

Modern Dutch Grammar

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Jenneke Oosterhoff



ROUTLEDGE



Modern DUTCH Grammar

Modern Dutch Grammar: A Practical Guide is an innovative reference guide to Dutch, combining traditional and function-based grammar in a single volume. With a strong emphasis on contemporary usage, all grammar points and functions are richly illustrated with examples.

The *Grammar* is divided into two parts. **Part I** covers traditional grammatical categories such as nouns and verbs. **Part II** is carefully organized around language functions and contexts such as:

- giving and seeking information;
- describing processes and results;
- expressing attitudes, mental states, and emotions;
- registers and style;
- formal and informal communication, e.g., youth talk.

Main features of the *Grammar* include:

- clear, succinct and jargon-free explanations;
- extensive cross-referencing between the different sections;
- emphasis on areas of particular difficulty for learners of Dutch.

This is the ideal reference grammar for learners of Dutch at all levels, from elementary to advanced; no prior knowledge of grammatical terminology is assumed and it provides indexes of grammatical terms and functions. This *Grammar* is complemented by a companion website at www.routledge.com/cw/oosterhoff featuring related exercises and activities to reinforce learning.

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Modern DUTCH Grammar

A Practical Guide

Jenneke Oosterhoff

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Introduction

Modern Dutch Grammar: A Practical Guide is a practical reference grammar designed with a modern, communicative approach for students learning and teachers teaching Dutch as a foreign language. This book differs from traditional grammars in that it combines detailed explanations of grammatical structures in [Part I](#) with a functional approach to the language in [Part II](#). In [Part II](#), learners of Dutch can find the specific uses of language in particular situations such as introducing oneself and others, talking about likes and dislikes, agreeing and disagreeing, expressing belief and disbelief, and many more. [Part II](#) aims to illustrate how we use the structures as explained in [Part I](#) to form statements, questions, hypotheses, conditions, observations, descriptions, opinions, and commands and to express attitudes and emotions. In [Part II](#) therefore, particular attention is paid to idiomatic use of the language and register. Register refers to the different vocabulary and grammar structures speakers use when talking or writing to different people, taking into account the status, age, and the relationship they have with other people, and whether the situation demands a formal or an informal level of speech. And so for each situation described, examples are given in formal as well as informal or colloquial contexts. By offering frequent cross-references, the book illustrates the interdependence of structures and functions. The functions illustrate how the grammatical structures are applied. For instance, one cannot give commands without knowing the imperative, just as one cannot describe and compare objects without the proper use of adjectival endings. Furthermore, the book points out particular language pitfalls, i.e., situations where native speakers of English are tempted to translate literally while the Dutch expression is totally different. Some examples of this are **Hoe ben je?** for ‘How are you?’ where it should be **Hoe gaat het met je?** which always automatically prompts the answer **Ik ben goed** for ‘I’m fine/good’ where it should be **Het gaat goed met me**. Another mistake that is often made is **Ik ben vervelend** for ‘I am bored’ where it should be **Ik verveel me**. The book offers many examples of such pitfalls.

This book is intended for learners who already have a basic knowledge of the Dutch language. While the grammatical structures are explained in a way that is also easy to understand for beginner learners, the functions in [Part II](#) would require a student to have reached the level of A2 or B1 as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning or Intermediate-Mid according to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The book will be a useful reference tool for undergraduate students taking Dutch to fulfill a language requirement or as a major or minor part of their four-year college program. It will also be a helpful reference tool for students of Dutch in secondary schools and adult education classes. University students as well as self-learners in an academic, non-academic, or postgraduate environment will find this book a welcome addition to my other two Dutch grammar books: *Basic Dutch: A Grammar and Workbook* and *Intermediate Dutch: A Grammar and Workbook*, also published by Routledge in 2009. Finally, teachers of Dutch will find this an invaluable resource in planning syllabi and teaching Dutch courses.

Exercises are an essential part in language learning. This textbook is accompanied by a companion website with exercises for both [Part I](#) and [Part II](#). Students can also use my *Basic Dutch: A Grammar and Workbook* and *Intermediate Dutch: A Grammar and Workbook*, which both have a number of exercises for each grammar topic.

