

Pejorative and Meliorative Prefixoids in Dutch

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Abstract

This article investigates pejorative and meliorative prefixoids in Dutch, situating them within the broader domain of evaluative morphology. While Dutch evaluative morphology is traditionally associated with diminutives, the language also makes extensive use of evaluative compounds whose left-hand members function as affixoids contributing negative or positive assessments. The study provides a detailed analysis of pejorative and meliorative compounds, focusing on their semantic properties, diachronic development, productivity, and distribution across text types. Particular attention is paid to the prominent role of taboo-based prefixoids in pejorative compounds, including disease, sexual, and scatological terms, and to their overlap with related expressive constructions such as elative compounds, degree causatives, and negative polarity items. Using data from historical sources, the SUBTLEX-NL subtitle corpus, and Dutch Twitter, the article traces changes in the relative prominence of different semantic classes of prefixoids over time and highlights register-sensitive usage patterns. Meliorative prefixoids are shown to be less frequent, less productive, and semantically more restricted than their pejorative counterparts, and largely devoid of taboo terms. The findings contribute to our understanding of evaluative word formation in Dutch and shed light on the interaction between morphology, expressivity, and sociolinguistic factors, as well as their development over time.

Keywords: *pejorative affixoids, meliorative affixoid, Dutch morphology, evaluative morphology, taboo words.*

1 Introduction

Dutch evaluative morphology consists of a small number of word formation types. Most familiar, not just from the Dutch morphological literature, but also from the typological study of evaluative morphology, is the category of diminutives. Diminutives indicate, in addition to smallness in size, depending on the base noun, notions such as cuteness, contempt, female¹ or, nonhuman status in the case of male and female specimens of animals (De Vooy 1967: 202; Booij 2002: 93; Van der Wouden 2007, *passim*, Scalise 1984: 131 ff., and for a cross-linguistic overview Jurafsky 1996, *passim*). Cuteness is illustrated in (1) below, contempt in (2), female status in (3) and use with male and female specimens of animals in (4). Relatively recent is the use of diminutives in elative compounds (Norde & Morris 2018, *passim*), presumably as playful variations on the more common compounds without diminutive affixes (cf. example (5)).

- (1) Wat een dotje
 What a cute-DIM
 ‘What a sweetie pie’

¹ Female given names were often derived from male names by diminutive-suffixes: *Jan – Jantje, Hendrik – Hendrikje, Klaas – Klaasje*. This practice is not all that common anymore, presumably because naming people after the (grand)parents, especially (grand)fathers, is no longer standard.

- (2) Had je wat, ventje?
 Had you something, man-DIM
 ‘Did you want to say something, little man?’
- (3) Hendrik’s dochter heet Hendrikje
 Hendrik’s daughter is called Hendrik-DIM
 ‘Hendrik’s daughter is called Hendrikje’
- (4) Dit is een mannetjesolifant
 this is a male-DIM-elephant
 ‘This is a male elephant’
- (5) Hij was poedelnaakt / poedeltjenaakt
 He was poodle-naked / poodle-DIM-naked
 ‘He was stark naked’

Dutch does not have augmentative affixation (except for compounding involving affixoids, see below), but it does have verbal affixation with iterative/intensifying semantics (De Jager 1875–1878), and a variety of approximative affixes (Masini, Norde & van Goethem 2023, Hüning & Schlücker 2023). These latter types are sometimes included in the larger category of evaluative morphology. They fall outside the scope of this article.

Dutch compounding likewise exhibits several subtypes that fall under the general umbrella of evaluative morphology, including elative compounds (Hoeksema 2013, 2023, Norde & Morris 2018), pejorative compounds (Van der Wouden 2008) and meliorative compounds (Van Goethem 2023). Some compounds also function semantically as diminutives or augmentatives—such as compounds with *dwerf*- ‘dwarf’ or *reuze*- ‘giant’ and *mammoet*- ‘mammoth’ as their initial member, as well as derived words with the international prefixes *mini*-, *micro*-, *nano*- or *maxi*, *mega*-, *macro*-. However, unlike standard diminutives, these forms primarily indicate size rather than carrying strong affective connotations.²

When a compound member is systematically used in an evaluative, intensificational, or diminutive capacity while its original lexical meaning fades, it can be classified as an affixoid³ (cf. Stevens 2005; Booij & Hüning 2014; Ralli 2020). In elative compounds, affixoids primarily serve in an intensifying capacity. This paper focuses on pejorative and meliorative prefixoids, which contribute to negative and positive evaluations, respectively. While elative compounds are typically adjectives, pejorative and meliorative compounds are predominantly nouns. The left-hand member modifies the right-hand member which serves as the head and restricts the denotation of the noun to negatively evaluated members in the case of pejoratives, and positively evaluated members in the case of melioratives.

² An exception is *reuze*, which may not only indicate size, but also give a positive evaluation, in much the same way as *great* in English: a great crowd could be very large, or very enthusiastic (see Van Goethem & Hiligsmann 2014, *passim* on the range of meanings and diachronic development of *reuze*). The international prefixes *super*- and *hyper*- have intensifying, as well as augmentative uses. E.g. *supersmart* illustrates intensifying *super*- whereas *supertanker* illustrates the augmentative use of *super*-. This is also true for Dutch, cf. *superslim* ‘supersmart’ and *superorkaan* ‘super-hurricane’.

³ Meibauer (2013) argues against affixoid status for evaluatively used compound members. He argues that words like *Mistkerl* (lit. dung guy, i.e. ‘asshole’) are regular compounds, albeit with metaphorical interpretation. The argument rests mainly on the fact that the affixoids have more properties in common with left-hand members of a compound than with bona fide prefixes. However, this is precisely the point of the affixoid analysis, which posits an origin in compounding, followed by semantic bleaching and sometimes also phonological reduction (e.g. the reduction of *man* to /mən/ in compounds such as *postman*, *salesman*, *clergyman*, cf. van de Weijer, Sloos & Wei 2019).

The kind of negative or positive evaluation may depend on contextual factors. Take a pejorative such as *rotvoetballer* ‘lousy soccer player’. One may use it to indicate that someone is bad at soccer in general, but also to indicate personal distaste. One might use it to describe Cristiano Ronaldo, one of the best players in the world, but not always well-liked. It may also be used situationally, to indicate a momentary disaffection with someone, for example a soccer player who made a bad foul. The use of a pejorative compound may express anger, dislike, jealousy, hatred, or disdain on the part of the speaker. They are, therefore, not neutral descriptions. They can be used with evaluative verbs such as *vinden* ‘find’ or *beschouwen* ‘consider’. Compare *ik vind hem een rotvoetballer* ‘I find him a lousy footballer’ with ??*Ik vind hem een voetballer* ‘I find him a footballer’. The latter sentence is off, because footballer is a neutral term, not an evaluation. Similar observations hold for meliorative affixoids, compare *ik vind hem een prachtvoetballer* ‘I find him a great footballer’.

