languages, but this will not be discussed.[11] Figure 1 summarises the results.

The vast majority of the participants preferred to sing religious songs in English, which, for many, was due to negative evaluations surrounding Dutch hymns and songs and Dutch translations of songs. Nineteen participants mentioned how bad the Dutch translations are, and how they prefer to listen to the original version of the song. For one person, these translations were even 'toe-curlingly' bad. Many people also mentioned that they consider English songs to be more beautiful and powerful. This illustrates the high English proficiency of these participants, as they are able to spot when a translation is bad, but it also reflects the attitudes towards Dutch-language music as shown in the literature review. Furthermore, a majority preferred an English church service. However, many participants mentioned that they would also be interested in an occasional Dutch service, or a mixture of both languages:

(1) [I prefer] English, but a service in Dutch is sometimes a welcoming relief.
(2) I would have liked to answer 50/50 because in [my church] I like it when they use both and I like worshipping in both languages.

In Bible study groups, smaller groups of people meet at each other's homes to discuss the sermon or other topics relevant to their faith. It is a more private affair, where they get to know fellow churchgoers more intimately, and encourage each other both on the spiritual and the worldly level. Although having an English Bible study group might be the obvious choice when joining an English church, it becomes clear from the data that opinions on this matter were divided. A slight majority of the participants preferred English over Dutch, which for some is just out of convenience and habit, but many mention that they have no preference either way. Those who preferred English over Dutch also reported a slightly higher English level ($M = 8{,}2$) than those who preferred Dutch ($M = 7{,}4$). Four participants mentioned that it is difficult to talk about feelings and experiences in a language other than the L1. One comment referred to the 'simple vocabulary' in English used in these study groups – presumably because for most of the group it would be their second or third language – which 'ensures that it is difficult to enter into deep or heavy theological discussions'. 'As a result,', the participant claimed, 'you talk more about real-life applications'. It is an interesting

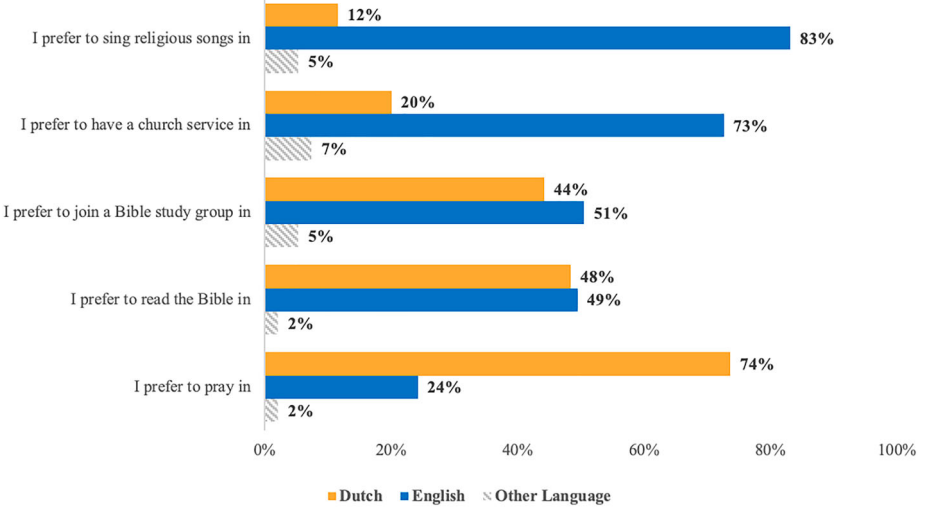

Figure 1. Language choice in religious contexts.

observation, where English, as an LX, puts everyone on linguistic square one and prevents dogmatic discussions.

