RAPID CHANGE AMONG EXPLETIVE POLARITY ITEMS

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1. Minimizers

Modern Dutch, like many other languages, has a large number of indefinite negative polarity items intended to strengthen negation by making the statement more emphatic. Among these, there is a large group referred to in the literature (e.g. Bolinger 1972, Horn 1989) as "minimizers" denoting scalar endpoints. This group includes superlatives meaning "the slightest" or "the least", compare English *Fred did not have the faintest idea* or *The inspector did not have the slightest inkling* but also expressions denoting minimal units of measurement, cf. English *Fred did not doubt it for a moment* or *The police gave instructions not to pay a dime to the kidnappers.* Included in this group are various idioms denoting things considered small or negligible on some scale:

(1)   een rooie cent   "a red cent"

      een gebenedijd woord   "a blessed word"   (Southern Dutch)

      een haarbreed   "a hair's width"

In older stages of Dutch, the set of expressions used as minimizers was very large and varied (see De Jager 1858), and in many cases, they had a distinctly pejorative character:

(2)   een sikkepit   "a goat's dropping"

       een mijt   "a mite"

       een verrotte mispel   "a rotten medlar"

       een zier   "a maggot"

Many of these idioms not only denoted something small, but indeed something worthless or distasteful. Hence they could be used as minimal endpoints for scales of *size* as well as scales of *value*. In particular for evaluative statements pejorative elements are obviously useful. For modern readers, the pejorative character of some of these items may not be all that obvious. In judging a Middle Dutch example such as

(3)   En prise mijn lijf niet twee peeren   (from: Karel ende Elegast, 13th century)

       neg prise my life not two pears

       "I don't give two pears for my chances of survival"

one should consider that pears, and fruit in general, were not considered valuable, or even healthy food in the Middle Ages.

The use of minimizers to strengthen negation is robustly attested in the European languages (cf. Pott 1833, Jespersen 1917). Making new minimizers is a productive process. New ones are added constantly, and old ones are being replaced. Of the dozens of Middle Dutch minimizers, only a couple are in use today, like the word for "hair," *haar*.

2. Taboo terms as minimizers

What appears to be a later development is the rise of *taboo terms* as reinforcers of negation (cf. Postma 1998). Beginning in the 19th century, we see a steady rise of indefinite taboo terms in the same kinds of negative contexts where previously minimizers were in use. These taboo terms can be divided into several subsets. The first to appear on the scene is a group of religious origin, or if you like, originating in folklore superstition, attested from the early 19th century onward.[2] Then there is a somewhat larger group of sexual or scatological taboo terms, the first of which are attested in the late 19th century. Finally there is a set of expressions denoting various contagious or lethal diseases, attested from the early 20th century onward. The religious taboo terms are all designations of the devil, or of thunder/lightning

(4)   een drommel   "a devil"

        een duvel   "a devil"

        een verdommenis   "a damnation"

        een donder   "a thunder"

        een bliksem   "a lightning"

        een deksel   "a lid"(but used as euphemism for devil)

        Dat gaat je geen drommel/duvel/verdommenis/donder/bliksem/deksel aan.

        That goes you no devil / devil / damnation / thunder / lightning / lid on

        "That does not concern you one bit"

Note that names for God, Jesus, or the saints are absent, although they are omni-present, so to speak, in swear words and curses. Only negative religious terms are used, presumably because only they are inherently pejorative. What is interesting about this group of expressions is that they show up in a number of emphatic constructions, not just polarity contexts, but also as degree adverbs and as evaluative adjectives:

(5)   drommels mooi   "devilishly pretty"

        duvels moeilijk   "devilishly difficult"

        verdomd lastig   "damned hard"

        donders goed   "thunderishly good = very well"

        bliksems aardig   "lightninglike nice = damned nice"

        deksels knap   "fiendishly clever"

(6)   een drommels/duvelse/verdomde/donderse/bliksemse/dekselse idioot

        "a damned idiot"

and in adverbial constructions denoting speed:

(7)   Ga als de drommel/duvel/(gesmeerde) bliksem hier weg!

