

Words You Won't Learn in Dutch Class

A Two-Weekly Newsletter by Taalbureau TXT

Word:

Geen kattenpis [ˌxe:n ˈkatəpɪs]

Meaning:

No small matter; important; expensive (literally: no cat piss)

Dat is geen kattenpis

The exact origin of this expression is not clear, and when the expression began to be used is not known either. It can be found in newspapers from the early 1960s onwards, but as this is a fairly informal – and even slightly rude – way of saying that something is important or costly, it is not the kind of expression that would normally be used in publications. Although written evidence of this expression being used before the 1960s is scarce, it is mentioned in the 1922 lemma in the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*.

Kattenpis is always used in combination with *geen* in this expression. The word is not normally used on its own to indicate that something is unimportant or cheap: You would not say, for example ‘*die auto kost maar 200 euro, dat is kattenpis*’; what you could say is ‘*die auto kost een ton (=100,000), dat is geen kattenpis*’. However, the word *kattenpis* can be used on its own to talk about coffee, tea or beer of inferior quality.

The German expression *kein Katzenreck* is similar to the Dutch idiom, except that – interestingly – in German it is the cat’s faeces rather than urine that is used to indicate that something is of significance.

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