"AB ERRORE LIBERATO"
THE NORTHERN EXPANSION OF FRANKISH POWER
IN THE MEROVINGIAN PERIOD AND THE GENESIS OF
THE DUTCH LANGUAGE

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"De vraag waar ik mee blijf zitten, luidt: Hoe komt het dat de strook
Vlaanderen-Zeeland-Holland als enig gebied van het hele Westger-
maans het fundamentele taalkenmerk bezat dat als vertrekpunt van de
specifiek Nederlandse ontwikkeling moet worden beschouwd?"
J. Goossens

1 The Distinctive Structural Characteristics of Dutch.¹
The development of Dutch as a separate branch of the Germanic
language family has often been described, both in general handbooks
on Germanic and in studies devoted specifically to the history of the
language, as a relatively unproblematic process. According to this
view, Dutch is a descendant of Old (West) Low Franconian and,
though it is not always expressly stated, a particularly conservative
branch of West Germanic, at least with respect to its early develop-
ment. This conservatism is most obviously manifested in the Dutch
failure to participate in the second or High German consonant shift
but, no less importantly, can also be seen in its lack of i-umlaut of
long vowels, at least according to received opinion.² Much of the dis-
cussion of the early history of Dutch concerns the issue of so-called
"Ingvæonisms", that is, the various phonological, morphological and
lexical features which are found in Dutch and which, for the most
part, clearly do not have analogues in the other Franconian dialects
but do have analogues in English and Frisian. Their presence in Dutch

¹ The Latin phrase of the title of this paper is taken from the heading of Chapter
13 of the Vita Amandi Episcopi I.: "De pago cui vocabulum est Gandao ab errore
liberato" (Krusch 1910: 430). The epigram is from Goossens 1988: 88. — In
writing this paper I have benefited greatly from discussions with and comments by
Amy Dahlstrom; to her many thanks. I must add that my earlier work on this gene-
tral topic was much improved by the guidance and criticism of my mentor, the late
Frans van Coetsem; he is sorely missed.
² See, for example, Van Hamel’s (1928) discussion of "ons conservatieve klank-
stelsel".
has been explained in various ways but in virtually all cases scholars have found in them no cause to question the basic Franconian pedigree of the language. Indeed, this traditional view can be said to emphasise the membership of Dutch in the greater dialect landscape of continental West Germanic and present the linguistic identity of the language as a combination of local conservative traits and a hotch-potch of local innovations of more or less secondary structural importance.  

This traditional view is, of course, by no means uninformed or poorly reasoned and it does capture an indisputable basic truth about Dutch, namely, that with regard to its lexicon and (albeit with qualifications) its morphology, it is most closely related to the Franconian dialects to the east and southeast in central Germany and Luxembourg. But since the publication in 1980 of Goossens' study “Middelnederlandse vocaalsystemen”, the traditional view is, in this writer’s opinion, outdated and untenable. Goossens’ work renders the traditional view untenable at two levels. First, he demonstrates clearly that the limited operation of i-umlaut in (standard and western) Dutch is not based on an opposition of short vowels, affected by umlaut, and long vowels, left unaffected, but rather involves the distinction made in German historical grammar between primary and secondary umlaut: In the eastern dialects of Dutch, both primary and secondary umlaut operated normally, just as in the neighbouring German language area, whereas in the coastal dialects and thus also in the standard, only primary umlaut operated. Second, at a broader level he draws attention to the structural significance of the absence of secondary umlaut: Whereas in the traditional view, the (incorrectly formulated) failure of i-umlaut in western and standard Dutch is but one of a list of largely unranked characteristics (e.g., Van Loey 1970: 253), Goossens (1988: 77ff.) not only sees the absence of secondary umlaut as

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3 For a recent example, see Van der Wal’s (1992) history of Dutch, in which the presentation of the linguistic identity begins with a discussion of the High German consonant shift, proceeds on to a brief discussion of “kustverschijnselen” and ends with a sketch of Old Dutch sound changes and the morphological and syntactic characteristics of Old Dutch; nowhere is there mention of the peculiar development of i-umlaut in Dutch, however defined.