

Sapientia Populi

Dutch Proverbs & Expressions

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Introduction

Learning proverbs and expressions has always been an important element of learning any language.

In addition, learning proverbs and expressions clothes a person in the garb of wisdom and adorns his head with the crown of dignity.

We may be somewhat fair when we say that some expressions were deviant or immoral, but the reason they were used among people was their use during the so-called Dark Ages. We have no right to hold accountable those who were not blessed with any degree of knowledge or civilization.

Therefore, I deleted over 511 expressions from the first draft of this book. This doesn't mean it includes every Dutch expression, but I tried to include as many of the most important expressions and proverbs as possible.

This book is divided into two main sections:

Section One: Dutch Proverbs. The phrases in this section are said as they are; pronouns and tenses such as the past or present tense are not changed.

Section Two: Dutch expressions and phrases. The pronouns and temporal grammar rules in this section change depending on the conversation.

In addition to explaining the phrases, I also explained the literal meaning of each phrase so that the reader can deduce the origin of each phrase, in an attempt to make it easier to remember.

I hope you find the content of this book useful.

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Nederlandse Spreekwoorden

Dutch Proverbs

1/ Aan een balk, die uit het bos gehaald wordt, moet veel gehakt worden, voor hij in het huis past.

[Literal: A beam which was taken from the forest requires a lot of chopping before it fits into the house].

In a religious group, association, etc.: you can win members from a community, but they must be taught to adapt.

2/ Aan een boom zo vol geladen, mist men een twee pruimpjes niet.

[Literal: On a tree so fully loaded, someone would not miss a plum or two].

It doesn't matter much whether there is enough of something, even if a small amount is gone or missing.

3/ Adel verplicht.

[Literal: Nobility obliges].

Anyone who is respected by the people must also meet their expectations.

4/ Al doende leert men.

[Literal: Practice makes perfect].

By doing something often, people learn how to do it better.

5/ Al is de leugen nog zo snel, de waarheid achterhaalt ze wel.

[Literal: No matter how fast a lie is, the truth will catch up with it].

A lie sometimes seems to achieve its intended goal, but is ultimately exposed as a lie.

6/ Alleen een piepend wiel krijgt olie.

[Literal: Only a squeaky wheel gets oil].

Someone gains attention by behaving conspicuously.

7/ Alle hout is nog geen timmerhout.

[Literal: Not all wood is carpentry wood].

Not everyone has the same talent for a particular activity.

8/ Alle waar is naar zijn geld.

[Literal: All goods are worth their price].

You can't expect top quality from something cheap.

9/ Alle wegen leiden naar Rome.

[Literal: All roads lead to Rome].

There are several methods to achieve something.

10/ Als de dagen gaan lengen, gaat de vorst strengen.

[Literal: As the days lengthen, the frost becomes harsher].

The coldest part of winter starts after the shortest day of the year.

11/ Als de dagen lengen, gaan de nachten strengen.

[Literal: As the days lengthen, the nights become shorter].

The coldest part of winter falls after the shortest day of the year.

12/ Als de ene hand de andere wast, worden ze beide schoon.

[Literal: When one hand washes the other, they both become clean].

Helping each other benefits both.

13/ Als de kat van huis is, dansen de muizen. (Of): Als de kat van huis is, dansen de muizen op tafel.

[Literal: When the cat's out of house, the mice will play. (Or): When the cat's out of house, the mice will play on the table].

If supervising is missing, things will get out of hand.

14/ Als de maan vol is, schijnt ze overal.

[Literal: When the moon is full, it shines everywhere].

When someone is happy, everyone can see it.

15/ Als de nood het hoogst is, is de redding nabij. (Of): Als de nood het hoogst is, is de redding het meest nabij.

[Literal: When the need is the greatest, help is near. (Or): When the need is the greatest, help is mostly near].

When you need something the most, it won't be long before it actually gets there.

16/ Als de vos de passie preekt, boer pas op je kippen! (Of): Als de vos de passie preekt, boer pas op je ganzen!

[Literal: When the fox preaches passion, farmer watch your chickens! (Or): When the fox preaches passion, farmer watch your geese!].

Whoever speak sweet words wants to deceive you and/or cause you material damage.
Watch out for a cheater who speak sweet words.

17/ Als de zon een mestvaalt schijnt, dan verspreidt deze een onaangename geur.