We found no clear preference for either Dutch or English for reading the Bible. Strikingly, many participants preferred to use both languages or, indeed, multiple languages when reading the Bible. According to them, it offered new perspectives to the text and it could give the text a different meaning:

(3) Actually, [I prefer to read the Bible] in multiple languages: a different translation can sometimes give a better feeling of the original intent of the text. Every language has its limits.
(4) I love to sometimes read the Bible in a different language because things stand out to me that I wouldn't notice as much in Dutch. I have read the Bible in English and in French. I also sometimes read passages in German. Thus, I like the variation.
(5) Actually, both: in English the wording can be just a bit more beautiful and you learn to look at the text in a different way. Because I was raised in a Dutch-language church and family, and so I 'have already heard' many texts. So, it's refreshing to read texts in English!

These participants seem to realise the benefit of their multilingualism, both for their individual – emotional – experience of the text, and for the broader hermeneutic sense when interpreting the scripture. To these participants, it is thus not only the English language that manages to stir something new in them.

At the same time, several participants expressed quite strong opinions regarding the lack of words in Dutch and the quality of Dutch Bible translations. These types of opinions were found in the other open answers as well: participants mentioned that English has more words – in general and when it concerns theological terminology – and that English has 'more depth and contains more beautiful words'. One specific Bible translation – The Message, which became fully available in 2002 and which is considered more interpretive and dynamic than previous translations (Peterson 2002) – is mentioned twice as having no equal in Dutch. These ideas are summarised succinctly by the following participant:

(6) I consider none of the Dutch Bible translations as good. In English, there are multiple good translations. Many theological terms in Dutch I feel are archaic and emotionally more distant. Think of the word *genade* [grace]. In English, I don't feel this emotional resistance. Dutch I experience as a flat language, as flat as our landscape.

The comment about 'grace' is especially interesting. The Dutch word *genade* refers to two different concepts for which English has two words: *grace* and *mercy*. Four other participants mentioned English as having more words than Dutch, which is for them a reason to prefer English.

When it came to talking about Christianity, however, opinions were slightly more divided: 55% found it easier to talk about Christianity in Dutch while 43% opted for English. [12] Those who preferred Dutch gave similar reasons as with prayer (see below): they felt more comfortable in Dutch and were able to use more nuances. However, mixing languages was also prevalent – as one participant claimed: 'I do often sprinkle in a few English terms, but I can express myself better and find the right words in Dutch'. Upbringing and coming-to-faith experiences also played a role in this, as participants mentioned that they are more familiar with Dutch terminology which they grew up with. One participant mentioned they have been thinking about leaving the English-speaking church over this issue.

Those who preferred English to talk about Christianity mentioned they had become habituated by the English terminology and Bible verses. Participants tended to explain their choice by means of evaluative terms concerning both languages, perhaps because they felt more self-conscious about this when speaking to other people. For example, they mentioned that Christian vocabulary in English felt less archaic, less weighty and gentler, as well as closer to everyday language. According to

one participant 'where in English it might sound like normal spoken and colloquial language, in Dutch, it sounds old-fashioned and out of touch'. Respondents also felt that English contained more Christian vocabulary in general, and that the English terminology was also used more often in daily conversations:

(7) To express yourself well about Christianity it could be useful to use precise or difficult words. In Dutch, these words feel more loaded than in English. I also feel that those kinds of words are used more often in everyday situations in the English language than in Dutch.
(8) Even though I can express myself better in Dutch, I think it's easier in English. Maybe because it's, especially in America, seen as more normal to be a Christian than in the Netherlands.

It is not entirely clear to what kind of 'everyday situations' the participant in (7) refers, but the second participant (8) mentioned 'America' as a place where Christianity feels more normal, which is why English feels easier to them. Lastly, English can also provide a sense of distance, which is specifically mentioned in the context of discussing with non-Christian people:

(9) Because [English] is more distant which makes it feel less fragile (when I refer to evangelisation, for example). It's easier for me to say 'God bless you' than 'Gods zegen' to a stranger at the end of a conversation.