        Go as the devil / devil / (greased) lightning   here away

        "Get the hell out of here"

Sexual and scatological taboo terms begin to occur toward the end of the 19th century in Dutch texts. Just how old they are in spoken Dutch is difficult to tell precisely, but

it is safe to suppose that they are not of ancient origin. In the farces and popular literature of the 17th century they are not to be found, and there can be no doubt that they would have shown up there, had they been around at the time. Now in the 19th century, we must, of course, consider Victorian attitudes toward sex and bodily functions in general as factors which may explain the absence of taboo words in the written language. However, already in the late 19th century, we see a general lifting of these taboos in certain genres, particularly naturalistic novels and plays, where there is a serious attempt at capturing then-current spoken language. Almost immediately, we see sexual taboo terms being used as negative polarity items. Some examples are given in (8):

(8)   a. 't kan ze geen bal verdommen[3]

            it can them no ball care

            "they don't give a damn"

        b. verder ontlopen jullie mekaar geen flikker[4]

            further differ you-all each-other no faggot

            "Otherwise you differ not at all"

A list of sexual and scatological taboo terms currently in use, is given in (9):

(9)   bal   "ball, testicle"

        barst   "crack"

        drol   "turd"

        flikker   "faggot"

        fluit   "flute, penis"

fuck	"fuck" (recent loan)
hol	"hole"
kloot	"testicle"
kut	"cunt"
laars	"boot" (euphemism for *aars* "arse")
reet	"asshole"
sodemieter	"sodomite"
zak	"sack, scrotum"

These terms vary widely in usage. Some are used quite generally, like *bal*, and are considered acceptable in polite language, some are widely known, but considered rude, yet others are restricted to small subsections of the population.

Rather more limited, and also more typically Dutch, it appears, is a set of taboo terms denoting contagious or lethal diseases:

(10)	kanker	"cancer"
	pest	"plague"
	pleuris	"pleuritis"
	pokken	"smallpox"
	tering	"tuberculosis"
	tyfus	"typhus"

With the exception of *pest*, which gained a broad popularity in the 1960's and 1970's, the use of disease terms as polarity items appears to be limited to the Rotterdam area.

It should be noted that the same items are also in use as pejorative noun modifiers. The two uses, noun modifier and polarity item, are both illustrated by example (11):

(11)   FEYENOORD KAMPIOEN en daar kunnen die kanker nepperds van PSV

Feyenoord   champion   and there can those cancer phonies of   PSV

geen kanker aan doen !!!!![5]

no   cancer about do

"Feyenoord is champion and those fucking phonies of PSV can't do a fuck about it!"

As the English translation is meant to suggest, it is not uncommon in English either that pejorative noun modifiers and polarity-sensitive minimizers are tapped from the same well.

3. Minimizers and Predicates

In contemporary Dutch, I have counted 170 terms which are being used as mini-mizers. It would be inconceivable that a language would support such a large set of items unless they were diversified along a number of dimensions. I have already mentioned the fact that there is variation in politeness and social acceptability as well as regional variation. But it is not this type of variation that I want to discuss here. Another dimension of variation concerns the predicates, which which the various minimizers combine. As it turns out, some items combine rather freely with predicates

of all sort, whereas others show a remarkable fastidiousness in their choice of predicates.[6]

Now some of these combinatory constraints are entirely unremarkable. When minimizers have a transparant etymology, and a use which is transparantly related to their etymology, we may see the effects of ordinary selection restrictions. Consider, for a moment, the use of the English transparant minimizer *a word*:

(12) a. The count did not say a word.

b. The police don't believe a word of it.

c. Fred doesn't speak a word of French.

d. #Ed didn't have a word.

e. #Edna didn't do a word all evening.

f. #Alex didn't care a word for his colleagues.

