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Navigating Across Centuries of Texts via the STCN



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OVER THE COURSE of the past semicentury,¹ book historians have sought to answer questions about a wide range of book-related phenomena, including production processes, materiality, distribution channels, readership and, importantly, the ways in which books functioned within society. Research on topics such as these can evidently take place at various levels of analysis. Regardless of scope or scale, however, it is clear that book historians, from whichever theoretical orientation, can benefit from the manifold overviews of books that have been produced by librarians and bibliographers. Library catalogues and bibliographies frequently offer a wealth of information not only on the contents and the material composition of books, but also about the people and the organisations involved in the creation of these works.²

In the Netherlands, one of the most expansive and reliable sources for the study of the printed book is undoubtedly the Short Title Catalogue of the Netherlands (STCN). As the national retrospective bibliography of the Netherlands, the STCN describes books published before 1800 within the present boundaries of the Netherlands, regardless of the language, as well as all books printed before 1800 in the Dutch language in other countries. The preparations for this encompassing endeavour began in 1969, and the first title descriptions were made following the establishment of the Bureau STCN in 1982.³ During the preparatory phase, it had been decided that broadsheets, newspapers, engravings and publications in the plano format were to be excluded.⁴ Books in private collections or books on sale at antiquarian booksellers were likewise disregarded. The STCN project was declared finished in 2009, although it was clear at that time that there were still im-

portant omissions.⁵ Despite these minor frailties, it is clear that the STCN forms an extremely helpful scholarly resource which can help to trace wide-ranging diachronic publication trends.⁶ The full dataset can currently be searched on the STCN website, managed by the *Consortium of European Research Libraries*.⁷ In 2015, all the data that has been compiled within the STCN project had been converted into Linked Open Data (LOD) as well. An updated and improved version of this collection of LOD can currently be accessed via the open data platform of the National Library of the Netherlands, <data.bibliotheken.nl>. It has often been claimed that the version of the STCN in LOD enables researchers to analyse the bibliographic data in more advanced and more directed ways, moving decidedly beyond the basic functionalities offered via the search functions on the regular STCN website.⁸

This article aims to assess the scholarly value of such advanced statistical analyses performed on the STCN in the RDF format. More specifically, it attempts to apply semantic web techniques and data science methods to investigate a topic which has already received considerable scholarly attention in the past few years, namely, the nature and the intensity of the trade in books between the Netherlands and the British Isles in the early modern period.⁹ Using data gathered from the Dutch National Library's SPARQL endpoint, this study sets out to elucidate, corroborate or, contravene some of the claims made in earlier studies about the various ways in which Dutch publishers have contributed to the dissemination of works written by British authors.¹⁰ The focus, furthermore, will be on books in three different categories. The first category consists of works written in the English language. The second category of books consists of translations of works by

British authors into other languages. The third category comprises original works written by British authors in languages other than English, such as Latin.

Before discussing the concrete analyses, it is useful to offer a brief historical introduction. During most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the English book trade was severely underdeveloped, especially in comparison to the thriving network of publishers, printers, and booksellers that existed in the Low Countries. William Caxton had established the first English printing shop at Westminster only in 1476, at a moment when printing had already become a well-established activity on the European continent.¹¹ Partly as a result of this belatedness, it proved difficult to attain a sufficiently high standard of printing and to attract all the skilled labourers that were needed to operate the printing offices. In the meantime, England had also developed into a lucrative export market for publishers and booksellers based in France, Italy and, notably, the Low Countries.¹² During this period, Dutch printers produced schoolbooks, works by classical authors, liturgical works and devotional works,¹³ all intended for the English market, and sometimes even printed using English type.¹⁴ For publishers based in England, it was obviously very difficult to compete with the European publishers involved in the “Latin Trade”. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the English book trade gradually gained strength, however. This growth of the English book industry also resulted in a more equalised bidirectional trade between England and the Netherlands. This international traffic of books was impeded, nonetheless, by the fact that England had installed a legal system to regulate imports, and which prohibited the sale of reprints of works from English publishers. The

Copyright Act of 1710, also known as the Statute of Anne, formed a predicament for the many Dutch booksellers who thrived on the merchandise of reprints of international bestsellers.¹⁵ The reprints of English titles could be produced and sold legally in the Dutch Republic, but it had become illegal to sell these reprints in England.

