

# Elative compounds in Dutch: Properties and developments

Jack Hoeksema, University of Groningen

## 1. Introduction

Elative compounds belong to the expressive component of the lexicon. They add a certain subjective flavor to our speech, in a colorful and stylistically sensitive manner. They indicate a high degree of a property that is expressed by their right-hand member, the head of the compound, usually by making use of some kind of conventionalized comparison. When I refer to something as *pitch dark*, I intend to indicate a shade of darkness by comparing it to pitch, a black substance. As a grammatical category, elative compounds are entirely superfluous. Anything one may want to say with the help of an elative compound may be expressed in some other way as well, either by using some idiom, like *dark as pitch*, or by using the regular adverbs of degree of the language, as in *extremely dark*, *very dark*, *ever so dark* etc. What then might be their *raison d'être*?

I believe the answer to this question lies in their expressive nature. Elative compounds are intuitively livelier creatures than modified adjectives such as *very dark*, and at the same time more compact than corresponding idioms. In general, it can be said that anything to do with degrees belongs to a part of the grammar where lexical parsimony is valued the least (cf. Hoeksema 2005 for some discussion). The multitude of adverbs of degree (hundreds in English alone) is testimony to this claim, as well as the large repertoire of other means to express degrees (prosodically, syntactically, and morphologically).

Elative compounding is not the only type of morphology with an expressive/evaluative flavor. Scalise (1984) and Napoli and Reynolds (1994) have drawn attention to diminutives, augmentatives and pejoratives in this connection. Diminutives do not just refer to small objects, but often add an evaluative component (Van Zonneveld 1983, Dressler and Barbaresi 1994, Bauer 1997, Kryk-Kastovsky 2000, Badarneh 2010), which may be a sense of endearment (“sweet little so and so”), or an element of disregard (“puny little so and so”). Augmentatives may refer to things that are big, but also sometimes things that are evaluated negatively. Pejoratives, finally, are by definition evaluative in nature. In this article, I will occasionally point toward similarities between elative compounds and pejorative compounds. As we will see below,

sometimes the boundaries between these two categories blur, especially when taboo terms are involved.

Before digging more deeply into the properties of elative compounds, it will be useful to consider briefly their definition. By the term *elative compound*, I will refer to any compound XY in which X serves as a modifier that is used to denote a very high degree of the property associated with head element Y. As noted in Hoeksema (1985), this means that elative compounds are possible only when Y is gradable. Many adjectives are inherently gradable (Sapir 1944, Bolinger 1972, Kamp 1975), as well as some verbs and nouns (for the latter, see e.g. Morzycki 2009, Ghesquière and Davidse 2011). We will see that Dutch has elative compounds based on gradable adjectives and nouns. Compounding with verbal heads is quite restricted in Dutch (De Vries 1975, Booij 2010), and elative compounds with verbal heads do not seem to exist. The existence of elative nominal compounds does not seem to have been noted much in the Dutch literature,<sup>1</sup> but for German, it is documented in Oebel (2011). As we will see, there are striking and important similarities between adjectival and nominal elative compounds, which make it necessary to consider both as belonging to the same general category.

One of the striking properties of elative compounds, setting them apart from other compounds, and at the same time showing their similarities with adverbs of degree, is the possibility of emphatic reduplicative conjunction (Hoeksema 1985, 2001b, Reker 1996, Booij 2010), compare for instance *ijs- en ijskoud* ‘ice and ice cold = extremely cold’ with *\*ijs- en ijsvrij* ‘ice and ice free’. The latter example is strictly ungrammatical, because *ijsvrij* ‘ice free’ means ‘free because of cold weather’ (sometimes Dutch schools permit their pupils to take the day off for skating, because of unusual weather conditions). The meaning is not in any way a strengthening of *vrij*, and the compound is not elative in nature. On the other hand, regular adverbs of degree may be reduplicated in a similar way (*erg maar dan ook erg koud* ‘very but indeed very cold = really very cold’, *zeer en zeer lang* ‘very and very long’).

Another property setting elative compounds apart from regular compounds is emphatic lengthening, an optional lengthening of the vowel to indicate extra high degree, and heightened emotion: *beeeerekoud* ‘bear cold’ (with lengthening indicated by additional *e*’s). For discussion of this phenomenon and phonetic measurements, see Van Ommen et al., 2007).

The general structure of this paper is as follows. I start with a discussion of the semantics of elative compounds (section 2), then I present a classification

of the main types of elative compounds (section 3), make a comparison with pejorative compounds (section 4), and discuss their diachronic development in Dutch (section 5). In section 6, the conclusions of this paper are stated. The data on which this paper is based come from a set of naturally-occurring examples, collected by the author from books, newspapers, magazines and electronic resources. While this set is too small (about 2400 occurrences of more than 700 compounds were collected) to do full justice to the complexity of the phenomenon, it will suffice to illustrate some points. Of course, like anyone studying a lexical category, I am also heavily indebted to the main dictionaries (in particular the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*) and studies of elative compounds in particular, most notably Fletcher (1980) and Reker (1996) for Dutch, and Oebel (2011) for German.

## 2. Semantics of elative compounds

The semantics of elative compounds is important for any study of this category, since the class is primarily defined by its interpretation. For instance, if you compare Dutch *zoutarm* ‘salt-poor = low in salt content’ and *straatarm* ‘street-poor = very poor’, the main difference is not one of structure, but of meaning. Both are A+N compounds, but *zout* functions as an argument to *arm*, whereas *straat* serves as a modifier, indicating a high degree (cf. Hoeksema 1985). I will use this high degree reading as the defining property of elative compounds in this paper.

It is important to realize that the high degree of properties associated with elative compounds is not the same as the *highest* degree of these properties. Semantically, elative compounds differ from superlatives. Compare:

- (1) Yesterday was the coldest day. Today is even colder.
- (2) This beer is ice-cold, but that one is even colder.

Whereas (1) is a direct contradiction, (2) is not. Examples like (2) can be generated at will, for all elative compounds, showing that elative compounds are gradable. Another test that might be invoked here is the use in exclamatives (Hoeksema 1985). Compare:

- (3) What a stone-cold murderer!
- (4) \*What a bisyllabic noun!

The reason why (4) sounds odd is that an exclamative subjectively expresses surprise at a high degree of some property (cf. Milner 1979, Zanuttini and Portner 2003, Constant et al, 2009, Rett 2009, inter alii). Adjectives that are not gradable, such as *bisyllabic*, do not qualify for this type of sentence that crucially depends on gradability.

As De Haas & Trommelen (1993: 428) note in their manual of Dutch morphology, elative compounds typically do not form comparatives and superlatives, not do they permit further modification by adding adverbs of degree (see for this observation also De Vooy 1947: 67). If elative compounds really denote the highest degree of some property, then this observation can be readily explained. In that case the lack of comparatives and superlatives would follow from the fact that the adjectives are superlatives themselves, and further modification would for that reason be impossible. However, the difference between (1) and (2) is strong evidence against this assumption, and shows that we must look elsewhere for an explanation.

