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*Document version:*  
Peer reviewed version

*Publication date:*  
2014

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
de Ruiter, A. C. J. (2014). *Jews in the Netherlands and their languages*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 116). [https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/upload/06dc7c8b-1819-4750-8e29-50313da16f75\\_TPCS\\_116\\_DeRuiter.pdf](https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/upload/06dc7c8b-1819-4750-8e29-50313da16f75_TPCS_116_DeRuiter.pdf)

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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 116

### **Jews in the Netherlands and their languages**

by

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November 2014



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# **Jews in the Netherlands and their languages**

*Jan Jaap de Ruiter*

## **ABSTRACT**

Cultural contacts between majority and minority groups involve many different aspects, one of which is language. Jews have been living in the Netherlands since around the beginning of the sixteenth century. In the two centuries that followed, their language repertoire was very rich, consisting of at least five different languages. As a result of processes of integration, speeded up by strongly pushed politics of assimilation pursued in line with the equality principle of the French revolution, Dutch Jews in the nineteenth century gave up using nearly all their original languages in favour of Dutch. The article describes these processes of language shift among Dutch Jews and poses the question whether the results of the acculturation process of the Jews going from being multilingual towards becoming monolingual are to be considered a success in terms of acculturation or a loss in terms of culture.

**KEY WORDS** Languages of Jews, History of Dutch Jews, Integration, Assimilation, Emancipation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the Dutch Golden Age, roughly coinciding with the seventeenth century and in the age that followed, Jewish communities living in the Netherlands made use of the following languages: Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew, Yiddish, Dutch, German and French<sup>1</sup>. At the end of the nineteenth century, not much was left of this linguistic abundance and the language that Dutch Jews spoke and wrote, predominantly if not exclusively, had become Dutch. At that time, the Jews were considered integrated, if not assimilated into Dutch society. This article describes the acculturation processes of Jews in the Netherlands based on the languages they used from the beginning of their stay in the country from around 1600 onwards until the end of the nineteenth century. Key questions investigated in this contribution are what processes have

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<sup>1</sup> Latin, Rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic are also on the list but, as these languages were used by very small groups of learned Jews and on a very small scale, their treatment is not necessary for understanding this contribution.

taken place in the language profiles of the Jews in the period under consideration and what caused them to give up their various languages. A related issue that is addressed is whether exchanging one's multilingual origins for a nearly exclusive adoption of the language of the host community should be considered a success for the community under concern and for society at large.

The article starts with a discussion of the theoretical context in which the languages of the Jews are considered, followed by a number of methodological remarks. Next, the history of the languages that the Jews in the Netherlands used is presented, interwoven with their own history. Three periods of time are set apart: the area of arrival and settlement of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews in the Netherlands from around 1600 until 1795; the so-called French period from 1795 until 1813, and finally the period from 1813 until around 1875. In the final part, the answers to the questions posed are presented, followed by a discussion.

## **CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LANGUAGE**

Cross-cultural psychology explores processes that take place when cultures make contact. In practice, this mostly concerns a non-dominant culture coming into contact with a dominant one. A key concept is acculturation. It refers to processes taking place when cultures come into contact, and no single possible outcome of this contact is excluded. It can range from full assimilation to full segregation of the non-dominant culture or group. Acculturation is therefore not identical to integration as is erroneously assumed in quite a number of historical studies, including publications dealing with the history of Jews<sup>2</sup>. This article, and related ones as well (Bax & De Ruiter, 2006; De Ruiter, 2009) depart from the cross-cultural model proposed by Berry (1997). With regard to cultural contacts between new groups in a given society and this society itself, Berry poses two key questions. The first one is formulated as follows: "Is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics?" The second question is: "Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with larger society?" In the simplest terms, there are two possible answers to these questions: 'yes' and 'no'. If both questions are answered in the affirmative, i.e., if "maintenance of one's identity

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<sup>2</sup> For instance Wallet (2007) refers regularly to 'acculturated' or "integrated" Jews without indicating in what respect these two concepts differ from each other; in Blom et al. (1995) several terms referring to integration are used without further specification. Without giving any further explanation of the term, Zwiars (2003) discusses the "forced acculturation" of Jews, which would be comparable to that of migrants in our times ([www.stichtingjiddisj.nl](http://www.stichtingjiddisj.nl)).

and characteristics” and “maintenance of relationships with larger society” are both considered of value, the type of acculturation in question is that of *integration* of the new group. If the answer to both questions is a negative one, the case is one of *marginalization* of the non- dominant group; if the answer is ‘yes’ to question one and ‘no’ to question two, the case is one of *segregation*. Finally, in the case of a ‘no’ to question one and a ‘yes’ to question two, the resulting type of acculturation is *assimilation*. It goes without saying that variation within the group is not only possible but also extremely likely. But since it concerns a model, simplification is necessary for the sake of clarity and besides that the extent of internal variation usually comes out quite clearly when individual cases are discussed in more detail.

Language is an important element in cross-cultural research. In the cases of assimilation as Berry conceives it, the non dominant groups tends to loose it in time; while in cases of segregation it continues playing an important role within the community under concern. Next to language there are obviously other factors that play a role in processes of acculturation. These include gender, socio economic status, level of education and religion. In the present study, the so-called ‘push and pull’ factor plays a role as well (Galchenko et al., 2006). ‘Push’ migration takes place when migrants are forced to leave their place of origin. In cases of a ‘pull’ migration, the new country pulls or attracts new migrants, but nothing stands in the way of their returning to their home countries if they wish to do so. Generally speaking, ‘push’ factors are likely to promote integration and assimilation while ‘pull’ factors tend to slow down integration and lead to assimilation less quickly.