[Literal: When the sun shines on a manure pile, it gives off an unpleasant odor].

Sometimes it seems like everything is going wrong at once and the negative aspects of a situation are amplified. Life sometimes seems to get worse with additional adversity.

18/ Als een boer niet zwemmen kan, ligt het aan het water.

[Literal: If a farmer can't swim, it's the water's fault]].

Someone always has an explanation or an excuse for why something doesn't work. A certain form of down-to-earth, but sometimes somewhat cynical logic whereby the blame is always placed on an external factor rather than on the person themselves.

19/ Als er één schaap over de dam is, volgen er meer.

[Literal: Once one sheep crosses the dam, more will follow].

If one person takes a certain step, others will often follow that example, especially if the step seemed difficult or risky.

20/ Als het getij verandert, verzet men de bakens. (Of): Als het getij verloopt, verzet men de bakens.

[Literal: When the tide changes, people move beacons . (Or): When the tide goes out, people move the beacons].

When circumstances change, people adapt another tactics.

21/ Als het melk regent, staan mijn schotels omgekeerd.

[Literal: If it rains milk, my dishes would be upside down].

Whenever something is available cheaply, I invariably miss out. To be never lucky.

22/ Als je alles van tevoren weet, ga je liggen voor je valt. (Of): Als je alles van tevoren wist, dan kwam je met een dubbeltje de wereld rond.

[Literal: If you know everything in advance, you lie down before you fall. (Or): If you knew everything in advance, you could go around the world with a dime].

There is no point in complaining about a lack of prior knowledge after the fact. (Usually in response to complaints like: "Als ik het van tevoren wist.../ If I had known that beforehand...).

23/ Als 't schip zinkt, dan zinkt ook de lading.

[Literal: If the ship sinks, the load sinks too].

When circumstances or the situation become unfavorable, the things that depend on it also suffer and perish.

24/ Als het water zakt, kraakt het ijs.

[Literal: When the water level drops, the ice cracks].

Every cause has a logical consequences. (Flanders, Sch.) Said when someone breaks wind while urinating.

25/ Als katjes muizen, mauwen ze niet.

[Literal: When kittens are eating mice, they don't meow].

People (especially children) who are busy with a task, such as eating, often talk less.

26/ Al te goed is buurmans gek.

[Literal: Already too good is a neighbor's fool].

If you always help everyone, someone will take advantage of that.

27/ Angst is een slechte raadgever.

[Literal: Fear is a bad advisor].

Fear often makes people make wrong, irrational decisions which prevents them from thinking logically and hinders his/her development.

28/ April doet wat ie wil.

[Literal: April does what it wants].

The weather in April is unpredictable.

29/ Aprilletje zoet, heeft nog weleens een witte hoed.

[Literal: Sweet April, sometimes it wears a white hat].

In the beginning (the hat) of April it can still snow occasionally.

30/ Arbeid adelt.

[Literal: Work ennobles].

Work elevates a person, makes him/her feel better and improves him/her socially or morally.

31/ Baat het niet, het schaadt ook niet. (Of): Baat het niet, dan schaadt het niet.

[Literal: If it doesn't benefit, it doesn't hurt either. (Or): If it doesn't benefit, it doesn't hurt].

Something may not bring any benefit but at least it cannot cause any harm either.

32/ Begonnen is half gewonnen.

[Literal: Beginning is half won].

What is not started will never be finished.

33/ Beidt Uw tijd, duur Uw uur.

[Literal: Bide your time, continue your hour].

To wait patiently for the right moment, but don't give up when things get tough.

34/ Belofte is een hemd der dwazen.

[Literal: Promise is a shirt of fools].

A meaningless promise can still bring temporary happiness.

35/ Belofte maakt schuld.

[Literal: A promise creates a debt].

If someone has promised something, then he also has the obligation to carry it out.

36/ Beter een goede buur, dan een verre vriend.

[Literal: Better a good neighbor than a distant friend].

Maintaining a good relationship with your neighbor is better than with someone who lives far away from you.

37/ Beter een half ei, dan een lege dop.

[Literal: Better half an egg, than an empty shell].

Something is better than nothing at all.

38/ Beter van een stad dan van een dorp.

[Literal: From a city is better than from a village].

It is better to receive payments from a rich person than from a poor person.

39/ Beter één vogel in de hand, dan tien in de lucht.

