The multilingualism of Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687)
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To Ad Leerintveld. A Scholar and a Gentleman
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Prologue

The aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive account of the multilingualism of the Dutch statesman and man of letters, Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687). He used eight languages – Dutch, French, Latin, Greek, Italian, English, Spanish, and (High) German – in the majority of his correspondence and poetry, although he also engaged with other languages, including Hebrew and Portuguese, to a lesser extent. During his long life he wrote and received a vast number of letters in these languages both in a private capacity and in the various functions he carried out for the House of Orange, including that of secretary to two stadholders from 1625-1650. He also wrote many thousands of poems on a whole range of subjects. In his letters and poems he sometimes used only one of these languages, whilst at other times he used more than one, engaging in bilingual and indeed multilingual code switching.¹ Furthermore, Huygens studied and wrote on a wide range of subjects, notably architecture, music, and natural science. His skills as a multilingual are again much in evidence in his engagement with these subjects.

Thankfully, we have much source material evincing Huygens’s multilingualism. Many of his letters and poems are preserved in manuscripts, above all, in the archives of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague, and many of his poems were published during his lifetime. Furthermore, a significant amount of secondary literature has been produced which contains transcriptions of and commentaries on these primary sources. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries J.A. Worp published extensive multivolume editions of Huygens’s verse and correspondence. The scale of each undertaking has not subsequently been surpassed. However, Worp’s editions have a number of errors and limitations. More recent editions of Huygens’s work have attempted to address these issues. In regard to his poetry, the most significant publication is Ad Leerintveld’s edition of Huygens’s early Dutch poetry up to and including the year 1625. To this can be added Tineke ter Meer’s edition of his early Latin verse, and a number of editions devoted to some of Huygens’s longer poems, such as Frans Blom’s 2003 edition of Huygens’s autobiographical Latin poem De Vita Propria and Ton van Strien’s 2008 edition of the Dutch poem Hofwijck. The most significant recent edition in relation to Huygens’s correspondence

¹ Sometimes the term ‘code switching’ is written in the literature as two separate words, sometimes with a hyphen, sometimes as one word.
is that published by Rudolph Rasch in 2007. Rasch is a musicologist, and his edition provides complete transcriptions from manuscript, containing three hundred letters to and from Huygens on the subject of music, together with Dutch translations and commentaries. This wealth of primary and secondary material is one reason why Huygens makes a good subject for a study such as this. He was by no means the only multilingual in the United Provinces in the seventeenth century, and so the central question that I shall work towards answering in this book is: What is the particularity of Huygens's multilingualism? The chapters of the book are arranged in such a way as to answer this question.

Chapter 1, ‘Multilingualism: An Introduction’, considers what multilingualism means when it is applied to an individual, such as Huygens, and then examines what I call the ‘multilingual landscape’ of the United Provinces in the early modern period. By this I mean what factors contributed to multilingualism in the United Provinces at this time, which languages were used, in which social domains or communities these languages were written and spoken, and how their fortunes changed during the course of the early modern period. This will provide the necessary background for the rest of this book.

Chapter 2, ‘Huygens’s Language Acquisition’, begins by discussing why Huygens learnt the eight languages that formed the core of his multilingualism and then considers in chronological order how he learnt and developed his knowledge of each language in his early years. In truth, his choice of languages is not in itself remarkable: to a certain extent, it was pre-determined, as he was destined for a career in administration for the House of Orange. Rather, it is the variety of ways in which Huygens applied his knowledge of these languages that is striking and demands our attention.

Chapter 3, ‘The “Multidimensionality” of Huygens’s Multilingualism’, picks up this theme and looks in detail at what makes Huygens’s multilingualism distinctive. After providing an account of how he used each of his core languages in his poetry and correspondence, I consider other languages with which he engaged; his use of Dutch dialects, often for comic effect; his coinage of neologisms in a number of languages; evidence for his spoken use of languages; and the multilingualism of his vast library. What becomes apparent is how his use of language was shaped by his great learning, his sense of humour, and by his manifold interests beyond the relatively narrow confines of serving the House of Orange.

Chapter 4, ‘Huygens’s Multilingualism in Music, Science, and Architecture’, examines how Huygens used his linguistic knowledge in these three areas of extra-curricular activity. It was above all his knowledge of
vernacular languages, notably, French, Italian, and English, which allowed him to read and write about each of these subjects and to establish networks for the exchange of ideas and information about them. Furthermore, his linguistic knowledge allowed him to open doors, both for himself and others, which might otherwise have remained closed.