## **PROCEDURES**

As introduced in the beginning of this article, the languages concerned of Dutch Jews were the following: Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew, Yiddish, Dutch, German and French<sup>3</sup>. Hebrew is together with Aramaic one of the languages of the Torah, the Talmud and countless religious documents. These language were written and read, but hardly if not spoken, and enjoyed a high status. The mother tongues of the Sephardic Jews were Portuguese and originally Spanish as well. Spanish was as well highly valued as the language of the literature produced by Sephardic Jews. Ashkenazi Jews spoke Yiddish, basically a Germanic language written in Hebrew, strongly influenced by Hebrew and in Eastern Europe by Slavic languages. Dutch would ultimately become an important language for both Jewish communities. At the end of

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<sup>3</sup> See note 2.

the seventeenth century, French was reinforced by the coming of Huguenots to the Netherlands, and was to become an important language of culture for developed Jews as it was likewise for the Dutch cultural elite. German was a language used by Ashkenazi rabbis in the nineteenth century.

#### **ARRIVAL AND SETTLEMENT OF JEWS IN THE NETHERLANDS AND CONSOLIDATION OF THEIR PRESENCE (1600-1795)**

The Spanish Kings pursued a rough policy of conversion and assimilation vis-à-vis the Jews, which culminated on 31 March 1492 with King Ferdinand II issuing a decree presenting the Jews with either of two options: to either leave the Iberian Peninsula or convert to Catholicism. Until 1515, some 100,000 Jews ultimately went for the last option. Some 50,000 others took refuge in other countries on the Mediterranean such as the Ottoman Empire. Around 70,000 Jews left for Portugal, where circumstances were still relatively good, but when in 1536 the Inquisition became active in that country as well, intensifying persecution after 1540, Jews left for countries in the Balkans, and for countries like Italy and places like Antwerp. Sometime later, in 1568, the Dutch Revolt against Spanish rule started in the northern part of the Low Countries. In 1585 the Duke of Parma occupied the city of Antwerp and the Dutch responded by blocking the Scheldt River and in doing so cut off the port of Antwerp, crippling the city's economy and that of other ports in Flanders as well. This made Jews and others leave these cities and they headed for northern towns like Middelburg, Rotterdam and Amsterdam, which was to become the centre of Dutch Jewry. In 1579, the Union of Utrecht Treaty had promulgated freedom of religion for all in the Netherlands. In practice, this meant that the Reformed Church, in particular after the final victory over Spain at the end of the Eighty Years' War in 1648, was in charge but that there was a measure of tolerance towards other religions such as Judaism and Catholicism.

Portuguese Jewish migrants to the Netherlands, often formally converted to Catholicism, who no longer had any family ties with Spain and Portugal could now, without fear of being caught in the tentacles of the Inquisition, return to the religion of their ancestors. Others remained so-called new or pseudo-Christians because they had good reason to fear for the safety of family members that had stayed behind on the Iberian Peninsula or if they wanted to maintain their commercial relations. Whether they belonged to the 'converted' group or to those that returned to their roots, it soon turned out that they had forgotten much

of their ancient religion and that therefore the need for knowledge was strong. Rabbis and scholars were attracted from abroad, such as Rabbi Jozef Pardo from Venice and Talmudic scholar Isak Uziel from Morocco (Swetschinski, 1995). The Sephardic Jews were well educated and they had a broad network of commercial and personal relations extending all over Europe. They were to contribute substantially to the Dutch Republic's welfare and warfare.

Around the year 1630, there were some 900 Portuguese Jews living in Amsterdam. According to Kaplan (1995), Portuguese was their most important language of oral and written communication and continued to be so for a very long time. The Portuguese Jews had a sufficient knowledge of written Dutch as business contracts with their Dutch partners were formulated in that language. However, they hardly if at all made use of Dutch as a written language among themselves. In their administration and their archives, the Dutch authorities refer to them as "Portuguese salesmen" and Hugo de Groot writes about "refugees from Portugal" (Swetschinski, 1995, p. 76). Reinders (1969, p. 33) relates that the Amsterdam administration as early as 1616 developed a separate 'printed oath' [eedformulier] for Jews in Portuguese. In order to obtain civil rights [burgerrecht] or burghership [poorterecht] an oath had to be taken. With the Jews focusing on their trade and business, and once again freely practicing their religion, living under the strict social control exerted by the Mahamed and Rabbis, the position of the Portuguese language among them was reinforced rather than diminished. Epitaphs in the Sephardic cemetery in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel and its administration were in Portuguese (Hagoort, 2005, p. xvi), and so were the records of schools and business enterprises. The continuous arrival, at least until the second decade of the eighteenth century (Kaplan, 1995), of new migrants from Portugal contributed to the maintenance of the strong position this language held among them. Portuguese was the language of books, newspapers, journals and pamphlets [vlugschriften] that appeared in the seventeenth and the major part of the eighteenth centuries. In the course of the eighteenth century, Sephardic Jews started writing in French, followed at the end of the eighteenth century by Dutch.

According to Offenbergh (2003, p. 308), the Sephardic Jews arriving in the Netherlands had lost nearly all of their knowledge of Hebrew due to the rigid conversion policies of the Spanish kings. Recruiting Rabbis and Talmud scholars from abroad soon redressed this loss. In the wake of these religious scholars, synagogues and schools were established and well-to-do parents began to hire private tutors for their children, as a result of which the level of

Hebrew rose. Reading and writing Hebrew poetry became very popular and was to remain so until the second half of the eighteenth century.