2 Pejorative affixes

2.1 Caveat

The pejorative affixoids to be discussed in this paper all have a relatively short history of two centuries or less, and are used to attach a negative connotation to the nouns they combine with. They typically occur in name-calling and defamatory utterances. There are also a number of prefixes that likewise attach a negative component to a noun stem but are not expressive in the way that *rot-* ‘rotten’ etc. are. These include *on-* ‘un-’, *wan-* ‘bad’ and *mis-* ‘bad, wrong’. The prefix *on-* is mostly used as a negative prefix for adjectives (e.g. *mogelijk* ‘possible’ versus *onmogelijk* ‘impossible’), but it also attaches to a small number of nouns (De Vooy 1967: 223). The prefix *wan-* stems from an adjective meaning ‘weak, incomplete, unripe’. The use of *wan* as an adjective no longer exists in modern Dutch, but English still has a few fixed phrases such as *wan smile*. *Mis-* finally, also stems from an adjective, much like its English counterpart in *misdeed*, *miscarriage* etc. In Table 1 below, I present some words with these prefixes and their meanings:

Table 1: Three negative prefixes

On-		Wan-		Mis-	
Ondeugd	Vice	Wanhoop	Despair	Misverstand	Misunderstanding
Ontij	Bad time	Wandaad	Evil deed	Miskoop	Bad buy
Ongedierte	Vermin	Wangedrag	Misbehavior	Misbruik	Abuse
Onmens	Fiend	Wansmaak	Bad taste	Misdaad	Crime

So, while *deugd* ‘virtue’ means something positive, *ondeugd* ‘vice’, has a corresponding negative interpretation. *Mens* ‘human being’, is neutral, but *onmens* ‘fiend, inhuman person’ is negative. However, these words are mostly not typical of name-calling or otherwise emotional language, and may appear in formal genres such as legal texts, newspaper editorials, academic texts.⁴ They are already attested in Middle Dutch and predate the set of affixoids to be discussed below by many centuries. Moreover, *wan-* and *mis-* also appear with verbs, unlike the

⁴ An exception should be made for *onmens* ‘fiend’ which is usually a term of abuse, and can be used in an emotional setting.

expressive pejoratives, which attach solely to nouns (compare *wantrouwen* ‘mistrust’, *wanboffen* ‘be out of luck’, *mishandelen* ‘to mistreat, torment’, etc.). Finally, it should be noted that they entirely lack the productivity typical of most pejorative affixoids. With new words, such as *televisie* ‘television’, it is not possible to form **ontelevisie*, **wantelevisie*, **mistelevisie*, whereas *rottelevisie* ‘rotten television’, or *snerttelevisie* ‘shit television’ are perfectly possible. In the corpus study below, I will exclude the three prefixes listed above in Table 1.

2.1 Shades of meaning

Not all pejorative affixoids carry the same shades of meaning. Take *snot-* ‘snot’, which is typically used to denigrate people that are considered immature, snotty noses being typical of young children. So we have *snotjoch* ‘snot-boy’, *snotmeid* ‘snot-girl’, *snotvent* ‘snot-guy’ and *snotaap* ‘snot-monkey’. The latter is an idiomatically interpreted compound, since it does not refer to monkeys, but to people, in a denigrating way. There is often a hint of cheekiness or insolence. Words for adults, including older people, do not combine with *snot-*: **snotvrouw* ‘snot woman’, **snotwinkelier* ‘snot shopkeeper’, **snotopa* ‘snot grandpa’.

Flut- is generally indicative of perceived low quality. For example, if you personally dislike a football player, but accept that he is good at his job, you may call him *die rotvoetballer* ‘that rotten football player’, but not a *flutvoetballer*. The latter term is reserved for someone who is considered a bad player. The same is true for *prul-* ‘piece of garbage’ which is now largely obsolete as an affixoid. *Snert-* on the other hand is like *rot-*: it expresses dislike or disdain for any reason, not just low quality. The same is true for most affixoids based on taboo words, e.g. *kut-* ‘cunt’, *schijt-* ‘shit’, *klote-* ‘testicles’, *tyfus-* ‘typhoid’, etc.

Noteworthy is also the difference between *kak-* ‘shit, poop’ on the one hand and *stront*, *poep-*, *schijt-*, *shit-* ‘shit, poop’ on the other hand. *Kak* is a denigrating term for people from the elite, often with overtones of arrogance and haughtiness. It may also be used for things associated with the elite. Field hockey is considered a *kaksport* by many in the Netherlands, in particular for those who belong to a social group that is not familiar with this sport. The other words, *poep*, *schijt* etc. could be used for verbal abuse of anyone or anything. A boring football match may be referred to as a *poepwedstrijd* ‘doodoo match’, *schijtwedstrijd* or *shit wedstrijd*. Not because of any elitist associations, but simply because it sucks.⁵

2.3 Overlap with other constructions

Pejorative and elative compounds have in common that they often make use of taboo words (Van der Sijs 2002, Napoli & Hoeksema 2009, Hoeksema 2018). Sometimes, this leads to classification issues. Certain nouns are inherently gradable, such as *noise* or *speed*, which makes them eligible for appearing in elative compounds (Hoeksema 2023). Now take a sentence like the following:

5 The use of *kak-* seems to be shifting toward a more general pejorative reading in informal Dutch (Roelof Kruisinga, p.c.). For example, *kakweer* ‘shitty weather’ is attested online, but never shows up in the Delpher newspaper corpus. Unlike people and their sports, the weather is not associated with any social class.

- (6) De auto ging er met een rotvaart vandoor.
 The car went PRT with a rot-speed off
 ‘The car drove off with enormous speed’

In this example, the element *rot-* may indicate both the degree of speed (high) and the fact that this speed is evaluated as negative (for instance, when a car is speeding in a residential neighborhood). Similar issues arise in English with taboo modifiers such as *shit*: in a compound such as *shithole* or *shitcar*, it serves to express a negative evaluation; on the other hand, in the compound *shitload*, as in *Jones has a shitload of books*, indicating a large quantity appears to be the key function of *shit*. No negative connotation need be intended, though the use of the word *shit* makes it exclusively suitable for somewhat informal contexts.

