

Say what you think but think about how you say it

Social conventions serve to express respect for others. It wouldn't hurt for the Dutch to be reminded of this.

OPINION

By Christoph Driessen

Are the Dutch rude? For me, as a German, it would be **impolite** to answer this question with a yes. Let me just say: the Dutch are direct – much more direct than other people.

Besides Germany, I have also lived for several years in the Netherlands, the UK and the United States, but only in the Netherlands has a friend phoned me up on my birthday to say that she **simply** did not feel like coming to my party, and that she would rather go for a walk in the dunes. In Germany, and certainly in the US - **not to mention** England - the friend would certainly have **resorted to** a white lie in this case. The Dutch however believe you must never lie to your friends, that it is always best to tell them what you think **clearly** and directly.

When I went to England after six years in the Netherlands, I had to get used to the fact that you never just tell someone what you think there. In the beginning I did not always understand exactly what the English were trying to say. "That's an unusual outfit" did not mean, "Those clothes are very **unique**," but rather, "You look **ridiculous**!" And, "That's an interesting thought," is just a polite way of saying, "That makes no sense all."

Even tourists notice that people are much more polite on the London Underground than on a tram in Amsterdam. If you step on a British person's toes, to your amazement he will say, "Sorry." And the way English people queue up is **another matter altogether**.

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Group behaviour

According to professors of anthropology Joseph Henrich and Robert Boyd, this "voluntary interaction with complete strangers" is the "highest form of cooperative group behaviour." The real queuing up is an art in itself. Observing the right distance between you and the person in front of you requires precision - as a rule of thumb, the Guardian once advised that you leave the same amount of room you would "when dancing with old aunt Hildegard."

Such niceties are generally alien to the Dutch person. His basic attitude with respect to matters of politeness is rooted deep in Dutch history, or rather, in Calvinism and the republican form of government of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Calvinists are concerned with the essence of things, with what is really important – all the rest is pointless ballast which distracts from the essential. That is why courtesy is easily seen as insincerity in the Netherlands.

The republican form of government likewise facilitated extremely direct and uncomplicated manners. In other countries etiquette was primarily developed for the aristocracy. The German word for politeness, *Höflichkeit*, contains the word 'Hof', meaning court, as in the 'royal court.' For a long time the court of Versailles set the tone in matters of etiquette.

In English class society as well, good manners were perfected by the upper echelons; they also served to screen them off from the lower classes. Mats Deutschmann, a Swedish anglo-expert, concluded in a 2003 study on English courtesy (*Apologizing in British English*) that those who often say sorry, pardon and excuse me underline their social position, refinement and high class in doing so. **"It is primarily the powerful who excuse themselves to the powerless," Deutschmann says.**

Seen in this light, in essence good English manners would be nothing other than manipulation. In contrast, an authoritarian military state like Prussia bore the stamp of obedience rather than courtesy; social life was subject to a strict hierarchy. Those times are long gone, but to this day directors of companies in Germany are treated with the kind of obeisance that would be inconceivable in the Netherlands.

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'Unpalatable insults'

The Netherlands has an entirely different tradition than Germany, the UK, France or Spain. Already in the seventeenth century foreign visitors noticed that in this remarkable "people's republic," ranks and classes had been **eliminated** and everyone was treated equally.

Of course, that was an **exaggeration** – a small elite group of citizens were in charge in the republic - but it was difficult for someone who was used to an absolute monarchy at home to get a different impression. A Frenchman **reported** for instance: "It is not at all unusual to hear a beggar, a bum, call out in an exchange of words with a respectable citizen, 'You may be richer than me, but you're no better,' and other such unpalatable insults."

Johan de Witt, the grand pensionary [the highest-ranking official in the Dutch Republic, Ed.], **was** occasionally powerful enough to foil Louis XIV's plans but' on the street, he was indistinguishable from an ordinary citizen. When, on the **occasion** of an inspection of the war fleet, he decided as an exception not to dress in the customary black but in a garment **decorated** with gold and silver frills, he was not received with respect but with laughter.

Even his own secretary only removed his hat with the greatest reluctance when he **spoke** with De Witt. Later the man let secret documents fall into the hands of De Witt's enemies, **arguing** that his boss had dealt him a deadly insult by insisting that he remove his hat for him.

Nor did a courtly culture ever develop in the nineteenth century kingdom. The Netherlands remained a country of peddlers, a nation of surly merchants without a distinguished upper echelon.

In the nineteen sixties, students and other young people in many countries **mounted** the barricades to dislodge the authority of their parents, the church and the government. In a country like Germany that had a beneficial effect. Since that movement you can breathe more freely in Germany and society has become more democratic and humane. Outmoded etiquette was scrapped.

From my own experience - I was born in 1967 - I still had to make a deep bow when the priest came to visit my Catholic primary school, for example. The girls had to curtsy. I am glad my children no longer have to do that.

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'I say what I think'

In the Netherlands as well, few people look back fondly on the post-war society, strictly organised along denominational lines. Still, on the whole, the effect of the sixties here was not entirely positive, in my opinion. After all, the Netherlands did not have a heavy **authoritative** tradition from which people had to liberate themselves.

Instead values like respect, consideration and self-control were discredited across the line. In the nineties [the populist politician] Pim Fortuyn **reinforced** that trend with his motto, "I say what I think."

"I say what I think" – and bugger anyone who thinks differently – sums the Dutch attitude up nicely for me. Of course, everyone should be able to say what they think, but it matters how you say it. **Courtesy** is also the art of making unpleasant things clear to others in a pleasant manner.

Outward forms of courtesy and social conventions should never be a goal in themselves, of course, but serve as an expression of respect for others. It would certainly do no harm for people to be taught that a bit more at home and at school.

Since outward forms have become a habit, I don't need to consider every time whether I should actually stand up and offer my seat to the old lady on the bus. When offering your seat has become automatic, it makes your life easier.

Is that un-Dutch? No, because it is certainly not the case that you only come across rude people in the Netherlands.

I've said a great deal here about English courtesy, but in the explicit class society this can also be condescending and accompanied by an icy aloofness. You are certainly not likely to experience that in the Netherlands, where the level landscape traditionally extends into social life.

When the Dutch are friendly, it usually really comes from the heart, and that is the best form of courtesy.

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