In the Netherlands, Spanish became a language of culture and to a lesser extent of science as well. There were some Sephardic Jews that had studied medicine in Spain, and later, after 1650, in the Netherlands. They would settle in Holland as doctors, publishing their academic studies in Spanish as well as in Portuguese. Sephardic writers composed poetry and plays in Spanish as well. Both Jewish and non-Jewish readers and theatregoers were quite enthusiastic about these works. Kaplan (1995) mentions Daniël Levi de Barrios (1635-1701) as the most important author at the time but his works were disapproved of by the Mahamed due to their allegedly profane and sometimes erotic character. Two literary academies were established, *Tremor Divino*, Divine Fright, in 1676 and *Los Floridos*, The Gifted Ones, in 1685. The latter organized the performance of Spanish language plays, often in the spacious dwellings of well-to-do Jews on Wednesday afternoons. In 1750, a society for the protection of the Spanish theatre was founded (Kaplan, 1995, p. 158; Den Boer, 2002). There were authors that wrote in Spanish but in Portuguese as well and even in Hebrew, as is the case with Jozef Penso de la Vega (1650-1692). The language of the newspaper *Gazeta de Amsterdam*, the first copy of which appeared in 1672 and of which only few copies have been preserved (Offenberg, 2003), was Spanish. The newspaper aimed to inform Jewish communities in and outside Europe on the latest political news and it found its way to Jews living as far away as Venice, Saloniki, Istanbul and Recife. In the eighteenth century, Spanish as well as Portuguese had to give way to French, the language of the Huguenots that fled to the Netherlands, and, more importantly for its adoption by the Jews, the language of the Enlightenment.

Of particular interest are the academic contacts that were established between Jewish and non-Jewish scholars as both Jews and Christians studied intensively the holy book they had in common, the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Old Testament. The establishment of the study of Hebrew and the appointment of the first professor of Hebraism (Jewish Studies) date back to the very first years of the University of Leiden, which was established in 1575. Kaplan (1995, p. 168) reports on a correspondence on all kinds of theological issues between Groningen professor Jacobus Alting, who taught oriental languages, and Rabbi Abraham Senior Coronel. The Reformed Church tended to be suspicious in cases like these. Its attitude towards Jews, as Brugmans & Frank (1940) observe, tended to be more negative than that of the municipal authorities, the dilemma being that although the Jews had brought forth the Messiah, and in spite of the fact that they



recognized the Old Testament as well, they were nevertheless still the killers of Christ and, more importantly, hardly inclined or not at all to convert to Christianity. Brugmans & Frank (1940) give a striking description of the attitude taken by various groups in society towards the Jews in the seventeenth century: “de positie van de overheid (was) welwillend en verdraagzaam; van de kerk, afkeurend en onverdraagzaam; van de bevolking, gematigd en onverschillig” (p. 642), “the position of the state was well-disposed and tolerant; that of the church disapproving and intolerant; and that of the population moderate and indifferent”.

In 1618, the Thirty Years’ War broke out and from that time onwards more and more High-German [Hoogduitse] or Ashkenazi Jews started coming into the Netherlands from Germany, to be followed by Jews from Poland after 1648. Ashkenazi Jews were permitted to frequent Portuguese synagogues but membership was forbidden. In 1635, they established their own community followed by the building of their own synagogues.

As was mentioned above, there were some 900 Portuguese Jews living in Amsterdam in 1630. The number of Ashkenazim at the time was around 60. In 1650, these numbers had risen to 1,400 and 1,000 respectively, making up 1,4 % of the total population of the city at the time. In 1674, there were 180,000 people living in Amsterdam, 5,000 of whom were Jewish, the majority by then being of Ashkenazi extraction, which would remain to be the case from then on. In 1725, there were 9,000 Ashkenazi Jews living in Amsterdam and in 1750 this figure had risen to 14,500. In that same period, the number of Sephardic Jews decreased from 3,000 to 2,800. On the eve of the French Revolution, there were 30,000 Jews living in the Republic, 20,000 of them in Amsterdam, accounting for 10% of the total population of the city.

Kaplan (1995, p. 162) observes that as far as linguistic richness was concerned the Ashkenazim could hardly compete with the Sephardim, as the former spoke only one language, Yiddish, their mother tongue. This language had originated in the relative isolation in which they had lived in Central and Eastern Europe. Most Ashkenazi Jews were good salesmen and they could thus be found on the streets and in market places (Fuks-Mansfeld, 2003). They picked up the language spoken there quite easily and acquired Dutch quickly as a result. Dutch came to influence the Yiddish they spoke, which gradually got to resemble Dutch more and more. When newspapers in Yiddish began to appear, they took over news and bulletins from Dutch newspapers, thus reinforcing even more the Dutch influence on their language. The isolation in which the Ashkenazi Jews had lived in Central Europe had given Rabbis the time and the opportunity to study Hebrew Scriptures and documents in detail. The arrival of these Rabbis in the Netherlands, in particular those from Poland, was to lead to the

reinforcement of Hebrew in Holland. But knowledge of Hebrew hardly trickled down to the poor Ashkenazi Jews, although Rabbis and religious teachers from Central Europe would continue to be recruited until the nineteenth century.

Education was of great importance to both Jewish communities. In 1616, Ets Haim was established (by Jews from the Sephardic community), an institute for education and research that still exists today be it only as a library. Many a Sephardic scholar took his first steps at Ets Haim on his way to knowledge and research. In 1639, Sephardic Jews established Talmud Torah, a school for boys to train them in the principles of the Hebrew faith. They were taught Hebrew grammar and learned to read the Torah flawlessly, aided by written Spanish comments on it. Talmud Torah attracted pupils from the educated classes; poor families could not afford to send their children to this school. The famous book printer and Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657, see below) also went to this school. Private teachers taught Spanish and Hebrew to rich children in their houses. Ashkenazi education took place under supervision of Chief Rabbis but it did not function very well. Kaplan (1995) reports on the complaints voiced at the beginning of the eighteenth century on the quality of Ashkenazi education. Teachers apparently lacked a good command of Hebrew, causing them to stand out negatively against their Sephardic colleagues.