More generally, there is a fair amount of overlap between the modifying elements in pejorative compounds and a number of other expressive constructions. Besides elative compounds, I want to mention negative polarity items (cf. Postma 2001, Hoeksema 2002, 2024) and degree causatives (Hoeksema & Napoli 2019). Consider the following examples:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| (7) a. Wat een ongelofelijk tyfuswif! | [pejorative] |
| What an incredible typhoid-bitch! | |
| ‘What an incredible uberbitch!’ | |
| b. Hij deed geen tyfus. | [polarity item] |
| He did no typhoid | |
| ‘He didn’t do shit’ | |
| c. Ik werk me de tyfus. | [degree causative] |
| I work myself the typhoid | |
| ‘I am working my ass off’ | |
| d. Ze speelden tyfushard. | [elative compound] |
| They played typhoid-loud | |
| ‘They played damn loud’ | |

The overlap between these constructions is most striking in the case of taboo expressions. These do not contribute a literal meaning, and can be put to work in many constructions where intensity, often in combination with rudeness, is required, rather than informational content. Dutch taboo terms come from a variety of sources: some from religion and superstition, others from sexual organs, bodily excrements or diseases. Especially the prominence of disease terms is relatively uncommon among Western European languages. In a study of curses and swear words, Nübling & Vogel (2004) found considerable differences even among the three Germanic languages Dutch, German and Swedish. These differences are not restricted, I should add, to swearing and cursing, but can be found among polarity items and degree causatives as well. Table 2 summarizes their main findings. Three pluses indicate high frequency and productivity, a minus indicates absence, and [+] means attested but rare.

Table 2: Domains of taboo terms in swearing and cursing

Domain→ Language↓	sexual	scatological	religious	disease
Dutch	+++	+(+)	+(+)	++(+)
German	[+]	+++	++	-
Swedish	[+]	+	+++	-

Hoeksema (2002) discusses negative polarity items of the minimizer type in standard Dutch. One finding was that unambiguous taboo terms were not found among these polarity items before the 18th century. Then polarity items based on religious expressions referring to the devil, thunder and lightning, hell and damnation start popping up. Toward the end of the 19th century disease terms appear and shortly after scatological and sexual terms. In English, we see a progression along somewhat similar lines, e.g. in emphatic questions, which develop from *what the devil* to *what the hell* to *what the fuck* (Den Dikken & Giannakidou 2002, Napoli & Hoeksema 2009, Haïk 2012).

2.4 Diachronic developments

Pejorative compounds, as a class, start appearing around the middle of the 19th century (provided we put aside the items in Table 1 above, which appear to be of a slightly different class). Besides using generally negative terms such as *rot* ‘rotten’, these compounds often make use of taboo terms from the disease name family, as already mentioned above, and later also sexual and scatological terms. Religious taboo words are missing. This might be because the words for hell and devil belonged to a slightly earlier period, and were no longer in vogue for new applications (cf. the discussion of taboo terms in minimizing negative polarity items in Hoeksema 2002). There is no apparent semantic reason why words for hell or devil can’t develop a pejorative use. In English, phrases like *girlfriend from hell* or *vacation from hell* have a strongly negative connotation. Note though, that these words are also quite often employed not to denigrate but to emphasize, compare *a hell of a problem* (i.e. a big problem), *fiendishly clever* (very clever), *diabolically smart* (extremely smart) etc. In some cases, they may even take on a meliorative meaning: *a hell of a woman* (i.e. an exceptional or very great woman), *a hell of a party* etc. Intensifying, meliorative and pejorative meanings are often closely related. Compare for instance the following examples from English in (8), all going back to a Latin root meaning ‘fear’, and the ones in German in (9), involving *irre* ‘crazy’.

- (8) a. The food was terribly expensive. [intensifier]
b. The food was terrible. [pejorative]
c. The food was terrific. [meliorative]
- (9) a. Das war irre teuer! [intensifier]
that was insanely expensive
b. Du bist total irre! [pejorative]
you are totally insane
c. Das war eine irre Erfahrung [meliorative]
that was an incredible experience

In addition to the lack of religious terms in pejorative compounds, one does not find in Dutch pejorative affixoids related to death, an otherwise familiar type of taboo expression in Dutch as well as many other languages (see e.g. Margerie 2011, Arrizabalaga 2014). In elative compounds as well as degree causatives, *dood* ‘dead’ is very common (Hoeksema 2012: 110, Gyselinck & Coleman 2016 *passim*, Hoeksema & Napoli 2019: 287), so this appears to be a striking gap. However, in informal slang, the semantically related word *graf* ‘grave’ has been enlisted as a pejorative affixoid. Some examples are given in (10):

- (10) a. De hele avond zat ik met die grafsmaak in m’n bek.⁶
 The whole evening sat I with that grave taste in my mouth
 ‘The entire evening, I had that shitty taste in my mouth’
 b. Die medewerker moet gewoon met zijn grafpoten van die folie
 afblijven.⁷
 That employee should just with his paws off that foil stay
 ‘That employee should just keep his fucking paws off that foil.’

In the literature on Dutch, a fair amount of attention has been given to its status as intermediate between German and English (cf. van Haeringen 1956, *passim*). However, in the use of taboo terms, including pejorative compounds, Dutch is all by itself, lacking the strong preference for scatological compounds found in German (*Scheißbude* ‘shit joint, i.e. lousy joint’, *Dreckskerl* ‘lit. shit-guy, i.e. asshole, jerk’) and scatological polarity items found in English (*I don’t give a shit*; *she did not tell me shit*).

Table 3 lists the main items used by Dutch in pejorative compounding. The top rows in blue contain *rot*, the number one pejorative prefixoid, and the category referred to as ‘other’. The items in orange have to do with diseases, the ones in green have a sexual connection, and the ones in yellow have a scatological background. Not all possible taboo terms end up as pejorative prefixoids in Dutch. Words for boobs and dicks are not attested in this usage, although *lul* ‘dick’, besides being a designation of a male body part, can also be used as an expletive. While *lul* is not used as a prefixoid, it may be combined with one, yielding combinations such as *grافلul* ‘grave dick’, *kankerlul* ‘cancer dick’, etc. These combinations, like their right-hand member, may either denote a body part or a detested man, though the latter is far more common. *Rot* is not a negative polarity item, but it occurs in polarity items such as *kunnen verrotten* ‘can rot, i.e. give a damn’, *een rooie rotcent* ‘a red rotten penny’ (Hoeksema 2024: 284, 356).

⁶ Martin Boelens, *De dochter van de hondekop* [1977]. Cited from De Coster 2020: 156. It seems to be one of the earliest occurrences of this use of *graf*.

⁷ Posting FOK!forum, 21-12-2011.

Table 3: Left-hand members of Dutch pejorative compounds. DC = degree causative, NPI = negative polarity item, EL = elative. Categories in brackets are marginally attested.