Being a linguistic unit, *word* may be combined with predicates of linguistic units, especially verbs of communication, like *say, speak, utter*, but also cognitive verbs such as *believe.* While it is literally speaking impossible to believe a word, objects of belief are linguistic in the sense that they can be expressed in words. Hence linguistic minimizers such as *word, syllabe,* or *iota* combine with cognitive predicates such as *believe, understand* or *mean.* The semantically deviant examples in (12) contain predicates whose objects are not readily understood as linguistic in nature.

With many other minimizers, however, the etymological word meaning plays no role whatsoever. This is obvious with words whose etymology is no longer transparant, or where the original word meaning is plainly irrelevant, as is the case with taboo minimizers. The question is whether such terms are used interchangeably, with

only stylistic or idiolectal differences, or whether they too show semantic specialization.

The main hypothesis of this paper is the following: When a nontransparant minimizer is first used, it does not show semantic specialization. Since its basic or original meaning is irrelevant, and hence does not constrain the combinatory potential of the minimizer, it may be used with a wide variety of predicates. However, due to fierce competition within the set of minimizers, such general-purpose minimizers easily become obsolete. The next generation of speakers may replace them by other equally general expressions which may sound more forceful because they are newer. But instead of dropping out, expressions may also specialize in some semantic domains. When this happens, stable collocation relations may get established between predicate and minimizer which help prevent early obsolescence.

As evidence for this diachronic tendency toward semantic specialization, I will discuss of number of Dutch minimizers which have undergone just such a process of specialization in this century. Based on a corpus of about 7500 natural occurrences of minimizers, mostly from the 20th century, I have looked at the type of predicate and tracked developments over time for some of the more frequent items. Because the evidence is statistical in nature, it is not possible to test the hypothesis on all minimizers. Many are just too infrequent, or only frequent in one period, so that any observable change in patterning might be due to mere chance. The items for which I will present some striking findings are listed in (13):

(13)   snars   (origin unclear, probably it denoted a fast, abrupt movement)

         zier   (originally: maggot; but this original meaning is lost)

         steek   (sting or stab)

         spat   (spatter)

I have divided the 20th century data into three periods: 1900-1950, 1950-1990 and 1990-2000 and cross-classified it according to predicate type. Here I distinguish nouns, comparatives, verbs of cognition, such as *geloven, begrijpen, snappen, verstaan* "believe, understand," verbs of indifference, such as *kunnen schelen, interesseren, geven om* "care, interest, give a damn" which denote indifference in combination with negation, and a category of remaining verbs. The division into periods may seem uneven, but has to do with the fact that it is far easier to find relevant data for the 1990's (from CD-ROMs, Internet, electronic corpora, etc.) than it is for earlier periods. I note that certain minimizers are mainly or often used as modifiers of nouns, such as for instance *shred* in English, which is typically found in combinations like *without a shred of evidence, not a shred of truth* and the like. The same is true for Dutch.

In (14), an overview is given for those minimizers which do not have selection restrictions based on their etymological meaning. Note that the set of predicates is not equally divided over the three periods.

(14) Minimizers and their predicates (NB: temporal, financial, linguistic or spatial minimizers are not included, as these tend to attract different predicates)

	1900-1950 N=524	1950-1990 N=1328	1990-2000 N=1546
noun	19%	9%	6%
comparative	6%	6%	10%
verb of cognition	19%	18%	18%
verb of indifference	23%	39%	35%
other	32%	28%	31%

With this in mind, let's now take a look at *snars*. The developments surrounding this item are summarized in (15):

(15)   SNARS: developments throughout the 20th century

	1900-1950 N=35	1950-1990 N=75	1990-2000 N=107
verbs of cognition	43%	56%	66%
verbs of indifference	26%	28%	16%
other	31%	19%	21%

We see an early preference for verbs of cognition which gains strength in the course of time, at the cost mainly of the class of verbs of indifference. The category "Other" remains fairly stable, it appears. The limited amount of data does not allow us to analyze possible developments in this rest category.

In the case of *zier*, we see similar developments, this time favoring the class of verbs of indifference. Again we see how a small early preference for one type of predicate gets stronger over time. Note that here the rest category seems to decrease monotonically.