Both Sephardic and Ashkenazi printing and publishing were thriving in Amsterdam, which became the main centre of Hebrew printing in Europe between 1650 and 1750 (Kaplan, 1995). Books were published in Spanish, Portuguese and Yiddish and in Dutch as well. Menasse ben Israel was a pioneer when he started his *officina* in 1626. He published works in Hebrew that were bought by both Jewish communities in the Netherlands. There were only a few that were later admitted to the guilds of book publishers, like the Ashkenazi Jozef Proops in 1677, followed in 1727 by the likewise Ashkenazi book printer Mozes Frankfort (Fuks-Mansfeld, 2003, p. 151). Proops published books in all the languages mentioned above, books that found their way all over Europe (Kaplan, 1995, p. 151). In the years 1686 and 1687, twice a week a newspaper in Yiddish appeared called *Dinstagisje* and *Frajtagisje Koerant* (The Tuesday Newspaper and the Friday Newspaper). The Bible (Jewish Scriptures) appeared in a Yiddish translation twice, one by Jekutiel Blitz in 1678 published by the publishing house Uri Phoebus Halevi and one by Jozef Witzhausen, in 1679, published by the publishing house Athias. From the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards, there were almanacs that appeared in Yiddish (Kaplan, 1995, p. 163). As it was for Hebrew, Amsterdam was to become the European centre for Yiddish printing as well, which was to last until deep into the eighteenth century (Fuks-Mansfeld, 2003; Berger, 2012). The printers also published teaching

materials for Jewish schools that were linked to synagogues, in Portuguese for Sephardic pupils and in Yiddish for Ashkenazi pupils. Yiddish works were published in the Hebrew script. Many of the works that had appeared in Spanish and in Yiddish (these languages in particular) were later translated into Dutch. As a result of this, knowledge of the Jewish faith and Jewish culture grew among the Dutch population (Fuks-Mansfeld, 2003, p. 154).

What was important for both communities was that they became acquainted with a new common language: Dutch. The text of the statute (by-law) [keur] that the Amsterdam city fathers [Amsterdamse vroedschap] drew up as early as 1616 in reference to the presumed misconduct of the “Portuguese” youngsters is illustrative in this respect (Hagoort, 2005, p. 23). The Jews were warned not to say or write anything “ ’t welk eenigsints soude moge strecken tot versmadenis van onse Christelijke Religie; niet te poogen eenig Christen persoon van onse Christelicke Religie af te trecken ...”, “that would harm in any measure our Christian religion; not to try to pull away any Christian person from our Christian religion ...”. It is striking that the statute refers to the act of writing without specifying whether this applies to writing in Dutch or in Portuguese.

For a long time, the two Jewish communities, the Sephardim and Ashkenazim, were to continue to develop themselves separately from one another. There was very little if any intermarriage and it was only in the nineteenth century that the two groups, forced by the economy and a by the policy of emancipation pursued by the authorities and the Jewish elite, would come to a cautious approach culturally speaking and that members of the two communities began to intermarry.

Furthermore, there has always existed a strong bond between both Jewish communities and the reigning House of Orange. By European standards, Jews in the Netherlands enjoyed a relatively large measure of freedom and they showed their gratitude for this to Stadholders and municipal authorities. This attitude was undoubtedly inspired by what was referred to above as the ‘push’ factor. There was no way back for the Jews and it was therefore wise of them to seek the protection of the authorities in their new country. Stadholders and municipal authorities were received in synagogues of both communities on a regular basis, an example being the visit in 1642 of Stadholder Frederik Hendrik, his son William and the English Queen Mary to the first Portuguese synagogue, which was inaugurated in 1639. A newly built synagogue in the Muiderstraat was inaugurated in 1675 in the presence of the complete Amsterdam city council.

The end of the seventeenth century marks the beginning of the decline of the Republics’ prosperity. The century that followed saw a continuous loss of Dutch political and

cultural strength. The country got into three wars with the English, and the French were a constant threat on its southern borders. More than once the stock market crashed, leaving the cities struck by poverty, and providing poor relief only to their indigenous citizens. The Jews, with both communities now getting impoverished, were left completely to themselves. The eighteenth century was to become the age of the Enlightenment, of the ideas of civil equality in particular, and its influence stretched to the Netherlands as well. The ideas were picked up and spread by the so-called Patriots, the opponents of the Stadholders. The Ashkenazi Jews in particular were enthusiastic about these ideas as they offered a way out of the misery that many of them were living in. Nevertheless, the Jews as a whole remained loyal to the Stadholders and the regent classes, which found themselves challenged more and more by the Patriots.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the language profile of the Jews was still quite rich. At home, Jews spoke their mother tongues, Yiddish though being more frequently used than Portuguese. During the entire eighteenth century Portuguese was to be the dominant written language in the Sephardic community: minutes of meetings, documents related to synagogues were written in Portuguese and if necessary translators or interpreters were hired. Epitaphs were written both in Portuguese and in Hebrew. From around 1750 onwards, Christian dates (CE/AD) were mentioned on graves as well. The importance of Spanish gradually diminished in the course of the eighteenth century as a language of culture, being abandoned in favour of French, and was eventually used only as a language of communication in synagogues, in teaching materials of Jewish schools and in reprints of secular and religious works. Sephardic theatre troupes that used to put on plays in Spanish switched to plays in Dutch in spite of the attempts to protect the Spanish language through the academies as described above. In the Sephardic schools Spanish was replaced by French as a language of instruction, which in its turn was later on replaced by Dutch, while Portuguese would continue to be taught and used, be it in a strongly corrupted form. During the French period (see below), the language of instruction was to be Dutch only in Sephardic schools. There was thus a continuous and growing influence of Dutch throughout the eighteenth century, in the Sephardic community in particular. According to Fuks-Mansfeld (1995a, p. 198; 1995b, p. 210), the Portuguese community had switched to Dutch virtually entirely by the end of the eighteenth century. She does not indicate, however, how she arrives at this conclusion. She is probably right as far as the elite of the Sephardic community were concerned. But the question is whether the Dutch language had indeed already replaced Portuguese in other layers of the Sephardic community as well. She makes a similar claim with regard to Yiddish

in the Ashkenazy community, which she says had been replaced by Dutch by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well. In her opinion, the shift from Portuguese and Yiddish to Dutch had effectively taken place within a single generation. Below it is argued that this transition must have taken much longer and that Yiddish in particular would remain a language of informal communication well into the nineteenth century. Hagoort relativizes Fuks-Mansfeld's claims when she states that the Sephardic Jews that had intensive contacts with the Dutch authorities had a good command of the Dutch language but that the language of internal communication continued to be Portuguese. After 1795, messages related to daily affairs were read aloud both in Portuguese and in Dutch in the Sephardic synagogues [huishoudelijke mededelingen] (Hagoort, 2005, p. 177-178).

