Both the Dutch and the Japanese had employed interpreters ever since the VOC (Dutch East India Company) established a factory at Hirado in 1609. After the forced move to Dejima in 1641, the selection and appointment of all interpreters became the responsibility of the office of the Nagasaki magistrate. Although the Portuguese had been expelled from Japan in 1639, the *lingua franca* remained Portuguese until 1673. For most of the seventeenth century, therefore, the interpreters’ knowledge of the Dutch language remained poor. Sworn to secrecy and, by and large, keeping their knowledge to themselves, they learned phrases without paying any attention to the structural features of the Dutch language. The *katakana* syllabary that was used for transcription was actually quite unsuitable for this purpose, because of the greater variety of syllables in Dutch. Moreover, as the interpreters were mostly *samurai* they considered the Dutch traders very much inferior to themselves, merchants being the lowest class in the Confucian ideology. This attitude was not conducive to fruitful intellectual exchange. As a result, the Dutch the Japanese interpreters spoke was stilted and archaic.

During the eighteenth century, however, some interpreters did develop impressive language skills through personal talent and contact with Dutch traders such as Isaac Titsingh (1745–1812) and Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779–1853), who both served as *kapitan* or *Opperhoofd* of the factory at

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Dejima. On the other hand, very few of the Dutchmen posted on Dejima ever acquired more than the most elementary level of Japanese language proficiency. Hendrik Doeff (1777–1835) was certainly an exception.\textsuperscript{4} The history of Doeff’s dictionary is the subject of this essay.

In 1745 the Japanese ban on importing Western books was lifted. In 1754, the first year that books were imported through Dejima, two copies of François Halma’s Dutch-French dictionary, a Dutch-French dictionary by Pieter Marin, and a Latin-Dutch lexicon arrived with a shipment from Java.\textsuperscript{5} As a limited number of Japanese scholars were now allowed to possess European books, slowly but surely, the interpreters’ linguistic skills were passed on to outsiders, especially to rangaku (Dutch Learning) scholars in Edo. Some interpreters even began translating Western works on medicine, astronomy, and geography. Medical studies were a major motive for Japanese scholars to learn Dutch.\textsuperscript{6}

What were the language skills of the interpreters during the last quarter of the eighteenth century? According to the Swedish botanist Carl Thunberg, who came to Japan in 1775, the language abilities of the interpreters tended to vary. Most of them could speak more or less intelligibly, and some of the older interpreters spoke very clear and understandable Dutch, when the conversation was limited to daily affairs. The majority, however, never properly learned the language and used strange expressions and unusual phrases.\textsuperscript{7} In general, up to the eighteen hundreds the linguistic interest of the Japanese interpreters and the Dutch personnel at Dejima was confined to maintaining a sort of lingua franca in order to trade. The beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of large-scale alphabetical dictionaries, which gave the translation of Dutch publications into Japanese a great boost. François Halma’s Dutch-French dictionary, mentioned above, was very much part of these developments. This dictionary provided the basis for the first Dutch-Japanese dictionaries, one by Japanese scholars working in Edo and another one produced under the direction of the Opperhoofd Hendrik Doeff at Dejima.

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\textsuperscript{4} Vos writes (1981, p. 56) that Doeff, “who could compose haiku in Japanese, turned out to be an assiduous lexicographer.”


\textsuperscript{7} Blusse et al. 2000, p. 118.