How to use this book

Modern Dutch Grammar: A Practical Guide is divided into two parts. **Part I** – Structures, is a reference guide to the grammatical structures of Dutch, organized in four parts: noun groups, verb groups, word order and sentence structure, and letters and sounds. In some cases, tables are used to illustrate forms and patterns, for example verb conjugation and subject and object pronouns. **Part I**, therefore, offers the reader quick and easy-to-locate reminders of adjectival endings, prepositions, the passive, and so on. An **appendix** with the most common strong and irregular verbs, organized according to their stem vowel change, is located at the back of the book. **Part II** – Functions, shows how the structures are used to express communicative functions in particular contexts and situations. The functions are organized in seven main categories: social contact, basic communication strategies, factual information, the wider context, transactions, attitudes and mental states, emotions. In the table of contents, the reader can find the contents of each category in more detail; most of the chapters each have ten sections.

While the detailed table of contents and the frequent cross-references facilitate navigating this book, two indexes, one on grammatical terminology, and one on functions, will allow the reader to look up exactly the grammatical or functional detail that he or she needs for a particular purpose. The index of grammatical terms includes examples in Dutch. The index of functions contains key words such as ‘availability,’ under which the different functions with which one can express the availability of something or someone are listed, for example ‘through borrowing/rental,’ ‘through purchase,’ ‘at hand,’ ‘available to meet,’ etc. When the learner has located the function, he or she will find examples in different contexts and registers.

Throughout the book, the reader will find cross-references to further information on, for instance, a particular grammatical structure or to other examples of a particular function.

The translations of the examples are kept as close to the Dutch as possible. But if one takes into consideration that the purpose of this book is to show that literal translations from English to Dutch are best avoided, one will understand that the translations sometimes have their own English wording, just as Dutch has its own way of expressing things and using particular idioms that may differ from English idioms.

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Part I

Structures

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A

Noun groups

1

Nouns

1.1 Articles and nouns

Dutch has two definite articles, **de** 'the' for masculine and feminine (or common) nouns, and **het** 'the' for neuter nouns. Examples are **de tafel** 'the table,' **de stoel** 'the chair,' and **het bed** 'the bed.' When we use indefinite nouns, we use **een** 'a' or no article. Examples are **een huis** 'a house' and **melk** 'milk.' **Melk** is an uncountable noun, and while all nouns, countable or uncountable, can appear with a definite article, the indefinite article **een** only appears with countable nouns in the singular. Uncountable indefinite nouns as well as countable indefinite nouns in the plural appear without article. All definite nouns in the plural appear with the article **de**. Examples:

	<i>Definite</i>		<i>Indefinite</i>	
	<i>Countable</i>	<i>Uncountable</i>	<i>Countable</i>	<i>Uncountable</i>
Singular	de tafel	de melk	een tafel	- melk
Plural	de tafels	-	- tafels	-
Singular	het bed	het ijs	een bed	- ijs
Plural	de bedden	-	- bedden	-

General uses of the article

Indefinite articles are used to introduce a subject or object that is not known to the listener or to use nouns in a general, categorical or abstract meaning. Definite articles are used to talk about subjects and objects that are known to the listener (often as abstract concepts) or to further specify or qualify an indefinite noun that has been introduced. The examples show the similarity to English.

Ik heb een tafel gekocht. De tafel staat nu in de eetkamer.

I bought a table. The table is now in the dining room.

Ik wou melk in de koffie doen, maar de melk was zuur.

I wanted to put milk in my coffee, but the milk was sour.

Er ligt ijs op het water. Het ijs is nog niet dik genoeg om te schaatsen.

There is ice on the water. The ice is not yet thick enough to skate.

Een poes is minder werk dan een hond, want je hoeft hem niet uit te laten.

A cat is less work than a dog, because you don't have to walk it.

De meeste mensen denken dat de gloeilamp door Edison werd uitgevonden.

Most people think the light bulb was invented by Edison.

De krant wordt 's morgens bezorgd.

The newspaper is delivered in the morning.

Names of people, countries and cities

These categories have no article, but take a definite article when a specific qualification or distinction is added. Note the difference in the following examples:

Mondriaan schilderde vooral abstracte schilderijen. Maar ken je *de* Mondriaan van *de* figuratieve schilderijen?

