Naming and subcultures in The Netherlands

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I Introduction

As everywhere in Europe, in The Netherlands the naming mechanisms changed considerably during the last century. Until 1950 the naming after relatives was dominant and far over 90 % of the children got the first name of a grandparent (and subsequently aunt or uncle) by rule of tradition. This has radically changed since then, leaving freedom for parents to follow their own preferences. We assume that these preferences are related to social-economic factors that originate in subcultures in society. On the basis of the first names of all 3,5 million children in the Netherlands which were born during the period 1983-1999, we will show that naming patterns can be identified that can be related to geographical, cultural, economical and social factors.

II Method

A database of first names
We had available the first name, the year of birth, a family code, and the postal code of birth for all Dutch children for which parents received financial support from the National Social Security Bank. Since by law all parents are entitled to receive this support, the first names of almost all 3,5 million children under 19 years of age are present in the database. The financial support depends on the number of children in a family, therefore the database included a family code by which we could identify the names of brothers and sisters in each of all 1,9 million families involved.

The 3,5 million children had 152.274 different first names, of which 100.868 occurred only once. 3.120 names had a frequency over 100 and represent 85 % of all children.

General methodology
To solve the question of how to identify naming preferences of subcultures in society, we make use of the quite unique knowledge of names given to children in the same family. It is thought that the names of these children are samples from the set of first names that are preferred in the subculture to which the parents belong. In The Netherlands subcultures may relate to (1) culture/language/ethnicity (Dutch, Frisian, Arabic, Turkish, Surinam, Antillean,..), (2) religion (Catholic, Protestant, Islam,..), (3) social-economic status (education, income,..), (4) geography (urban, rural, regional,..), and more. Although these are plausible factors underlying subcultures, reality may show complex

interactions between them. Besides, we do not have available information on these factors at the level of a single family.

Therefore, the approach taken in this study is first to identify a number of name sets which each described the preferences of a certain groups of parents. Subsequently, we aggregate the information on name sets per postal code area, for which social-economic indicators, religion, and geographical descriptors are known. Then we look for relations between naming and these factors.

Identification of name sets
Starting from the view point that the first names of children in the same family do show a culturally determined relation between the names, we first limited our database to those families that have more than one child. These were 1,17 million families with 2,8 million children. As a unit for analysis we used the name pair, the combination of the names of each pair of children from the same family. If a family has two children named Mark and Linda, we used Mark - Linda and Linda - Mark as name pairs. In a family with three children there are six of these pairs, and so on. On the basis of name pairs, we can easily derive the names of all brothers and sisters of Mark for instance, and their frequency. In total, there were 2,12 million different pairs of first names. Table 1 shows some of the most frequent name pairs.

Frequency	Pair of first names	
1091	Johannes	Maria
790	Johannes	Johanna
754	Jeroen	Martijn
727	Johanna	Maria
…		
572	Mohamed	Fatima
459	Lars	Niels

Table 1. Most frequent pairs of first names in a family (1983-1999).

Table 1 shows the combination Johannes and Maria on top followed by Johannes and Johanna. Interestingly, the combination Johanna and Maria is already on the fourth place, indicating strong links between the three names Johannes, Maria and Johanna. Other examples of closely related names are the Dutch names Jeroen and Martijn, the Arabic names Mohamed and Fatima, and the Scandinavian names Lars and Niels. These examples demonstrate that name pairs may indeed point to clustering of first names into meaningful sets.

The frequency of a name pair itself is not enough to quantify the relationship between two names, because this frequency is biased by the general popularity of the constituting names of a pair. We devised the following – symmetric – measure, which is demonstrated by an example. There were 7.967 girls with the name of Esther, who had 12.973 brothers and sisters. Of these, Judith was present 276 times (= 2,1 %). Judith itself occurred 4.828 times, with 8.033 brothers and sisters. Out of these, 276 of course

were named Esther (= 4,5 %). We now computed the geometric average (= 2,7 %) as a symmetric measure of relationship between the two names. If this percentage is 100, this would imply that all sisters of Esther would be named Judith, and reverse. The relation measure was computed for all names pairs.

