

# Nominative-Dative Inversion and the Decline of Dutch

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, linguistics was in the centre of a debate in Dutch newspapers. Starting point of this discussion was a colloquium that took place at the University of Amsterdam, where linguists were trying to analyse some ongoing changes in Dutch. One of these changes is the spread of the pronoun *hun* ‘them’, originally an object form, which more and more appears in subject position as well (cf. Van Hout 1996). In the standard language the subject pronoun for 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural is *zij* ‘they’, whereas *hun* ‘them’ takes an object position (cf. 1a-b). However, using *hun* as a subject, as in (1c), is nowadays widespread in the spoken language.

- (1) a. **Zij** hebben het gedaan.  
*They have it done*
- b. We hebben **hun** niet meer gezien.  
*We have them not more seen*
- c. **Hun** hebben het gedaan.  
*They have it done*

This change is the more interesting since using *hun* as a subject is heavily stigmatised. Probably for this reason the upshot of the newspaper debate was that linguists should rather stop this ‘decline of Dutch’ instead of try and explain the change.

At first sight, the change from *zij* to *hun* looks like case neutralisation. Over a period of several centuries Dutch lost a system of morphological case typical for the Germanic languages, and one may argue that the change illustrated in (1) is just another step in this process of deflection. It can be shown that many of these changes are ‘changes from below’ that are disapproved of by speakers of the Labovian middle

and upper class, so that the hostile reactions towards *hun* as a subject do not have to surprise us.

In this paper I will argue, however, that in essence the change from subject *zij* to subject *hun* is no matter of deflection. I will show, on the contrary, that speakers who use *hun* both in subject and object position make exactly the same case distinctions as speakers of the standard variant. The core of my argumentation is based on the behaviour of pronouns in nominative-dative inversion (section 3, cf. Weerman & Evers-Vermeul 2002). In section 2 I will first discuss briefly why an explanation in terms of deflection is not convincing. In the final section I will discuss some consequences of the analysis and suggest another formal trigger for the change. To be sure, I have no illusions that a linguistic analysis will influence the layman's judgement on the change.

## 2. No deflection

Apart from some idiomatic constructions, Dutch lost nearly all its morphological case distinctions. Whereas in Middle Dutch four cases could be distinguished, as illustrated in (2), only one form remains in Modern Dutch (cf. 3).

### (2) *Middle Dutch*

NOMINATIVE	die man	'the man'
GENITIVE	dies mans	
DATIVE	dien manne	
ACCUSATIVE	dien man	

### (3) *Modern Dutch*

CASE	de man
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Like in many other languages that underwent a process of deflection, the only exception is the paradigm of the personal pronouns. In this paradigm we still find forms that correspond to the 'nominative' and the 'accusative', at least from a historical point of view:

## (3) Personal pronouns in Modern Dutch

	'nominative'	'accusative'
1 <sup>st</sup> singular	ik	mij
2 <sup>nd</sup> singular	jij	jou
3 <sup>rd</sup> singular, masculine	hij	hem
3 <sup>rd</sup> singular, feminine	zij	haar
1 <sup>st</sup> plural	wij	ons
2 <sup>nd</sup> plural	jullie	jullie
3 <sup>rd</sup> plural	zij	hun

If the personal pronoun *hun* takes over the position of the subject pronoun *zij* in (2), there is at first sight no distinction left between nominative and accusative for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural. In this respect this change looks like the one from Middle Dutch (2) to Modern Dutch (3), and therefore it might be tempting to suggest that the pronominal change is just another case of deflection.

However, on further consideration there are at least two important differences. First of all, the changes in the nouns are literally instances of deflection in that the nouns lose case endings. This is different for the pronominal change, where in terms of number of syllables *zij* is similar to *hun*. Second, in the nominal system the form that remains is similar to the former nominative: the nouns change in the direction of the nominative. In the pronominal change it is just the reverse: the accusative form *hun* seems to take over the position of the nominative *zij*.

It should be noted in this regard that the Dutch nominative pronouns show default behaviour, in contrast to English. In English the 'accusative' (here: *me*) is used in constructions like (4).

- (4) a. **Me** buy a book? (Come on!)  
 b. Poor **me**  
 c. The chairman, *me*, will not accept this.