BOOK IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE¹⁶

In the STCN, the number of books in the English language can be established via a search using the *schema:inLanguage* property.¹⁷ The STCN currently describes books in 45 different languages. Out of the 216,051 titles that have been catalogued to date, 1,299 publications contain texts in English and 7 publications contain texts in Old English. The oldest book of these is a copy-book, intended for teaching calligraphy, printed in 1569 by Christopher Plantin in Antwerp.¹⁸ As this selection of books, thus, spans a period of 230 years, it can be established that, in the Netherlands, about 5 English language books were published per year on average. Some outliers were noted in the years 1638, 1640, and 1688, when the number of English books rose to over 20. In 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution, Arnout Leers in The Hague published four editions of William III's declaration explaining the motivations to take the throne from James II. Many of the publications from 1638 had similarly been instigated by contemporary events. In that specific year, members of the Scottish Church had signed the National Covenant, an agreement which reflected the refusal of Scottish clergymen to conform to the liturgical practices of the Anglican Church, as had been enforced by Charles I.¹⁹ One work, published by John Canne, has the telling title 'The beast is wounded. Or Information from Scotland, concerning their reformation'.²⁰

Works on contemporary political issues and works on theology form the bulk of this collection of books in the English language. This latter category also includes 29 Bibles. Except for two Geneva Bibles, printed in 1601, these were all reprints of the King James Bible, published by Jan Fredericksz Stam, Willem Christiaens van der Boxe and Steven Swart, among others. Dictionaries and works on grammar form a third important category of books. Jacob ter Beek, based in Amsterdam, published 6 books on the Dutch language, which, in all likelihood, were intended for Englishmen travelling to the Low Countries. Henri van Bulderen published five editions of Guy Miège's French-English dictionary.

In the late sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, the most prolific publisher of English books was Richard Schilders in Middelburg. As is explained by Hoftijzer, Schilders was closely associated with the Brownists, a group English led by Robert Browne.²¹ Between 1580 and 1619, Schilders produced 70 works in the English language on theology and on political matters. At the start of the seventeenth century, most of the English language titles were printed by Giles Thorp and by John Canne, who were responsible for 69 and 31 English books respectively. Thorp was an expatriate printer, who had set up his business in Amsterdam in 1604 where he remained active until 1622.²² Among his publications were 15 works by Henry Ainsworth, the first minister of the Brownist church.²³ Ainsworth was succeeded in Amsterdam by John Canne, who, next to his work as a pastor, was also active as an author and printer. He published one work authored by himself, *Syons prerogatyve royal* from 1641, and also titles by Henry Ainsworth and the English political leveller John Lilburne.

In this context, reference must also be made to Thomas Johnson, a Scottish printer who worked in The Hague from 1701 to 1728, and after this in Rotterdam until his death in 1735. Johnson produced a total number of 126 English titles. Kossmann notes that Johnson was known as the pre-eminent “Libraire Anglois” in The Netherlands.²⁴ The imprints of many of Johnson’s books mention that they were printed in ‘London, for the Company of booksellers’, but the cataloguers of the STCN have indicated in many of the records that the actual place of publication is The Hague.²⁵ McMullin describes Johnson as a ‘punctilious pirate’, who, although he was engaged in an activity which was essentially illegal, was still very careful to reproduce the original texts accurately and reliably.²⁶

TRANSLATIONS

To study the ways in which publishers in the Netherlands have contributed to the dissemination of the works of British authors, it is important, evidently, to consider not only the works in the English language, but also the works that have been translated into other languages. In the STCN, these works can be selected by filtering on the *schema:translationOfWork* property. This property has been used in 26,950 of the 216,051 records in the STCN, suggesting that 12.4% of all the books in the STCN are translations. 6,103 of these titles are translations of works originally in the English language. 4,656 of the English works titles were translated into Dutch, and 1,239 into French. The STCN also lists translations of English works into German, Latin, and Hebrew, among other languages. About 40% of all of these translations from English, 2,544, date from the seventeenth century, and 2,174 of these are translations into Dutch. This is a considerably higher number than the 641

titles that are listed in C.W. Schoneveld's overview of seventeenth century Dutch translations of English works.²⁷