Using the relation measure, an iterative clustering procedure was applied to establish distinct sets of names. See Bloothooft (2001) for more details. We limited the available material to 4.013 first names from pairs that had a frequency higher than four. The procedure resulted in 340 different name sets. Some included a large number of names, others only a few. The top-25 of these sets already proved to be very illustrative. They contained 2.887 first names and had a coverage of 2,64 million children (75 % of all children).

III Results

Name sets
For a detailed description of the name sets, we refer to Bloothooft (2001). But in general terms the name sets could be described using the following features:

- Period of maximum popularity
  – Traditional, Pre-modern (1950-1980), Modern
- Language
  – Dutch, Frisian, English, American, French, Spanish, Italian, [Arabic, Turkish]
  – Common Western
- Topic area
  – Nature, History and Culture, Old Testament
- Length
  – Short, long (more than two syllables)

The period of maximum popularity of the first names is relevant even for the description of current naming. This concerns some sets with traditional names which were predominantly used until 1950, sets with names that gained popularity in the fifties and sixties which we called pre-modern names, and sets with names that became popular since then, the modern names. Furthermore, the language is an important factor. There are sets with Dutch, Frisian, English, American, French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic and Turkish names. In this paper we exclude the Arabic and Turkish first names because they form separate and closed classes. Then there are sets that include names that are commonly used in Western societies. Several sets are related to topic areas, such as nature, history and culture and the Old Testament. Finally the length of the name proved to be an important factor. A distinction showed between sets with short names and longer names (more than two syllables). Table 2 presents some examples of major sets.

set	sexe	examples
Traditional Dutch names		
Traditional names from the bible and from saints	M	Johannes, Cornelis, Petrus, Christiaan, Marinus
	F	Maria, Johanna, Anna, Elisabeth, Cornelia
Traditional names	M	Jan, Willem, Hendrik, Gerrit, Dirk, Jacob
	F	Hendrika, Janna, Aaltje, Geertje, Grietje, Jannetje
Pre-modern names		
Pre-modern Dutch names	M	Jeroen, Thomas, Martijn, Sander, Wouter,
	F	Suzanne, Eline, Lisanne, Marloes, Marleen
Pre-modern common Western names	M	Mark, Peter, Frank, Erik, Paul, Rob
	F	Linda, Ilse, Sandra, Inge, Saskia, Ellen, Vera
Foreign names		
Pre-modern English / French names	M	Dennis, Robin, Stefan, Patrick, Robert, Vincent
	F	Laura, Michelle, Chantal, Daniëlle, Denise, Wendy
Long American / English names	M	Michael, Jeffrey, Danny, Wesley, Jordy, Joey
	F	Melissa, Samantha, Melanie, Kimberley, Jennifer
Short American / English names	M	Kevin, Nick , Roy, Mike, Dylan, Brian, Justin
	F	Kim, Joyce, Kelly, Sharon, Mandy, Romy, Demi
Spanish / Italian names	M	Ricardo, Lorenzo, Giovanni, Angelo, Romano
	F	Isabella, Romana, Lucinda, Rosita, Bonita
Short modern names		
Short modern Dutch names	M	Bart, Koen, Daan, Bram, Thijs, Joost, Luuk, Pim
	F	Anne, Eva, Lieke, Floor, Hilde
Short traditional Dutch names with renewed popularity	M	Teun, Mees, Piet, Joop, Dries
	F	Jet, Pien, Kiki, Puck, Loes, Els, Lies, Lot
Short modern common Western names	M	Tim, Tom, Rick, Bas, Max, Rick, Bob, Sam, Luc
	F	Lisa, Tessa, Nina, Lara
Scandinavian names	M	Niels, Lars, Sven, Bjorn, Jesper, Björn, Jorn
	F	Kirsten, Marit, Bente, Ingeborg, Annika, Silke
Names from nature, history, culture, and the Old Testament		
Names from nature	F	Iris, Merel, Fleur, Roos, Jasmijn, Mirthe, Madelief
Names from history / culture	M	Laurens, Floris, Rutger, Fabian, Hugo, Lennart
	F	Willemijn, Juliette, Josephine, Mathilde, Annemijn
Names from the Old Testament	M	Daniël, Ruben, David, Simon, Benjamin, Jonathan
	F	Naomi, Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, Joëlle, Elisa
French names	M	Charlotte, Isabelle, Babette, Dominique, Maxime
	F	Yannick, Jules, Maxim, Louis, Thierry, Alain
Frisian names		
Frisian names	M	Jelle, Jesse, Sjoerd, Menno, Wessel, Hidde
	F	Fenna, Sietske, Wietske, Froukje, Aukje, Jitske