[Literal: One bird in the hand is better than ten in the air].

Everyone should prefer what he has or can definitely get over vague promises. (Applicable when signing contracts).

40/ Beter ermee verlegen, dan erom verlegen.

[Literal: Better to be shy with it, than shy about it].

Better to have too much of something than too little of something.

41/ Beter laat dan nooit.

[Literal: Better late than never].

Those who did not do something on time will partially make up for it by still doing it.

42/ Beter ten halve gekeerd dan ten hele gedwaald.

[Literal: Better to turn back halfway than to be lost completely].

Go back on a decision if this is still possible. It is better to abort something halfway through if it turns out to be a wrong venture. Or: If someone has made a misstep, it is better if he does not follow through.

43/ Bezint eer ge begint.

[Literal: Reflect honour (befoe) you begin].

Think carefully before starting anything.

44/ Bezoek brengt altijd vreugde aan, zo 't niet bij het komen is, dan bij het gaan. (Of): Bezoek en vis blijven drie dagen fris.

[Literal: Visits always bring joy, if not on coming, then on going. (Or): Visitors and fish stay fresh for three days].

If you are going to stay somewhere, you should only stay for a few days. Guests can be enjoyable through their company, but also through the peace and space they leave behind when they leave.

45/ Bij de burenen is het gras altijd groener. (Of): Buurmans gras is altijd groener. (Or): Het gras lijkt altijd groener aan de overkant.

[Literal: The grass is always greener next door. (Or): Neighbour's grass is always greener. (Or): The grass always seems greener on the other side].

Other people or situations always seem more appealing than someone's own situation, even though that may not be the case.

46/ Bij het scheiden van de markt leert men de kooplui kennen.

[Literal: As the market separates, people get to know the merchants].

When the market closes and it is time to pay, the true character of the merchants becomes apparent.

47/ Boompje groot, plantertje dood.

[Literal: The little tree is big, the planter is dead].

To undertake something which someone no longer enjoys.

48/ Bomen ontmoeten elkaar niet, mensen wel.

[Literal: Trees don't meet each other, people do].

You can always run into someone you would rather avoid, or someone you would like to see again.

49/ Boontje komt om zijn loontje.

[Literal: Little bean comes around his little wage].

Someone gets the punishment he/she deserves for a wrong action or behavior. (Usually used at the time of this punishment).

50/ Boter bij de vis.

[Literal: Butter by the fish].

When making a purchase, money and goods must be crossed at the same time.

51/ Brood vrienden zijn geen nood vrienden.

[Literal: Bread friends are not emergency friends].

In times of prosperity everyone makes friends easily who are of no use in times of adversity.

52/ Dat klopt als een zwerende vinger.

[Literal: That's true as a sore finger].

That is correct.

53/ Dat muisje krijgt nog wel een staartje.

[Literal: That little mouse will still have a tail].

A seemingly insignificant event will have even greater, often negative, consequences.

54/ De aanhouder wint.

[Literal: The persistent one wins].

Those who keep trying to achieve their goals will eventually succeed.

55/ De aanval is de beste verdediging.

[Literal: The attack is the best defence].

In a fight or argument, it is better to take action yourself than to wait.

56/ De appel valt niet ver van de boom. (Of): De appel valt niet ver van de stam.

[Literal: The apple does not fall far from the tree. (Or): The apple does not fall far from the root].

The child resembles his/her parent in terms of behaviour.

57/ De beste stuurlii staan aan wal.

[Literal: The best steersmen are on shore].

People who don't have to perform a task themselves, but just watch it.

58/ De draak heeft zijn eieren gelegd.

[Literal: The dragon has laid its eggs].

The damage has been done or an undesirable situation has arisen which cannot be remedied.

59/ De drager kan het beste zeggen waar de schoen wringt.

[Literal: The wearer can best tell where the shoe pinches].

Only the person experiencing a problem can most clearly identify the core of the problem.

60/ De een zijn dood is een ander zijn brood.

[Literal: One man's death is another man's bread].

Prosperity is often achieved at the expense of others; a competitor disappearing helps business move forward.

61/ De eerste klap is een daalder waard.

[Literal: The first slap is worth a dime].

Whoever takes action first has a great advantage in a conflict or competition and has a greater chance of success or victory.

62/ De gestadige jager wint.

[Literal: The steady hunter wins].