The 6,103 translations from the English have been published during the period between 1543 and 1850, amounting to about 19 translations annually. As was the case for the original English titles, there was a clear surge in the number of translations in 1688. Many of the 186 translated works which were issued in this year can be connected to the debate spurred by William III's accession of the throne. A similar peak in productivity occurred earlier in 1649, the year in which Charles I was executed.

The most prolific publisher of works translated from English was the Leiden-based publisher Pieter van der Aa. He published 122 translations in total. During the age of the great expeditions to the East and West Indies, Van der Aa mostly published travel reports and descriptions of sea voyages. He published 78 translations of works written by Samuel Purchas, an English Anglican cleric who had also recorded many accounts of journeys that were shared with him by seafarers.²⁸ The half brothers Johann Caspar Arkstee and Henricus Merkus, who ran bookshops in Amsterdam and in Leipzig, were similarly highly active as publishers of translations. They published 75 translations of English works of literature and of historical works into French.

The author whose works have been translated most frequently in the Netherlands before 1800 was John Bunyan. The STCN mentions 136 translations of works by Bunyan, and 64 of these are translations of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Other theologians whose works have often been translated include William Perkins (105 translations), Ralph Erskine (60 translations) and John Owen (49 translations). The most frequently translated literary author was Daniel Defoe.²⁹

The STCN mentions 31 translations of his *Robinson Crusoe*. Another novel which was translated very frequently is Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. The STCN mentions 15 translations, and 10 of these have been published by Gerrit Tielenburg in Amsterdam.

WORKS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

A third category of works which needs to be surveyed in a study of the English book in the Netherlands consists of titles which were written by British authors in languages other than English. As may be assumed, this category includes many scientific works written in Latin, the lingua franca of the early modern period. In the STCN, it is not possible to search directly on the nationalities of authors. A search action of this nature can be conducted, nonetheless, as a result of the metadata enhancements that have been implemented during the conversion of the STCN data into LOD. For most authors in the STCN, a Wikidata or VIAF identifier was added, and, within these external databases, it is generally possible to request information about nationalities. For this study, an overview was first made of all the authors mentioned in the STCN. For each of the 37,890 authors that were found, the nationalities were requested from Wikidata. This list of nationalities included a number of labels referring to locations on the British Isles, including the 'United Kingdom', 'Great Britain' and 'England'.³⁰ Working with this filtered list of nationalities, it became possible to select all original works written by a person hailing from the British Isles, and which are not in the English language. This method resulted in a list of an additional 1,112 books. Within the collection of books found using this method, 687 books were written in Latin, 320 titles were written in Dutch and 103 titles in French. The high number of Dutch books authored by Englishmen is particularly striking.

The Dutch titles in this selection have generally been penned by authors who had travelled extensively in or had emigrated to the Low Countries, such as Richard Verstegen and George Downing.

Figure 1 is a network visualisation which clarifies the number of connections between the authors and publishers in this selection of books. The node sizes thus reflect the number of books which were authored or published. As can be seen from the network, William Ames was the most productive author of non-English books in this period, having published 75 works, mostly with Johannes Janssonius and Justus Livius. Ames was a Puritan minister, who was forced to flee to the Netherlands in 1710, where he became a professor of Theology at the university of Franeker in 1622.³¹ Apparently, he was proficient both in Latin and in Dutch.

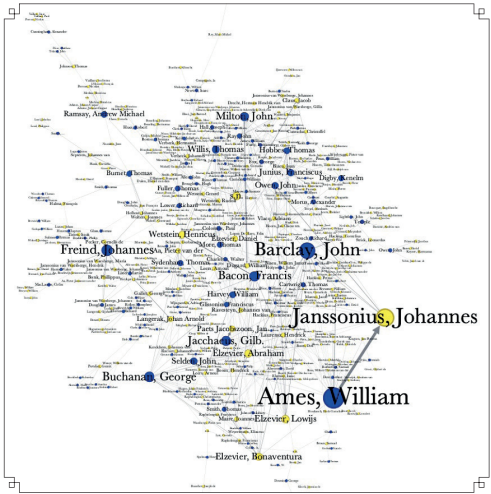


Figure 1: Network visualisation clarifying the number of interactions between authors (represented as blue nodes) and publishers (represented as yellow nodes).