A large majority of the respondents preferred to pray in Dutch over English. Praying is viewed by participants as something personal and intimate, for which they preferred their first or dominant language. Reference is made by several participants to Dutch 'touching their heart' more than English. To some, it felt easier to express themselves in Dutch as the words come more easily and, especially in group settings, 'it removes barriers to share personal problems and give each other words of encouragement and to pray'. One respondent mentioned praying in English felt 'like a theatre play', suggesting a sense of performativity in English. Others actually preferred to use English when they were praying with a group of people, but opted for Dutch in a personal prayer.[13] The choice for one language over another in prayer settings seems therefore context-dependent to most participants: although, clearly, the data shows that when they are forced to choose, a majority prefers Dutch over English. Code-switching to English was also mentioned as a technique they employed while praying, especially when they used Bible verses or songs. Several answers concerned more explicitly language attitudes in this context: one person found the English language more inspiring and another participant mentioned that English was a richer language for prayer. The language used when people came to faith also seemed to be important:

(10) I only recently came to faith, and the development of my faith has been in English (because of my church and online sources), which is why English became the language of my personal faith in a natural way.

This idea of your formative faith experience shaping the preference for a religious language was something also mentioned by one of the pastors in Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2022).

Reasons to join an English church

The vast majority of the participants did not explicitly mention the English language as the main reason to choose an English-language church. Instead, they referred to the general welcoming atmosphere in these churches, the theology and the diverse international community. The English language facilitates these factors. Many considered the international community and the conversations this can bring as an enrichment to their faith and general life, as 'a mirror of heaven' as one participant claims. The comments do reveal, however, a negative attitude towards Dutch churches:

(11) My experience with Dutch churches is that they often stem from Calvinism which makes them less free. Calvinism feels like a yoke. A team with non-Dutch people provides a less heavy spiritual atmosphere.
(12) Now I have had a taste of the richness of an international church, I experience a Dutch-only church as a bit narrow-minded and uniform. I think it is good that a church is a place where many nationalities can meet each other.
(13) I did not feel at home with the theology and the rituals of the traditional Dutch churches. I feel that this congregation is more connected with the current culture and my personal theology.

A smaller number of people (n = 13) mentioned a more practical reason: they joined the church when they were in a relationship with someone with a non-Dutch background or they had non-Dutch family members or friends who introduced them to the church.

Although language is supposedly not the reason that these people joined an English-speaking church, it is interesting to see that 'Dutch-only' churches are seen as different and 'other'. While we see in examples (11) and (12) that this is connected to the diverse community attracted to the churches, comment (13) claims that the English church is more connected to 'the current culture'. The English churches seem to be equivalent to a modern and less narrow-minded church family. The English language in these churches does not present an obstacle for people, but rather widens the range of churches that they can choose from.

For a few, language did play an active role in their choice of an English church. They often mention that they find the worship songs more appealing in English. Two participants actually used the church services to work on their English skills. Most interesting are those who claimed the English language offered an escape from past experiences and beliefs in Dutch churches:

(14) I've lived abroad for five years. That period brought about a great change in my life … When I was sitting in my old [Dutch] church, the images of the past and my old way of thinking and believing in God surfaced again. My new way of believing and thinking of God was therefore hard to hold on to. That's why I did not go to church at all for around two years, and after that, I went to look for one again. In this English-language church I quickly felt at ease in two ways: firstly, because there weren't only Dutch people but also people with different cultural backgrounds which made it all less 'ecclesiastical Dutch'. And secondly, because I heard the songs and the sermon etc. in English, which did not trigger my older views of God.
(15) I've been brought up in a heavy religious environment and that wasn't always pleasant. Therefore, I associate Dutch with that strict doctrine. English to me stands for the personal connection I want to have with God. In that sense, it's kind of mythical to communicate with Him in another language.

To these participants, the Dutch language became associated with an older way of believing which was no longer compatible with their newly-found faith. The change that was brought into their life was introduced through another language and was also found to be sustainable only in that language. The Dutch language carried too much 'baggage' (Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2022).

Out of 95 participants, 78 had been a member of a Dutch church before joining an English church. Reasons to switch from one language to another overlap with the previous answers of why they joined an English church in general. Again, most participants do not explicitly mention English as the main reason to join the church: rather they were drawn in by the atmosphere and theology. Dutch churches, on the other hand, are mentioned as uninspiring, unwelcoming, and as having a lack of diversity. The English language did not deter these participants from joining the church, but rather it made the church less 'Dutch' and thus more attractive.

