Dutch Naming Conventions & History

Dutch family names were not required until 1811 when emperor Napoleon annexed the Netherlands; prior to 1811, the use of patronymics was much more common.

In Dutch linguistics, many names use certain *qualifying* words (prepositions) which are positioned between a person's given name and their surname. Although these words, *tussenvoegsels*, are not strictly essential to state the person's surname, they are nevertheless a part of the surname and are almost always included for clarity. For example, someone whose family name is "De Vries" is not found at the letter "D" in the telephone directory but at "V"; the "de" is a *tussenvoegsel* and is not a part of the indexing process but rather is more of a stylistic qualifier. Another reason for this methodology is that it makes finding someone's name in a database relatively easy, since most Dutch prepositions start with the same letter (and thus if the prepositions led, there would be constant superfluous data entry to arrive at the desired name). In the Netherlands, the *tussenvoegsel* is written with a capital letter if no name precedes it. For example:

- a person with the name *"Jan"* as a given name and *"de Vries"* as a surname would be written *Jan de **V**ries* or "*de heer **D**e **V**ries*", literally, *Mr. De Vries*.

History of Dutch given names

The history of Dutch given names can roughly be divided in four main periods:

1. The domination of Germanic names. (Migration Period and before until the High Middle Ages)
2. The high Middle Ages when Germanic-based personal names were losing ground to non-native holy names. (High Middle Ages until the Early Modern era)
3. A period of stability, when an extraordinarily strong naming habit emerged. (Early Modern era–1960s)
4. The post-World War II period, characterized by previously unknown personal names. (1960s–present)

Germanic period

The Germanic names are the names with the longest history in the Dutch-speaking area; they form the oldest layer of the given names known in Dutch. The Germanic names were characterized by a rich diversity, as there were many possible combinations.

A Germanic name is composed of two parts, the latter of which also indicates the gender of the person. A name like Adelbert or Albert is composed of *"adel"* (meaning *"noble"*) and *"bert"* which is derived from *"beracht"* (meaning *"bright"* or *"shining"*) hence the name means something in the order of *"Bright/Shining through noble behaviour";* the English name *"Albright"*, now only seen as a surname, is a cognate with the same origin.

Combining these parts was used when the child was named after family or other relatives. For example, the child would receive two parts from different family members, in this way a father named *"Hildebrant"* and a mother called *"Gertrud"* would call their son *"Gerbrant"* and their daughter *"Hiltrud".*

Medieval names

Through the course of the Middle Ages names derived from Christian Saints became more common than Germanic ones. From the 12th century onwards, it became custom for the child to receive a Christian name, although some names of Germanic origin like Gertrude and Hubertus remained prevalent as these too became names of Christian saints.

The direct influence of the church on the transition from Germanic to Christian names must not be overestimated. Before the council of Trent (1545–1563), the Roman Catholic church did not have any regulation of the practice of naming children.

There are thought to have been several reasons the Christian names gained the upper hand, such as the crusades, the larger ecclesiastical influence and the appearance of mendicant orders (such as the Franciscans and Dominicans) and most importantly, the veneration of saints and the appearance of patron saints.

Besides religious influence it is believed that fashion was the main reason to give children a Christian name. With larger cities starting to flourish across the Low Countries, wealthy citizens in particular became *trend-setters* in this regard.

In these times typical Dutch names such as *"Kees" (Cornelis), "Jan" (Johannes)* and *"Piet" (Petrus)* emerged.

Stability

When the conversion was made from Germanic to Christian names, most parents just picked a name they liked best or would be most helpful in their child's later life, for example if the child would come from a butcher's family and he himself would one day become a butcher, the child would probably be called after *"Sint Joris"* (the Dutch name for "Saint George"), the patron saint of the butchers.

The Dutch habit of naming newborns after another family member originates with a then-widespread superstition that the name in some way contributed to some form of reincarnation of the person the child was named after, who was usually much older. This superstition disappeared after some time, even though a certain Le Francq van Berkeij writes the following in 1776: "*bij veelen, een oud, overgeloovig denkbeeld, dat iemand weldra sterft, wanneer hij, gelijk men zegt, vernoemd is*" ("many have a superstitious belief that a person will soon die when someone, as they say, has been named after him").

As the centuries passed, this practice became so standard that the names of the children were practically known at the marriage of the future parents. The rules for naming were the following:

- First-born son is named after paternal grandfather.
- First-born daughter is named after maternal grandmother.
- Second son is named after maternal grandfather.
- Second daughter is named after paternal grandmother.
- Subsequent children were often named after uncles and aunts – there was some liberty of choice here.