Yiddish maintained its role as mother tongue and language of communication relatively strongly in the Ashkenazi communities in the eighteenth century. From the middle of this century, Ashkenazi Jews began to write Yiddish historical works some of which were later translated into Dutch. Later, Sephardic writers like David Franco Mendes (1713-1792) would follow them, obviously writing in Spanish and in Portuguese. The Ashkenazi community developed furthermore a modest theatre tradition (Kaplan, 1995, p. 162). In 1784, a Jewish opera and theatre company was established that performed Yiddish versions of French and German operas. Plays were mostly works written in Yiddish that expressed the ideas of the Enlightenment or even propagated them actively. The paradox is that the Yiddish language itself was to fall victim to the emancipation movement engendered by the ideas of the Enlightenment considering that by the end of the nineteenth century hardly any Dutch Jew still used it as a language of communication. The resistance against Yiddish was also fed by the works and ideas of Jewish reformist Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786; Van Ginneken, 1913) who, as early as the middle of the eighteenth century and thus long before the French revolution, urged Jews in Germany to abandon Yiddish and aim at using German, arguing that the -linguistic- isolation of the Jews in Europe had to come to an end. In the Netherlands, voices were raised as well to replace the so-called 'jargon', the name both Jews and non-Jews had used to refer to Yiddish since around 1750, by Dutch (Voorzanger, 1915). The transition from Yiddish to Dutch continued during the eighteenth century.

Finally, the end of the eighteenth century showed a modest revival of Hebrew poetry. A Hebrew Chamber of Rhetoric [rederijkersclub] (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995a, p. 200) was established.

## THE FRENCH ERA

Prussian troops prevented a dash for power by the patriots in 1787 but in 1795 French revolutionary forces occupied the Netherlands and the Stadholder and his family took in the end refuge in England<sup>4</sup>. In the first instance, the patriots acquired power under French supervision and formed the Batavian Republic. The French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte decided nonetheless to consolidate his grip on the Netherlands and in 1806 put his brother Louis on the throne. Louis Napoleon's reign lasted until 1810 when the Low Countries were incorporated as part of France. After the fall of the French empire, the son of Stadholder William V, who had fled to England, was invited to return to the country (to eventually become King William I (1772-1843)) in November 1813. The southern Netherlands (present-day Belgium) were added to the Netherlands and both parts together now formed, together with the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg, the new Kingdom of the Netherlands. As of the year 1795, the country was ruled from one central seat of power. The cities, which had been the true centres of power until the French era, were forced to give up their privileges, and guilds were abolished. The French revolutionary principle of liberty, equality and fraternity implied that every citizen enjoyed equal rights and duties, irrespective of their religious background. Protestants, the previously dominant class, Catholics, whose religion was formally forbidden before 1795, and Jews were to be equal before the Law.

However, the decision-making process of the emancipation of the Dutch Jews took so much time that a number of mainly Ashkenazi Jews decided to establish an association called Felix Libertate on 11 February 1796. The association had the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* translated into Yiddish in March 1796 and presented it to the Mahamed requesting it to have the document read aloud in the synagogues (Italie, 1898a), which the latter quite rudely refused to do. This event led to the publication of the so-called *Diskursn* by Felix Libertate. These *Diskursn* were public letters written in a Yiddish version, aimed at the Mahamed and the Jewish Ashkenazi community, and a Dutch version, aimed at the Dutch authorities and the Dutch general public (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995a, p. 193; Offenbach, 2003; Italie 1898a, b & c presents a meticulous account of this correspondence and the effectiveness of the *Diskursn*). In the end, the National Assembly of the Batavian Republic

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<sup>4</sup> The events of the Prussian troops besieging Amsterdam was reported on in two eyewitness accounts, one in Yiddish and one in Portuguese (see Fuks-Mansfeld & Fuks, 1973).

decided on 2 December 1796 to grant the Jews fully-fledged civil rights (Schama, 1989 p. 315<sup>5</sup>).

During as well as after the French era, the Mahamed, traditionally supporters of the House of Orange, were not at all enthusiastic about the novelties of the Enlightenment. They preferred “the ghetto over the road to heterodoxy and mixed marriage” (Zij zaten liever “in het getto dan op weg naar heterodoxie en het gemengde huwelijk”) ( Schama, 1989, p. 39). The Rabbis kept a very low profile during the French era. They were under the strict control of the Mahamed and according to Fuks-Mansfeld (1995a) they hardly spoke any Dutch.

The Batavian Republic was not very effective in its policy vis-à-vis the Jews. It was King Louis Napoleon who seriously undertook efforts for the emancipation of the Jews. By decree, he installed on 12 September 1808 the High Consistory of the High German Israelite Congregations in the Kingdom of Holland (Opperconsistorie der Hoogduitsche Israelitische Gemeenten in het Koninkrijk Holland) (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995a, p. 195). With this act, he neutralized the split of the Neie Kille, a new movement of enlightened Ashkenazi Jews sprung forth from the Alte Kille, the existing Ashkenazi Jews. Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews were given new names that were considered more in keeping with modern times: they were now referred to as the Dutch-Portuguese community and the High German Israelite community. Apart from centralizing the Jews, Louis Napoleon also strove for the reform of Jewish education and in 1808 abolished by decree the use of Yiddish as a language of communication of the Jews (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995a, p. 202; Wallet, 2006). The actual execution of the decree took a while but the future King William I would make it one of the essential points of his language politics.

