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Come down with Cholera! Disease Names in Dutch Strong Language

This paper examines a variety of expressions with two traits in common: they all incorporate the names of diseases, real or imagined, and they all belong to the coarser strata of popular speech. My first encounter with one of the archetypal curses in this group was more puzzling than shocking. At the Albert Cuyp open-air market in the heart of Amsterdam's Pijp district, I eavesdropped on an altercation punctuated by *krijg de klere!* In my linguistic innocence I interpreted this to mean "get the clothes", an exhortation inconsistent with the terms of abuse surrounding it. A fellow student set me straight: *klere* was not the harmless homophone for clothes, but a syncopated form of *kelere*, a corruption of standard *cholera* "cholera". The confusing phrase I had heard was thus an expression of hostility suggesting that the person thus addressed come down with cholera, in the final analysis not unlike English *drop dead*. Once alerted to this phenomenon, I was to experience what many students of language do: I began hearing the newly-discovered type of expression based on the names of horrible diseases all over the place. Thus was born the study on which I report to you here.

Of course, Dutch is not alone in expressing strong sentiments through disease names. In English, we "avoid someone like the plague"; reading Shakespeare has been known to inspire the anachronistic "a pox on you!" —

surely more facetious than effective as a curse today. Even in the last century, such exclamations as "what the plague!" and imprecations as "a pest on you!" were still used. Data on other languages are not easy to find. Arabic, Persian and some Mongolian languages offer elaborately detailed, rather gruesome wishes for a decline in one's health. Other modern languages, such as Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Polish, and especially Yiddish use a couple of disease names in common curses and exclamations. The phenomenon seems to have been far more widespread in Western Europe at one time, but now is limited to sporadic vestiges in the languages with which I am familiar; perhaps it has gone the way of the diseases.

What makes Dutch unique among the European languages which curse with disease names is that it disposes of such an extensive set of expressions in this category and such a large number of disease names to fit into them. In the basic Dutch malediction *krijg de/het _____!* "come down with _____!", over twenty diseases can fill the blank, from humorous to unpleasant and fatal ones. Of the fifteen curses listed in the *Bargoens Woordenboek* "dictionary of cant and slang", eleven incorporate disease names, and two more urge the cursee to die. Disease names appear not only in curses, but also in exclamations, insults, pejoratives, intensifiers, derived verbs, and other expressions.

Furthermore, various euphemisms and humorous pseudo-disease names attest that use of the original expressions is censured in some situations, but common in others.

Just what manner of sicknesses are involved? Among the most dread diseases, the Dutch have at their disposal *de kanker* "cancer", *de k(e)lere* (Standard Dutch = ABN *cholera*) "cholera, *het lazarus* (ABN *de lepra*, *melaatsheid*) "leprosy", *de pest* (euphemism *de pee*) "plague", *de pleuris* (ABN *pleuritis*) "pleurisy", *de pokken* "(small) pox", *de takke* (ABN *attaque*) "attacks, especially stroke", *de tering* "consumption, tuberculosis", *de tyfus* "typhoid fever", *de zenuwen* "nerves, neurosis", and *de ziekte* "disease, formerly especially the plague". To complement this epidemic smörgåsbord, various milder ailments appear: *de koorts* "fever", *de mazelen* "measles", *de pip* "pip, a disease, also applied to undefined human illnesses", *het schijt*, *de schijterij* "diarrhea" (literally "shits"), *de schurft* "scabies, scurf", *het snot* "snot", *het speen* "hemorrhoids", *de vellen* "flaking skin, rash". Euphemisms, humorous variants and pseudo-diseases will be detailed below.

All of these diseases fit into the archetypal formulae:

- 1a) *krijg de/het* _____! "come down with _____!"
 1b) *van mij kan hij de/het* _____ *krijgen!* "for all I care, he can come down with _____!"