Word	Translation	Sample compound	Other uses
Rot	Rotten	Rotvent ‘asshole’	DC, NPI
Snert	Pea soup	Snertvent ‘jerk, loser’	-
Honden	Dog(s)	Hondenbaan ‘lousy job’	-
Snot	Snot	Snotjoch ‘snotty boy’	DC
Flut	Trash	Flutboek ‘trashy book’	-
Kul	Nonsense	Kulvraag ‘stupid question’	-
Graf	Grave	Grafpoten ‘damn paws’	-
Prul	Junk	Prulvent ‘lousy guy’	-
Pruts	Fumble	Prutsvent ‘worthless guy’	-
Bagger	Mud	Baggermuziek ‘shitty music’	-
Puin	Rubble	Puinweer ‘terrible weather’	-
Stink	Stink	Stinkmoffen ‘damn krauts’	-
Pest	Pest	Pestvent ‘asshole’	NPI
K(o)lere	Cholera	Klerebaan ‘shitty job’	DC
Tyfus	Typhoid	Tyfushoer ‘nasty whore’	DC, NPI, EL
Pleuris	Pleuritis	Pleurisweer ‘lousy weather’	DC, NPI, EL
Pokken	Smallpox	Pokkenschool ‘fucking school’	DC, EL
Tering	Tuberculosis	Teringjuut ‘fucking cop’	DC, NPI, EL
Kanker	Cancer	Kankertzooi ‘fucking mess’	(NPI), EL
Schurft	Scabies	Schurfthekel ‘fierce dislike’	
Takke	Attack	Takkewijf ‘nasty broad’	(EL)
Klote	Bollocks	Klotezooi ‘fucking mess’	NPI
Kut	Cunt	Kutfiets ‘shitty bicycle’	NPI
Zaad	Sperm	Zaadwedstrijd ‘lousy match’	
Kak	Shit	Kakmadam ‘shit madam’	
Poep	Poop	Poephoofd ‘shithead’	EL
Plee	Toilet	Pleefiguur ‘toilet figure’	
Stront	Shit	Strontdorp ‘shit-village’	EL
Schijt	Shit	Schijtbedrijfje ‘shitty business’	EL
Shit	Shit	Shitboel ‘fucking mess’	(NPI)
Zeik	Pee	Zeikmuziek ‘piss music’	
Kwijn	Drool	Kwijnproza ‘drool prose’	

For corpus data pertaining to the use of the various kinds of pejorative compounds, see subsection 4.2. below.

3 Melioratives

The set of words used as positive evaluative affixoids is quite diverse, see Table 4 for a list.

Table 4: Meliorative compounds

Word	Translation	Example
Droom	Dream	Droomhuis ‘dream house’
Klasse	Class, classy	Klassespeler ‘classy player’
Knal	Bang	Knalfeest ‘blowout party’
Meester	Master	Meesterzet ‘master move’
Model	Model	Modelburger ‘model citizen’
Moord	Murder	Moordgozer ‘helluva guy’
Pracht	Splendor	Prachtkans ‘splendid opportunity’
Puik	Best part	Puikwijn ‘top wine’ [archaic]
Ras	Race	Rasartiest ‘born artist, true artist’
Super	Super	Superwedstrijd ‘super match’
Top	Top	Topbaan ‘super job’
Wereld	World	Wereldgoal ‘supergoal’

These affixoids are mostly not older than the 20th century. There is one exception, *puik*, which was primarily used in compounds in the early modern period, and is now archaic in that particular usage. Nowadays it is an adjective (see section 4.2. below for some discussion). Some examples from my corpus are given in (11):

- (11) a. Vind men dan geen Puikpoëten / Overäl waar huizen staan?⁸
 Finds one then no superpoets / wherever houses stand?
 ‘Doesn’t one find excellent poets wherever there are houses?’
- b. Jullie hebt een prachtleven, maar je beseft het niet...⁹
 you.pl have a superlife but you realize it not
 ‘you guys have a great life, but don’t realize it’
- c. Een moordwif ben je, Jeanne¹⁰
 a murder-woman are you, Jeanne
 ‘you are one hell of a woman, Jeanne’
- d. Dit was een reuzereis!¹¹
 This was a super-trip
 ‘This was an excellent trip!’
- e. ja, dat was topfriet¹²
 yes, that was super fries
 ‘Yes, those were superfries’

⁸ Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken, *Historie van den heer Willem Leevend* vol. 8, 277. [1784]

⁹ A.M. de Jong, *Notities van een landstormman* [1918].

¹⁰ Jef Last, *Een huis zonder vensters* [1935].

¹¹ K. Norel, *Waterratten* [1962]

¹² Herman Brusselmans, *Hij schreef te weinig boeken* [2017]

- f. Ik had zeker geen superbenen¹³
 I had certainly no super legs
 ‘I certainly didn’t have super legs’
- g. Een goede parasiet is een meestermanipulator¹⁴
 A good parasite is a master manipulator
 ‘A good parasite is a master manipulator’

Unlike pejorative compounds, there is relatively little overlap with the expressions used in elative compounds, degree causatives or negative polarity items. Some exceptions should be mentioned here. One exception is *super* ‘super’, which is common in elative compounds as well. It may have a degree reading, as in *supervervelend* ‘super annoying’ or a size reading as in *supertanker* ‘id.’, but in combinations such as *superwedstrijd* ‘super match’ or *superidee* ‘super idea’ it merely serves to express a highly positive evaluation. Another exception is *knal*- which appears with a few nouns to add a positive flavor (e.g. *knalfeest* ‘blowout party’), but also with an intensifier interpretation in elative compounds such as *knalhard* ‘very hard’, or *knalrood* ‘bright red’.

A somewhat different case of polysemy is to be found with the item *top*. It may express the highest point in some ranking, or it may express a very positive evaluation. For instance, a female CEO of a company may be referred to as *topvrouw* ‘top woman’ because she is a woman at the top, but a woman who is loved dearly, but serves in a lowly position may also be called a *topvrouw* ‘great gal’.

Ras ‘race’ may express good qualities in *rasartiest*, *rasvoetballer*, *raskomiek*, mostly names of occupations, whereas *rashond*, *raspaard*, *raskat* have a non-evaluative meaning, referring to purebred dogs, horses, cats etc. Compounds with *ras*- emphasize innate qualities, much like *born* does in English: *a born comedian*, *fighter*, *leader* etc. Just like *born*, it is not only used for positive evaluations. In English, people can be described as a born loser, a born coward and so on, and in Dutch *raspessimist* ‘arch-pessimist’, *rasegoïst* ‘arch-egotist’ need not be viewed as positive evaluations. *Ras*- serves as an intensifier in those cases. Nouns such as *voetballer* are not inherently gradable, unlike *pessimist*. Compare e.g. *hij is nogal een pessimist* ‘he is rather a pessimist’ with **hij is nogal een voetballer* ‘he is rather a footballer’. For some discussion of gradation among nouns, see Morzycki (2009).

Droom ‘dream’, like its English counterpart, may be used for people or things occurring in dreams, i.e. *droomgezicht* ‘face seen in a dream’, or for things that are very desirable: *droomkans* ‘great opportunity’, *droombaan* ‘dream job’, *droombestemming* ‘dream destination’ etc. While dreams may be nightmares, the metaphorical use in these compounds only emphasizes wishful dreaming.