#### **AFTER THE FRENCH ERA**

With the House of Orange reinstalled, the conservative Jews, who constituted the majority, were hoping for the restoration of the good old days of before 1795. But that was not to be. The new King inherited a country that was doing miserably economically but that was equipped with a strong central power structure. All he had to do was to position him at the top of it in order to obtain authority. As a result, the King introduced few modifications into the institutions of the state and the laws that had been introduced by the French. As early as

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<sup>5</sup> Quotes from Schama (1977) are taken from the Dutch translation of his work (1989).

December 1813, a month after his return to the Netherlands, he installed a committee that was to occupy itself with the text of a new constitution under the supervision of politician Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp (1762-1834). On 29 March 1814, the final version of the text was approved.

The new King pursued the politics of centralization of the Jews as championed by his French predecessors, and on 26 February 1814 by Royal Decree installed the Commission for Issues Related to the Israelites, renamed in 1815 as the Head Commission for Issues related to the Israelites, a commission that would continue to function until 1870. The commission was supervised by the new Ministry of Reformed and Other Forms of Worship [Ministerie van Hervormde en andere Erediensten], which was to continue to function until 1848, when a more effective separation of church and state would be implemented. The Commission consisted of seven to nine members coming from both Jewish communities taken together. The Sephardic Jews were to supply the president of the Commission during the major part of its existence (Wallet, 2007; De Leeuw, 1987/1988).

Being a government institution, the Head Commission communicated in Dutch only. Wallet (2007) reports on a number of Jewish communities, in Luxemburg and Limburg among others, expressing the trouble they had writing in Dutch. The Commission refused to budge on the issue and remained adamant that correspondence was to be conducted in Dutch only. My own research in the National Archives in The Hague on the first years of the correspondence of the Commission showed that all documents and all outgoing letters were in Dutch. Some of the incoming letters were written in Yiddish in the Hebrew alphabet but the replies were always in Dutch. The Head Commission was to become the most important institution in managing Jewish communities in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century. Parnassim, who for a large part had to give up their authority, and Rabbis, who likewise saw their power crumbling, ended up being completely subservient to the Commission, which in turn was supervised by the Ministry mentioned above. Government and Commission would undertake the irreversible emancipation of the Jews and implement it rigorously, the goal of their language policy being to implement the Dutch language even in the most intimate parts of Jewish life and in the services in their synagogues. The price they had to pay for their equality was, as Fuks-Mansfeld (1995b, p. 207) observes: “de teloorgang van een deel van de traditioneel overgedragen kennis van de joodse cultuur en religie,” “the loss of part of the traditionally transmitted knowledge of Jewish culture and religion”, and this loss included their original languages. While in the eighteenth century the Jewish communities were well-versed in Spanish poetry, in their knowledge of Hebrew, spoke Yiddish and Portuguese



fluently at home, next to Dutch in the streets and in their contacts with Dutchmen, spoke French as a language of culture, Dutch ended up being their dominant if not their only language of communication. The final part of this process is described in the following section.

## **REGULATIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

In 1815, the Regulations of the Dutch Israelite Main Synagogue in Amsterdam were drawn up<sup>6</sup>. They consisted of 19 chapters, each subdivided into articles and subsections. The agreement printed on pages 62 and 63 contains stipulations to the effect that there are in principle two Jewish communities, the Dutch Portuguese and the High German Israelite, or the ancient Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities. Different articles relate to the role of language in these Jewish communities. The following articles mention the Dutch language: article 6 of Chapter I, 'On the community in general'; articles 37m and 37n of Chapter II 'On the governors of the Community'; article 52 of Chapter III 'On the Parnassim-Treasurers'; article 123 of Chapter X 'On the Chief Rabbi'; article 141 Chapter XI 'On the Cantors'; Chapter XII (contains no articles) 'On the sextons'; article 160 Chapter XIII 'On the seats and the ceremonial Order in the Church'; article 190 Chapter XVI 'On Education'. The following articles mention the Hebrew language: article 141 Chapter XI (contains no articles) 'On the Cantors'; Chapter XII 'On the sextons'. There is not a single word in the Regulations on Yiddish or Portuguese. Knowledge of Hebrew is not even a prerequisite for the Rabbis. The Head Commission was, in its language policies to consistently act in accordance with and in the spirit of the Regulations.

In 1817, there were about 37,000 Jews living in the Netherlands, most of them in Amsterdam. Economically speaking, the majority were living in poor conditions. Their lives were marked by a daily struggle against poverty and they hardly had time to develop as full citizens. The government and the Head Commission conveniently took advantage of this, unfavourable position by pushing as much as possible their acculturation in the form of assimilation. The Jewish elite were oriented towards the Dutch language and Dutch society and sent their children to Dutch universities.

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<sup>6</sup> I have a full copy of the Regulations in my possession.