Before we consider this matter some more, there is another observation in the literature, concerning elative compounds, that needs to be scrutinized. Hoeksema (1985: 90) notes that elative compounds do not support nominalizations, unlike other adjectives. Indeed, if we make an informal comparison, we notice huge differences between elative compounds and simple adjectives:

(5)	arm ‘poor’	armoe ‘poverty’
(6)	straatarm ‘street poor = dirt poor’	*straatarmoe ‘dirt poverty’
(7)	stil ‘still, quiet’	stilte ‘silence, quiet’
(8)	muisstil ‘mouse-quiet’	*muisstilte ‘mouse-silence’
(9)	snel ‘fast’	snelheid ‘speed’
(10)	pijlsnel ‘arrow-fast’	*pijlsnelheid

The tentative conclusion drawn in Hoeksema (1985) on the basis of such judgments is that elative compounds may not undergo any kind of affixation, whether it be nominalization affixes, or comparative and superlative affixes. Why there should be such a constraint militating against affixation, however, was not made clear.

Linguistics may not have made big steps forward since the 1980s, however, in one respect the situation has radically changed. It is much easier

nowadays to sift through large amounts of data, thanks to the faster computers at our disposal, and in particular to the availability of the Internet. When we use Google to verify the above claims, we quickly find counterexamples.

For comparatives, I have found (among others) the following attestations:

- (11) zijn plannen maakten China nog straatarmer<sup>2</sup>  
his plans made China even street-poorer  
“his plans made China even more dirt-poor”
- (12) Sommige strafrecht juristen zijn nog bikkelharder dan Bram M.<sup>3</sup>  
Some criminal lawyers are even nail-harder than Bram M.  
“Some criminal lawyers are even more hard as nails as Bram M.”
- (13) Het wordt met de tijd steeds muisstiller op dit forum.<sup>4</sup>  
It beomes with the time ever mouse-quieter at this forum  
“Things are getting ever more mouse-quiet on this forum”

For superlatives:

- (14) Wat opviel is dat de jongeman niet van *de straatarmste* is.<sup>5</sup>  
What struck is that the young-man not of the street-poorest is  
“What was striking was that the young man was not one of the most dirt-poor”
- (15) Hij/zij wint het spel en is de pijlsnelste piraat.<sup>6</sup>  
He/she wins the game and is the arrow-fastest pirate  
“He/she wins the game and is the most lightning-fast pirate”
- (16) Dat blijkt overigens het zonneklaarst als je ze gelijke kansen geeft<sup>7</sup>  
That appears BTW the sun-clearest if you them same chances give  
“That will appear the most crystal-clear, by the way, if you give them the same odds”

And as for nominalizations, the original observations have to be toned down as well, as the following examples show:<sup>8</sup>

- (17) Muisstilte in het zaaltje volgde.<sup>9</sup>  
Mouse-quiet in the room-DIM followed  
“A dead silence ensued in the little room”

- (18) Je hebt in de snikhitte van Spanje gereden...<sup>10</sup>  
 You have in the sob-heat of Spain ridden  
 “You have cycled in the blistering heat of Spain”
- (19) Ik hoop maar dat ik me zo dadelijk niet in de bosjes verschuil,  
 I hope only that I me in-a-moment not in the bushes hide  
 blozend van schaamte over mijn poedelnaaktheid.<sup>11</sup>  
 blushing with shame about my poodle-nakedness  
 “I just hope I won’t be hiding in the bushes in a moment, red-faced  
 with shame about my stark nakedness”

What examples such as the above show is that elative compounds do not entirely lack the derivational and inflectional properties of other adjectives. It remains true that comparative and superlative forms are rare, just as nominalizations based on elative compounds are rare. Stylistic and/or pragmatic factors may well play a role here, rather than some absolute prohibition of unknown origin. Extreme adjectives, that indicate some high degree of a property, such as *gorgeous* (more extreme than *pretty* or *beautiful*) or *gigantic* (more extreme than *big*), make take different modifiers (Morzycki 2011) than their run-of-the-mill cousins. Elative compounds are a special subset of extreme adjectives. It is quite likely that the likelihood of forming comparatives and superlatives, or nominalizations, is simply different for extreme adjectives.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Types of elative compounds

#### 3.1. Compounds expressing stereotyped comparisons

The best known type of elative compound in Dutch is based on an idiomatic and stereotypical comparison. *Beresterk* ‘bear strong’ indicates the level of strength associated with bears, *pijlsnel* ‘arrow fast’ indicates a standard of speed associated with arrows, and so on. As noted in Hoeksema (1985), the comparison is not with a particular bear, or set of bears, but rather uses a standard of comparison that is conventionally and vaguely associated with prototypical bears. Even when bears die out, or when their strength is not precisely known, we may use the expression simply to denote a high degree of strength. What counts as a very high degree of strength is very strongly context-dependent (cf. Kamp 1975, Klein 1980, Kennedy and McNally 2005, among

others). We may use *beresterk* for a very strong 3-year old, without intending to imply that this child could match a grizzly bear, or for a particularly strong truck, again without implying that a bear could pull as much weight as this truck.

Some typical examples of this type are:

- (20) aalglad 'eel slippery = slippery as an eel'  
beeldschoon 'picture beautiful'  
donszacht 'down soft'  
eivol 'egg-full'  
hondstrouw 'dog faithful'  
ijskoud 'ice cold'  
kaarsrecht 'candle straight'  
kristalhelder 'crystal clear'  
pijlsnel 'arrow fast'  
roetzwart 'soot black'  
schatrijk 'treasure rich'  
torenhoog 'tower high'  
zonneklaar 'sun clear/obvious'

Sometimes, these compounds correspond to idioms made up from the same material (Mollay 1991):

- (21) De minister is aalglad  
The minister is eel-slippery  
'The minister is very slippery'
- (22) De minister is zo glad als een aal.  
The minister is so slippery as an eel  
'The minister is slippery as an eel'
- (23) De handdoek is donsacht  
The towel is down-soft  
'The towel is very soft'
- (24) De handdoek is zacht als dons  
The towel is soft as down  
'The towel is as soft as down'

- (25) Mijn buren waren spinnijdig  
 My neighbors were spider-angry  
 ‘My neighbors were very angry’
- (26) Mijne buren waren zo nijdig als een spin  
 My neighbors were so angry as a spider  
 ‘My neighbors were mad as hell’

However, it would be wrong to see the compounds as merely condensed forms of the idioms. In quite a few cases, there is no corresponding idiom, or if there is one, it is slightly different from the compound. Next to the pair *beresterk* ‘bear strong’/*sterk als een beer* ‘strong as a bear’ there is the idiom *sterk als een paard*, but no compound \**paardesterk* ‘horse strong’. Conversely, *ijzersterk* ‘iron strong = very strong’ is a common relative compound, but the expression *(zo) sterk als ijzer* ‘strong as iron’ seems to be used only, or at least by most, as a literal comparison (“this type of plastic is as strong as iron”). We may speak of an argument in a discussion as *ijzersterk* when it is very strong, but cannot say that the argument is strong as iron without creating an odd sense of literalness.

