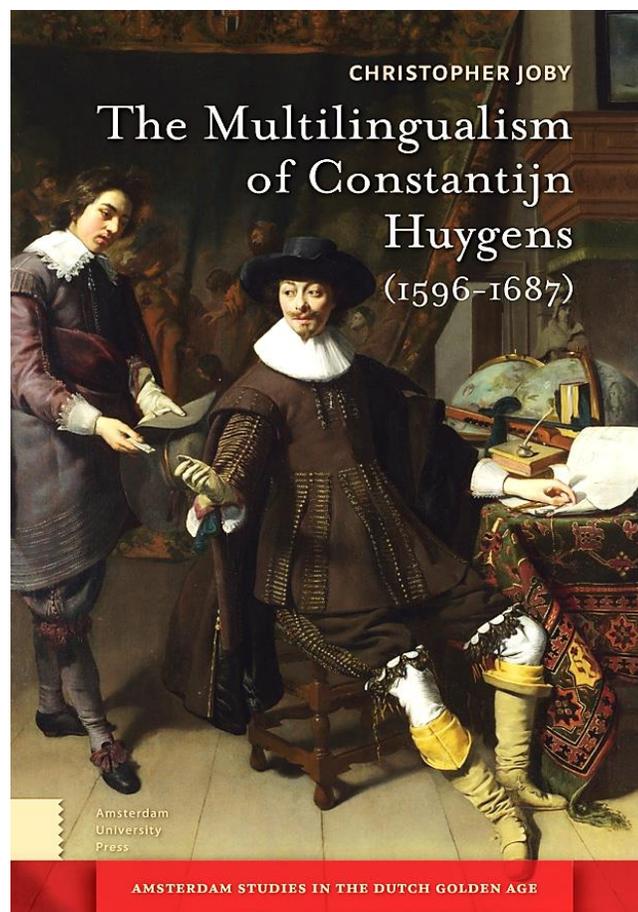


Review
Christopher Joby
The multilingualism of Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687)
[Amsterdam studies in the Dutch Golden Age]
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Reviewed by Ton Broos



One superstar at the firmament of the Golden Age in the Low Countries is without any doubt Constantijn Huygens. His early upbringing in a wealthy family, his talents, ambitions and connections made him into one of the most influential people of the 17th century. His skills ranged from secretary to the Prince of Orange, Frederick Henry, to correspondent and friends with European heavy-weights like Descartes, Barlaeus, Rubens, and John Donne, besides being a composer and player of the lute, architect, scientist, playwright and poet. In this study we learn about Huygens' talent for languages and the result is impressive. The author starts first with an introduction to multilingualism in general and to that of Huygens in particular, and he succeeds in giving a framework of the United Provinces in general and of Huygens as its representative.

Huygens had ability in and used eight languages: Dutch, French, Latin, Greek, Italian, English, Spanish and German. Even today, speaking more than one language is not surprising for most of the inhabitants of the Low Countries, but Huygens shows his versatility in several. Of course we should keep in mind that the borders of the various countries were not fixed in the 17th century, and that the languages, and dialects, were equally fluid. Still, Huygens was definitely a genius, who learned Dutch as a first language, French and Latin before his tenth birthday, Greek at early teenage years and Italian and English during his later teens. At Leiden University and subsequently at diplomatic missions he could practice his skills, and later added Spanish and a certain competence in German. All this can be gleaned from his poems and international correspondence, which according to the author of this study could amount to as many as 70,000 letters during his lifetime. He lived to be 91.