For many of these terminal illnesses, such an execration is tantamount to such expletives as: *val dood* "drop dead", *steek de moord* "stick the murder", *barst* "burst", *stik* "suffocate", *sterf* "die", and *verrek* "die a miserable and protracted death". The last four non-Freudian death wishes can also be uttered with no candidate for death in mind, merely to express vexation, unpleasant surprise or amazement. Under the same circumstance, formula 1a appears with the words for cholera, plague,

pip and leprosy, often softened with the flavoring particle *nou*, e.g., *krijg nou de pip!*, in flavor somewhat like "what the hell!" which an Amsterdammer can also express with *wat heb ik nou an me kar hangen!* "what have I got hanging on my cart now!"

Of all the available disease names, cholera is certainly one of the contemporary favorites, at least in Amsterdam. Besides archaic *pestilentie*, it is the only one which can be uttered alone as an expletive, to vent anger or surprise, or merely for the joy of intoning a juicy expletive. The uninhibited Amsterdammer — and what Amsterdammer worthy of the name *is* inhibited when it comes to swearing — takes the word onto his tongue and plays with it, savoring every sound: the /k/ is held longer than normal, then released into the pretonic /ə/; this schwa, so often dropped in the longer expressions, is drawn out, then progressively velarized in anticipation of the lengthened "thick" /l/, which finally explodes into the climax of the last two syllables: *kelere!*

But why cholera? A variety of factors collaborate to make it a logical choice. Of all the rapidly fatal epidemic diseases, it inspired the greatest terror in the last century. The Dutch word *cholera* originally designated paratyphoid, an agonizing disease at best, but rarely fatal. With the arrival of the Asiatic cholera in the Netherlands in 1817, the Grim Reaper had his work cut out for him. In a series of epidemics, especially those of 1848-9 and 1866, cholera claimed thousands of victims; the last epidemic struck Holland as recently as 1909. Thus, but a couple of generations ago, cholera was a known and feared enemy, surely a more graphic curse than say the plague, whose effectiveness ebbed through overuse and unfamiliarity of both curser and curse with the malady.

An indication of the strength — and perhaps

the novelty — of cholera in such expressions is unwittingly provided by an editor of the monumental *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal* (=WNT, comparable to the *Oxford English Dictionary*): the relevant volumes, which appeared in 1916, provide no evidence for its use in strong language; in contrast, the articles on the plague, pleurisy, pox and leprosy are replete with examples which have enriched my corpus, many from the most esteemed figures of the Dutch Golden Age of literature. I suspect the editor responsible for this omission was more inhibited by the real-life association of this term than ignorant of its use. In our modern world of antisepsis and immunization we readily forget the terror such diseases can hold for people — and the "primitive" taboos against uttering the names of diseases which one day may strike down the utterer. Many Dutch still unwittingly observe this taboo when they say *k/kaa/* for *kanker* "cancer", the scourge of our time.

Cholera has more to offer the native curser of Dutch than vivid associations with suffering and death. In its usual syncopated form, the initial */k/* plus liquid cluster alliterates with formulaic *krijg*; the entire execration forms a euphonious rhythmic phrase in trochaic dimeter. Alliteration can be a powerful force in binding elements into popular expressions. My informal observations also suggest that */k/* is a favorite initial sound in the highly flavored vocabulary of many languages.¹ So the */k/* of *kelere* makes it ideal both in terms of alliteration and of preferred initial phonemes in such items.

So far I have proceeded on the assumption that *kelere* indeed means "cholera". The standard Dutch for this disease, *cholera*, differs from the form I have been discussing in several regards. The standard word has initial */x/*, stress on the first syllable, and */oo/* and */aa/* in the first and third syllables respectively; the curse word has initial */k/*,

stress on the second syllable, and */ə/* in the first and third syllables. Van Dale's dictionary² derives *kelere* from French *colère* "anger,"³ perhaps to avoid explaining the phonological discrepancies with *cholera*, or else to rehabilitate the genealogy of a word besmirched by the company it keeps. I will argue that, whatever the etymology, it *functions* as a disease name in spoken Dutch, and I will attempt to explain the conflicts between the learned and popular forms.