In some cases, the comparison on which the compound is based may be indirect, and for that reason more difficult to recover for the language learner. Such is the case in a compound like *moedernaakt* ‘mother-naked’, which cannot plausibly be analyzed as ‘as naked as a mother’, but rather as ‘as naked as a newborn child’ (and the noun *moeder* presumably functions as somehow bringing the circumstances of birth to our attention). Tobler (1858) mentions the middle Dutch form *moederbareennaect* (with the old, now obsolete word *baren* = *child*), literally *motherchildnaked*, where the relation with the nudity of newborn babies is more obvious. Perhaps, then, *moedernaakt* (and its German counterpart *mutternackt*) is a shortened compound.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.2. Analogical extensions of comparison-based compounds

As noted by De Vooy (1916), children frequently use and overuse relative compounds without any proper understanding of their component parts. Next to *pikzwart* ‘pitch black’, a common comparison-based compound, De Vooy noted children saying *pikdroog* ‘pitch dry’, which makes no sense at all, and next to *ijskoud* ‘ice-cold’, he also observed *ijswarm* ‘ice-warm’ and *ijsmoe* ‘ice-tired’. Clearly, what is most important about relative compounds is their overall interpretation at high-degree adjectives, and their constituent parts are only



important for the linguist, not so much for the language user. Indeed, in the case of *pikzwart*, it should be noted that the form *pik* is no longer understood by most speakers. The word for pitch in present-day Dutch is *pek*, and *pik* is an old dialectal variant that is no longer part of the standard language.

Formations like *pikdroog* and *ijsmoe* can be viewed as analogical formations, based on existing models. While the examples listed by De Vooy's never entered the adult language and the official dictionaries of Dutch, it is clear that many compounds that did, arose out of similar analogical processes. For instance, *beresterk* 'bear-strong', a comparison-based compound, gave rise to many newfangled compounds in the 1970s and 1980s, such as *beregoed* 'bear-good', *beregezellig* 'bear-cosy', *bereslecht* 'bear-bad' and even *berestoned* 'bear-stoned'. For none of these compounds, a comparison-based interpretation makes a lot of sense. Rather, we must view *bere-* in these words as an *affixoid*, a word half-way on the route to becoming a prefix (cf. e.g. Stevens 2005). At the moment, many of these compounds appear on their way out again, having outlived their fashion. A similar fate presumably awaits a group of compounds formed on the basis of *keihard* 'rockhard', such as *keileuk* 'rock-nice', *keislim* 'rock-smart', *keisloom* 'rock-slow', etc., which are especially popular in the province of Brabant.

In addition to *apetrots* 'monkey proud', there is a small group of elative compounds with closely related meanings: *apelazerus* 'monkey plastered', *apedronken* 'monkey drunk,' *apezat* 'monkey wasted', *apestoned* 'monkey stoned.' These may be viewed as analogical extensions, but at the same time all of them have a straightforward comparison-based interpretation, as is evident from the fact that idiomatic comparisons such as *stoned als een aap*, *zat als een aap* and to a lesser degree *lazerus als een aap* are well-attested.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3. Causative compounds

Causative constructions are often employed to indicate a high degree (Margerie 2011). Dutch idioms such as *zich doodschamen* 'to be ashamed to death', *zich rotschrikken* 'to startle oneself rotten = to startle terribly' indicate a high degree by metaphorically suggesting some extreme result caused by the shame or startle event. There is a group of elative compounds with a similar type of interpretation, typically with a verbal stem (and in some cases an infinitive), accompanied by an optional augment *-s-* (see Botha 1969, Neijt and Schreuder

2009 for discussion of these augments, or linking morphemes) or, as the leftmost member of the compound:

(27)	barstensvol	‘bursting full’
	broeiheet	‘scald/brew hot’
	doodmoe	‘dead-tired = tired to death’
	foeilelijk	‘fy-ugly’
	kotsmisselijk	‘puke-sick’
	smoorheet	‘choke-hot’
	snikheet	‘sob-hot’
	spuuglelijk	‘spit ugly’
	stervenskoud	‘dying cold’
	stikvol	‘choke full’
	stomdronken	‘stupid drunk’

Again, it is possible to form other compounds on the basis of this causative type by analogical means, in which case the original causative semantics need no longer be present: *doodgewoon* ‘dead normal’, *doodeenvoudig* ‘dead simple’, *stervensduur* ‘dying expensive = prohibitively expensive’, *smoorverliefd* ‘choke-infatuated = totally infatuated.’ Due to the nature of the resulting states that most of these causatives express, such as death or nausea, most of these compounds might plausibly also be listed in the category of taboo-based compounds, to be discussed in the next section.

Compounds such as *stokoud* ‘stick old’, which do not have a verbal stem as their lefthand member, might be placed in this category as well, if we are to interpret them as ‘so old that one has to use a stick’. Many other cases with *stok-* (cf. van der Wouden 2011) are semantically opaque, and are probably best viewed as analogical formations.

### 3.4. Compounds with taboo elements

The employment of taboo terms from various domains (religion and superstition, sexual habits, and excrements) in the service of linguistic expressivity is diverse, wide-spread and well-known (Pott 1833, de Jager 1858, de Baere 1940, Allan and Burridge 1991, Postma 2001, Horn 2001, Hoeksema and Napoli 2008, Napoli and Hoeksema 2009). Some areas involved are adverbs of degree (compare the use of curses and semicurses as degree adverbs, e.g. *damned smart*), negative polarity items (*John did not do a damn thing all*

day), emphatic wh-questions (*what the hell is going on?* – cf. Pesetsky 1987, Den Dikken and Giannakidou 2002), certain verbal constructions (*Get the hell out of my house!*) and of course plain swearing and name-calling.

Tobler (1858) already mentions the use of terms for forces of nature (thunder, lightning, hail) in curses, exclamatives and as intensifying elements in relative compounds. In a case like *blitzschnell*, or Dutch *bliksemsnel* ‘lightning fast’, one might consider it to be a regular comparison-based compound, since it is undeniable that lightning is fast. However, *blitzdumm* ‘lightning stupid’, *blitzliederlich* ‘lightning debauched’, likewise cited by Tobler, cannot be viewed in the same light. In Dutch, the use of thunder and lightning for relative compound is more limited than it was in German, although an investigation of the various dialects might produce some more evidence.<sup>15</sup> For emphatic questions, negative polarity items (cf. Hoeksema 2001a, 2002) and adverbs of degree, however, this lexical domain was much in use, especially in informal language, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. In some cases, the borderline between relative compounds and syntactic combinations involving adverbs of degree isn’t easy to draw. Thus one may find the combination *donders goed* ‘thunderly good = extremely well’ both written as two words, or as one: *dondersgoed*. However, many other combinations with *donders* were never written as a single word, so my preference would be to treat this as a syntactic combination, not a compound.<sup>16</sup>

Relative compounds with *god-* are fairly widespread, e.g. *godgans* ‘god-entire = entire’, *godsgruwelijk* ‘god-awful’. A special case is provided by the pair *godsmogelijk* ‘god-possible’ and *godsonmogelijk* ‘god-impossible.’ While the latter means ‘totally, completely impossible’, a regular strengthening of *onmogelijk*, such is not the case for *godsmogelijk*. Indeed, such words as *possible* hardly lend themselves to intensification, except when they are interpreted as ‘likely, plausible’. In the case of *godsmogelijk*, the interpretation is rather something like ‘possible at all, possible in any degree whatsoever’, and this compound appears to be used only in exclamative questions such as:

- (28) Hoe is het godsmogelijk dat je dat niet weet?!  
How is it god-possible that you it not know  
‘How is it even possible that you don’t know that?’