All aspects of Huygens' multilingualism are discussed in different chapters, first in general terms, and then in terms of his language acquisition, his "multidimensionality", Huygens' use of it in music, science, and architecture, and last but not least his translation skills. The next chapter deals with code switching. This term remains elusive, and the author seems to be unconvinced by other scholars who describe it as "alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties" (Huygens uses more than two) or relating to spoken languages, which is of course not applicable to Huygens. His switching applies to written language, for which there is the term "macaronics". Then we have to deal with "intrasentential" and "intersentential" writing. It looks convincing, but the author retained my attention much longer when presenting examples of Huygens' usage of euphemisms, critical terms, neologisms, medical terms, puns and rhymes. I wished he had given the reader more extensive quotes, and complete poems, reflecting the Huygens we would like to have for dinner with international friends. Now we have to do with a small selection in the appendix. Of course all Huygens' texts can be found on the websites, but it would make for a more enjoyable study, which is now an

enormous exercise in minutely detailed word searching. It affects the writing style occasionally, as on p. 230 where I counted six sentences starting with “In”.

The final chapter deals with the Huygens family. Daughter Susanna had deliberately (!) received less education than her four brothers, of whom Christiaan is the well-known scientist (pendulum clock), Constantijn Jr. the secretary to William III, and Lodewijck the language champion. Philips, the least well known, wrote to his brother Christiaan this funny multilingual sentence: “*Ses iam dico vos esse praestentissimos verrkyckeratorum Slypatores*” (‘But now I say that you are the most excellent of lens grinders of telescopes’).

Similar pleasures can be found in some of the footnotes in this study. They are full of little tidbits, like the fact that there were at least 12 Dutch Calvinist churches in England, or that half of all aliens in England were Dutch, or that there was very little teaching of English in schools in the Netherlands. Also, there were about 3,000 Scots soldiers in Dutch service in 1603. Huygens had about 10,000 books in his library, he wore spectacles for much of his life, Rubens corresponded in Spanish, French, Dutch and Italian, and a Richard Dafforne taught Dutch in London at the time. These details are the currants in the porridge and do make the reader smile, because one feels sometimes overwhelmed by an overload of minutiae.

There is not much to criticize about this study. However, I cannot resist to point out a few minor tweaks. On p. 88 in a footnote about a poem in French, the author translates the Dutch “*het zijn paradoxen, ik meen het niet*” as “they are paradoxes, I don’t think”. I believe the latter part means: “I am not serious.” The author interprets the name of Jacob Cats’ summer home *Sorghvliet* as the compound of ‘care’ and ‘stream’ or ‘refuge’. I interpret it (also) as ‘worry’ and ‘avoid’ or ‘flee’, which is appropriate for an out-of-town residence. A Huygens wordplay on his friend Utricia Ogle and her beautiful voice reads: “*’T is geen’ Ogel, nae die gorgel: / ’T scheelt een’ letter; ’t is een Orgel.*” The author translates: “It is no Ogel, after that gargle. / It lacks a letter; it is an Orgel” (p. 140). I agree that orgel means ‘organ’ and Huygens likens her voice to the musical instrument, but ‘gorgel’ is not the noun from the verb ‘gorgelen’ meaning to ‘gargle’ but is the common word for ‘throat’.

As a service to the student it would have been interesting if we were provided with the transcription of the letter from Huygens to Anna Maria van Schurman (also a remarkable polyglot wunderkind!) on p. 240, which is now an exercise in staring at ink stains. The page from the *Olla Podrida* poem is likewise just a curiosum and the colour quality of the illustrations is below par in this expensive work.

Overall, however, the scholarly world of the Dutch Golden Age will be delighted with this study which is a wonderful addition to the extensive literature by and about Constantijn Huygens.

About the reviewer

Ton Broos studied Dutch Language and Literature at the universities of Amsterdam and Nijmegen. He taught Dutch at Sheffield University (UK) and was until recently Director of Dutch Studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, USA. He has published on Jacob Campo Weyerman's *Biographies of Painters* (Rodopi, 1990) and other 18th century Dutch literary subjects. Other publications include Anne Frank's literary interests, and translations of the medieval plays *Elckerlyc* (Medieval Institute Publications, 2007) and *Mariken van Nieumegen* (Medieval Institute Publications, in press).

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