Regular persistence gives the best results.

63/ De kaars uit, de schaamte uit.

[Literal: The candle out, the shame out].

People are often only decent for as long as they are seen by others.

64/ De kaart is gekeerd.

[Literal: The card has flipped].

The odds have turned. The situation has changed.

65/ De kleren maken de man.

[Literal: The clothes make the man].

A person's clothing determines the prestige he receives.

66/ De kost gaat de baat vooruit. (Of): De kost gaat voor de baat uit. (Of): De kosten gaan voor de baten uit.

[Literal: The cost precedes benefit. (Or): The cost goes before benefit. (Or): The costs go before benefits].

You have to incur costs first to benefit later.

67/ De kruik gaat zo lang te water tot ze barst. (Of): De kruik gaat zo lang te water tot ze breekt.

[Literal: The jug goes to water until it bursts. (Or): The jug goes to water until it breaks].

Things will go wrong at some point.

68/ De laatste loodjes wegen het zwaarst.

[Literal: The last leads weigh the hardest].

To complete a task is often the hardest because it is the last part that requires the most perseverance or is the most difficult part to complete.

69/ De liefde van de man gaat door de maag.

[Literal: Man's love goes through the stomach].

Men love the women who can cook good food for them.

70/ De morgenstond heeft goud in de mond. (Of): De ochtendstond heeft goud in de mond.

[Literal: The dawn has gold in the mouth. (Or): The morning has gold in the mouth].

Getting up early offers advantages.

71/ Denken moet je aan een paard overlaten, dat heeft een groter hoofd.

[Literal: You should leave thinking to a horse, which has a bigger head].

Don't think too much but act.

72/ Denkt aleer gij doende zijt en doende denkt dan nog.

[Literal: Think about honour before you act and while you are doing think again].

Make a plan before starting anything and adjust the plan during the activity if necessary.

73/ De pen is machtiger dan het zwaard. (Of): Het puntje van een scherpe pen is 't felste wapen dat ik ken.

[Literal: The pen is mightier than the sword. (Or): The tip of a sharp pen is the most powerful weapon I know].

Publishing texts can exert more influence than using force.

74/ De pot verwijt de ketel dat hij zwart ziet.

[Literal: The jar reproaches the boiler what it sees black].

someone criticizes another for a mistake he himself makes.

75/ De soep wordt nooit zo heet gegeten, als zij wordt opgediend.

[Literal: The soup is never eaten as hot as it is served].

Less severe measures are usually applied than had been announced. Something ultimately does not have such big consequences as it might seem at first.

76/ De tijd gaat snel, gebruik haar wel.

[Literal: The time goes fast, use it well].

Never waste time that you can use while you enjoy your life.

77/ De tijd heelt alle wonden.

[Literal: The time heals all wounds].

After a long time grief will go away on its own.

78/ De uitzondering bevestigt de regel.

[Literal: The exception confirms the rule].

Everywhere there are exceptions.

79/ De vis wordt duur betaald.

[Literal: The fish is paid expensively].

It takes a lot of sacrifice to get what you want. (Originated from a play: The fish itself does not cost a lot of money, but the human lives that fishing are priceless).

80/ De vrucht der ervaring rijpt niet aan jonge takken.

[Literal: The fruit of experience does not ripen on young branches].

The wisest comments come from older people, because experience takes time to mature.

81/ De willekens groeien in de bossen.

[Literal: The willows grow in the forests].

Said by parents when a child says, 'Ik wil.../ I want ...' Word play with (wil/ want).

82/ Die de minste tanden hebben, kauwen het meest.

[Literal: Those who have the fewest teeth, chew the most].

The dumbest people usually have the most to say.

83/ Die haring braadt niet.

[Literal: That herring doesn't fry].

A particular plan or idea will not succeed, or that someone is not welcome somewhere.

84/ Die het grootste hoofd heeft, moet de grootste hoed hebben.

[Literal: Whoever has the biggest head, should have the biggest hat].

Whoever is entitled to the largest share, should get it.

85/ Door meten tot weten.

[Literal: By measurement to knowledge].

By measuring accurately, concrete and factual information is collected, which ultimately leads to a better understanding and knowledge of a subject.

86/ Een boer met kiespijn lacht niet.

[Literal: A farmer with a toothache doesn't laugh].

People in pain have difficulties to relax. A smile that is not genuine and often a sign of discomfort or a hidden emotion.