Mondriaan painted primarily abstract paintings. But do you know the Mondriaan of the figurative paintings?

Ik woon al heel lang in Amsterdam. Ik hield vooral van *het* Amsterdam van *de* 70er jaren. *Het* Amsterdam van nu vind ik vreselijk.

I have lived in Amsterdam for a long time. I loved the Amsterdam of the 1970s. I think today's Amsterdam is terrible.

Names of languages

Similarly, names of languages that one knows, speaks, or learns do not take an article.

Peter spreekt goed Duits en Engels. Hij leert nu ook Frans.

Peter speaks German and English well. He is also learning French now.

However, when talking about a certain kind of a specific language, the indefinite article is added.

In Baden spreken ze *een* Duits dat ik niet versta.

In Baden, they speak a German that I don't understand.

Note that contrary to English, in the following cases, the name of a language takes the definite article.

Karel heeft drie boeken in *het* Engels vertaald.

Carl has translated three books into English.

Annemarie bestudeert de geschiedenis van *het* Nederlands.

Annemarie is doing research on the history of Dutch.

Other cases in which Dutch often differs from English

There are some cases in which the use of the article differs from English. For example, when talking about one's profession, function, or hobby, one's affiliation with a country, a city, or a religion, we do not use the indefinite article.

Johan is advocaat.

John is a lawyer.

Stephan is Duitser.

Stephan is a German.

Veel kinderen willen brandweerman worden.

Many kids want to become a firefighter.

Hij is manager in een groot bedrijf.

He is a manager in a big company.

Karin en Minnie spelen piano.

Karin and Minnie play the piano.

Joop is lid van de tennisvereniging.

Joop is a member of the tennis club.

Professions, functions, nouns in a general meaning with the conjunction **als** (meaning 'as a') also do not take the indefinite article.

Als leraar heb je veel correctiewerk.

As a teacher, one has a lot of grading to do.

Als Moslim mag je geen alcohol drinken.

As a Muslim, one is not allowed to drink alcohol.

Een oude klomp kan je ook als plantenbakje gebruiken.

You can use an old clog as a plant pot.

However, similar to English, when an adjective or any other qualifying notion is added, or when **als** means ‘in the manner of’ to indicate a stereotype, we use the indefinite article. Also, when talking about affiliations in a general sense, Dutch uses the indefinite article.

André Hazes was een echte Amsterdammer.

André Hazes was a real Amsterdammer.

In dat zwarte pak zie je eruit als een begrafenisondernemer.

In that black suit you look like an undertaker.

Een manager heeft veel verantwoordelijkheid.

A manager has a lot of responsibility.

Seasons and wind directions

These categories are generally used with the definite article.

Margrietten bloeien midden in de zomer.

Daisies bloom in the middle of summer.

Het voorjaar begon dit jaar heel vroeg.

Spring started very early this year.

Ron en Lisa wonen nu in het noorden van het land.

Ron and Lisa now live in the north of the country.

Note, however, the following examples for names of seasons in which an indefinite article or no article is used.

Het was een prachtige zomer.

It was a beautiful summer.

Het wordt binnenkort weer winter.

Winter is coming soon.

Other important differences to English

Time expressions involving a meal take the definite article in Dutch.

We gaan na het eten naar oma.

After dinner, we go to grandma’s.

Laten we dit nog even voor de lunch afmaken.

Let’s finish this before lunch.

Similarly, names of streets, places, parks and many buildings take the definite article.

Pieter woont in de Raadhuisstraat.

Pieter lives on Raadhuisstreet.

Ik heb meer zin om naar het Vondelpark te gaan.

I’d rather go to Vondel Park.

We gaan vanmiddag de stad in.

We are going to town this afternoon.

Ik moet naar *het* Centraal Station.

I have to go to Central Station.

Ga je mee naar *de* kerk?

Do you want to come along to church?

Note also that there are many abstract, familiar concepts and phenomena where Dutch uses the definite article, while English does not.

***Het* leven is niet altijd makkelijk.**

Life is not always easy.

***De* dood speelt een belangrijke rol in dit boek.**

Death plays an important role in this book.