In addition to *god-*, we may also list *ziel-* ‘soul’ here as a common element in relative compounds. Compare *zielsgelukkig* ‘soul-happy = intensely happy’, *zielsbedroefd* ‘soul-sad = deeply sad’, *zielsgraag* ‘soul-gladly = with immense

pleasure, *zielsveel* ‘soul-much = very much’. The latter expression, by the way, is only used in combination with the predicate *houden van* ‘to love’. A common thread in these compounds is that they express mental states, such as love, hate, or anguish. While *ziel* may not be a typical taboo term, it does have uses that remind one of such terms, in particular as a polarity item (compare English *a (living) soul*, French *âme qui vive*, Dutch *levende ziel*, etc.), and it belongs to the general domain of religious terms that often form an integral part of the taboo vocabulary (cf. Allan and Burridge 1991, Napoli and Hoeksema 2009).

Most popular of all are compounds involving *dood* ‘death’. In German, compounds with *tod-* or *todes-* are likewise an important group within the class of elative compounds (cf. Oebel 2011, part 1). In English, *dead* has developed into a degree adverb of its own: *dead simple*, *dead quiet* etc. The oldest compounds of this type seem to have been *doodziek* ‘mortally ill’ and *doodkrank* (same meaning), which can be viewed as causative compounds of the type discussed in the previous section. A compound like *doodsbleek* ‘deathly pale’ could be viewed as a case of a comparison-based compound: pale as a corpse (cf. *lijkbleek* ‘corpse-pale’). However, the majority of cases do not have such a straightforward semantic basis, and are best viewed as cases of taboo-based strengthening: *doodgewoon* ‘dead normal’, *doodsimpel* ‘dead simple’, *doodongelukkig* ‘dead unhappy’, *doodonverschillig* ‘dead indifferent’. The main scientific dictionary of Dutch, the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT), lists large numbers of them from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. The period after 1750 was also found to be the one in which taboo-based minimizers, such as *geen donder* ‘no thunder = nothing whatsoever, not a damn thing’, became common in the language (see Hoeksema (2002) for discussion). Earlier occurrences of compounds with *dood-* listed in the WNT all involve the comparative-like cases *doodziek*, *doodkrank*. Related to compounds in *dood-* are a few involving *stervens-* ‘dying’, such as *stervenskoud* ‘freezing cold’, *stervensdruk* ‘dying busy = extremely busy’, *stervenssaai* ‘dying boring = extremely boring,’ and a few others in *stik-* ‘choke’, such as *stikjaloers* ‘choke jealous = extremely jealous’. Again it might be argued that some of them could also be placed in the group of causative elative compounds, discussed in the previous section.

A large group of compounds in *bloed-* ‘blood’ are plausibly to be placed in the category of taboo elatives as well. In some cases, a comparative-like meaning may be discerned, as in *bloedeigen* ‘blood-own’, since this is often used in combination with kinship terms (*zijn bloedeigen moeder* ‘his bloodown

(=very own) mother’), and could so be paraphrased as ‘as own as one’s blood’. In most cases, however, no such semantics is to be detected, e.g. in *bloedmooi* ‘blood-beautiful = extremely beautiful’, *bloedjong* ‘blood-young = very young’, *bloedsaai* ‘blood boring = boring as hell’, *bloedserieus* ‘blood serious = completely serious’. Of course, taboo terms based on *blood* are not uncommon, compare English *bloody* (intensifier, related to the swear word/intensifier uses of *damn*, *fucking* etc.).

Of fairly recent origin are relative compounds involving taboo terms from various bodily excretions, such as *pis-* ‘piss’, *zeik-* ‘pee’, *poep-* ‘shit’, *schijt-* ‘shit’, *stront-* ‘shit’, *spuug-* ‘spit’, *kots-* ‘vomit’, as well as the body part term *rete-* ‘asshole’. Some examples are: *pisnijdig* ‘piss-angry’, *pislink* ‘piss-angry’ or ‘piss dangerous’ (both meanings are attested), *piswoest* ‘piss-angry’, *poepchic* ‘shit chic = very chic’, *poepduur* ‘shit expensive = very expensive’, *schijtbenuwd* ‘shit afraid = extremely afraid’, *schijtmoe* ‘shit tired = very tired (of something)’, *schijtziek* ‘shit sick = very sick’, *spuugzat* ‘spitting tired (of) = completely fed up with,’ *stront eigenwijs* ‘shit-stubborn’, *kotsmisselijk* ‘vomit sick/fed up’, *retecool* ‘ass-cool = very cool’. Most of these are not attested before 1950 (see Van der Sijs 2002: 541), with the exception of *pisnijdig* ‘piss-angry’, for which Van der Sijs has a first occurrence from 1914. From other sources (Hoeksema 2001a, 2002), we know that such taboo terms are fairly recent in their use as intensifiers in various constructions. Similar compounds with *scheiß-* in German are attested from 1900 or so onward (Oebel 2011, vol. 1, 188-190). There is some overlap between pejorative and relative uses. German *Scheißkerl* ‘asshole, jerk’ is a case of a nominal compound, in which the taboo element has the function of providing a negative evaluation, and in *scheißegal* ‘completely indifferent’ it is relative, having a function of indicating a maximum degree of indifference. Sometimes both functions are active in one word, as Oebel (2011) points out, e.g. in *scheißklug* ‘damn smart’, where the word not only indicates a high degree of cleverness, but also an evaluation on the part of the speaker that this cleverness is not positively appreciated. Some of the items listed above are strictly informal, and especially common in youth slang, others are more widely used, even in more formal registers. Presumably this is a matter of taboo terms becoming *salonfähig*, a slow process that leads to constant replacement by newer taboo terms.

A final group of taboo terms in Dutch is the group of names of lethal (often contagious) diseases. These are primarily used in pejorative nominal compounds (example: *pokkenweer* ‘pocks weather = lousy weather’). However,

there is some spillover in the area of nominal compounds with an elative character (see section 4 below for discussion).

### 3.5. Elative prefixes and affixoids

Elative adjectives are not always strict compounds. Certain prefixes function in a similar way, such as *oer-* (German *ur-*), *aarts-* ‘arch-’, *in-* (no German counterparts, except for some dialectforms from the Westmünsterland, see Piirainen and Elling 1992), *door-* (‘thoroughly, through and through’), *over-* ‘over’ and more recently *super-*, *hyper-*, *mega-*, *giga-* (cf. Schultink 1962).

The prefix *oer-* is polysemous, meaning both ‘original, ancient’, as in *oerbos* ‘primal forest’, *oermens* ‘prehistoric man’, as well as ‘very’, as evidenced by *oergezellig* ‘very cosy’, *oersterk* ‘very strong’, *oerhollands* ‘very Dutch’ and the like. The prefix is not as popular as it was in High German (WNT, s.v. *oor-*III, Oebel 2011), but spans a much longer period than *super-* and other Latin and Greek prefixes. An old Dutch form *oor-* (cf. *oorsprong* ‘origin’) is not productive anymore (De Meijer 1906), and was never used as an intensifier prefix.