Certainly etymology yields no proof of the precise meaning of a word; it is well documented that all linguistic forms and their meanings are subject to change in the course of time. By whatever means the form *kelere* did find its way into the language, it is associated in the popular mind with disease names by virtue of appearing in various aggressive expressions reserved for real or imagined illnesses.

The phonological conflicts are easily accounted for. In the first centuries of its use in Dutch, *cholera* is spelled with *k* or *c*, indicating a */k/*-pronunciation as in *kelere*. Contemporary */x/* is a later innovation, based on the Latin spelling of the original Greek. The popular form is thus more conservative with regard to the initial consonant than modern medical terminology; compare the case of colloquial *pleuris* "pleurisy" — another favorite for cursing — which is older than official *pleuritis*. Although the spelling of a few centuries ago clearly indicates initial */k/*, we cannot ascertain where the stress originally fell. By coincidence, the colloquial word presents the stress pattern of the Greek etymon, while the learned word reflects the Latin tradition; we must however assume that both came down through the latter. We do know that the dactylic rhythm of words like *chólera* has been poorly tolerated in the history of Dutch; in many words it has shifted to the amphibrachic stress of *kelére*, for

example in the adjective *waanzzinnig* "insane", derived from the noun *wáánzin*. So the shift of stress from initial to medial syllable could well be an innovation from within Dutch popular speech. The unstressed vowels are reduced to /ə/ in accordance with well documented tendencies in colloquial Dutch.

Yiddish offers an alternative explanation for the stress pattern of *kelere* which also explains its popularity in Dutch. Yiddish is known to have supplied a significant portion of Dutch slang. It also disposes of a vast arsenal of curses in which disease are not lacking. A *kholérye* can be wished upon someone, or the word can be uttered along as an expletive — and often is.⁴ In both form and use, *kholérye* echoes the Slavic languages with which Yiddish has been in contact so long; Russian and particularly Polish favor /xol'éra/ and xolér'e/ respectively as interjections.

In the final analysis, it matters little whether *kelere* owes its present shape to French, Yiddish, or native Dutch sources: it is a word the native curser of Dutch can hardly do without.

Let's now move from fatal diseases to more innocuous curses. When in a language certain forms are felt to be too strong or too vulgar, substitutes are often coined to replace the offensive words. In English, words like *heck*, *darn* and *shucks* stand in for unacceptable *hell*, *damn* and *shit*. People who say the former do not always realize that; nevertheless, they should remember that it is the thought that counts, not the exact phonetic shape of the word called upon to express it!

Since many of the diseases I have named so far are so drastic, Dutch has evolved euphemisms to replace them in less coarse speech. Let's first consider the pseudo-euphemisms. *De pee* 'p (letter name)' would seem to be a mere abbreviation of *de pest*

"plague" — recall the case of *de k* for *kanker* above. However, the WNT notes that in olden times the law required the letter *p* to be posted on the doors of plague victims as a sign of quarantine; in some expressions, such as *ergens de pee aan (gezien) hebben* "to hate something (literally: to have the plague on it)", *pee* or *pestpee* "plague *p*" seems to be older than *pest* alone. *De ziekte* "sickness" is an obvious synonym for *de pest*: it patterns exactly like *de pee* in use. Nevertheless it is no euphemism: *de pest* is actually the more recent name for the plague. In Middle Dutch it was called *gadood* "rapid death", *de haestige siecte* "rapid sickness", or simply *de siecte* "sickness"; *de ziekte* appears in such expressions as a survival of this tradition.

The use of a word as euphemism for some taboo subject often devaluates the word so that a new euphemism must be found; the plethora of designations for public toilet facilities in English exemplifies this principle. The coarse Dutch word for leprosy, *het lazerus*, is in origin a euphemism: Lazerus was the patron saint of leprosy victims. Parallels to this substitution of a saint's name for the disease which he is supposed to protect one against are to be found in older French and German.