***De* tijd vliegt.**

Time flies.

Ik wandel graag in *de* natuur.

I like walking in nature.

Wat weet jij over *het* boeddhisme?

What do you know about Buddhism?

Similarly, Dutch puts the definite article in front of nouns in a very general meaning, words that are not further specified. Examples:

Peter gaat met *de* trein (*de* bus, *de* tram, *de* fiets) naar z'n werk.

Peter goes to work by train (bus, light rail, bike).

Jan moet naar *het* ziekenhuis.

Jan has to go to hospital.

Ik stuur dit pakje met *de* post.

I'm sending this parcel by mail.

Fixed combinations

Many fixed combinations of preposition and noun appear without article.

Opa en oma komen *op* bezoek.

Grandpa and grandma are coming to visit.

In augustus gaan alle kinderen weer *naar* school.

In August, all the children go back to school.

***Na* gebruik van deze pijnstillers kun je beter niet autorijden.**

After using this painkiller, it is better not to drive.

Ik ben *van* plan om m'n huis te verkopen.

I'm planning to sell my house.

Je moet nooit *zonder* rijbewijs in de auto stappen.

You should never get into your car without a driver's license.

Ik heb dat kopje *per* ongeluk gebroken.

I broke that cup by accident.

Similarly, Dutch has idiomatic or generic sentence parts involving two nouns that do not take an article.

Je kunt hier *dag en nacht* parkeren.

You can park here around the clock.

De kat heeft die muis met huid en haar opgegeten.

The cat devoured that mouse completely, the whole thing.

De politie vond een foto met naam en adres erop.

The police found a photograph with a name and an address.

And lastly, the article is also omitted in many fixed combinations of noun and verb. I am including certain bodily sensations such as hunger, thirst, and pain in this group.

Heb jij moeite met wakker worden?

Do you have difficulty waking up?

We moeten even rekening houden met het weer.

We need to take the weather into consideration.

Ik heb honger. Heb jij ook zin in een broodje?

I'm hungry. Would you also like a sandwich?

Jan is met hoofdpijn naar huis gegaan.

Jan went home with a headache.

Thuis bleek dat hij koorts had. Hij heeft griep.

At home, he appeared to have a fever. He has the flu.

1.2 The gender of nouns

Roughly 75% of Dutch nouns are **de**-words, and 25% are **het**-words. There are also some nouns that can have either **de** or **het**. Noun gender can be determined either by the meaning of the word or by its derivation from other words. This section will focus on gender by meaning only, while subsequent sections will focus on gender by derivation.

Nouns with the article 'de'

Names of persons such as family names and professions are **de**-words. Note, however, that **kind** 'child' is a **het**-word.

de mens person, **de vader** father, **de moeder** mother, **de zoon** son,

de dochter daughter, **de bakker** baker, **de musicus** musician, **de onderwijzer** teacher

Names of most animals are also **de**-words.

de poes cat, **de hond** dog, **de ooievaar** stork, **de koe** cow, **de tijger** tiger

Names of flowers, trees, and fruits are also **de**-words. Note, however, that **fruit** 'fruit' itself is a **het**-word.

de dahlia dahlia, **de tulp** tulip, **de eik** oak, **de beuk** beech, **de aardbei** strawberry,
de appel apple

Names of seasons are **de**-words:

de lente spring, **de zomer** summer, **de herfst** fall, **de winter** winter

Names of numbers, letters and music notes are **de**-words.

de drie three, **de a** a, **de f** f, **de gis** g sharp

Lastly, most musical instruments are **de**-words. However, instruments with keyboards, except **piano** 'piano,' are **het**-words.

de viool violin, **de fluit** flute, **de cello** cello, **de trompet** trumpet, **de gitaar** guitar

► See 1.4 for gender of noun derivations with suffixes.