In parallel constructions in Dutch the nominative (here: *ik* 'I') has to be used instead:

- (5) a. **Ik** een book kopen? (Kom nou!)  
 b. Arme **ik**  
 c. De voorzitter, **ik**, zal dit niet accepteren.

So, unlike the changes in the Dutch nouns, the change in the pronominal system is not in the direction of the default. Therefore we have to conclude that it will not do to keep deflection responsible for both changes. Arguably loss of case endings is what happened in the nominal system, but this cannot be the whole story for the pronouns.

### 3. Nominative-Dative Inversion

In fact, I will go one step further and argue that the change in the pronominal system does not imply that the distinction between ‘nominative’ and ‘accusative’ is neutralised. My argument is based on nominative-dative inversion.

Nominative-dative inversion is one of those phenomena studied in detail by Hans den Besten that became a topic in generative linguistics (see, for instance, Den Besten 1989). In this construction the subject can optionally remain in situ if it has an internal theta role. This is illustrated in the (embedded) sentences in (6)-(7). In (6) the subject is in a VP-external position, on the left hand side of the indirect object, whereas it is in a VP-internal position in (7).

- (6) a. dat de boeken Hans bevallen.  
*that the books (subject) Hans (indirect object) please*  
 b. dat de foto's Hans getoond worden.  
*that the pictures (subject) Hans (indirect object) shown are*
- (7) a. dat Hans de boeken bevallen.  
*that Hans (indirect object) the books (subject) please*  
 b. dat Hans de foto's getoond worden.  
*that Hans (indirect object) the pictures (subject) shown are*

Without discussing the details and slightly simplifying it, I will follow the analysis Neeleman & Weerman (1999, chapter 5) give for this construction. Neeleman & Weerman argue extensively that subjects in (6) and (7) have to be associated with two thematic relations that are co-valued. One of these relations is internal, and therefore ‘accusative’ is checked. The other one is external and therefore ‘nominative’ checking is relevant. Interpretation takes place at LF, where the subjects in (6) and (7) should both be visible in the external as well as in the internal position. Their PFs, however, differ. Neeleman & Weerman argue that surface order is a function of extra-syntactic modules. Simplifying their analysis still further, it boils down to the claim that ‘accusative’ checking can only take place in an OV order (in an OV language), whereas ‘nominative’ checking requires the subject to be on the left-hand side of an agreeing verb.

For the present argument the overt structures of (7) are relevant in particular. As said, the subject in (7) should be both internal and external, and therefore both ‘accusative’ and ‘nominative’ checking come into play. At PF this is possible since *de boeken* ‘the books’ in (7a) and *de foto’s* ‘the pictures’ in (7b) can fulfil both checking requirements at the same time: the phrase is in a position where ‘accusative’ checking can take place since the phrase is in an OV position, but since the phrase is also on the left-hand side of (the base position of) an agreeing verb, ‘nominative’ checking can take place as well.

It follows from this analysis that nominative-dative inversion of the Dutch type is not possible in English. In (8a) the DP *Hans* must follow the verb in order for ‘accusative’ checking to be possible, English being a VO language. At the same time, however, *Hans* is involved in ‘nominative’ checking in order to be able to be associated with the external position. This implies that *Hans* must precede the agreeing verb. Thus, contradictory ordering requirements result, and as a consequence the sentence is ill formed. If raising of *Hans* takes place, as in (8b), the problem is solved. The trace is relevant for ‘accusative’ checking. At the same time the overt DP *Hans* is on the left-hand side of an agreeing verb so that ‘nominative’ checking can take place.

- (8) a. \* is shown Hans the pictures  
 b. Hans<sub>i</sub> is t<sub>i</sub> shown the pictures

More generally, the prediction is that nominative-dative inversion of the type illustrated in (7) is typical for OV languages. In VO languages, on the other hand, the subject must be raised overtly, as in (6). The typological prediction seems to be correct, at least for the Germanic languages. Languages like Dutch, Frisian, German and Old English allow the structures in (7), whereas in languages like Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and Icelandic the subject raises obligatorily, as in (8).

The analysis makes another prediction. In section 2 we saw that Dutch has separate personal pronouns for nominative and accusative positions. This is rather different for nouns in Modern Dutch, where no case distinctions exist at all. In fact, the personal pronouns also differ from the system of nouns in Middle Dutch, since for nouns the case affixes can be distinguished from the stem (and the nominative can be analysed as the form that does not have an case affix). Since the personal pronouns have separate forms for nominative and accusative checking we predict that constructions like in (7) are excluded when we replace *de boeken* ‘the books’ or *de foto’s* ‘the pictures’ by a personal pronoun. This prediction is correct, as the facts in (9) show (where *Hans* is interpreted as an indirect object).