Amidst this gathering of authors not writing in their vernacular we can also find scientific authors such as Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon. As noted by Hoftijzer, two of the first four editions printed of Newton's *Philosophiæ naturalis principia mathematica* were published in the Low Countries, in 1714 and in 1724, both by La Compagnie, a publisher based in Amsterdam.³² Editions of Newton's *Arithmetica universalis* have been published by Hermanus and Johannes Verbeek in 1732, and by Marc Michel Rey in 1761. The STCN mentions 31 original works by Francis Bacon, including four editions of Bacon's *Novum Organum*, which was published originally in 1620. The work remained popular, as shown by reprints in 1645, 1650, 1660 and 1694 by various printers.

DISCUSSION

Having quantified the three major manifestations of the English book in the Netherlands, it becomes possible to gain a more comprehensive insight into the publication history of this specific collection of titles. To develop a more abstracted view on the relevant chronological trends, the numbers collected for the three different categories have, firstly, been broken down by year. Secondly, the annual numbers that were collected have all been expressed as a percentage of the total Dutch book production in these various years, as such percentages offer a better view on the overall importance of the trade in English books for Dutch publishers. Figure 2 displays the result of this approach. It shows that the production of English language titles was most intense in the period between 1550 and 1650. From the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, publishers increasingly began to focus on the circulation of translations.

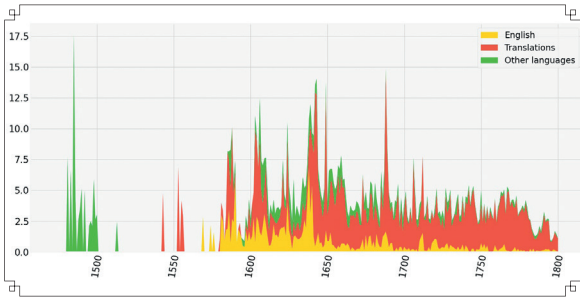


Figure 2: Number of books in English, number of translations and number of books by British authors in other languages shown as percentage of annual Dutch book production

Figure 3 displays the number of books published annually in the field of theology in between 1600 and 1800. These numbers are expressed as a percentage of the total number of British books that have appeared annually (i.e. all books published in the English language, or by British authors in translation or in languages other than English). The graph indicates that theology was an important topic, particularly in the seventeenth century. During some years, these books on theology accounted for about 80% of the yearly production of British books. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the book production of these types of works diminished considerably.

This trajectory of the theological works appears to be the mirror opposite of that of the works on language and literature, as can be seen in Figure 4. The number of literary works remained modest during most of the seventeenth century, confirming Hoftijzer’s claim that the Dutch initially showed little interest in the literature emerging from the other side of the North Sea.³³ In the eighteenth century, by contrast, numerous publishers active in

the United Republic began to print or reprint British novels, plays and poems, mostly in translation.

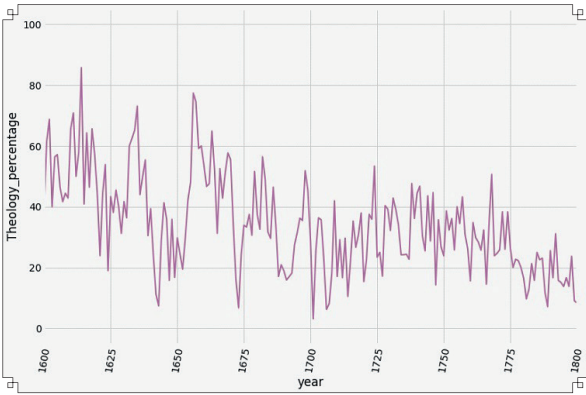


Figure 3. Number of books on theology shown as a percentage of the total number of English books