Chapter 5, ‘Huygens and Translation’, discusses what Huygens himself had to say on the subject of translation, how he developed as a translator, and what material he translated into which language. He translated primarily into Dutch, most notably, nineteen poems by John Donne in the early 1630s. However, he also translated into other languages, in particular Latin and French, once more demonstrating his great versatility and dexterity as a linguist. One distinctive feature of Huygens’s translation is the extent to which he produced translations of his own poetry or ‘self-translated’. In two cases he produced poems in his eight core languages on the same theme. Here, the question arises as to whether he was translating or code switching.

Chapter 6, ‘Code Switching in Huygens’s Work’, considers why Huygens practised code switching. Two principal influences on him seem to be at work in this regard; one is the notion of *imitatio* of classical models, such as the work of Cicero. It is striking how often the reasons for Huygens’s code switching mirror those of Roman authors who code switched into Greek. The other influence on Huygens’s code switching is ‘macaronics’, the playful mixing of languages that emerged with the rise of vernaculars on the cusp of the late medieval and early modern periods. In 1625 Huygens produced a fine macaronic poem, entitled *Olla Podrida*, in which he changes language in each line whilst maintaining rhyming couplets. In some sense code switching provided a perfect linguistic storm for Huygens, as it allowed him to marry his vast knowledge of languages and literary sources with his innate sense of humour and love of word play.

Chapter 7, ‘The Multilingualism of Huygens’s Children’, is something of a coda for this study, but also a return to Huygens’s own linguistic beginnings, as it considers how he passed his love of languages and recognition of their usefulness onto his children. Whilst the opportunity for language acquisition given to his daughter, Susanna, was limited, no expense was spared in educating his sons in the languages that Huygens considered important for them: Christiaan became one of the leading scientists of his day; Constantijn Jr. became secretary to William, prince of Orange, later King William III; and Lodewijck took part in diplomatic missions for the Dutch Republic. In each case, the sons were able to put their knowledge of languages to good use.
Here is perhaps the best place to comment on a couple of decisions I have made regarding the layout of my book. Rather than including citations in footnotes, I have chosen to use in-text parenthetical citations, following the practice of other recent works in this field, such as Roland Willemyns’s history of the Dutch language, published in 2013. Where there is only one entry for an author or combination of authors in the bibliography I only give the author’s name together with the page number(s) in the in-text citation, for example ‘(Willemyns: 23)’. Where there is more than one entry for an author/authors in the bibliography, I give the relevant year as well, for example ‘(Leerintveld 2008: 20)’. In both cases, where the reference is to a work in general rather than to a specific page number, the in-text citation contains both the author’s name and year of publication, for example ‘(Willemyns 2013)’. As I note in Chapter 1, in-text parenthetical citations in the form (1, 20) refer to the volume (1) and letter (20) of the edition of Huygens’s correspondence published by J.A. Worp (Huygens 1911-17). In-text parenthetical citations in the form (VI, 30) refer to the volume (VI) and page (30) of the edition of Huygens’s verse published by Worp (Huygens 1892-9). My use of capitalization in foreign language titles reflects that used in the original works. For the translations of these titles, I follow English language rules for capitalization. Finally, in relation to block quotations, all such quotations are given in italics. For my translations of block quotations, I use standard font in square brackets.

After a short epilogue, I conclude with an appendix containing my translations of some of Huygens’s poems referred to elsewhere in the book. Indeed, I have endeavoured throughout this book to provide translations into English of Huygens’s work in different languages. This has sometimes proved challenging where a play on words is at work (in one or two instances in three languages), and I have found some of his Latin verse to be very terse (no rhyme intended) and difficult to render into English, and am grateful in particular to Ton Harmsen for his assistance in this regard. Nevertheless, what I hope I have managed to do is to bring to life something of the richly varied and distinctive manner in which Constantijn Huygens applied his knowledge of languages and to capture something of the inexhaustible creativity (one might even say, magic) which flowed from his pen when he put his multilingualism to work.
This book provides a comprehensive account of the multilingualism of the Dutch statesman and man of letters, Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687). He used eight languages, Dutch, French, Latin, Greek, Italian, English, Spanish and German, in the majority of his correspondence and poetry, and engaged to a lesser extent with other languages including Hebrew and Portuguese. During his long life he wrote and received a vast number of letters in these languages both in a private capacity and in the various functions he carried out for the House of Orange, including that of secretary to two stadholders from 1625–1650. He also wrote many thousands of poems on an extensive range of subjects. In his letters and poems he sometimes used only one language, whilst at other times he used more than one, engaging in bilingual and indeed multilingual code switching, which amply demonstrates his wit, learning and linguistic aptitude. Furthermore Huygens studied and wrote on a wide range of subjects, notably architecture, music and natural science. His skills as a multilingual are again much in evidence in his engagement with these subjects. Finally he translated poetry including his own in a range of source–target language combinations. In short Huygens fully tested the boundaries of language with his virtuosity as a multilingual.

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