- (9) a. \* dat Hans ik/mij beval.  
       *that Hans I/me please*
- b. \* dat Hans jij/jou bevalt.  
       *that Hans you (singular) please*
- c. \* dat Hans hij/hem bevalt.  
       *that Hans he/him pleases*
- d. \* dat Hans wij/ons bevallen.  
       *that Hans we/us please*
- e. \* dat Hans zij/hun bevallen.  
       *that Hans/ they please*

If the internal argument in (9) is a nominative pronoun, accusative checking cannot take place, if the personal pronoun is an accusative pronoun, nominative checking is impossible. However, the construction can only survive if both types of checking occur. Just like in (8), there is one way to solve this problem, namely via raising. Consequently, the parallel constructions in (10) are all grammatical.

- (10) a. dat ik Hans beval.  
           *that I Hans please*
- b. dat jij Hans bevalt.  
           *that you (singular) Hans please*
- c. dat hij Hans bevalt.  
           *that he Hans pleases*
- d. dat wij Hans bevallen.  
           *that we Hans please*
- e. dat zij Hans bevallen.  
           *that they Hans please*

Like in (6) and (8), the overt subject is in a position where nominative checking can take place. Since there is a trace in the VP internal-position, accusative checking is possible as well.

That indeed case is relevant, is supported by pronominal paradigms in which the case dimension does not play a role. Dutch demonstrative pronouns, for instance, do not show nominative-accusative oppositions. Just like in English, there is only one form for *deze* ‘this’ and *die* ‘that’ (and the neutral variants *dit* and *dat*). The same is true for possessive pronouns like *jouwes* ‘yours’. As predicted, nominative-accusative inversion is possible with these pronouns:

- (11) a. dat Hans deze bevalt.  
           *that Hans (indirect object) this-one (subject) pleases*
- b. dat deze Hans bevalt.
- (12) a. dat Hans die bevalt.  
           *that Hans (indirect object) that-one (subject) pleases*
- b. dat die Hans bevalt.
- (13) a. dat Hans jouwes bevalt.  
           *that Hans (indirect object) yours (subject) pleases*
- b. dat jouwes Hans bevalt.

Just like for ordinary nouns, there is no special form for the nominative and the accusative and therefore the pronouns in (11)-(13) behave like ordinary nouns.

The relevance of the case dimension is confirmed by the behaviour of clitics. The clitical variants of the full pronouns in (9) show exactly the same pattern in that nominative-dative inversion is excluded. Only the raising variant is grammatical. This is illustrated for the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular in (14):

- (14) a. \* dat Hans `k/me beval  
           *that Hans (indirect object) I/me (subject, CL) please*  
       b. da `k Hans beval  
           *that I (subject, CL) Hans please*

The impersonal clitic `t 'it', on the other hand, does not have a separate nominative and accusative form and therefore nominative-dative inversion is possible:

- (15) a. dat Hans `t bevalt  
           *that Hans it-CL pleases*  
       b. dat `t Hans bevalt  
           *that it-CL Hans pleases*

Not only do these facts support the role of case in normative-dative inversion, (15) also shows that the ungrammaticality of (9) cannot be attributed to clitic behaviour of the full pronouns, since real clitics do appear in the inverted position (if there is no case distinction). Neither is it correct to argue that (9) is ungrammatical since the inverted subject is animate. In (16) the subject pronoun is replaced by a proper name and therefore both arguments are animate. As can be seen, both sentences are grammatical nevertheless. Apparently it is not some feature referring to animacy but rather case that is decisive.

- (16) a. dat Hans Piet bevalt  
           *that Hans (indirect object) Pete (subject) pleases*  
       b. dat Piet Hans bevalt



Note that from a purely descriptive point of view one could also say that the personal pronouns do not undergo nominative-dative inversion because they are personal pronouns. The main distinction with the present proposal is that this generalization does not explain the fact that it is precisely this group that cannot invert. It could just as well be the group of possessives or demonstratives. In the proposal defended here we are able to explain that it is the group of personal pronouns in Modern Dutch, and only this group, that has this peculiar characteristic and it is directly related to another characteristic of this group, namely the fact that these pronouns have a different form for nominative and accusative positions. In this respect they differ from nouns in modern Dutch, and even Middle Dutch, since in Middle Dutch nouns we can separate the case affixes from the stem. For this reason Middle Dutch nouns do not correspond to a nominative or an accusative position, but rather to the lexical head of the phrase.