One type of genuine euphemism is what I call the *setup*: a phrase is used in which only the end differs from a taboo expression, as in English for *cry-ing out loud*, where *-ing out loud* replaces blasphemous *-st's sake*. In Dutch one can say *hij kan van mij de pot op!* "he can go to the pot for all I care!", which sets the listener up to expect *de pokke krijgen* "to come down with the pox". Since mention of *de pot* is also less than delicate, it in turn has spawned another setup, ending in *de boom in* "to climb a tree".

Another type of euphemism involves nonsense diseases; the humorous effect then outweighs

the gravity of the act of cursing. One can wish a victim such ailments as *het apezuur* "ape acid (indigestion, belch)", which may be a euphemism for *het apelazur(us)* "ape leprosy", in which *ape-* is a humorous intensifier. Another pseudo-sickness is *de beris*, which may derive from *beriberi*,⁵ but more likely is a variation on the theme of pleurisy: *de pleuris*, given by one informant as *de pleris*, is very close phonetically. How about *het heen-en-weer* "back-and-forth"? Does it suggest epilepsy or Parkinson's disease, or is it really as harmless as it seems? Here is a real gem of Amsterdam humor for those who can appreciate it: *krijg de cetem!* The *Cetem* was a sports-oriented newspaper before the war; on Sundays it was sold with the cry *alle uitslagen!* "all the sports results", a claim which the punning mind can turn into "all rashes". Thus *krijg de cetem!* wishes the cursee an assortment of skin diseases!⁶

Purely for fun, say *krijg een kind met een koperen kop!* "have a child with a copper head!", then compound the curse — and the humour — with *dan kekke je lam poetsen* "then you can polish till you're lame".⁷ Or wish someone *de muizehoog*, which suggests a squeaky mouse-high voice,⁸ or nonsensical *het rambam*, which sounds ghastly, but has no real associations as far as I can tell. The arsenal of wild yet mild curses is likely much more extensive than these samples suggest.

Dutch employs disease names for far more than cursing. A select subset of them function as pejorative prefixes, some of which can only be applied to humans, others only to things. One can vent one's anger at someone by calling him a *zenuwelijker* "neurotic" or a *kankerlijer* "cancer patient"; in fact, *lijer* (ABN *lijder*) "sufferer, patient" alone suffices to abuse someone verbally. A handy insult to a woman would be *klerewijf* "cholera woman" or *tyfusmens* "typhoid woman"; a man's ire can be raised by calling him a *pestvent* "plague

guy" or a *rotkerel* "rotten guy". In this context I should point out that the very productive pejorative prefix *rot* "rotten" formerly also a euphemism meaning "suffering from venereal disease", a bit of linguistic history that ties it into our theme. Perhaps this association is responsible for its inclusion in the list of mildly taboo words, even in its original meaning.

The list of ills which can be applied pejoratively to things is even longer. Some familiar combinations are *pokkeweer* "pox weather", *zenuwebaan* "nerves job" and *rotbui* "rotten mood". Although these compounds are familiar, such pejoratives are productive — they form new combinations at will. Pejorative prefixes also can be concatenated for extra effect, as in *pestpokkeweer* "plague pox weather", *rotkankerding* "rotten cancer thing" and *kankertyfusteringlijer* "cancer typhoid consumption sufferer".

Disease names also figure in two kinds of general verb intensifiers which convey a negative attitude of the speaker toward the action expressed by the verb. The first is *als de pest* "like the plague", and its synonyms with *pee* and *ziekte*, perhaps derived from the expression *iemand / iets mijden als de pest* "to avoid someone / something like the plague." Again, certain combinations such as *het stinkt hier als de pest* "it smells awful (literally: like the plague) here" are standard, but the intensifying phrase can appear with virtually any semantically compatible verb.