The *Werdegang* of the languages of the Jews in the nineteenth century is illustrated quite clearly in the sermons held in the synagogues. Wallet (2000) describes the shift from Portuguese, Yiddish and even German as languages of the sermon, the *derasha*, to Dutch. Already in the days of King Louis Napoleon some sermons were translated into Dutch and published. These, however, had all been ‘ordered’ by Royal Decree, as was the case with the sermon by Rabbi Samuel Berenstein, originally held in German on 7 March 1804, for the benefit of the French in the wars they were engaged in. In 1836, Rabbi Carillon had his son read aloud a sermon in Dutch in the Utrecht synagogue on the occasion of the bicentennial anniversary of the University of Utrecht. This caused commotion among conservative Jews but also gained admiration from modernist Jews. In 1842, it was decided that the new Rabbi that was to be appointed in The Hague should preach in Dutch only. In the eighteen forties, sermons in the Amsterdam Esnoga were still held in Portuguese, but strikingly enough the believers would leave the synagogue when the sermon began because, as it turned out, they did not understand what it was about because they no longer spoke the language. Wallet (2012) states that the ordinary Jew was to use Yiddish still for a considerable period of time in the nineteenth century, and in that respect the enlightened Rabbis and the Head Commission formed an *avant-garde* in embracing the Dutch language. Meijer (1963) describes with considerable disdain the emancipation of the Jews in the first half of the nineteenth century, complaining about the loss of their religion, the loss of their culture and languages and referring to the useless resistance put up against this loss by the ordinary Jews in the streets. Much as they would like to stick to their language and tradition, they were not permitted to do so. Michman (1995, p.66, note 24) mentions the appearance of an article in the *Weekblad voor Israëlieten* in 1867, rather late in the nineteenth century, which tells of the numerous Jews that are unable to follow the sermons in Dutch. Zwiép (2000) describes the decline of Hebrew in relation to Yiddish in that same century. The consistent campaign by the government and the Head Commission against Yiddish led to a redefinition in the Jewish communities of the significance of Hebrew. If even, as Zwiép writes, Hebrew was taught with Yiddish as a language of instruction, it would not do well. “For the majority of the Dutch Israelites (‘Nederlandse Israëlieten’) Hebrew would soon become a language of the past” (Zwiép, 2000, p. 70, 73).

A royal decree issued in 1822 stipulated that no stranger could be admitted as Rabbi or Chief Rabbi without the permission of the Head Commission and that only Rabbis would be appointed that were religiously formed in the Netherlands (Reinsma, 1964). This decree led to major problems, as the existing religious formation centres did not offer Dutch language

programs. The originally Ashkenazi seminaries strongly opposed this decree and it was not until 1836, after 14 years of debate and discussion, that the board finally accepted a new-style Dutch language program and the seminary was given a new name: het Nederlandsch Israelitisch Seminarium, the Dutch Israelite Seminary. No one spoke of Yiddish any more. The Portuguese Seminary for Rabbis, Ets Haim, did not have comparable language problems as it had already switched to Dutch at the end of the eighteenth century. But this Seminary as well was forced to offer a program that was inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment and did so from the year 1839 onwards (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995b, p. 214). As such, both Seminaries in the end offered more or less the same program. Still it would take until 1864 before a fully-fledged Dutch language Rabbi formation program would be developed and implemented. The new director of the Dutch Israelite Seminary, dr. Joseph Hirsch Dünner, who was appointed in that same year, installed it. He also added to the Seminary a virtually complete so-called 'gymnasium' (grammar school) program at secondary-school level, and stimulated cooperation with existing universities, the result being that finally Rabbis would be completely formed in the Netherlands in a fully Dutch language program. In this context, it will be clear that the distinction between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews was becoming more and more irrelevant, a development that was further reinforced by the increasing measure of intermarriages between the two groups.

Another Royal Decree, that of 10 May 1817, stipulated the abolition of the existing Jewish religious schools and the establishment of new schools, directly linked to the synagogues, open to boys, and – and this was a novelty - to girls as well, where a curriculum was offered both in Dutch and in Hebrew under the strict supervision of the Ministry of Education (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995b, p. 213). Very strict language conditions were imposed, in particular on the teachers (Reinsma, 1964). Needless to say, the Head Commission was heavily involved in the execution of this decree. School boards were appointed by the Head Commission, and stood under the direct supervision of the Ministry, only in order to prevent Rabbis and Parnassim from obtaining too much power and influence. The use of Yiddish was forbidden. But forbidding is one thing; seeing that the prohibition is observed is quite another. Thus, Jewish school inspector Mulder was confronted with a teacher of religion at the local Jewish school in the city of Den Bosch: “een Pers van geboorte....die geen woord Hollands spreek” (Reinsma, 1964, p. 454), “A Persian by birth... who does not speak a word of Dutch”. A row ensued, and two years later there no longer was a Jewish school in Den Bosch. Wallet (2007, p. 100) mentions a case of a Jewish school in Zutphen in 1847, where Yiddish was still spoken.

Between 1816 and 1847, 73 manuals or textbooks were published for Jewish education (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995b). Between 1838 and 1847, Chief inspector Mulder wrote seven textbooks, one of which, published in 1846, was the *Leesboekje voor de Israëlitische jeugd*, (A reader for the Israelite Youth). Wallet (2007) states that the most progressive Jewish schools were found in peripheral regions like the northern and eastern Provinces of Groningen and Overijssel, and that Amsterdam, centre of orthodoxy, was the most difficult to conquer (p. 99). The new Education Act of 1853 opened up the gates of regular schools to Jewish children and ended the funding of Jewish schools. This was quite a blow to Jewish primary education. Jewish children at that time, already strongly exposed to Dutch as a language of communication, in this transfer to the regular Dutch schools, took their final step towards full ‘emancipation’.

The first half of the nineteenth century was not a period of cultural prosperity for the Jews. Initiatives were taken to publish Dutch language magazines and yearbooks. Fuks-Mansfeld (1995b, p. 222-227) mentions some of these but none of them had a long life span. The ideas expressed in them tended towards emancipation but the major part of the Jewish communities were not ready for that for the simple reason that they were extremely poor and had a hard time merely trying to survive. In 1816, a literary club called *Tongeleth*, (Usefulness), was established to study religious and literary texts in the Hebrew language. At its peak, the association numbered 50 members, trying hard to compose poems in Hebrew. The association was abolished in 1836 (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995b, p. 234). The German-Jewish reform movement Haskalah hardly influenced the conditions of Dutch Jewry. The Jews were simply too poor to pay attention to issues like the Enlightenment and emancipation. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that they would begin to pick up cultural issues again and to express them more freely. New magazines were published that continued to exist for a number of years or even up to the present day, like the *Nieuw Israëlitisch Weekblad*, established in 1865. The first Jewish Cabinet Minister in the Dutch government was Michiel Hendrik Godefroi, who was Minister of Justice from 1860-1862. He was successful in opposing an amendment by Christian leader Groen van Prinsterer, who wanted to add the adjective ‘Christian’ to the virtues that were to be taught to pupils in primary schools. The amendment was rejected and this way the Jewish minister prevented primary schools from getting too much of a Christian curriculum.