Table 2. Examples of names for boys and girls in major name sets. Because the sets are entirely based on co-occurrence of names in a same family, some deviations from the general description of a set may occur. A further grouping of sets is also indicated.

A map of name sets
Name sets are usually no closed sets. This means that name pairs can be found that constitute of first names that belong to different sets. The more two name sets are related, the more of these cross-set pairs can be found, the less they are related, the less of these pair will occur. We can convert this type of information into distance between name sets on a map. The closer two name sets are positioned on such a map, the more related they are. And reversily. Figure 1 presents the map of name sets for the 16 most frequent sets, each described in terms of the features described above.
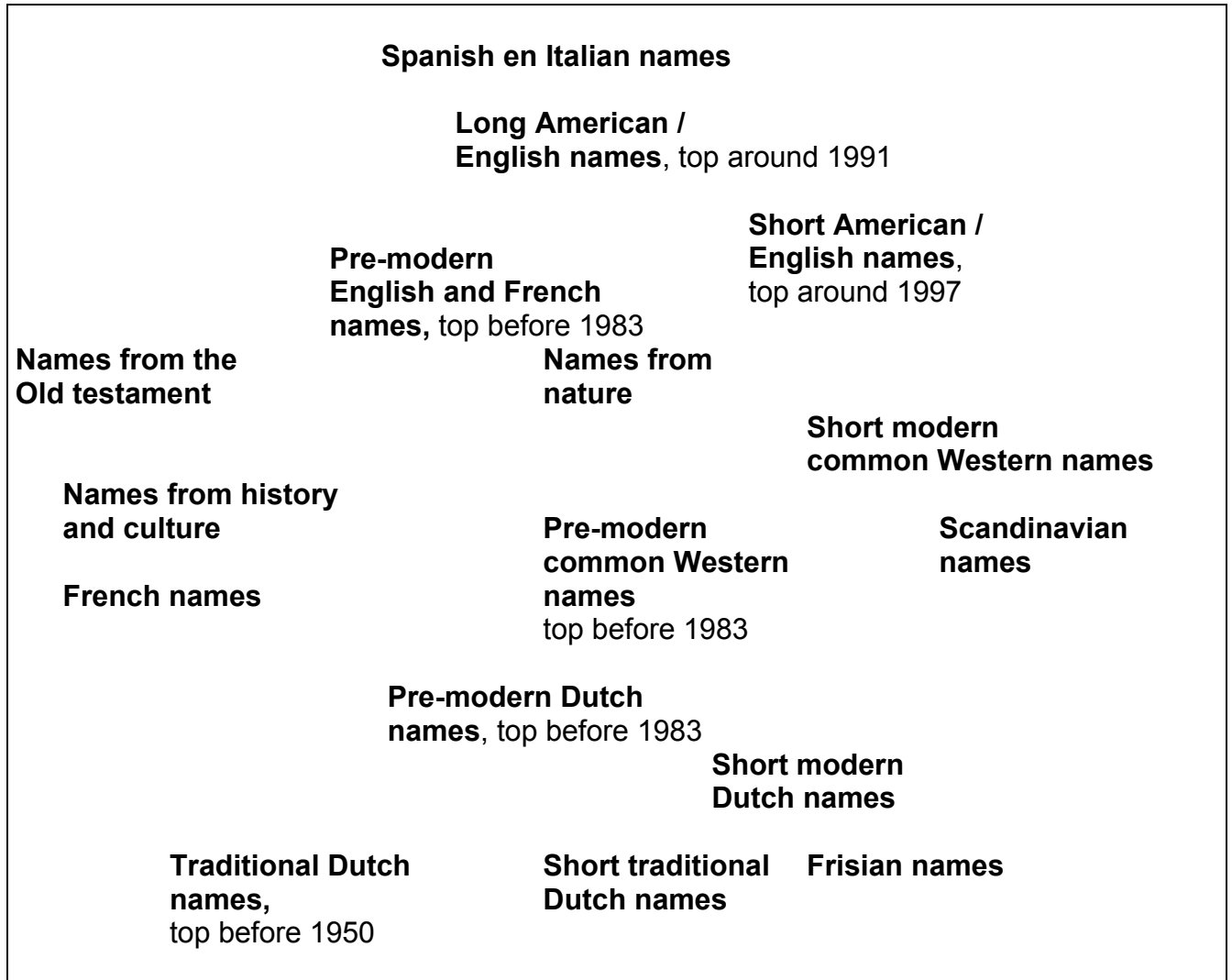
Spanish en Italian names

