

DUTCH CROW-EGGS (KRAAIEEIEREN)

GEORGE J. LEVENBACH
New Providence, New Jersey

Editor's Note: This article is a translation of material appearing on pages 108, 110 and 113 of Opperlandse Taal- & Letterkunde, the Dutch book of wordplay reviewed in the February 1985 Word Ways. One of the outstanding features of Dutch is its ability to form words with large numbers of consecutive vowels; here this ability is stretched to the limit.

On May 31 1975, Dr. Kruyskamp, the editor-in-chief of the most recent edition of the Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal [the Dutch analogue of the Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary], known as Van Dale, wrote a letter to the NEC-Handelsblad [the Dutch equivalent of the New York Times] in which he made a rash claim. Kruyskamp had recently noted in Breinbreker [a column in the newspaper devoted to brain-teasers and similar puzzles] a puzzle asking the reader to find a Dutch word containing five identical vowels in a row, the answer being feeëenga [a fairy's spouse]. "Not so," said Dr. Kruyskamp. "It is spelled feeëneega instead. And," he added, "there are no Dutch words with normally-encountered spelling having five vowels in a row." By vowels, of course, he meant the letters a, e, i, o, u, and ij or y.

Three readers refuted Kruyskamp. The first: "There are hundreds of Dutch words with five consecutive vowels. In Kruyskamp's own dictionary, Van Dale, we find, for example, twee-eig [from two eggs, such as fraternal twins] and zaaioster [seed oyster, as found in a hatchery]. Van Dale words with six vowels include kraaieoog [crow's eye] and koeieoog [cow's eye]. And with seven vowels we find (on pages 730 and 1476 of the 9th edition of Van Dale) papegaaieëiren [parrot's eggs] and haaieëieren [shark's eggs].

Perhaps Kruyskamp meant to say that no Dutch words exist with five identical vowels in a row. However, in two dictionaries [the 10th and 11th editions of Van Dale] one finds reeëoog [deer's eye] and orchideeësoort [a type of orchid], so why not reeëeelt [a callus on a deer] and orchideeëeersteling [the first orchid of the season]? [Neither word, of course, is found in Van Dale.]

The second reader wrote: "Is Van Dale a weggooioeuvre [super-seded work] in the eyes of Kruyskamp? Even if one does not yield to onomatopeeëaaien [onomatope-caressing, a highly-specialized variety of word-onanism] as exemplified by the oeioeioeioeiende [the sound of a siren] police car, I find in Van Dale the words zaaiui [seed onion] and uiegeur [onion smell], from which one

can form a genuine eight-vowel Dutch word, *zaaiuieaandoening* [the sensation caused by smelling a seed onion, not in Van Dale]."

The third missive said: "May I comment again briefly on the vowel discussion? The record stands with twelve vowels in the word *weggooiooieaaiaanvechting*, the urge of a farmer to caress an ewe which is about to be disposed of (*weggooiooi* [a superfluous ewe] can be found in an article on sheep-raising in the March 1973 issue of the magazine *De Boerderij*). However, if we want to see eight identical vowels in a row, we need only look in the 27th edition of Koenen [a much smaller Dutch dictionary] to find on page 1367 the *Tee-ee-ee-trein* [the vocalized form of TEE-train, an acronym for the Trans-Europe Express]. Why cannot we speak of the *Tee-ee-ee-eeuw* [the TEE-century] with eight e's?"

To these efforts one can only add the following fable about a farmer and his two sons which exhibits a "word" with sixteen consecutive vowels (NRC-Handelsblad cultural supplement, August 27 1976):

A farmer named *Angtschreeuw* [a non-dictionary word which has undoubtedly appeared in print, containing eight consecutive consonants, and meaning "cry of anguish"] died. He bequeathed to his sons two *ooien* [ewes], one *kraai* [crow], one *papegaaï* [parrot], and one *ui* [onion]. To distinguish between the ewes, the sons tied to one a *kraaieei* [crow's egg] and to the other a *papegaaieei* [parrot's egg]. From then on, one could recognize the ewes as the *kraaieiooi* [crow's egg ewe] and the *papegaaieiooi* [parrot's egg ewe]. The brothers were identical twins. To distinguish between them, they decided that one would carry the onion and caress it whenever he met somebody; consequently the neighboring farmers called him the *uieaaier* [onion-caresser]. The other brother, being of a mean-spirited nature, stole an onion and also caressed it whenever he met another person. The farmers quickly discovered that there were two onion-caressers, the *kraaieiooiuieaaier* [the crow's-egg ewe onion caresser] and the *papegaaieiooiuieaaier* [the parrot's-egg ewe onion caresser], but no one could tell them apart ...

My thanks to the editor for making the translation read more idiomatically.

VERBATIM COMPETITION

Verbatim Magazine announces a contest inviting writers to submit by July 31, 1985 original articles (not to exceed 2000 words) on any topic pertaining to language - how to speak it, write it, play with it, mutilate it, criticize it, or enliven it. There is a \$1000 first prize, a \$500 second prize, and four \$250 prizes. For further information about contest rules, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to *Verbatim*, Box 668, Essex CT 06426.