The prefix *aarts-* is used as an intensifier prefix for both adjectives and nouns, similar to German *Erz-*. Just like *oer-*, this prefix is polysemous, and also serves to express other meanings, such as in *aartsbisschop* ‘arch bishop’, *aartsvader* ‘arch-father = patriarch’. More than *oer-*, *aarts-* is primarily used for elative nominal compounds. Schultink (1962) considers neither prefix productive, an opinion that I share, except for nominal combinations with *aarts-*, which appear to be somewhat productive, even now. For instance, *loser* is a recent loan word in Dutch, and yet *aartsloser* ‘arch loser’ is attested on the Internet.<sup>17</sup>

The prefix *in-* derives elatives from adjectives, but unlike the previous two cases, never from nouns. The popularity of this prefix seems to be waning. The most common words with this prefix are *intriest* ‘very sad’, *inslecht* ‘very bad’ and *ingemeen* ‘very nasty, very mean’. These examples suggest that the prefix is primarily used to form words with a negative connotation. However, *inkeurig* ‘very proper’ and *innetjes* ‘very neat, very proper’ are also attested. Particularly common with this prefix is emphatic reduplicative conjunction, as in:

- (29) We zijn allemaal in- en inverdrietig.<sup>18</sup>  
We are all in-and-in sad  
'We are all deeply saddened'

The prefix *door-* 'through', finally, is rare and found in only a few formations. Most common appears to be *doornat* 'wet through and through, completely wet'. Other combinations are listed in the WNT as obsolete, such as *doorbraaf*, *dooreerlijk*, *doorgeleerd*, *doorkundig* ('very brave', 'very honest', 'very learned' and 'very able', respectively). The adverbial combination *door en door* (presumably originating by dint of the same process of emphatic reduplicative conjunction referred to above) has replaced the prefix, according to the WNT. Note, however, that *door en door* is used in a much wider range of combinations, including the verbal combination *door en door kennen* 'know through and through, know very well', than *door-* was ever employed in.<sup>19</sup>

The case of *over-* is somewhat complicated. Some combinations with this prefix are indeed regular relative compounds, such as *overheerlijk* 'over-delicious = very delicious'. In other cases, like *oververstandig* 'overly sensible', the meaning is not so much "high degree of X" but rather "too high degree of X". An odd case is *overgroot* 'over-great', which appears to be used only as an attributive adjective, modifying *meerderheid* 'majority', or *deel* 'part', to indicate what is by far the largest part or majority. The list of cases with *over-* in Fletcher (1980) does not distinguish relative from other uses.

The prefixes *super-*, *mega-*, *giga-* and to a lesser degree *hyper-* have become popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Schultink (1962) already noted a fair amount of cases with *super-* and *hyper-* from the 1950s, and *mega-* and *giga-* are increasingly popular since 2000 or so. With adjectives, these prefixes are usually intensifiers, in combinations with nouns, they may also have other meanings. Thus *superman* is not a man to a high degree, but a man with special powers. Hence *super-* may also serve to express various qualitative properties, such as being good, strong, outstanding, etc. Quite recently, the prefix *über-* joined this group of prefixes, not as a borrowing from German, but from English (see Güneysel 2010 for discussion of this prefix in English). In informal settings, *super-*, *uber-*, *giga-* and *mega-* are more and more written as two words. This makes it hard to decide whether the language users view the items in question as prefixes, or primarily as adverbs of degree. Students of mine have found that if you give high school students a cloze test, with an empty position marked by

dots right before an adjective, they are just as likely to fill in *super* as some regular adverb of degree, like *erg* ‘very’.

### 3.6. Measure noun constructions

Some elative compounds have as their lefthand member a plural form of a measure noun: *eeuwenoud* ‘centuries old’, *ellenlang* ‘yards long’, *urenlang* ‘hours long’, *duimendik* ‘inches thick’. It might appear that these are regular measure constructions, which just happen to be written as one word, similar to:

- (30)        twee dagen lang ‘two days long, for two days’  
               een dag lang ‘a day long, for a day’  
               enkele dagen lang ‘several days long, for several days’

However, as I argued in Hoeksema (2006), bare plural forms of measure nouns have a special degree reading, setting them apart from the cases with determiners exemplified in (30). When I say that a lecture went on for two hours, that is just a factual statement. When I say that it went on for hours, there is an additional suggestion that this is a long time. Hence it is no longer just a factual statement, but it expresses a subjective evaluation on the part of the speaker as well. The same is true for cases like *eeuwenoud*, *ellenlang*, *duimendik* cited above. They all involve contextual maximizers, that is to say, expressions indicating a maximal amount of time, or length, or thickness, relative to contextual expectations. Quite often, they are not interpreted literally. Thus *ellenlang* ‘yards long’, is often used in a temporal interpretation: *een ellenlang betoog* ‘a yards long argument = a long – and, by implication, tedious – argument, *een ellenlange vergadering* ‘a very long meeting’, etc. Because these measure noun cases are involve reference to high degrees, it is appropriate to classify them here as elative compounds.

### 3.7. Nominal elatives

The literature on elatives does not often mention the possibility of nominal elative compounds (but see Oebel 2011 for a precedent). To some extent, this is understandable, since adjectives are the primary vehicles for the expression of degrees in evaluative qualifications. Nonetheless, as Sapir (1944) already



pointed out, degree is not restricted to adjectives. Many verbs, nouns and prepositional phrases are gradable as well. Hence, there is no a priori reason why nominal relative compounds cannot exist. In this section, I will argue that Dutch has a smallish group of nominal relative compounds.

In section 3.5., we have already seen that some of the relative prefixes may be used for nouns as well: *aarts-* for instance, compare: *aartsleugenaar* ‘arch liar’, *aartsvijand* ‘arch enemy’, *aartsrivaal* ‘arch rival’. The same is true for *super-*, compare *superhaast* ‘super hurry’, *superhunk* ‘super hunk’ (a recent borrowing from English), etc. Of course, many cases, like *supermarkt* ‘super market’, *superbenzine* ‘premium gas’, etc. are based on nouns that are nongradable, and so these cannot be regarded as relative compounds.

Gradable nouns that easily give rise to relative compounds are *vaart* ‘speed’, *gang* ‘speed’, and *bonje* ‘rivalry, hostility’. All three form compounds with *bloed-*, which is, as we have seen above, a popular element in adjectival compounds as well: *bloedgang* ‘very high speed’, *bloedvaart* ‘very high speed’ and *bloedbonje* ‘big fight, brouhaha’. For *gang*, I also noted the compounds *noodgang* ‘emergency speed = very high speed’ (no actual emergency need be involved), *rotgang* ‘rotten speed = very high speed’, *koleregang* ‘cholera speed = very high speed.’ *Rot-* and *kolere-* or with vowel reduction *klere-* are more common as pejorative prefixes, compare *klereschool* ‘cholera school = lousy school’, *rotvent* ‘rotten guy, bastard’, and so on. Here, however, they serve primarily to indicate high speed, not necessarily in a derogatory fashion. For *vaart*, I noted *noodvaart*, *reuzevaart* ‘giant speed’, and *sneltreinvaart* ‘fast-train speed’.

*Geeuwhonger* ‘yawn hunger’ indicates an intense feeling of hunger. Alternative compounds are *brulhonger* ‘cry hunger’ and *wolfshonger* ‘wolf hunger’. *Engelengeduld* ‘angels patience’ is the patience of an angel, an incredible patience, similar to *Jobsgeduld* ‘patience of Job’. *Straatlengte* ‘street length’ is used to indicate a long distance:

- (31) De kampioen had een straatlengte voorsprong.  
The champion had a street-length lead  
‘The champion had an enormous lead’

*Doodzonde* has two meanings: the nonrelative interpretation ‘mortal sin’, and the relative interpretation ‘great pity.’ In the latter sense, it is not entirely clear

whether to view the word as a noun or as an adjective. Consider the following two examples:

- (32)       Dat is zonde  
              That is sin  
              ‘That’s a pity’
- (33)       Dat is een zonde  
              That is a    sin  
              ‘That is a sin’

When *zonde* has the meaning ‘pity’, it does not take an article, or any other determiner, nor can it be modified by adnominal adjuncts, such as adjectives and prepositional phrases. This would be compatible with the hypothesis that *zonde* has been reanalyzed as a predicative adjective. (It cannot be used as an attributive adjective.) Only in the adjectival usage does *doodzonde* have the relative interpretation. This might be viewed in two ways: *doodzonde* is a simple relative, built using the popular initial element *dood-*, or it has, like *zonde*, been reanalyzed from the nonrelative compound noun *doodzonde*.

