

Advantages of Loanwords of Latin Origin for Learning German and Dutch

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Abstract

Latin is the primary donor language to German and Dutch. In this study, a vocabulary survey was conducted to propose the advantages of frequently used German and Dutch vocabulary of Latin origin and their English equivalents for learners of German and Dutch. The Oxford 3000 was used as the primary reference for the 3,000 most frequently used English words, and the author analyzed the frequency of their German and Dutch equivalents. As a result, 432 loanwords of Latin or Greek origin were found to be included in the 3,000 most common German and Dutch words. Therefore, the present study concluded that possessing a knowledge of basic German and Dutch vocabulary of Latin or Greek origin effectively assists English speakers in learning German and Dutch.

Keywords: Dutch; English; German; Greek; Latin.



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1. Introduction

1.1. Characteristics of German and Dutch

German and Dutch belong to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family (Crystal, 2010). Therefore, the vocabularies of these two languages retain phonetic and semantic similarities. For instance, German and Dutch words with slightly different spellings are *Brot* and *brood* (bread), *Jahr* and *jaar* (year), and *Haus* and *huis* (house). Moreover, similar verb pairs include the German *hören* and the Dutch *horen* (hear, listen) and the German *geben* and the Dutch *geven* (give). Between German and Dutch loanwords of Latin origin, there are minor differences in spellings, e.g., the German *Kultur* and the Dutch *cultuur* (culture), the German *Qualität* and the Dutch *kwaliteit* (quality), and the German *Universität* and the Dutch *universiteit* (university).

However, many German and Dutch terms originate from Germanic languages and are significantly different from English words of Latin origin, such as the words “city” and “money.” Contrastingly, the German *Stadt* and the Danish *stad* (city) and the German *Geld* and the Dutch *geld* (money) remain similar.

English, German, and Dutch share thousands of words of Latin origin that retain a high degree of phonetic and semantic similarities. Therefore, English-speaking learners of German and Dutch need to analyze German and Dutch vocabularies of Latin origin to learn these languages efficiently.

1.2. Grammatical and Lexical Complexity in German and Dutch

One of the main difficulties of German grammar faced by foreign learners is the perfect tense structure. For instance, the German present tense sentence “ich esse Brot” means “I eat bread,” with the structure being similar to English; however, the structure of the perfect tense is more difficult because the German past participle *gegessen* (eaten) appears at the end of the perfect tense “ich habe Brot gegessen” (I have eaten bread) (Durrell *et al.*, 2015). The Dutch past participle *gegeten* (eaten), as in the Dutch sentence “ik heb brood gegeten” (I have eaten bread) has an identical structure (Donaldson, 2017).

Additionally, several forms of separable verbs often hinder foreign learners’ comprehension of sentence structures: the German verb *ankommen* (arrive), which is comprised of *an* (on) and *kommen* (come), and the Dutch verb *aankomen* (arrive), which consists of *aan* (on) and *komen* (come). When these types of German and Dutch verbs are used in the perfect tense, the German past participle *angekommen* (arrived) and the Dutch equivalent *aangekomen* (arrived) are usually in the final sentence position; other words that indicate the time, date, and place are frequently placed before the past participle. Therefore, it is difficult for many learners of German and Dutch to appropriately conclude perfect tense sentences with the past participle.

Another difficult feature more closely related to vocabulary is the existence of multiple types of plural suffixes in German and Dutch. The most common plural ending in both languages is *-en*. However, the suffix *-er* also pluralizes many German nouns such as *Kind* (child) and *Ei* (egg) to *Kinder* (children) and *Eier* (eggs). In Dutch, *kind* (child) and *ei* (egg) change to *kinderen* (children) and *eieren* (eggs) as the suffix *-eren* was introduced to Dutch as a result of a fusion of the suffixes *-er* and *-en*. Moreover, the vowels in several radicals change in the singular and plural forms, e.g., *Buch* (book) and *Bücher* (books). The suffix *-e* is also used for German nouns, such as *Jahre* (years) from *Jahr* (year) and *Monate* (months) from *Monat* (month). A similar vowel alternation also occurs between *Hand* (hand) and *Hände* (hands), in which the suffix *-e* clearly indicates the plurality (Sanders, 2010). These complex features regarding the plural may demotivate learners of German and Dutch.