The importance of language in religious experience

Although the choice of an English-language church for these Dutch L1 speakers might not be directly linked to language per se, many churchgoers believed that their linguistic choices influenced their relationship with God. For some, this meant that they would always come back to their L1 or the language of their youth, as 'a relationship with God only in a language that's not your mother tongue sounds a little scary', one participant notes. This meant that, even though they joined an English church, their personal faith was still experienced more strongly in Dutch.

However, for others, this relationship was not dependent on language – they believed that The Holy Spirit would help them understand any language, or that He would speak in tongues or images. Or, even, that God would communicate to them in the language they would feel most comfortable in – that it is God's choice, in the end. Interestingly, the two questions – on whether using a different language influenced their spiritual bond with God and their faith experience in general – sometimes raised conflicting answers even by the same person. For example, one participant answered that their spiritual bond with God was not influenced by language, using an often-repeated sentence by others 'God speaks every language'. On the other hand, they mentioned they experienced their faith as 'better' in Dutch. Another participant also mentioned that God speaks every language, but that he did switch between faith languages, from Dutch to English. From the perspective of communicating with God, then, it did not matter what language they spoke but it did matter for their own experience.

As with talking about Christianity (in section Language choice in religious contexts), the notion of distance is brought up by several participants. They seem to be aware that English is further away from them emotionally, but view this in a positive light:

(16) In English I find it easier to use personal terms because it is a little less close to me. That actually helps me to experience my faith as personal.
(17) Dutch is so close to me. Reading the Bible then turns into close reading and that would be missing the point: that is, to understand what is being said to me reading between the lines. Same for praying and listening to sermons. Dutch is too literal, too logical.
(18) I was going through a crisis of personal suffering. The English in [my church] made it temporarily easier to continue to go to church because it offered me more emotional distance.

All three comments mention the use of distance differently: comment (16) sees their faith as more personal by means of a second language, comment (17) views the closeness and linguistic competence of Dutch as something that hampers their understanding of God's message, and comment (18) uses the emotional distance that the English language brings as a tool to get through a crisis. Similarities can be drawn with (14) and (15), where Dutch is mentioned as carrying unpleasant connotations.

Discussion

This study has set out to examine the growing influence of the English language in the religious domain in the Netherlands. The focus of the investigation was on Dutch L1 speakers who frequented English churches and the language choices and motivations connected to this phenomenon. The comments of the participants on their language use included many assumptions surrounding the English language. Many mentioned that English was prettier, more graceful and less harsh than Dutch. The idea that English has 'more words' than Dutch has also been expressed by multiple participants. Our study shows that the global spread of English even affects the religious domain (Mooney 2010), while also demonstrating that this global spread proceeds in a locally diversified way (Mufwene 2010), and is highly dependent, for example, on the specific context within the larger domain of religion.

While churchgoers favoured English for the service and worship songs, they still used Dutch for personal prayers. Personal prayer in these types of churches was viewed as something deeply personal and emotional, for which English did not always suffice. This highlights two important findings: firstly, while on the outside, the English language might be gaining more ground in the religious domain, a complete shift should not be expected. For public and performative matters such as songs and services, English was preferred and even beneficial for some. For private and intimate moments, free from societal pressure and interlocuters, they resorted back to their L1. This is even more flagrant when taking into account that a prayer does not even have to be said out loud, but can be quiet and internal. If we consider prayer to be a form of emotional inner speech, this discovery also makes sense in the context of Dewaele's (2015) study – where multilinguals tended to prefer their L1 for emotional inner speech. The language of their heart is still Dutch, even though their organised religious life is in English.