The infant mortality rate was high. If a son had died before his next brother was born, this younger brother was usually given the same name. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for a daughter. When the father died before the birth of a son, the son was usually named after him. When the mother died at the birth of a daughter, the daughter was usually named after the mother.

Post-World War II period (1945–present)

Traditionally there was little difference between the Christian name ("doopnaam") and the name used in domestic spheres ("roepnaam"). If someone's Christian name was *Johannes*, domestically he was called *Johan*, *Jan* or *Hans*.

After the war, the Dutch became less religious. Thus, the Christian name and given name started to diverge, as personal names of foreign origin were adopted. In some cases these names are written more or less phonetically, for example *Sjaak* (French *Jacques*, English *Jack*) and *Sjaan* (French *Jeanne*). (See also Sjors & Sjimmie.) Working-class names Jan, Piet and Klaas (the Dutch proverbial equivalent to "Tom, Dick and Harry") were often replaced by middle-class Hans, Peter and Nico. Also, the urge to name children after their grandparents lessened dramatically. The change in naming also led to a new law on naming in 1970, replacing the old one, which had been in force since 1803.

Nowadays, traditional official names are found, but often only as an addition to the modern name. Boys are more often given a traditional Dutch name than girls. Boys are also more commonly named after a family member while

girls are simply named for the sound of the name. As in the past there is a certain difference between working class names and middle-class names. As working class tend to adopt more modern names and names of celebrities as middle-class names are more traditional.

(The above information is from Wiki and the following section from Cormac Mac Ruairi)

The defining moment came on 18 August 1811 when Napoleon Bonaparte — whose French army were occupying the Netherlands — signed a decree establishing a registry of births, deaths, and marriages. Families, who until that time had got on simply fine without a surname, were suddenly obliged to pick a surname.

It is a common misconception that the Dutch did not take old 'boney-parts' all that seriously and set about picking silly names like Borst (breast) and Kok anticipating they could drop them as soon as 'Nappy' got what was coming to him. It is an interesting theory but why didn't the Dutch follow through on this? Perhaps, after all, the Dutch took their new names seriously.

Genealogist Rick van der Wielen says that traditionally, the Dutch used a patronymic system where the father's first name became the first son's last name, and the other kids got the left-over names from the grandfather, great grandfather and so on.

Gradually in the 1600, people began to turn the patronymic name into modern surnames — Jan Hendricksen (Jan the son of Hendrick) gave his son the surname Hendricksen instead of Jansen. A suffix was often added to indicate 'son of' or 'daughter of'. (Ex. Jan, son of Hendrick would be written Jan Hendricks, Jan Hendrickse or Jan Hendricksen).

Women took a feminine form such as 's', 'se', 'sd', 'sdr' and even 'sen' which implied the full suffix of 'sdochter', meaning 'daughter of; (Ex. Jannetje Dirksdr would be Jane, daughter of Dirk).

"But the Dutch, being independently minded, couldn't agree on a single system. For instance, one of the sons might use the name Hendricksen, while another might call himself Jansen, with another sibling basing his name on his town of origin and another on his occupation, Brouwer (brewer)," says van der Wielen.

Incidentally, Van der Wielen's own name refers to a pool of water along the coast that remains after the tide goes out – and not the Dutch word for wheel.

The top 10 Dutch names

Genealogist Miriam Klaassen says that a combination of unflattering nicknames, patronymic-based names, associations with place of origin and references to occupation have become the most popular surnames.

The top 10 surnames include: De Jong (the young), Jansen or Janssen (son of Jan), Bakker (baker), Visser (fisher), Smit (smith) and Meijer/Meyer (land agent).

Van Dijk is another all-time favorite but boringly enough, it refers to the Dutch preoccupation with keeping sea water out of their clogs rather than a reference to the mother's sexual preference.

My personal favorite is Van den/der Berg (from/of the mountain). Now that has got to be a joke.

We can have a giggle about the Dutch first name Pik which seems to relate to the Dutch word for the male organ, but we should not lose the run of ourselves. Kok for instance means cook.

In the movie *Meet the Parents*, Ben Stiller plays a character named Gaylord Fokker and we are all supposed to laugh. But Fokker (breeder) is a perfectly legitimate surname in the Netherlands. And while we are on the subject, my heart goes out to the Dutch man who proudly announced 'I fok horses' when asked about his occupation during an interview on British television some years back.