Wereld- is used in a non-evaluative way in *wereldburger* ‘citizen of the world, cosmopolite’, *wereldkampioen* ‘world champion’, *wereldrecord* ‘world record’ or *wereldstad* ‘world city, i.e. metropolis’. Many of these words have a positive connotation, which may have given rise to the meliorative use in *wereldgoal* ‘super goal’, *wereldelftal* ‘super team’, *wereldgozer* ‘super guy’ and their ilk.

Model- is evaluative in compounds such as *modelburger* ‘model citizen’, *modelvader* ‘model father’, *modelechtgenoot* ‘model husband’ or *modelgevangene* ‘model prisoner’. These

¹³ *Algemeen Dagblad*, 14-4-2024. The expression comes from cycling. ‘Having great legs’ in this context means having the stamina to perform really well. When cyclists say: ‘today I did not have the legs,’ they do not refer to missing body parts.

¹⁴ *VPRO-gids*, 29-11-2025

are all descriptions of roles that people may have, and the affixoid *model-* indicates that these roles are performed in an exemplary manner. Non-evaluative is the use of *model-* in compounds such as *modelvliegtuig* ‘model airplane’.

Taboo terms are not attested among the meliorative prefixoids, with the possible exception of *moord-* ‘murder’, which relates to the taboo topic of death. Words such as *moordgozer* ‘murder guy, i.e. great guy’ or *moordgriet* ‘murder broad, i.e. great gal’ are no longer as popular as they were in the middle of the 20th century. They are calques from German, where words like *Mordkerl* have been attested since at least the early 19th century.

Positive evaluations may be based on many aspects. *Pracht-* tends to emphasize beauty, but can also be used for things that are perfect in other respects, whereas *droom-* not only states the desirability of a person or a thing, but also that it may not exist in real life. A wonderful idea is a *prachtidee* in Dutch, not a *droomidee*. *Ras-* emphasizes innate aptitudes, and as such it is not appropriate for inanimate objects.

Van Goethem (2023: 327 ff.) also lists *wonder-* as a meliorative prefixoid. I have not included it here, after some hesitation, because it does more than just give a positive evaluation. Thus *wonderkind* ‘prodigy’ is a child who performs well beyond their age. A *wonderdokter* ‘miracle healer’ may sometimes have a negative connotation as a quack or imposter. This might serve as an illustration of how difficult it is to precisely circumscribe the class of meliorative affixoids.

4 Frequency data

4.1 Two corpora

I will make use of two sets of corpus data. First, data from a set of 2032 examples of pejorative compounds were collected, from online books, magazines and newspapers, and a set of 718 melioratives from the same sources. For the purposes of this article, examples from before 1890 (which were few and far between) were excluded. This material was used to study diachronic developments. Second, data from the SUBTLEX-NL corpus of Dutch film subtitles (Keuleers, Brysbaert & New 2010) were used (section 5 below). The subtitle corpus is very large and comes with a handy spreadsheet with word frequencies. I should note that the use of pejoratives (and melioratives) is sensitive to text type. In newspapers, for instance, pejoratives are not found much in news texts or editorials, except for sports items and pieces on court proceedings, but not uncommon in interviews or columns. Melioratives abound in advertisements, for obvious reasons. Subtitles represent spoken language and reflect informal usage standards. These, too, vary according to the nature of the movie or program that is subtitled. A program like the BBC’s *Antiques Roadshow* will mostly yield melioratives in the Dutch subtitles, whereas cop shows such as *Dexter* or *The Wire* tend to produce mostly pejoratives. A disadvantage of the SUBTLEX-NL corpus is that it does not go beyond the year 2010, and so does not accurately reflect the very latest usage trends. Also, while subtitles have an informal character, they do not reflect the very informal registers found on social media such as Twitter (now X). In particular the use of taboo language is very common there. See section 5 below for some remarks.

4.2 Trends among pejoratives

Let's first take a look at the diachronic developments among pejorative compounds. The main pejorative affixoid throughout the entire period is *rot-* 'rotten'. However, in the last couple of decades, this item has been losing ground to sexual taboo terms, in particular *kut-* 'cunt' and *klote-* 'bollocks.' Scatological taboo terms are only a tiny component of all pejorative compounds, rather different from German with its prominent affixoid *Scheiß-* and English, where *shit* is king of the heap. The category of disease terms appears rather stable as a whole, but Figure 1 hides some important changes internal to the group of disease terms (for the latter, see Figure 3 below). The category 'other', finally, is losing ground.

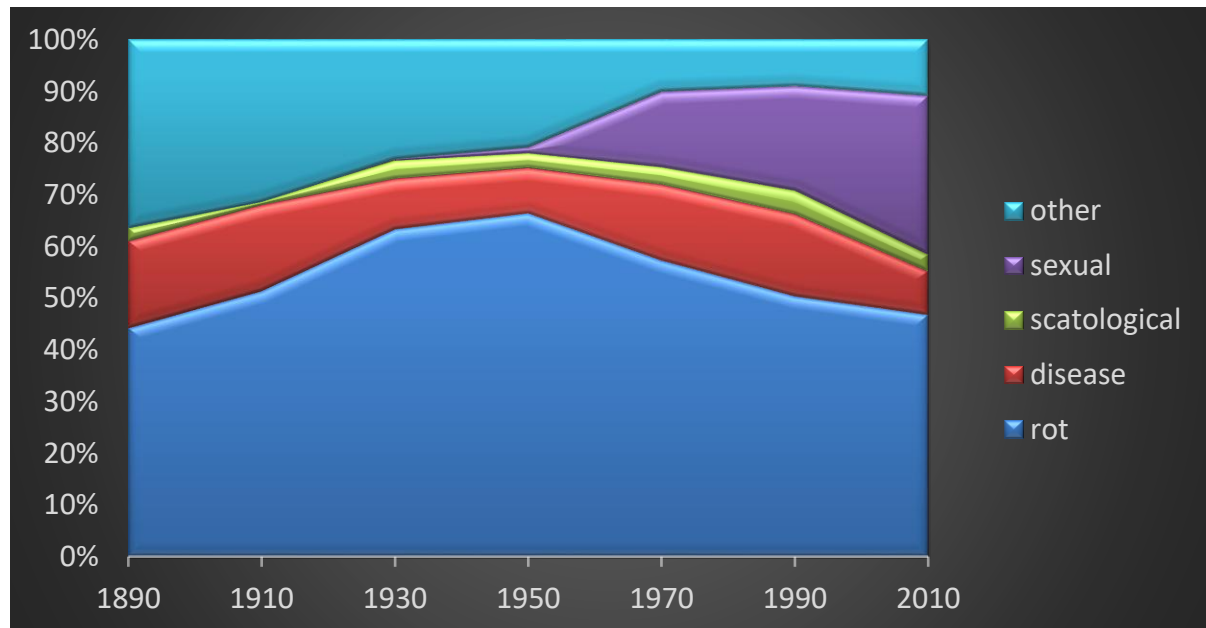


Figure 1: Diachronic trends in 5 classes of pejorative affixoids

The total number of affixoid types with pejorative meaning grows over time. Some remain fairly slangy and are limited to informal language, others have more general currency. In Figure 2, the number of types is plotted for the period 1890-2025, in 20 year intervals. The data show that the number of types triples in the course of this period.