Long American / English names, top around 1991

Short American / English names, top around 1997

Pre-modern English and French names, top before 1983

Names from the Old testament

Names from nature

Short modern common Western names

Names from history and culture

Pre-modern common Western names top before 1983

Scandinavian names

French names

Pre-modern Dutch names, top before 1983

Short modern Dutch names

Traditional Dutch names, top before 1950

Short traditional Dutch names

Frisian names

Figure 1. Map of sets of first names in the Netherlands. The closer two name sets are positioned to each other, the more related they are. When sets have had their years of maximum popularity this is indicated. Name examples per set can be found in table 2.

The map from figure 1 can be schematized by a couple of major factors: the language factor: Dutch and Frisian - Common Western - Foreign, and independent from this one the time factor: Traditional - Pre-modern - Modern, and the name length factor: short - long. This is shown in Figure 2.
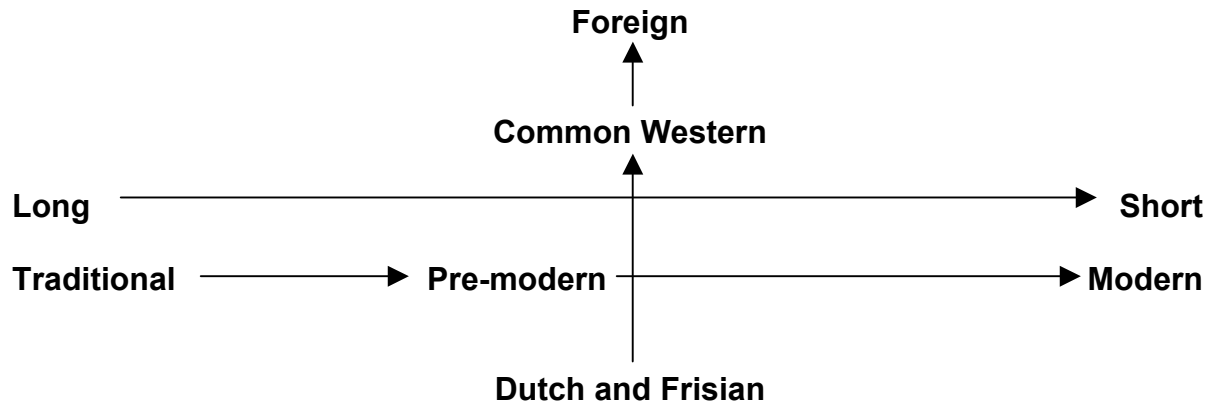
Foreign

Common Western

Long ⟶ **Short**

Traditional ⟶ **Pre-modern** **Modern**

Dutch and Frisian

Figure 2. Schematized relations between name sets.