So the main semantic types that we found among adjectival relative compounds can be found for their nominal counterparts: comparison-based forms (*sneltreinvaart* – speed compared to a train), causative (*geeuwhonger* – hunger causing one to yawn, *brulhonger* – hunger causing one to cry) and taboo-based (*bloedvaart*, *koleregang*). In addition, there are cases with specialized affixes, e.g. *aarts-*.

### 3.8.       Color terms

A special word is in order for relative compounds that refer to colors. Many compounds that refer to color describe a certain hue of a color, without being relative. For instance, *salmon pink* or *moss green* are names for subtypes of pink and green, respectively. Indeed, one might ask whether color terms are really gradable to begin with. If I show you two clearly green objects, and ask whether one is greener than the other, you might be rather puzzled. However, there is plenty of evidence that such doubts can be put aside. Adverbs of degree may be combined with color terms (cf. also Kennedy and McNally 2010), compare:

- (34) You look very white/pale.  
 (35) Her cheeks were very red.  
 (36) The future looks very black.

This suggests a test that will help us to distinguish elative from nonelative color terms. If it seems reasonable to describe *pitch black* as *very black*, then it is elative; on the other hand, if we feel that *olive green* does not permit a paraphrase as *very green*, then it is not elative.

Another test that we may safely employ here is to try whether emphatic lengthening is possible (cf. section 1 above). In a case like *vuurrood* ‘fire red’, it is easy to lengthen the vowel of the first member for emphatic purposes, in a case like *mosgroen* ‘moss green’, the result sounds awkward. Elative color terms in Dutch are:

- |                              |                                       |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (37) hagelblank ‘hail white’ | felrood ‘bright red’                  |
| knalblauw ‘bang blue’        | hoogrood ‘high red’                   |
| felblauw ‘bright blue’       | knalrood ‘bang red’                   |
| doodsbleek ‘dead pale’       | vuurrood ‘fire red’                   |
| lijkbleek ‘corpse pale’      | pimpelpaars ‘deep purple’             |
| steenbleek ‘stone pale’      | knalroze ‘bang pink’                  |
| wasbleek ‘wax pale’          | hagelwit ‘hail white’                 |
| aardedonker ‘earth dark’     | kalkwit ‘chalk white’                 |
| balkedonker ‘beam dark’      | krijtwit ‘chalk white’                |
| pik(ke)donker ‘pitch dark’   | lijkwit ‘corpse white’                |
| stikdonker ‘suffocate dark’  | sneeuw wit ‘snow white’               |
| felgeel ‘fierce yellow’      | spierwit <sup>20</sup> ‘muscle white’ |
| kanariegeel ‘canary yellow’  | duvelzwart ‘devil black’              |
| knalgeel ‘bang yellow’       | gitzwart ‘git black’                  |
| asgrauw ‘ash grey’           | inktzwart ‘ink black’                 |
| gifgroen ‘poison green’      | pikzwart ‘pitch black’                |
| grasgroen ‘grass green’      | ravenzwart ‘raven black’              |
| bloedrood ‘blood red’        | roetzwart ‘soot black’                |
| dieprood ‘deep red’          |                                       |

We see a lot of words for black and white, and related words such as pale and dark, quite a few for red as well, some for yellow, green, blue and little else. The elative compounds clearly prefer items from the top of the color term hierarchy

discovered by Berlin and Kay (1969). According to this cross-linguistic study, color vocabularies may vary quite a bit as to how many colors they distinguish, but the variation is limited severely by a universal hierarchy. The simplest systems only distinguish dark and light, systems with three color terms add red, then green or yellow, etc:

Stage I: Dark-cool and light-warm

Stage II: Red

Stage III: Either green or yellow

Stage IV: Both green and yellow

Stage V: Blue

Stage VI: Brown

Stage VII: Purple, pink, orange, or grey

We see that most of our terms correspond to Stage I, somewhat fewer to Stage II, then Stage III, etc. This is true both in terms of lexical diversity, and in terms of token frequency. If we add together the numbers for *white* and *pale*, for *dark* and *black*, and compare the results with the other colors, we get the results of Table 1, which shows an almost perfect fit with the Berlin and Kay stages.

Table 1: Color relatives, by head word

Colors	N
White / pale	40
Black / dark	44
Red	24
Green	7
Yellow	2
Blue	2
Brown	-
Orange	1
Purple	1
Grey	1

A factor complicating matters is that very often, color terms modified by adverbs of degree or occurring in relative compounds refer to skin colors or colors indicating an endpoint in a process of color change. Thus *vuurrood* ‘fire red’ might denote something that would otherwise not be considered very red when we use it to describe someone blushing. Likewise *erg bruin* ‘very brown’

sounds a bit odd, except when speaking about tanning, or frying eggs or other food. It does not seem equally OK to say of my desk, for instance, that it is ‘very brown’. The term *asgrauw* ‘ash grey, ashen’, is fine when describing someone’s complexion, but not good to describe the color of a pencil. Some cases, like *grasgroen*, seem to be more clearly elative in a figurative interpretation: ‘very green, very inexperienced’.

### 3.9. Borderline cases

The borderline between adverb + adjective combinations and elative compounds is blurred. If we take our cue from spelling (as one word or two), we may notice considerable variation for a number of adverbs. *Dol* ‘crazy’ is a case in point:

(38) Ik was dolblij.

I was crazy-glad  
‘I was elated’

(39) We hadden dol veel plezier.

We had crazy much pleasure  
‘We had an awful lot of fun’

The same is true for *razend* ‘furious’, *hoogst* ‘highest, highly’, *wondermooi* ‘wonder beautiful = wonderfully beautiful’. Usually, the adverbial cases permit more variation. *Wonder*, for instance, is no longer a regular adverb of degree, but in its heyday, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it could be combined with many adjectives. Nowadays, only the fixed combinations *wonderschoon* ‘wonder beautiful’, *wondermooi* ‘idem’, and *wonderwel* ‘very well’, are in use. When syntactic combinations become fixed strings, rather than free combinations, there is a tendency (by no means absolute) to spell them as one word, and to treat them grammatically as such. This is sometimes referred to as the process of univerbation.

A confusing factor in all of this is a recent tendency, not codified in the official spelling of Dutch, but noticeable everywhere, especially on the Internet, to spell compounds as two words. The influence of English can be detected here. Even some elements that were always considered to be prefixes, such as *super*, are now frequently spelled as separate words.

The road from free adverbial combination to elative compound may also be travelled in the other direction (as a type of degrammaticalization, see Janda 2001, Norde 2009 for discussion of this notion). Thus the compound *reuzesterk* ‘giant strong’ quickly led to other cases with *reuze*, like *reuzesnel* ‘giant fast’, *reuzeveel* ‘giant many’, which were then reanalyzed as adverb + adjective combinations, leading ultimately to the use of *reuze* as a modifier of verbs, compare (36) below (see W. de Vries 1920/21).