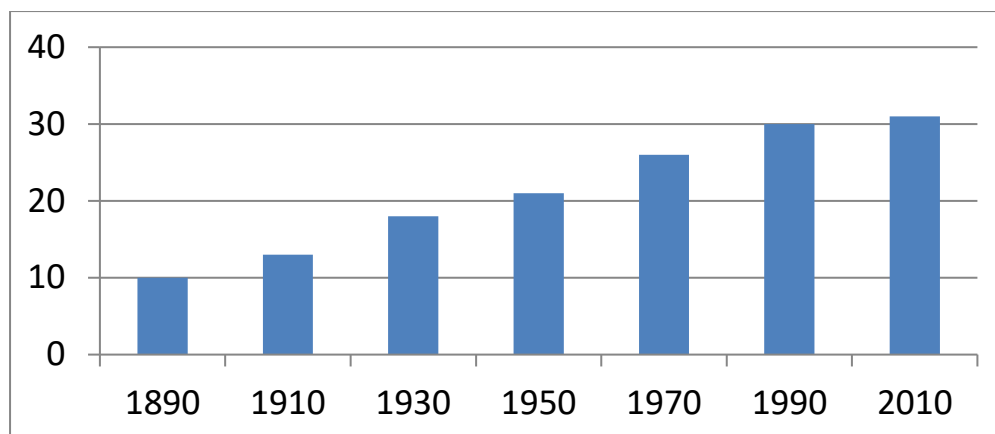


Figure 2: Types of pejorative affixoids per period

The growth seen in this diagram is reminiscent of similar developments elsewhere: among degree causatives, negative polarity items and elative compounds the lexical variety among the words used in these constructions shows a steady growth, as new terms are being introduced, while the old ones linger on (Hoeksema 2002, 2012, Hoeksema & Napoli 2019).

The internal changes within the category disease terms are plotted in Figure 3. As one can see, at first the word *pest* is the only disease term used in pejorative compounds, then others are gradually added. The decline of *pest* in pejorative compounds mirrors a similar decline in the use of *pest* as a negative polarity item.

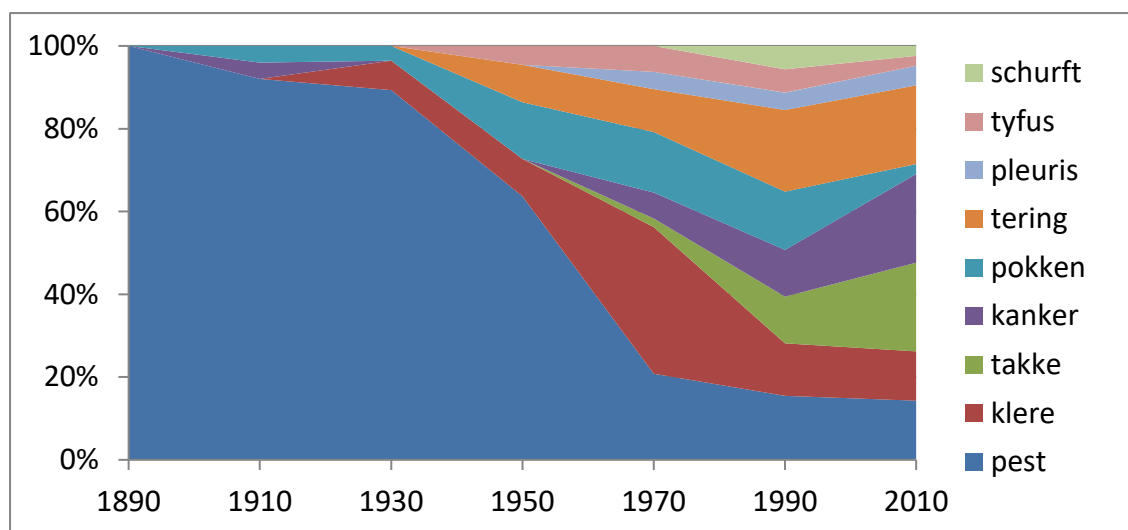


Figure 3: Disease names in pejorative compounds

The sexually-tinged affixoids *klote-* and *kut-* can nowadays also be used as adjectives, even though they are originally nouns. This is due to reanalysis of pejorative compounds as phrasal combinations of a noun and a modifier (a phenomenon known as “debonding”). I won’t say much on this topic here, since there is ample literature on this matter (Norde 2009, Norde & Van Goethem 2014, 2018, Van Goethem 2014, Van Goethem & Hüning 2015, Willis 2016).

However, it is interesting to note that this process has not extended to disease terms. Compare the sentences in (12):

- (12) a. Wat is dat kut!
 What is that cunt
 ‘That is so awful’
 b. Dat is echt klote!
 That is really bollocks
 ‘That really sucks’
 c. ?Dat is tering / pokken / pleuris (only literal readings)
 That is tuberculosis / smallpox / pleurisy

This may be viewed as evidence that the disease terms behave as a group. Why this group resists debonding is somewhat unclear. Confusion with the literal readings may be a factor. In the case of the sexual terms, such confusion is unlikely, for grammatical reasons. *Dat is kut* ‘that is awful’ does not have a reading involving the female body part, which requires a determiner, like all singular count nouns. *Dat is klote* ‘that sucks’ is likewise not ambiguous. The literal reading involving the male body part should be *Dat zijn kloten* ‘those are bollocks’, with plural agreement. Disease names, on the other hand, are mass nouns, and may appear as bare nouns in predicative position, unlike the body part names, which are count nouns.

The change from noun to adjective we see in debonding is not restricted to pejorative affixoids. A similar change appears to have taken place with the meliorative noun *puik*. Originally, this word meant the best quality of something, and in the early modern period it came to be used in meliorative compounds such as *puikjuweel* ‘a choice jewel’ or *puikooft* ‘high quality fruit’. It is still used as a diminutive in the idiom *het puikje van de zalm* ‘the best part of the salmon, i.e. something of top-notch quality.’ Nowadays, these compounds are obsolete, and instead we find *puik* as an adjective in combinations like *een puike wedstrijd* ‘a good game’, or *een puik verhaal* ‘an excellent story’. Note the adjectival inflection in *puike*. *Super* can also be used as an adjective but is not inflected: *die wedstrijd was super* ‘that game was super’ versus **die supere wedstrijd*. Hence the conclusion has to be that *super* is a predicative, but not an attributive adjective in Dutch.