Nouns with the article 'het'

In the previous section, we learned that most animal names are **de**-words. However, the names of cattle are **het**-words. Only **big** 'piglet' is a **de**-word.

het paard horse, **het veulen** foal, **het hoen** hen, **het kuiken** chick, **het varken** pig,
het zwijn swine, **het schaap** sheep, **het lam** lamb, **het rund** cow, **het kalf** calf

While most musical instruments are **de**-words, most keyboard instruments are **het**-words, including the word for keyboard itself.

het klavier keyboard, **het klavecimbel** clavichord, **het harmonium** chamber organ,
het spinet spinet, **het orgel** organ

Names of wind directions are **het**-words.

het westen west, **het oosten** east, **het noorden** north, **het zuiden** south,
het noordwesten northwest

Names of sports and games are also **het**-words.

het voetbal soccer, **het hockey** hockey, **het monopoly** monopoly,
het mens-erger-je-niet Sorry!

Names of metals are **het**-words as well.

het zilver silver, **het goud** gold, **het brons** bronze, **het ijzer** iron

Lastly, names of countries, cities, and languages belong in this group.

het Nederland van de jaren zestig the Netherlands of the sixties, **het Amsterdam van mijn jeugd** the Amsterdam of my youth, **het Frans** French, **het Duits** German,
het Engels English

Nouns with 'de' or 'het'

There are many nouns that can appear with either the article **de** or with **het**. The meaning of the word changes with the gender. For example, **de bal** is a round object for playing a game, while **het bal** is an event at which people dance a waltz or a foxtrot. Other such examples are, to name but a few, **de bos** 'bunch' vs. **het bos** 'forest,' **de jacht** 'hunt' vs. **het jacht** 'yacht,' **de pad** 'toad' vs. **het pad** 'path,' and **de was** 'laundry' vs. **het was** 'wax.'

In the following sections, note how word derivation often determines the gender of the noun.

1.3 Compound nouns

Most of the time, compound nouns are formed by simply putting two words together, for example, **de koffie** 'coffee' and **de pot** 'pot' together form the noun **de koffiepote** 'coffeepot.' Note that the gender of the compound noun is determined by the gender of the second noun, and therefore **de post** 'post' and **het kantoor** 'office' together form the word **het postkantoor** 'post office.' While many English compound nouns are written separate (fish tank, bank account), Dutch compound nouns are always written as one word: **het huiswerk** 'homework,' **het tafelkleed** 'tablecloth,' **de aardappelsalade** 'potato salad,' **de avondjurk** 'evening dress.'

In some cases, nouns change their gender when forming a compound noun with another word. A few examples of these are **de blik** 'glance' vs. **het ogenblik** 'moment,' **de doek** 'cloth' vs. **het spandoek** 'banner,' **de hof** 'garden' vs. **het kerkhof** 'graveyard,' and **het sap** 'juice' vs. **de bessensap** 'currant juice.'

Some nouns take a ‘**tussenklank**,’ an ‘in-between sound,’ to form compound nouns. There are four of these **tussenklanken**: **-en-** or **-e-**, **-s-**, and **-er-**. Examples:

-en-	pannenkoek pancake, boekenkast bookcase, hondenweer bad weather
-e-	zonneshijn sunshine, Koninginnedag Queen’s Day
-s-	bedrijfsarts company physician, groepswerk group work
-er-	kinderkamer nursery, eierdoosje egg carton

Compound nouns are formed with **-en-** if the plural of the first noun ends in **-en**, and not in **-es**:

de pan – de pannen	⇒	de pannenkoek pancake
het boek – de boeken	⇒	de boekenkast bookcase
de zaak – de zaken	⇒	de zakenreis business trip

Compound nouns are formed with **-e-** if the plural of the noun doesn’t exist (as in the example with **rijst**), if it isn’t used much (as in the example with **zon**), or if the noun ends in unstressed **-e** and its plural form ends in **-s** or **-n** or both. Examples of these are **asperge**, **garage**, **weide**, **groente**.

de asperge – de asperges	⇒	de aspergesoep
de weide – de weiden	⇒	het weideland
de groente – de groentes/en	⇒	de groentewinkel

It is much more difficult to give a rule for the **tussenklank -s-**. Compound nouns are written with **-s-** if the **-s-** can be heard in the pronunciation. We use the **-s-** when it makes more sense in how the noun is spoken. This means that there are regional differences, and sometimes two forms of a compound noun exist, either with or without **-s-**, for example **tijdverschil** and **tijdsverschil** ‘time difference,’ or **drugbeleid** and **drugsbeleid** ‘drug policy,’ and also **doodkist** and **doodskist** ‘coffin.’ However, some Dutch suffixes almost always ask for a **tussenklank -s-**: **-heid**, **-iteit**, **-ing**, and **-schap**. Examples for these are **schoonheidsspecialiste** ‘beautician,’ **elektriciteitskabel** ‘power cable,’ **verzekeringsmaatschappij** ‘insurance company,’ and **zwangerschapstest** ‘pregnancy test.’