The graphs discussed above could not have been created without the detailed and structured data that were compiled during the STCN project. It is clear, simultaneously, that there are a number of caveats and challenges which need to be borne in mind while conducting book historical research via the STCN. The first difficulty is that the roles of the various actors involved in the production processes of books have not been specified explicitly. In the data model for the STCN, a generic field named *schema:contributor* has been defined, and this field brings together a wide range of actors, including printers, illustrators, translators, editors or booksellers, without any distinction. Because of this dearth of specific information, it is difficult to carry out a systematic study of, for example, the relations between publishers and printers, or between publishers and illustrators.

A second complication is that the records in the STCN have not been explicitly clustered on the basis of the IFLA Library Reference Model, which distinguishes between Works, Expressions, Manifestations and Items.³⁴ Arguably, the STCN only describes manifestations. It appears to be nigh impossible to examine the relationships between different manifestations containing expressions of the same work. Within the current

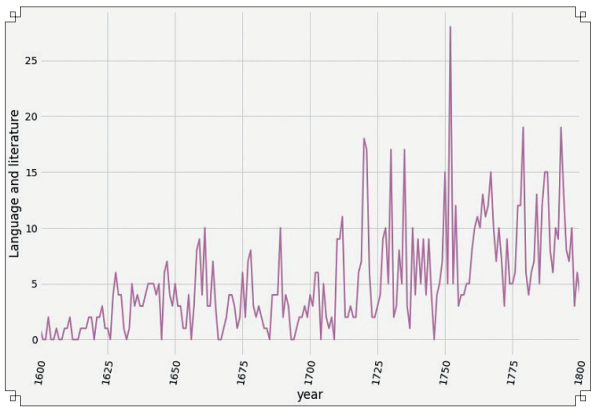


Figure 4. Number of books on language and literature shown as a percentage of the total number of English books

study, it would have been very helpful if the many translations of a given work could have been assembled directly. Given the current organisation of the STCN, however, a methodical examination of the publication history of translations still demands manual effort.

A third and perhaps more trite issue is caused by the fact that one and the same agent in the book trade may have been assigned multiple identifiers. This can be the case when a publisher has been

active professionally in different cities. The publisher Thomas Johnson, for example, has received two PPN identifiers, 136442420 and 148057543. The first of these apparently spans Johnson's work in The Hague, while the second identifier is connected to works which Johnson published in Rotterdam. Confusingly, a similar strategy has been followed for books with imprints 'sine nomine'. The "unknown publisher", has many different PPN identifiers, including 07556596X and 075566842. These identifiers refer to unidentified agents in Amsterdam and London, respectively. Scholars engaged in quantitative research based on data in the STCN obviously need to be aware of this issue of multiple identifiers. When books are selected via one identifier only, the analyses may be incomplete, and the results may be misguided.

At a more fundamental level, it is also important to stress that quantitative analyses performed on the records in the STCN are of limited value if these are pursued in isolation. In many cases, the numbers and the graphs that result from such encompassing queries can be interpreted and explained only via references to earlier scholarship based on the books and historical documents found in libraries and in archives. Statistical investigations of bibliographical data tend to treat all the titles in the data set as equivalent data points, and they may gloss over the crucial differences that may exist between different types of works, such as academic dissertations, literary works, almanacs, religious tracts, atlases or cookbooks. Numerical dominance in a dataset is not necessarily a reliable proxy for societal impact.

In spite of certain shortcomings, however, the analyses performed for this study also help to substantiate the claim that such statistical analyses performed on bibliographic data can ultimately

serve as a valuable aid in book historical research. The information and patterns exposed by data science methods can often spawn useful insights, which may provide additional support for scholarly claims that have been made earlier, or propose areas of interest that warrant further exploration. Of course, the digital data should not be viewed as a substitute for the actual books. In the case of the STCN, these quantitative screen-based investigations can actually be viewed as a continuation, or as a culmination, of such processes in which bibliographers and book historians have handled paper books in autopsy. The panoramic vantage points that were constructed for this study could be realised solely because of the gargantuan amount of work that was conducted to amass the STCN.