4.3 Trends among melioratives

In Figure 4, the main trends among meliorative prefixoids are plotted. Most notable are the rise of *droom* ‘dream’ and *top* ‘top’, at the expense mainly of *pracht* ‘beauty, splendor’. *Moord* ‘murder’ shows a peak around the middle of the 20th century, and then fades away, perhaps due to the waning of German influence on Dutch. *Droom-* and *top-* on the other hand, reflect English influence. The combination *dream girl*, for instance, has been in use since the 1920s and attested in each following decade according to the Corpus of Historical English (COHA, Davies 2009). Here is an early example (1921) from that corpus:

- (13) Quin glanced up hastily, and there, framed in the doorway, in a Red Cross uniform, stood his dream girl, looking so much more ravishing than she had before

Dream man is even slightly older (1914):

- (14) "You must not die," the girl cried passionately. "You're my Dream Man and I've waited so long for you and dreamed of your coming! I'll pray for you, I'll ask God to give you to me."

Dream job has been attested from the 1970s onward, *dream wedding* since the 1990s. Dutch cases have been attested from the 1930s onward.

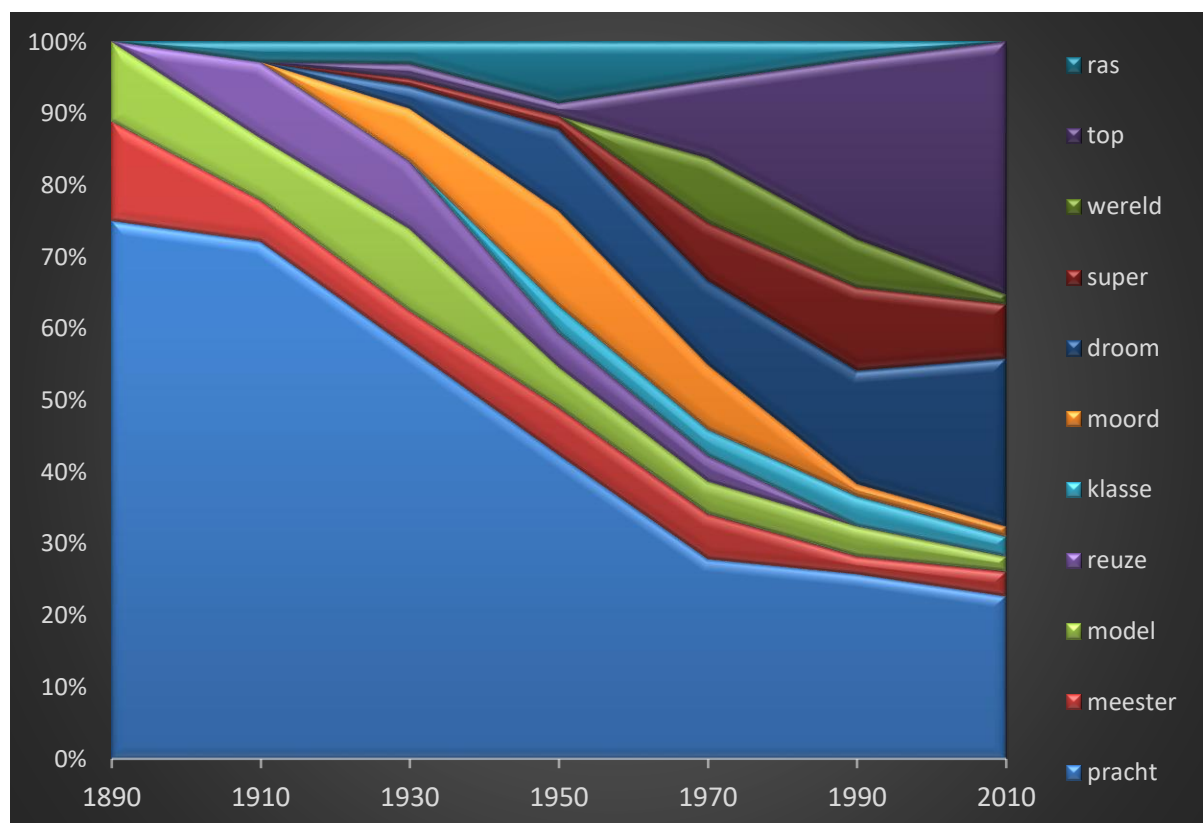


Figure 4: Developments among meliorative affixoids

5 Comparing pejorative and meliorative compounds in SUBTLEX-NL

5.1 Productivity

When we compare pejorative compounds with meliorative compounds, two things stand out. First of all, pejorative compounds are more common than meliorative compounds. In the SUBTLEX-NL corpus, the most common pejorative affixoid is *rot-* which appears in 4778 pejorative compounds. The most common meliorative affixoid is *pracht-*, which appears 359 times. *Rot*, then, is about 13 times as common as *pracht* in subtitles. The number two pejorative affixoid in that corpus, *klote-*, appears 1391 times, which is still more than *pracht-*, or the number two meliorative affixoid *droom-* ‘dream’.

A similar difference emerges when we go from tokens to types. It is a bit difficult to tell from a wordlist exactly which words are meliorative affixoids. In Table 4 (see section 3 above), I listed 12 types. If we take out the obsolete item *puik*, we end up with 11 types, as opposed to 28 for pejorative compounds.

I tried to find a difference in terms of productivity, based on Baayen’s (1992) measure which makes heavy use of the notion of hapax forms.¹⁵ However, there wasn’t much of a general difference between pejorative and meliorative compounds. Within each of these two classes, however, there is a lot of variation in productivity. The affixoid *snot-* is restricted to a small number of denigrating terms for young people (see section 2.2. above). In the SUBTLEX-NL corpus, 2 hapax combinations were found among a total of 103 tokens. Compare this with *tering*, which appears in 123 tokens, of which 41 are hapaxes. Clearly, *tering-* is productive, whereas *snot-* is not. Among the meliorative affixoids, *super-*, *top-* and *pracht-* are clearly productive, whereas *knal-* is not. It is mainly used in the combinations *knalfeest* ‘blowout party’ and *knalfuif* ‘id.’, both of which are rather obsolete. The two hapaxes, *knalshow* ‘super show’ and *knalsucces* ‘bang up success’ remain in the sphere of festivities.

5.2 Neutral and not-so neutral nouns

So far little has been said about the nouns modified by pejorative affixoids. It turns out to be useful to distinguish between more or less neutral terms, such as *man* or *woman*, and more informal and occasionally even denigrating words, such as *guy*, *bloke*, *broad* or *chick*. In Dutch, there is a distinction between *vrouw* ‘woman’ and *wijf* ‘broad’. In Table 5, I compare the two words in pejorative and meliorative compounds, using data from the SUBTLEX-NL corpus:

Wijf	Vrouw	
458	4	Pejorative
9	41	Meliorative

Table 5: Two words for females in two contexts

A number of things are remarkable. First, the denigrating term *wijf* is used more than the neutral term *vrouw*, in spite of the latter vastly outnumbering the former outside of these compounds (in SUBTLEX-NL *wijf* occurs 953 times, and *vrouw* 35931 times). Second, the denigrating term can be used in meliorative compounds, without affecting the positive evaluation. However, words such as *prachtwijf* and *topwijf* do have an informal ring to them.