Lastly, the **tussenklank -er-** is used in only a few cases, when the plural of a noun ends in **-eren**, such as **kinderen** ‘children,’ **eieren** ‘eggs.’ Examples of compound nouns with these are **kinderboek** ‘children’s book’ and **eiersalade** ‘egg salad.’

So far we have discussed compound nouns formed with nouns only. There are also compound nouns formed with verb stems, adjectives, and adverbs and prepositions. Compound nouns with verb stems are formed by putting the stem of a verb in front of another noun:

lezen (lees) + bril	⇒	de leesbril reading glasses
schrijven (schrijf) + fout	⇒	de schrijffout spelling mistake
slapen (slaap) + pil	⇒	de slaappil sleeping pill

Similarly, adjectives can be the first part of a compound noun:

klein + geld	⇒	het kleingeld change
snel + restaurant	⇒	het snelrestaurant fast-food restaurant
laag + bouw	⇒	de laagbouw low-rise building

Lastly, prepositions and adverbs can form the first part of a compound noun:

voor + deur	⇒	de voordeur front door
bij + werking	⇒	de bijwerking side effect
boven + verdieping	⇒	de bovenverdieping upper floor

1.4 Noun derivation

Noun derivation from verbs

The following is a closer look at other forms of noun formation and derivation. As pointed out above, verb stems can be the first part of a compound word. But nouns can be derived from verbs in various other ways. For example, the verb infinitive itself can be a noun. Such nouns take the definite article **het**. Examples:

Het koken van risotto vergt een beetje tijd en inspanning.

Cooking risotto demands a little time and effort.

Het fotograferen van kolibri's is heel moeilijk.

Taking photographs of humming birds is very difficult.

Many other nouns are derived from verbs. In some, it is easier to recognize a verb stem than in others. A number of irregular verbs, for example, have corresponding nouns that show only a vague resemblance to the original verb stem. Note that most of these nouns are **de**-words.

breken – Door een breuk in het bovenbeen was de atleet lang geblesseerd.

Because of a fracture in the upper leg, the athlete was injured for a long time.

grijpen – De jongen deed een greep in het zakje snoep.

The boy grabbed from the bag of candy.

slaan – Die opmerking was een slag in m'n gezicht.

The remark was a slap in my face.

rijden – Wat kostte die rit naar het centrum van de stad?

How much was the ride to the center of the city?

Other nouns are directly derived from the verb stem, and identical with it.

duiken – Ik heb zin in een frisse duik in de rivier.

I'm feeling like a fresh dive into the river.

vallen – De val van de Muur is alweer meer dan 20 jaar geleden.

The fall of the Berlin Wall is now more than 20 years ago.

spelen – Politiek is soms net een spel, vind je niet?

Sometimes, politics is like a game, don't you agree?

lopen – In de loop van de tijd ging hij harder praten.

In the course of time, he began to speak louder.

When the prefix **ge-** is put in front of a verb stem, this expresses that the action of the verb is presently going on, conscious or unconscious to the subject of the action, and in many cases it is somewhat annoying or disturbing. Many verbs that can form a noun with this prefix are emotional or physical expressions. Note that all nouns with the prefix **ge-** take the article **het**.

gezeur/gemopper/gezanik/gezeik nagging, whining

gejank/gejammer/gehuil/geblaf whining, crying, barking

geschreeuw/geroep/gejuich/geraas/getier screaming, yelling, raging and ranting

gepraat/geroddel/gefluister talking, gossiping, whispering

geloop/gestamp/getrommel/getik/gedonder walking, stomping, drumming, ticking, thundering

Examples in context with these verbs show irritation of the speaker:

Hou op met dat getrommel op de tafel!

Stop drumming on the table.

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