1.3. Importance of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland

Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, which are predominantly German-speaking countries, are among the wealthiest countries in the world (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018a). Additionally, these countries are renowned for their high-quality education, technology, and medicine. Besides, the former Austrian empire ruled by the House of Habsburg had occupied vast territories that included parts of present-day Italy, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and several other European countries (Judson, 2016). For this reason, traditional Austrian culture has been developed as an amalgamation of German, Italian, Hungarian, and Slavic cultural elements (Beller, 2007).

1.4. Economic Prosperity of the Netherlands

Despite being the 135th largest country, the Netherlands has proven to be an economically successful country (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018b). In 1648, the Netherlands officially gained independence from Spain under the Habsburg rule (Kennedy, 2017). The Dutch East India Company primarily enabled the country's prosperity since the 18th century, and owes its success to present-day Indonesia, which provided high-quality spices as the primary colony for centuries but gained independence after the Second World War. Although the Dutch presence in the world has diminished, multinational Dutch companies such as Philips continue to thrive.

1.5. Objective

Learning the basic vocabulary of German and Dutch languages is essential, especially for students and researchers from other countries, to understand the fields in which German-speaking countries and the Netherlands gained success. Additionally, an effective approach to learning basic German and Dutch vocabularies will benefit foreigners who are working or wish to work in those countries and local municipalities that need to promote integration of foreign residents.

This study proposes an efficient method for learning basic German and Dutch words of Latin or Greek origin. Most Greek words were borrowed through Latin. This method is primarily oriented toward native English speakers who are interested in learning basic German and Dutch. The primary references for Latin and German are the *Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Morwood, 2005) and the *Compact Oxford German Dictionary* (Clark and Thyen, 2013) respectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Utility of Vocabularies of Common Origin

Ringbom (2007) defined cognates as "historically related, phonetically similar words, whose meanings may be identical, similar, or partly different." Nation and Webb (2011) emphasized the benefits of using English words with shared etymologies to teach vocabulary to foreign learners of English. Lubliner and Hiebert (2011) investigated cognates shared by English and Spanish from the Academic Word List and the General Service List in order to propose the usefulness of a category of cognates that are almost identical. Bardel and Lindqvist (2011) examined the advantages of cognates that exist in both French and Italian to aid the learning of French and Italian as foreign languages. Bardel and Lindqvist analyzed the correlation between the participants' ability of using low-frequency foreign cognates and the participants' level of speaking proficiency. The two studies mentioned above imply that German and Dutch cognates that are similar to their English equivalents may also be helpful for English-speaking learners of German and Dutch. Since French and Italian both stem from Latin, learners who speak an Indo-European language are often able to identify cognates with ease, e.g., the French *nature* and the Italian *natura* (nature) (Solodow, 2010). In contrast to the obvious lexical similarity between French and Italian, the difference between basic German and English vocabularies is much greater as English loaned several thousands of Latin origin through French and other European languages after the Norman Conquest of England and other historical events related to the British and French peoples (Gramley, 2019).

Peeters *et al.* (2013) also stressed that a careful use of cognates would encourage English vocabulary instruction for French-speaking learners of English. Brenders *et al.* (2011) suggested the benefits of English and Dutch cognates for Dutch-speaking learners of English. Thus, all the aforementioned studies justify the use of phonetically and semantically similar cognates for vocabulary instruction. Therefore, this approach may also assist speakers of English, French, or other European languages in learning basic German and Dutch vocabularies.

2.2. Swedish Vocabulary of Latin or Greek Origin

Swedish belongs to the North Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family (Crystal, 2010). Uni (2019) examined the percentages of Swedish words of Latin or Greek origin, selecting approximately 3,000 of the most frequently used Swedish words. The study observed 556 loanwords. For instance, the Swedish *funktion* (function), *nation* (nation), and *tradition* (tradition) are loanwords from the Latin *functio* (function), *natio* (nation), and *traditio* (tradition), respectively (Morwood, 2005).