In our data analysis, we furthermore encountered two interesting attitudes surrounding English and Dutch that we like to discuss. One is the sense of 'linguistic trauma' expressed by several participants. They felt a sense of aversion when hearing religious vocabulary and turns of phrases in Dutch. The English language is seemingly able to circumvent these negative feelings and gives them a fresh way of looking at their faith. A clear parallel can be drawn with Cook and Dewaele's (2022) study on the emotional-detachment effect. Lived experiences, whether in childhood or later in life, were a reason for Dutch L1 speakers to resort to their L2 for their faith. A second aspect which came to light pertains to the notion of distance that the English language brings as opposed to Dutch. It is interesting that distance was viewed as something positive to some participants, considering that spiritual closeness to God is important in many of these church denominations. The distance in the language removed a level of anxiety to discuss faith with others because the words were less loaded and more like colloquial language as opposed to the archaic Dutch associated with Dutch churches.

Conclusion

The present study is the first to examine the motivations and choices of Dutch L1 speakers who attend English-language churches. We have shown that the English language, which already holds a very prominent place in Dutch society, is also spreading into the religious domain of the Netherlands. Dutch L1 speakers are attracted to the multicultural environment of these churches and see the English language as a facilitator for this. They view English as more beautiful and much gentler in comparison to the harshness of the Dutch language, and feel like the language brings a new and refreshing point of view to their faith. However, for their personal prayer, they still opted for L1 instead of English – showing that their language use is context-specific and that a complete shift to English in the religious life of these participants might not be on the cards. In addition, churchgoers used the English language as a tool in order to circumvent memories and emotions contained in the often-archaic Dutch terminology used in Dutch churches. The distance that the L2 brought was also viewed as a positive attribute since it allowed believers to speak more freely about their faith. The observations in this study point to existing research on the emotionality of language and the expanding use of English, yet is also novel in its application to the religious domain.

Notes

1. Protestantse Kerk Nederland (PKN), 'Dutch Protestant Church'
2. See the open access statistics created by the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS), 'Central Bureau for Statistics', at https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/37944/table.
3. There is no consensus in the literature on the terminology concerning these churches. The organisation Samen Kerk in Nederland uses the term 'international churches' over migrant churches, while Nagy (2009, 69) prefers 'migrant churches' as 'it includes all types and sorts of people who are actively engaged in

migration processes'. Stoffels (2008, 18) prefers the term 'immigrant church', acknowledging that it is a contested term among churches.

4. The Anglican Church of St. John and St. Phillip, situated in The Hague, dates back to 1586.
5. For example, City Life Church in The Hague lists English, Dutch and Spanish as their languages but the church service is in Dutch with English songs (City Life Church Den Haag 2022). A church called Levend Woord Gemeente claims to use Dutch and English, but the website states that their service is in Dutch, and that they sing Dutch and English songs (Levend Woord Gemeente 2018).
6. Some churches in the dataset call themselves 'non-denominational', as they do not adhere to one particular church organisation. However, in style and theology they closely resemble the group of churches that Klaver (2021) classified as neo-Pentecostal.
7. It is notoriously difficult for scholars to differentiate between the different Christian denominations, as many of the church practices may overlap between denominations or differ within. Many of the pentecostal practices have also spread into non-pentecostal denominations (Ingalls 2015, 3–4). Klaver (2015), in her chapter on pentecostal churches in the Netherlands, uses the term 'evangelical/pentecostal' as it is difficult to distinguish between the two in the Dutch context.
8. The data of this study was collected by the first author when she was a student at Leiden University. The ethics committee of Leiden University does not review research applications of students. Full responsibility for ethical considerations is given to the student's supervisor, the second author of this article.
9. None of the participants selected the options 'prefer not to say' and 'other, please specify'.
10. This was not mentioned in Alberts and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2022), but was present in their data set and is shown now to be highly relevant.
11. Most of the people who opted for 'other language' used this to mean both English and Dutch, as became clear in their reasoning behind this choice.
12. For this category, the question was phrased slightly different, that is: 'do you find it easier to talk about Christianity in Dutch or in English?'. For this reason, it has not been added to the graph.
13. In general, personal prayer in these types of churches can be seen as a conversation with God: people express their thankfulness, discuss their worries, and ask for help or advice on personal matters. This can be a spoken prayer, out loud, or a silent prayer. It may comprise formulaic expressions, but it is generally unrestricted and intimate.

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