Fuks-Mansfeld (1995b, p.209) claims that around the year 1845 the Dutch language had successfully been implemented in the Jewish communities in the country and that knowledge of Hebrew had been reduced to a minimum. Judging by what has been discussed

above, this conclusion seems a bit premature and perhaps should be restricted to apply mainly to the elite of the Jews rather than the entire Jewish community. But it does not really make much of a difference. One or two generations later the Jews in the Netherlands were nearly completely and exclusively Dutch speaking.

### **THE LANGUAGE PROFILES OF THE JEWS: FROM EMANCIPATION TO ASSIMILATION**

In the Golden Age, Dutch Jews really were polyglots; towards the end of the nineteenth century most of them were using Dutch only. Hebrew, being the language of the Holy Scriptures, had not disappeared but had lost much of its prestige. The rich profile consisting of Spanish, Portuguese, Yiddish, German and French, spoken as well as written, eventually was virtually entirely reduced to Dutch.

In formulating answers to the two questions put forward by John Berry, the overriding conclusion would be that during the whole period under consideration, the Jews have felt the need to maintain good contacts with the receiving society. The answer to Berry's second question: - "Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with larger society?" - is an obvious 'yes'. With regard to the first question - "Is it considered to be of value to maintain one's identity and characteristics?" - there appear to be two possible answers, depending on the period under consideration. In the period until 1795, the dominant wish was to preserve their Jewish culture as much as possible, making the answer for that period a definite 'yes'. In the period after 1795, or rather after 1813, the answer changes into a 'no'. There is no longer a strong wish to preserve their languages and culture. In terms of Berry, the period before 1795 can thus be labelled as an era of integration, maintenance of own language and culture combined with good contacts with the host society, and the period after 1813 as an era of assimilation: fully fledged adaptation to the host culture and loss of own languages and culture. The fact that this assimilation was strongly enforced by the King, the Government and the Head Commission in no way diminishes the value of this conclusion. The ordinary Jews might have felt the urge to preserve their heritage but failed to muster up major and persistent resistance. The policies pursued by the government and the Head Commission were not accompanied by sanctions. Peacefully and steadily, the Jews were forced into modernity. Following Berry's model, the conclusion is that the Jews underwent processes of assimilation in the latter period, the Sephardim being ahead of the Ashkenazim in that respect.

While the language policies applied led to the loss of Yiddish as the dominant language of communication in the Jewish Ashkenazi community, some decades later a movement of nostalgia emerged. In this context, the following passage taken from Jewish author Voorzanger's 1915 work *Het Joodsch in Nederland*, (Jewish [= Yiddish] in the Netherlands) is revealing:

*“Nooit kwam bij mij of bij een ander, die met zijn tijd is vooruitgegaan, en niets zoo zeer veracht als de vroegere onwetendheid, domheid en barbaarschheid, de wensch opkomen, dat het Joodsch jargon weer het burgerrecht of liever het recht van bestaan bij ons verkrijge..... Voor ons Nederlandse Israëlieten, welke zich in de zon der burgerlijke vrijheid en der moderne wetenschap bakeren, is het jargon dood en begraven... Onze emancipatie heeft aan dat jargon de doodsteek toegebracht.” (...) “Dat neemt echter niet weg, dat men de doode wel eer mag bewijzen. door nu en dan een zijner vroegere gezegden aan te halen, welke rijk aan gedachten en ideeën waren.”*

“Never has the wish entered my mind or that of any other who has kept up with progressive times, and who despises nought like the ignorance, stupidity and barbarism of old, that Jewish jargon should once more gain civil right or rather the right to exist ... For us, Dutch Israelites, basking in the sun of civil liberty and modern science, the jargon is dead and buried ... Our emancipation has dealt this jargon the final blow. (...) This, however, does not preclude our honouring the dead by now and then referring to their former sayings, which were rich in thought and ideas”.

The passage is followed by an argument in which Vogelzang talks about the beauty of this ‘dead’ Yiddish language. More studies on Yiddish and the measure in which this language has enriched Dutch were to follow this publication (Beem, 1974; Van der Sijs & Van Veen, 1997). In 1998, the Dutch government even recognized Yiddish as a Regional Language in the context of the European Charter of Regional Languages. There is at present also an association for the preservation of Yiddish, but all of this is largely symbolic. Yiddish will never again be the lively language it once was in the Netherlands.

From a matter-of-fact point of view the result of the linguistic acculturation processes of the Jews in the Netherlands is a success but the regrettable side of the story, and I agree with Fuks-Mansfeld (see above) on this, is that the Jews lost their rich culture and language

repertory and that they were not the only ones that suffered as a result. In the process, Dutch society, by forcing the Jews into a petit bourgeois society model, was bereft of a rich culture and reaped a political benefit consisting solely of the fact that ‘they’ now finally used Dutch. This not only reflects the Dutch mentality prevalent at the time, but a mentality continuing to this day where migrants, Islamic ones in particular, are told and forced with soft hands and less soft hands to shift to Dutch assuming that speaking the language of the host society would lead to integration or even assimilation, easily forgetting that something more is necessary for that: namely that the host society ultimately accepts the newcomers as its equals. The Jews having integrated or assimilated as they were have always been considered others, a fate that looms over Dutch Muslims nowadays as well.

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