- (40) We hebben ons reuze vermaakt.  
We have ourselves giant amused  
‘We amused ourselves enormously’

The use of *super* as an adverb of degree, rather than a prefix, is likewise an example of degrammaticalization.

#### 4. Elative and pejorative compounds

Compounds with a pejorative character are fairly common in Dutch as well as the surrounding languages, in particular German. Whereas German is fond of nouns such as *Scheiß(e)* ‘shit’ and *Dreck* ‘shit’, Dutch primarily uses *rot-* ‘rotten’, *kut-* ‘cunt’, *kloten-* ‘bollocks’, and various names for contagious diseases. It need not come entirely as a surprise that there is some overlap between elative and pejorative compounds. Both types of compounds are intended to express a subjective judgment in a colorful way, and taboo terms are definitely colorful.<sup>21</sup> In English, we see similar double duty in another domain for an expression such as *hell*: When we say that so-and-so is one hell of an actor, we praise him, using *hell* to indicate a high degree, but when we say he is an actor from hell, we use the term in a purely derogatory manner. Likewise, the word *damned* is pejorative in *that damned professor* but a degree word in *he is damned good*.

One cause of overlap, besides a common desire for expressiveness, between elative and pejorative compounds is an inherently negative evaluation for certain nouns. For instance, *herrie* ‘noise’, is always a negative term,<sup>22</sup> and any pejorative noun prefixed to it will typically function to reinforce both the negative evaluation and the high-degree reading associated with the noun. For other nouns, the negative character may not be inherent, but context-dependent.

Thus *eind* ‘distance’ may well be interpreted negatively when it comes to travelling. Hence common compounds like *pokkeneind* ‘pox distance’, *teringeind* ‘phthisis distance’ and the like, which indicate simultaneously that the distance is great, and that it is viewed in a negative light by the speaker or writer, for presumably the same reason. In some cases, like *teringhekel* ‘phthisis dislike’, the noun is inherently negative, but the affixoid *tering-* is not used to indicate a negative judgment regarding the dislike, but merely to reinforce its negative character: it is therefore not indicative of a dislike which you should not have, but of a strong aversion.

## 5. Polysemy and constructional specialization

Polysemous adjectives do not always give rise to equally polysemous elative compounds. Take for instance the word *helder* ‘clear; clean.’ In the compounds *kristalhelder* ‘crystal clear’ and *glashelder* ‘glass clear’, the meaning ‘clear’ is relevant, but not the meaning ‘clean’. Both compounds still have a certain ambiguity that is also inherent in English *clear*, viz. that it either denotes a property of glass and other material of being easy to see through, or metaphorically a property of being easy to understand. *Kraakhelder* ‘crackling clean’, on the other hand, uses the other meaning by indicating a high degree of cleanliness.

Another polysemous item is *hoog* ‘high’. While its basic meaning has to do with vertical extension (of buildings, mountains, etc.), a derived meaning has to do with a metaphorical degree interpretation. Some compounds, such as *torenhoog* ‘torenhoog’ can be used either way (e.g. *een torenhoge reclamezuil* ‘a gigantic advertising column’ but also *torenhoge schulden* ‘gigantic debts’), whereas *metershoog* ‘meters high’ can only have the vertical extension interpretation (*metershoge golven* ‘meters high waves’, not \**metershoge schulden*).

*Lekker* ‘tasty’ is used in Dutch in many ways, only some of which have to do with food. For instance, *zich lekker voelen* ‘to feel well’, has a meaning never associated with German *lecker* or English *tasty*. The compound *kiplekker* ‘chicken good’ is primarily used in the second meaning (*ik voel me vandaag kiplekker* = “I feel really good today”), whereas *superlekker* ‘super tasty’, can be said of tasty food, beverages, or anything else that might be considered tasty, for instance hot-looking members of the opposite sex (or whatever sex one is attracted to).

Besides the complexity of polysemy, adjectives may also show considerable variety in terms of the constructions they participate in. For instance, the adjective *vol* ‘full’ can be used in the following constructions:

- (41) a. De boot is vol. [predicate: I]  
the boat is full  
“the boat is full”
- b. een volle boot [attributive: II]  
a full boat  
“a full boat”
- c. De boot is vol boeken [predicate plus NP complement: III]  
the boat is full books  
“the boat is full of books”
- d. De boot is vol met boeken [predicate plus PP complement: IV]  
the boat is full with books  
“the boat is full of books”

In my corpus data, we see the following distribution of compounds over the four constructions:

Table 2: Compounds in –vol ‘full’, according to construction

Left member	I	II	III	IV
Bom- ‘bomb’	12	3	-	-
Boorde- ‘brim’	-	-	10	2
Ei- ‘egg’	8	-	-	-
Mud- <sup>23</sup> ‘mud’	3	1	-	-
Nok- ‘crest’	1	-	-	-
Prop- ‘cram’	6	2	2	4
Stik- ‘choke’	2	-	-	-
Stamp- ‘mash’	7	2	-	-
Tjok- ‘chock’	5	3	11	1

Note in particular that some compounds (especially *boordevol*) prefer the two constructions with complements, others show a strong preference for the two constructions without complement (e.g. *bomvol*, *eivol*). *Propvol* and *tjokvol* are found in all constructions. Differences between *bomvol* and *boordevol* are statistically significant, according to Fisher’s Exact test ( $p < 0.001$ ).



## 6. Diachronic developments

The material in the database is too scant to allow us to paint a completely accurate picture of the diachronic developments in the class of elative compounds, but we can sketch some broad outlines. The database consists of 2000 occurrences from 1330 to the present, of which about half are recent, from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The oldest occurrences appear to be comparison-based or causative, such as *steendoof* ‘stone deaf’ and *brandnieuw* ‘brand new, new like something just made in the fire.’ Of the prefixoid cases, *aarts-* ‘arch’, *oer-*, *in-* are all attested from early modern Dutch onward, cases where *dood-* ‘dead’ is not causative in nature, but a booster with taboo status, can be found starting in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: *doodeenvoudig* ‘dead simple’, *doodsverlegen* ‘dead shy’ etc. These compounds became very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After 1930 or so, however, the type was no longer productive. The many instances that can still be found today all go back many decades, as I was able to ascertain by cross-checking my material with the vast resources of the newspaper corpus at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague (through their website [www.kb.nl/kranten](http://www.kb.nl/kranten)) and the books and journal at the Digital Library of Dutch ([www.dbnl.nl](http://www.dbnl.nl)). In total, I found 62 types of elative compounds in *dood-*, all attested at least once in texts dating from before World War II.

The postwar period saw the rise of *super-* as an elative prefix (cf. Schultink 1962). *Hyper-* had been in use somewhat longer even, but it never spread much beyond a few common words, such as *hypermodern* ‘hyper modern’ and *hypernervous* ‘hypernervous.’ My corpus material contains 27 types with *super-*, suggesting that *super-* is less productive than *dood-* at its heyday, but this is most likely a wrong conclusion. Most combinations with *super-* are felt to be somewhat informal, and hence show up less frequently in my corpus material (mostly written language). Many of the 27 types occur only once in the corpus, suggesting that productivity is high (Baaijen 1989, 1992).