The second such intensifier is a construction limited to a small number of verbs expressing great physical exertion or emotional reaction: *ik werk me het lazerus* "I work myself to death (literally: the leprosy)". Verbs in this category include *werken* "to work", *lopen* "to walk, run", *tillen* "to lift", *zoeken* "to look for", *lachen* "to laugh", and *schrikken* "to be frightened". Some intensifiers which appear in

this construction cannot be used as curses: *een beroerte* "a stroke", *een ongeluk* "an accident", *te pletter* "into little pieces", the humorous *een aap* "an ape", and the girlish *een hoedje* "a hat (diminutive)"; one adjective, *naar* "unpleasant, nauseated", also fits into this construction. Since the compound past tense of these verbs can take *zijn*, the construction is only pseudo-reflexive, e.g., *ik ben me een aap geschrokken* "I was scared to death (literally: scared myself an ape)".

Two verbal idioms occur with various diseases: *ik heb de schurft in* "I am angry (literally: have the scabies in)" and *ik heb er de pest aan (gezien)* "I detest it (literally: have (seen) the plague on it)". The choice of illnesses to fill in depends on the strength of the reaction and on the speaker's sense of propriety: some find *de pee* quite acceptable, but *de pest* and especially *de ziekte* too coarse. *De schurft* "scabies" seems even more graphic to others, since, unlike the plague, this affliction may well be within their personal experience.

A final use of disease names appears in derived verbs and allied expressions. *Kanker* "cancer" yields *kankeren* "to gripe" and *kankerpit* "griper". Leprosy spawns the largest group: *belazeren* "to trick, cheat," has a humorous setup variant *belatafelen* literally "to table with drawer"; from this is derived the adjective *belazerd* "crazy", used interchangeably with *gek*. *Lazeren* alone means "to throw, fall." In standard Dutch you can tell someone to get a move on with *schiet op!* More piquant variations on this theme are *lazer op*, derived from leprosy, and *pleur op*, *tief op*, *kleer op*, *teer op* and *rot op*, from pleurisy, typhoid, cholera, consumption and rotten respectively. To get your hide tanned is *op je lazer(ij) krijgen*. An *oplazer* is a hit, and *gelazer* is nagging or nonsense.

The disease names in such expressions appear

totally drained of their original meaning; they merely rely on their coarse overtones to lend affective strength to the statement. In the expressions with *lazer*, other strong words can be substituted: *duvel* "devil", *donder* "thunder" (like English *deuce* a euphemism for *devil*), and *sodemieter* "sodomizer":

hij heb me beduvel "he cheated me"
bejje nou helemaal bedonderd! "have you gone stark raving mad!"
sodemieter op! "get the hell out of here!"
moet je een pak op je duvel? "are you looking for a drubbing?"
toen heb ik hem toch een opdonder gegeven!
 "then I really beat the daylights out of him!"
is het nou afgelopen met het gesodemieter?
 "are you done with your belly-aching?"

Such a choice of semantically empty but emotionally charged words allows the language user refreshing variety in expressing aggression. Curiously, only *het lazarus* of all the disease names has inspired such creative use.

The Dutch use the same hyperbolic metaphor as we in the verb *pesten* "to tease, pester", with derived noun *pestkop* "(a) tease"; *verpesten* means "to spoil, ruin".

With this last group of expressions we have concluded our examination of the most popular diseases and their principal uses in Dutch strong language. A survey of the combinations I have encountered appears in Table 1. Many of these combinations are probably unknown outside of the large cities of Holland; my Belgian informants were generally unfamiliar with all but certain items involving the plague. What remains to be investigated more thoroughly is who uses what expressions to whom and under what circumstances; the relative coarseness of the diseases and expressions deserves attention as well. Currently I am also examining the role of disease names in verbal aggression in other

languages. I would appreciate responses from readers of this paper reacting to the material I have discussed and supplementing it if possible.

In singling out certain aspects of Dutch aggressive language, I hope to have called attention to the fascination popular speech can hold for the investigator. Slang is so appealing because it affords every language user the opportunity to be linguistically creative, regardless of his command of the standard language; certainly aggression has inspired more than its share of creativity. I hope you have enjoyed this rambling stroll through the Vile Garden of Curses (my apologies to R.L. Stevenson). In closing, I would like to leave with you the words of Bredero: *het volk vloekt als de pest* "the lower classes curse like the plague." Let us not deny our serious attention to this aspect of popular culture.