87/ Een ezel stoot zich in het algemeen niet tweemaal aan dezelfde steen.

[Literal: A donkey generally does not stumble twice on the same stone].

Someone who has once experienced something bad or made a mistake, makes sure that it does not happen again.

88/ Een goed begin is het halve werk. (Of): Goed begonnen is half gewonnen.

[Literal: A good start is half the work. (Or): Well begun is half won].

Good preparation and a successful start make the work considerably easier and increase the chance of a good end result.

89/ Een goede buur is beter dan een verre vriend.

[Literal: A good neighbour is better than a far friend].

A helpful neighbour is of greater use than a friend who cannot attend.

90/ Een goede daad is goud waard.

[Literal: A good deed is worth gold].

Someone who does a good deed is as valuable as gold, which is one of the most precious metals.

91/ Een kat in het donker maakt rare sprongen. (Of): Een kat in het nauw maakt rare sprongen.

[Literal: A cat in the dark makes strange jumps. (Or): A cat in the strait makes strange jumps].

Someone who is in a dire situation and can exhibit unpredictable and sometimes dangerous behavior

92/ Een kruimeltje is ook brood.

[Literal: A crumb is also bread].

Be happy with what you have.

93/ Één rotte appel in de mand, maakt al het gave fruit te schand.

[Literal: One rotten apple in the basket, puts all the great fruit to shame].

Bad behavior or a negative influence from one person can spoil an entire group.

94/ Wie a zegt moet ook b zeggen.

[Literal: Whoever says a must also say b].

Once you start something, you have to finish it.

95/ Wie appelen vaart, die appelen eet.

[Literal: He who sails apples, he who eats apples].

Anyone who practices a particular profession or activity also experiences the benefits or consequences thereof.

96/ Wie zichzelf bewaart, bewaart geen rotte appel.

[Literal: Those who preserve themselves, do not preserve a rotten apple].

The importance of self-preservation and avoiding situations or relationships that could be harmful to you. You need to take good care of yourself, especially your health.

97/ Om de kracht van het anker te voelen, moet men de storm trotseren.

[Literal: To feel the power of the anchor, someone must defy the storm].

Only when someone experiences something serious, does he/she know who to rely on.

98/ Wie bang leeft, gaat ook bang dood.

[Literal: Those who live fearfully also die fearfully].

A life full of fear can lead to a death that is also characterised by fear. Also: The way you live will determine the way you die.

99/ Wie kaatst kan de bal verwachten. (Of): Wie kaatst moet de bal verwachten.

[Literal: He who bounces, can expect the ball. (Or): He who bounces, must expect the ball].

If you tease another person, you can expect them to tease you back. If you take action, such as throwing something at someone, you can also expect a reaction.

100/ Men moet zijn bed maken zoals men slapen wil.

[Literal: Everyone has to make his bed the way he wants to sleep].

If you want to live a certain way or to achieve something, you have to adjust your behaviour accordingly.

101/ Het zijn sterke benen die de weelde kunnen dragen.

[Literal: It's his strong legs that can carry the opulence].

Not everyone can handle prosperity and wealth well.

102/ Je moet de huid niet verkopen voor de beer geschoten is. (Of): Je moet geen dingen toezeggen die nog niet van jou zijn. (Of): Je moet geen dingen beloven die nog niet van jou zijn.

[Literal: You should not sell the skin before the bear is shot. (Or): You should not pledge things that are not yours yet. (Or): You should not promise things that are not yours yet].

Everyone should not boast of his success before achieving it.

103/ Veel beloven en weinig geven, doet de zotten in vreugde leven.

[Literal: To promise much and give little makes fools live happily].

It is unwise to rely on promises without concrete actions.

104/ Wie wat bewaart, die heeft wat.

[Literal: He who keeps some, has some].

Saving money/things can prove beneficial in the long run.

105/ Nieuwe bezems vegen schoon, maar oude bezems kennen alle hoeken en gaten.

[Literal: New brooms sweep clean, but old brooms know every nook and cranny].

New employees (or: new leaders) tackle things thoroughly, but old employees (or: old leaders) know how to do it based on experience.

106/ In het land der blinden is eenoog koning.

[Literal: In the land of the blind, one-eyed man is king].

Someone with limited knowledge or skills is considered an expert in a group that others know even less about.