First name geography of The Netherlands
So far we were successful in establishing sets of names, related to the preferences of parents. We now look into the distribution of name sets across The Netherlands. For this, we make use of the postal code of birth which we know for every child. The Netherlands is divided into 3.584 postal code units. For clarity of presentation we used larger areas (90) based on a part of the code only. To keep the analysis manageable, we also reduced the number of name sets by combining name sets into the following six name groups (see table 2): Foreign names (24 %), Traditional Dutch names (12 %), Pre-modern names (11 %), Short modern names (11 %), names from Nature, History, Culture and the Old Testament (6 %), Frisian names (2 %). Percentages indicate the grand average for the group for all Dutch children.

We now wanted to characterize each postal code area. For this, we computed for each name group the deviation from the grand average for The Netherlands. The name group that most positively deviated from the grand average was assigned to the postal code area. Figure 3 shows the resulting first name geography of The Netherlands.

It is immediately obvious that regional factors are in play in naming. We now describe the various areas, and pay attention to some social-cultural descriptors of these areas which were available from the National Bureau of Statistics.
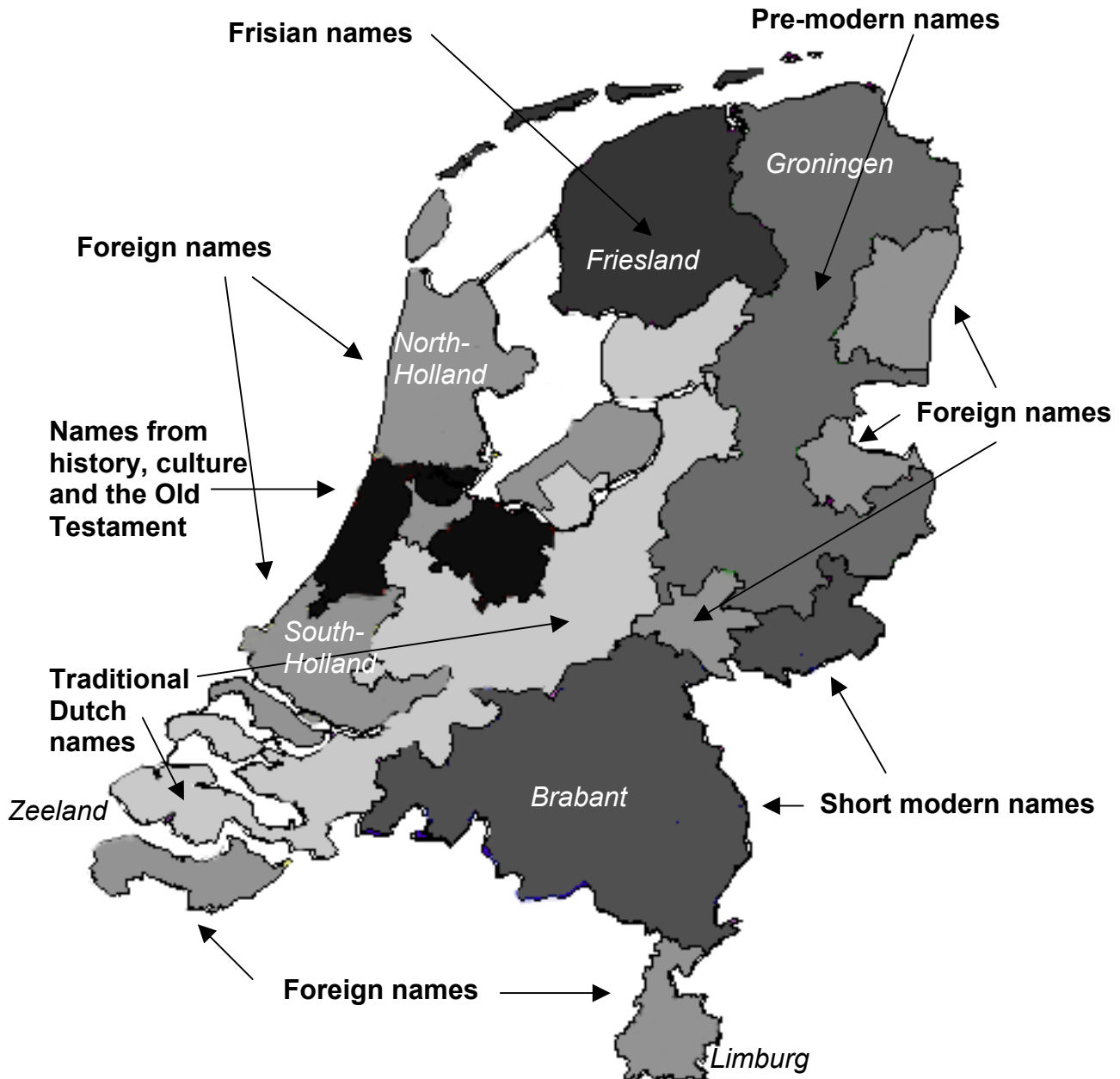
Frisian names