During the 1970’s there was a brief period of popularity of compounds with *bere-* and in the last two decades we see a sharp rise in the use of taboo prefixes, especially *rete-* ‘ass’, in informal language (teenage magazines, internet, etc.). *Stront-* ‘shit’ is a bit older, attested since the 1960s, and isn’t restricted to youth slang. Compounds with *stront-* mostly have a negative connotation, such as *strontchagrijnig* ‘shit chagrined’, *strontlazerus* ‘shit drunk’, whereas *rete-* may also be combined frequently with headwords that have a positive connotation, such as *retegaaf* ‘ass cool’.

Since the 1990s, there is a trend in popular informal language to use diminutives as left-hand members of elative compounds. So next to *peperduur* ‘pepper expensive’, there is *pepertje duur* ‘peper-DIM expensive’. Other attested cases are *tonnetje rond* ‘barrel-DIM round = round as a barrel’, *veertjelicht* ‘feather-DIM light’, *bloedje-heet* ‘blood-DIM hot’ and *gloedjenieuw* ‘glow-DIM nieuw’. Such compounds are striking because this type did not exist 30 years ago, and still does not exist in other languages, but they are not terribly common, and presumably won’t replace the existing types. Rather, they seem to provide speakers/writers with an informal variant of existing compounds.

Elative compounds based on comparison are no longer a very productive type. New cases are rare. From advertisements, I collected a few new cases, such as *concertgebouwecht* ‘Concert Hall real’, meaning a sound that is so realistic that one might think that one is listening to an orchestra in the famous Amsterdam Concertgebouw. Another is *tandartsschoon* ‘dentist clean’, a word coined by the (advertising agency of the) toothbrush company Oral-B. However, these words are not likely to be picked up by the population at large. They show that new formations may readily be understood (in context), but their very scarcity is a sign that comparison-based elative compounding is no longer productive, presumably due to the availability and popularity of alternative ways of creating elative combinations, especially by prefixoids like *super-*, *giga-*, and *kei-* and pejorative elements such as *rot-* and *rete-*.

## 7. Conclusions

Elative compounds are best studied in the context of grading and adverbs of degree. The Dutch cases studied in this chapter are no exception to this, as I have tried to argue above. Only gradable expressions form elative compounds, especially adjectives and adverbs, to a lesser extent also nouns. Various properties of grading were discussed, including prosodic marking such as emphatic lengthening, and emphatic reduplicative coordination.

Another connection worth looking into is that between elative compounds and expressive types of morphology, especially pejorative compounding. The intricate relationships between taboo terms that abound in pejorative compounds and the expression of degree are by now well-known and have been attested in many domains of language. The rise of taboo terms in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, first on the basis of religious terms having to do with *God*, *devil*, *death*, later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also sexual organs and bodily excretions, follows a pathway of change

that has been attested elsewhere in the study of polarity items, adverbs of degree and emphatic WH-questions.

Other topics discussed here are analogical extensions, the status of elative color compounds, and the rise of prefix-like elements such as *razend-*, *dol-*, *super-*, *hyper-*, *giga-* and *mega-*, and the diachronic developments were sketched in broad strokes. Whenever possible, I have based my discussion on corpus data from a collection of over 2,000 attested occurrences, as well as the large historical dictionaries of Dutch. One thing that remains to be studied for Dutch is regional variation in the use of elative compounds. Apart from Reker (1996), there is not much in the way of dialect studies, but the topic lends itself to a great deal more study.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The first important study of elative compounds, Fletcher (1980), does not mention them, and in fact speaks of 'adjective-specific' intensifiers. However, there are many deep similarities between degree marking for nouns and adjectives. Thus we have *bitter koud* 'bitter(ly) cold' and *bittere kou* 'bitter cold (noun)', *hard nodig* 'hard necessary = very necessary' and *harde noodzaak* 'hard necessity.'

<sup>2</sup> From: [www.stripinfo.be/recensie.php?recensie=778](http://www.stripinfo.be/recensie.php?recensie=778) (March 5, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> From: <http://www.nuij.nl/algemeen/hof-beslist-in-vete-moszkowicz-versus-kelder.161094.lynkx#axzz1YrePo7mm> (May 24, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> From: [http://hwww.dwtonline.com/website/forum\\_reactie.asp?menuid=44&topic=34889&page=1](http://hwww.dwtonline.com/website/forum_reactie.asp?menuid=44&topic=34889&page=1) (March 1, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> From: <http://www.indymedia.be/index.html%3Fq=node%252F30653.html> (November 28, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> From: [www.ludism.fr/wp-content/plugins/ludism/download.php?id=9132](http://www.ludism.fr/wp-content/plugins/ludism/download.php?id=9132) (no date given)

<sup>7</sup> From: *De Volkskrant* (newspaper), March 22, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> The first two examples also suggest that the claim in Booij (1977: 129) that such compounds cannot undergo prefixation by *-te* because that affix only attaches to morphologically simple (monomorphemic) words, can't be correct.

<sup>9</sup> From: *NRC Handelsblad* (newspaper), October 24, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> From: Mart Smeets, *Kopmannen en waterdragers*, Veen, Amsterdam/Antwerps, 1992, page 29.

<sup>11</sup> From: <http://louisestefani.blogspot.com/2009/09/ode-aan-het-naturisme.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also the comments in Schultink (1961) regarding the claim by De Vooys (1947) that certain absolute adjectives like *dood* 'dead' do not support comparatives or degree modification. Schultink noted that this intuition does not square with actual usage, which shows lots of counterexamples such as *doder dan dood* 'deader than dead', *hartstikke dood* 'very dead' etc.

<sup>13</sup> Shortening of longer compounds is a common process, cf. Plank (1981) for examples and discussion.

<sup>14</sup> The popular German word *affengeil* also has a Dutch counterpart *apegeil*, meaning both 'very horny' and 'very good, excellent', similar to German youth slang.

<sup>15</sup> See Reker (1996) for an excellent study of elative compounds in the dialect of Groningen.

<sup>16</sup> Similar problems arise with the adverbs of degree *hoog* 'highly' and *hoogst* 'highest = highly', which are likewise sometimes attached to another word, and sometimes written separately: *hoognodig* 'highly necessary', or *hoog nodig*.

<sup>17</sup> From: <http://www.nuij.nl/nu-ik-efte.2320439.lynkx?pageStart=81&tab=Reacties#axzz1clQNVqFg>. [March 12, 2010]

<sup>18</sup> Dutch prime-minister Wim Kok, Radio 1, October 2, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Reker (1996: 38) mentions a large number of dialectforms from the Groningen dialect based on *deurnat*, the dialectal variant of *doornat*, formed by added another initial element: *dompeldeurnat* 'dump-through-wet', *driefdeurnat* 'drip-through-wet', *kletsdeurnat* 'slap-through-wet', *strontdeurnat* 'shit-through-wet.'

<sup>20</sup> *Spier* means muscle, but in older Dutch could also refer to the white meat of fowl and game.

<sup>21</sup> For some discussion of the rich syntactic and semantic versatility of taboo expressions, see Napoli and Hoeksema (2009).

<sup>22</sup> Although some people, in particular hard-rock fans ('head bangers'), have adopted the word *herrie* as a term of endearment, including the reinforced forms such as *teringherrie*, *klereherrie* etc. This is a common process, similar to what happens to words like *insane* when used as positive terms.

<sup>23</sup> The etymology of *mudvol* is somewhat unclear, according to the WNT.