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NOTES

¹ The following data appear to corroborate this observation for Dutch: the *Bargoens Woordenboek* lists 113 insults and terms of abuse; of these, nineteen begin with /k/, a full sixth of the corpus! Initial /s/ runs second with fourteen items, even though its lexical frequency for the language as a whole is roughly one and a half times greater than that of initial /k/. Were the distribution of initial phonemes in aggressive words totally independent of sound symbolism, we would expect many more insults with initial /s/ and other phonemes more frequent than /k/.

² Van Dale incidentally only gives etymologies "in the rare case where it can be important for the precise understanding of the meaning" (Kruyskamp 1970:xxxx); I wonder about the motives for offering an etymology of the word in question.

³ French *colère* is actually a doublet of *choléra*

"cholera," both of which ultimately derive through Latin from Greek *Χολέρα* "bilious diarrhœa", from *Χολή* "bile". The meaning of the former stems from the ancient concept of the four humours, according to which a surplus of bile produces ill temper; the second is a Learned borrowing in early modern times to designate paratyphoid, then cholera. Dutch also has such a doublet: *kolder* "staggers" (a horse disease); "nonsense, wild whimsy", an early borrowing, and *cholera* "cholera", which first surfaces in the late middle ages.

⁴ The yiddish predilection for cursing with cholera may stem from folk etymological associations with biblical Hebrew *xôli rā* "sore affliction" (Eccl. 6:2). For this observation I am indebted to Dr. David Fink of the University of Maryland.

⁵ cf. Endt 1974:13.

⁶ *De cetem* is known to me only through Endt (1974:25), who describes it as *verouderend* "becoming archaic" of the newspaper in question.

⁷ Daan (1949:55) provides this version; Endt (1974:70) lists the less elaborate: *krijg een koperen kind, dan ken je je rotpoetsen* "have a copper child, then you can polish yourself rotten."

⁸ *De muizehoog* and its explanation are given by Endt (1974:78).

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Table 1: Combinations of disease names and expressions

<u>Serious:</u>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
de kanker "cancer"	+	+		+				+	+
de kelere "cholera"	+	+	+	+		+			+
het lazarus "leprosy"	+					+			+
de pee "plague"	+				+		+		
de pest "plague"	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+
de pleuris "pleurisy"	+	+		+		+	+		+
de pokken "(small) pox"	+	+	+	+		+	+		
de tering "consumption"	+	+	+	+				+	+
de tyfus "typhoid fever"	+	+	+						+
de zenuwen "nervous disorder"	+	+	+	+		+			
de ziekte "disease, plague"	+				+	+			
<u>Mild / humorous:</u>									
het apezuur "ape acid"	+					+			
de pip "pip"	+				+				
de schurft "scabies"	+						+		
<u>Miscellaneous:</u>									
een beroerte "stroke"						+			
naar "nauseated"						+			
een ongeluk "accident"						+			
rot "rotten"			+	+		+			

+ = combinations of disease names and expressions known to my informants

Numbers stand for the following expressions:

1 = krijg de/het _____! "come down with _____!"

2 = _____-lijer! "_____ -sufferer"

3 = pejorative prefix for humans

4 = pejorative prefix for things

5 = intensifier: als de _____ "like the _____"

6 = verb intensifier: ik werk me de _____ "I work myself the _____"

7 = de _____ in hebben "to be angry"

8 = de _____ aan iets (gezien) hebben "to hate something"

9 = derived verbs and other expressions

Disease names which apparently only occur in expression 1: de beris "?", de cetem "skin diseases", het heen-en-weer "back and forth", een kind met een koperen kop "a child with a copper head", de muizehoog "mouse-high (voice)", het rambam "pseudo-disease", de rolling "epilepsy", het schijt / de schijterij "diarrhea", het speen "hemorrhoids", de takke "fits, seizures", de vellen "rash".