Pre-modern names

Foreign names

Groningen

Friesland

North-Holland

Names from history, culture and the Old Testament

Foreign names

Traditional Dutch names

South-Holland

Zeeland

Brabant

Short modern names

Foreign names

Limburg

Figure 3. First name geography of the Netherlands depicting regions in which a certain name type is dominant. Some province names are given in Italics, but for reasons of clarity their borders are not shown.

1 - The traditional Dutch names occupy a diagonal belt from the province of Zeeland in the south-west, across the centre of the country towards the north-east. We also know this area as the bible belt, with a predominant Protestant and conservative population in a rural setting. The naming still resembles the pattern for the whole country before 1950, although percentages of traditional names reduced by half since then.

2 - Not surprisingly, the Frisian names are found in the province of Friesland, including the islands of the Waddenzee. Whereas for The Netherlands as a whole the percentage of Frisian names is about 2 %, in several communities in Friesland the percentage is as high as 20 %.

3 - The names from nature, history, culture and the Old Testament are found in the richer neighborhoods of the big cities in the West of the country and in their suburbs. In general, these areas have the highest average income of the Netherlands, and the population has the highest education. Not shown, but scattered across the country several smaller areas have the same type of naming and the same social-economic indicators.

4 - The foreign names are found in large parts of the provinces of North- and South-Holland but also in the border areas of Groningen, Limburg and Zeeland. These areas are both urban and rural, many of the border areas have the lowest educational level of the country.

5 - The short modern names are most popular in the catholic province of Brabant. Before 1950 the provinces of Brabant and Limburg had typical catholic naming (with names of saints in Latin form), but this was almost complete abandoned during the last 50 years. This is in sharp contrast with the far slower reduction of the traditional naming in the conservative protestant area of the bible belt.

6 - The pre-modern names are mainly found in the rural areas of the north east. It seems that this depicts a transitional period from traditional to modern naming which takes longer in this region.

IV Conclusions

On the basis of a rich database of first names of almost all children in the Netherlands under 19 years of age, including the family composition in terms of first names, we could successfully analyze Dutch naming patterns. This analysis was performed without making any onomastic assumption, but resulted in a description that seems not only onomastically relevant but is also interpretable in terms of social and economic factors. This demonstrates the primacy of full population studies over sample studies when the aim is to come to grips with tendencies and mechanisms in naming. Every attempt must be taken to collect full population databases for further onomastic research, of course within legal limits concerning privacy.

Methodology stood central in this study. Obviously there are lots of opportunities to refine and detail the general picture of naming outlined here. Further studies to this end are envisioned.

Reference

Bloothooft, G. (2001). 'Naming in Dutch families between 1983 and 1999', Naamkunde **33**, 1-47 (in Dutch).