Let us now return to the paradigm of Dutch personal pronouns in (3). Note that the way we structured the paradigm implies that there are nominative and accusative pronouns for all persons, even for the (relatively new) pronoun *jullie* ‘you’ (plural), that has only one phonological form. In fact, the situation for *jullie* is similar to the one for *hun* ‘them’ if this pronoun is able to appear in subject position, as is the case in substandard Dutch. If there really is a nominative pronoun *jullie* alongside an accusative pronoun (as suggested by the paradigm in (3)), we expect *jullie* to behave like the other personal pronouns. If, on the other hand, *jullie* behaves like a possessive or demonstrative pronoun (cf. (11)-(13)), there is evidence that there is only one form. The same goes for the pronoun *hun* in substandard Dutch. Here are the crucial sentences:

- (17) a. \* dat Hans jullie bevallen  
           *that Hans (indirect object) you (subject, plural) please*  
       b. dat jullie Hans bevallen
- (18) a. \*dat Hans hun bevallen  
           *that Hans (indirect object) they (subject) please*  
       b. dat hun Hans bevallen  
           *that they (subject) Hans (indirect object) please*

The facts clearly support the idea that there is both a nominative and accusative pronoun, in contrast to what the phonological form at first sight suggests. In other words, the change from *zij* to *hun* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural is no deflection. Although there seems to be one form at the surface, there still is a distinction between nominative and accusative from a morphological point of view, just like in standard Dutch.

#### 4. Final Remarks

The evidence presented here suggests that the decision to form a case dimension is not taken for each pronoun separately, but rather for a group of pronouns. In this respect the evidence supports the linguistic relevance of a paradigm.

That indeed paradigmatic information should be distinguished from phonological information is further supported if we consider another factor that seems to play a role in the change from *zij* to *hun*. In (19) a comparison is made of the paradigm of personal pronouns with that of possessive pronouns:

(19) a. Personal pronouns (cf. 3)      b. Possessive pronouns

	nom	acc
1st sg	ik	mij
2nd sg	jij	jou
3rd sg m	hij	hem
3rd sg f	zij	haar
1st pl	wij	ons
2nd pl	jullie	jullie
3rd pl	zij	hun

1st	mijn
2nd	jouw
3rd m	zijn
3rd f	haar
1st pl	ons/onze
2nd pl	jullie
3rd pl	hun

It strikes the eye that there are some phonological similarities between the pronouns in the two paradigms. It is not very likely that these correspondences are a complete

coincidence. In fact, one can occasionally observe in acquisition that the relations between these paradigms are ‘real’. For instance, Van Os (1997) observes that children say things like *hem pet* ‘him cap’ instead of *zijn pet* ‘his cap’.

One way to express the form similarities while maintaining the crucial differences between (19a-b), is to make a distinction between the features of the paradigm and the actual phonological forms. For instance, with respect to *jullie*, the paradigms in (19a-b) dictate that the following three cells have to be distinguished (we are not concerned here with the proper formulation of the relevant features):

(20)	a.	<+ nom>	b.	<+ acc>	c.	<+poss>
		<+ 2 <sup>nd</sup> pl>		<+ 2 <sup>nd</sup> pl>		<+ 2 <sup>nd</sup> pl>
		.....		.....		.....

For the actual phonological formulation we could do with (21). This rule would express, then, that the similarity between the different forms is not a complete coincidence, notwithstanding the differences.

(21) <+ 2<sup>nd</sup>> → /jullie/

Once we make a distinction along these lines, the change from *zij* to *hun* is understandable. As said, it will not lead to a different paradigm; the relevant cells stay as they are. However, whereas these cells are phonologically realized differently in the standard language, a generalization as in (22) will do in the substandard variant.

(22) <+ 3<sup>rd</sup> pl> → /hun/

At the surface speakers of the substandard variant make a new generalization, deep down they are still in the same Middle Ages as the speakers of the standard variant.

## References

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