2.3. Modern Hebrew Vocabulary of Latin or Greek Origin

Hebrew belongs to the Semitic language family (Crystal, 2010), but its vocabulary also includes loanwords of Latin origin. Uni (2018) explored the proportion of Hebrew words of Latin or Greek origin, selecting approximately 3,000 of the most frequently used Hebrew words. The study observed 186 loanwords. For example, the Hebrew *ambitsya* (ambition) and *funktisya* (function) are loanwords from the Latin *ambitio* (ambition) and *functio* (function),

respectively (Morwood, 2005). His study concluded that possessing a knowledge of English and Hebrew vocabulary of Latin origin assists English speakers in learning Hebrew.

3. Materials and Methods

In this study, the primary reference for high-frequency English words was the Oxford 3000 word list. The author of the study counted German and Dutch words of Latin or Greek origin within the scope of the German and Dutch equivalents of the English list.

4. Results

In total, 432 words of Latin origin were included in the study's list of German and Dutch equivalents to the 3,000 most frequently used English words. The number of loanwords was equal to 14.4% of the total number of basic German and Dutch words.

5. Discussion

5.1. German and Dutch Words Ending in *-isch*

Table 1 presents German and Dutch words ending in *-isch*. The listed English equivalents end with the suffix *-ic* or *-ical*. A high degree of regularity is observed between these adjectives and their English equivalents. Therefore, this correspondence may enable English-speaking learners to produce German or Dutch sentences more confidently.

Table-1. Examples of Similar Words in German, Dutch, and English (1)

G.: German D.: Dutch			
G./D. <i>automatisch</i> (automatic)	G./D. <i>dramatisch</i> (dramatic)	G./D. <i>elektronisch</i> (electronic)	G./D. <i>kritisch</i> (critical)
G./D. <i>logisch</i> (logical)	G./D. <i>organisch</i> (organic)	S./D. <i>romantisch</i> (romantic)	G./D. <i>technisch</i> (technical)

5.2. German Words Ending in *-iv*

Table 2 presents several German words ending in *-iv*. The listed Dutch and English words end with *-ief* and *-ive*, respectively. Despite minor differences in spellings, the listed words remain similar to their English equivalents. These Dutch words retain *c*, as in their original Latin words.

Table-2. Examples of Similar Words in German, Dutch, and English (2)

G.: German D.: Dutch			
G. <i>aktiv</i> D. <i>actief</i> (active)	G. <i>alternativ</i> D. <i>alternatief</i> (alternative)	G. <i>konservativ</i> D. <i>conservatief</i> (conservative)	G. <i>negativ</i> D. <i>negatief</i> (negative)
G. <i>objektiv</i> D. <i>objectief</i> (objective)	G. <i>passiv</i> D. <i>passief</i> (passive)	G. <i>positiv</i> D. <i>positief</i> (positive)	G. <i>subjektiv</i> D. <i>subjectief</i> (subjective)

5.3. German and Dutch Words Ending in *-ie*

Table 3 presents German and Dutch words ending in *-ie*. The English equivalents end with the suffix *-y*. In particular, the spelling of the Dutch noun *categorie* is similar to its French and English equivalents i.e., *catégorie* and *category*, respectively. In German, the [k] sound in loanwords of Latin origin is more frequently spelled with the letter *k* than *c* in Dutch. Many French, German, and Dutch words remain similar. For instance, the German nouns *Philosophie* (philosophy), *Sympathie* (sympathy), and *Technologie* (technology) correspond to the French *philosophie*, *sympathie*, and *technologie*, respectively.