The main words for ‘man’ are: *vent* ‘guy, fellow’, *kerel* ‘guy, dude’, *man* ‘man’. See Table 6.

Vent	Kerel	Man	
39	13	1	Pejorative
26	12	4	Meliorative

Table 6: Three words for males in two contexts.

Even more striking than in the case of the female terms is the almost complete absence of the regular word for men, namely *man*, in these compounds. Similar observations hold for German, where *Scheißkerl* is far more common than *Scheißmann*. Another observation is the generally

¹⁵ A hapax word is a word that occurs only once in a corpus.

small number of pejorative and meliorative compounds with a word for men. The most likely explanation is that for men, there are a lot of slurs and negative terms that are already gendered and are not pejorative compounds. Words such as *klootzak* ‘scrotum’ and *rotzak* ‘rotten bollocks’ are primarily used as abusive terms for men, not women, and occur in the SUBTLEX-NL data 9180 and 926 times, respectively. Abusive terms restricted primarily to women, such as *trut* (1754 occurrences) are less common in the corpus, but this seems to be a direct consequence of the large gender bias found in most corpora (cf. Caliskan et al. 2022). To illustrate this point, the masculine singular personal pronoun *hij* ‘he’ occurs 388127 times in SUBTLEX-NL, whereas the feminine singular personal pronouns *zij* ‘she’ and *ze* ‘she’ together occur 170013 times.

Finally, a brief look at the animal kingdom (Table 7).

Beest	Dier	
77	4	Pejorative
9	4	Meliorative

Table 7: Two words for animals in two contexts

The general term for animal is *dier* whereas *beest* ‘beast’ has a somewhat negative connotation. Again, we see that the neutral term is hardly used, even in meliorative compounds, whereas the negative term is prominent in pejorative compounds.

5.3 Subtitles versus Twitter

In this section, pejorative and meliorative terms for the weather in the SUBTLEX-NL corpus are compared to the Twitter corpus data from the interface made available by Gosse Bouma of the department of Communication and Information Science of the University of Groningen.¹⁶ The Dutch word for ‘weather’ is *weer*, and some of the main combinations of a pejorative or a meliorative prefixoid with this noun are presented in Table 8 below. Dutch orthography requires writing the parts of a compound as one word, a spelling rule that is often ignored on Twitter and other social media. I combined the various spellings into one number. E.g. *kutweer* ‘cunt weather’ occurs 193089 times, and *kut weer* 385309 times, so the table lists *kutweer* as occurring 578398 times. Twitter is an excellent source for comments about the weather, since there is an enormous amount of venting on this platform.

Prefixoid	SUBTLEX-NL	Twitter
Pejorative		
Kut- ‘cunt’	0	578398
Klote- ‘bollocks’	5	97101
Rot- ‘rotten’	15	73358
Kanker- ‘cancer’	0	45006
Pokken- ‘smallpox’	0	25337
Tering- ‘tuberculosis’	0	19048
Shit- ‘shit’	0	17976

¹⁶ <https://www.let.rug.nl/gosse/Ngrams/>. See also Bouma (2015). The data are from 2013 and 2014, when the platform was called Twitter, before it became X.

Snert- ‘pea soup’	2	4364
Meliorative		
Super- ‘super’	0	19310
Top- ‘top’	0	16735
Pracht- ‘splendor’	2	2285

Table 8: Pejorative and meliorative terms for the weather

Apart from the huge differences in size of the datasets, it is striking how much more common the taboo items are compared to *rot-* and *snert-*. The disease terms are robustly attested, but rank below the taboo terms with sexual connotations. The English loan *shit*, which is not very common in the other datasets, also appears to be on the rise. Among the meliorative compounds, *top-* is clearly more popular on Twitter than *pracht-*, which is slowly becoming old-fashioned.

The differences between Twitter and SUBTLEX-NL are not just due to the informal nature of Twitter, but most likely also reflect age differences. Twitter users were and mostly still are predominantly teenagers and young adults (Sloan et al. 2015), unlike the more general audience of TV shows that the subtitles cater to.

6 Conclusions

The class of pejorative compounds in Dutch is “relatively new,” meaning that it is not older than two centuries. Within that period, it has undergone major changes. In particular taboo words have been added to the mix, following a trend that can be found among polarity items, degree causatives and elative compounds as well. This does not appear to be an oddity of Dutch, judging from the emergence of swear words in English and German in many of the same constructions. Typically Dutch, however, is the role of disease terms, which are also to be found in typical Dutch maledictions. Instead of saying ‘go to hell’ or ‘go fuck yourself’, the Dutch often wish for horrible diseases: *krijg de tering*, *vuile schoft* ‘get tuberculosis, you dirty bastard’. The terms for diseases appear in a number of expressive constructions, not just maledictions, but also negative polarity items, degree causatives and pejorative compounds. Scatological pejoratives are less common than in German or English, but the strong influence of English on the language of younger generations might predict a brighter future for this category. Data from Twitter support this prediction.

The class of meliorative compounds appears to be much older, if we include the archaic cases with *puik*, but does not contain taboo terms, with the possible exception of *moord-* ‘murder’. Meliorative compounds show less variation than pejorative compounds, and are less frequent overall. Whether pejorative or meliorative compounds are used and to what extent depends on text type and/or communicative setting. Further research on the use of this kind of evaluative language by different groups of speakers and in different kinds of settings would be welcome, especially if it were to be amplified with a study of competing means for pejoration and melioration, such as adjectives and attributive prepositional phrases.

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Appendix

Table A1: Raw numbers for Figure 1

	rot	disease	scatological	sexual	other
1890	34	13	2	0	28
1910	77	25	1	0	47
1930	181	28	10	1	66
1950	166	22	7	3	52
1970	188	48	11	48	33
1990	224	71	20	90	40
2010	232	42	16	152	54

Table A2: Raw numbers for Figure 3

	pest	klere	takke	kanker	pokken	tering	pleuris	tyfus	schurft
1890	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1910	23	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
1930	25	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
1950	14	2	0	0	3	2	0	1	0
1970	10	17	1	3	7	5	2	3	0
1990	11	9	8	8	10	14	3	4	4
2010	6	5	9	9	1	8	2	1	1

Table A3: Raw numbers for Figure 4

	pracht	meester	model	reuze	klasse	moord	droom	super	wereld	top	ras
1890	27	5	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1910	75	6	9	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
1930	55	5	11	9	0	7	3	1	0	2	3
1950	45	7	6	5	4	14	12	2	0	2	9
1970	31	7	5	4	4	10	13	9	10	12	6
1990	31	3	5	0	5	2	19	14	8	30	3
2010	33	5	3	0	4	2	34	11	2	51	0

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