Table-3. Examples of Similar Words in German, Dutch, and English (3)

G.: German D.: Dutch			
G. <i>Energie</i> D. <i>energie</i> (energy)	G. <i>Geographie</i> D. <i>geografie</i> (geography)	G. <i>Industrie</i> D. <i>industrie</i> (industry)	G. <i>Kategorie</i> D. <i>categorie</i> (category)
G. <i>Philosophie</i> D. <i>filosofie</i> (philosophy)	G. <i>Sympathie</i> D. <i>sympathie</i> (sympathy)	G. <i>Technologie</i> D. <i>technologie</i> (technology)	G. <i>Theorie</i> D. <i>theorie</i> (theory)

5.4. German Words Ending in *-tion*

Table 4 presents German and English words ending in *-tion*. Their Dutch equivalents include the suffix *-tie*. The spellings of these German and Dutch words are similar to their English equivalents. While some slight differences in spelling and pronunciation are observed, the German *Diskussion* (discussion) and *Explosion* (explosion), which end with *-sion*, are also comprehensible for English-speaking learners.

Table-4. Examples of Similar Words in German, Dutch, and English (4)

G.: German D.: Dutch			
G. <i>Definition</i> D. <i>definitie</i> (definition)	G. <i>Funktion</i> D. <i>functie</i> (function)	G. <i>Generation</i> D. <i>generatie</i> (generation)	G. <i>Infektion</i> D. <i>infectie</i> (infection)
G. <i>Information</i> D. <i>informatie</i> (information)	G. <i>Nation</i> D. <i>natie</i> (nation)	G. <i>Organisation</i> D. <i>organisatie</i> (organization)	G. <i>Tradition</i> D. <i>traditie</i> (tradition)

5.5. German Words Ending in *-ität*

Table 5 presents German words ending in *-ität* and Dutch words ending in *-iteit*. The listed English words end with *-ity*, which corresponds with the French suffix *-ité*. Majority of English and French speakers learning German and Dutch may recognize the listed words as cognates.

Table-5. Examples of Similar Words in German, Dutch, and English (5)

G.: German D.: Dutch			
G. <i>Aktivität</i> D. <i>activiteit</i> (activity)	G. <i>Elektrizität</i> D. <i>elektriciteit</i> (electricity)	G. <i>Identität</i> D. <i>identiteit</i> (identity)	G. <i>Nationalität</i> D. <i>nationaliteit</i> (nationality)
G. <i>Popularität</i> D. <i>populariteit</i> (popularity)	G. <i>Priorität</i> D. <i>prioriteit</i> (priority)	G. <i>Qualität</i> D. <i>kwaliteit</i> (quality)	G. <i>Universität</i> D. <i>universiteit</i> (university)

5.6. German Words Ending in *-ell* and *-al*

Table 6 presents several German words ending in *-ell* and *-al*. The Dutch and English equivalents mostly end with *-eel* and *-al*, respectively. The endings of these words are similar to their French equivalents, such as *formel* (formal) and *culturel* (cultural). In Dutch, long *a* and *e* sounds in closed syllables are generally spelled with *aa* and *ee*, respectively. Therefore, even beginners of Dutch can recognize the vowel length of majority of the basic Dutch words. Vowel length in German orthography is less clearly indicated than in Dutch.

Table-6. Examples of Similar Words in German, Dutch, and English (6)

G.: German D.: Dutch			
G. <i>digital</i> D. <i>digitaal</i> (digital)	G. <i>formell</i> D. <i>formeel</i> (formal)	G. <i>individuell</i> D. <i>individueel</i> (individual)	G. <i>industriell</i> D. <i>industrieel</i> (industrial)
G. <i>international</i> D. <i>internationaal</i> (international)	G. <i>kulturell</i> D. <i>cultureel</i> (cultural)	G. <i>traditionell</i> D. <i>traditioneel</i> (traditional)	G. <i>zentral</i> D. <i>centraal</i> (central)

6. Conclusion

This study examined the benefits of basic German and Dutch words of Latin origin while preparing a German and Dutch equivalent to the Oxford 3000 list. As a result, 432 German and Dutch words originating from Latin were observed among the approximately 3,000 most used words. The majority of these words remain phonetically similar to their English equivalents. This is one of the primary advantages of the shared loanwords. The findings indicate that the selected German and Dutch loanwords assist English speakers in learning basic German and Dutch words.

Future studies could investigate grammatical features that retain similarities among German, Dutch, English, and other European languages. Such studies could help English-speaking learners of German and Dutch operate the target languages more competently.

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