(16)   ZIER: developments throughout the 20th century

	1900-1950 N=65	1950-1990 N=72	1990-2000 N=74
verbs of cognition	5%	7%	3%
verbs of indifference	38%	69%	84%
other	57%	24%	13%

When we consider the position of *snars* and *zier* relatively to their favorite semantic domains, a striking difference emerges:[7]

(17)

	1900-1950	% snars	1950-1990	% snars	1990-2000	% snars
verbs of cognition	130	11	290	14	327	21
		% zier		% zier		% zier
verbs of indifference	95	20	462	10	478	13

While *snars* shows a steady increase within the domain of cognition predicates, *zier* remains stable at best within the domain of indifference predicates. Hence the steady increase of verbs of indifference to be noted in (16) is due merely to the fact that all other contexts are slowly disappearing. The increase of verbs of cognition in (15) on the other hand is not just a result of all other contexts withering away, but also due to a growing preference of verbs of cognition for the item *snars*.

The next item to be considered is *steek*, the word meaning "sting, stab".

(18)   STEEK: developments throughout the 20th century

	1900-1950 N=50	1950-1990 N=77	1990-2000 N=104
verbs of cognition	38%	18%	2%
verbs of indifference	30%	26%	5%
comparatives	6%	23%	46%
verbs of change	2	11%	33%
zien "to see"	2%	9%	8%
other	28%	13%	6%

Here, there is a growing association with comparatives and verbs of change which have a comparative-like meaning. Foremost among these verbs are expressions like *vooruitgaan* "go forward, improve" and *veranderen* "change". These verbs form a natural class with comparatives. Evidence for this claim comes from certain adverbials, such as Dutch *een stuk* ("a lot") which only combine with verbs of change and comparatives (cf. 19 below), but not with positive adjectives or verbs which do not denote change (cf. Klein 1998: 80 ff.):

(19)   een stuk groter   "a lot bigger"

        een stuk sneller   "a lot faster"

        *een stuk groot   "a lot big"

        *een stuk snel   "a lot fast"

        een stuk vooruitgaan "improve a lot"

        een stuk veranderen" "change a lot"

        een stuk versnellen   "to accelerate a lot"

        *een stuk werken   "work a lot"

        *een stuk haten   "hate a lot"

Semantically, this makes sense, of course. If we add the notion of time to a comparative, we get predicates of change (cf. Kamp 1980): e.g. to improve is to become or make better, to change is to become different. I note here that within the group of comparatives and comparative-like expressions, the importance of *steek* rose continually throughout the 20th century, from 10% in the first half of the century to 37% of all combinations with minimizers in the last decade.

Before moving on to the next minimizer, there is a problem with *steek* that I need to address. The table in (18) is compatible with my general claim that nontransparant minimizers show increasing semantic specialization, or become obsolete. However, if we look beyond the 20th century, the picture looks rather different. According to the WNT, the large scientific dictionary of the Dutch language, *steek* was used in the early Modern Dutch period as a minimizer, but solely in combination with the verb *zien* "to see". From the 19th century onward, however, it is used with a much wider set of predicates. This, then, looks like a perfect counter-example to my claim of unidirectional specialization. However, the WNT also suggests a way out of this problem. It suggests that the original minimizer *steek* does not come from the noun meaning "sting, stab", but from a homophonous word meaning "stitch". This makes sense because stitches are precisely the kind of small things which are difficult to see, unlike stabs. The latter, much wider usage would then be due to the emerge of a separate minimizer, this time meaning "sting, stab", which belongs to a group of minimizers denoting quick, abrupt movements, listed in (20) below:

(20)   klap   "slap"

        ruk   "jerk"

        slag   "slap, hit"

        snars   "sip, also: snatch"

        steek   "stab, sting"

The final minimizer to be considered here is *spat* "speck". Unfortunately, there are not very many data points for this item, which is fairly rare, but whatever little I could find is summarized in (21):

(21) SPAT: developments throughout the 20th century

	1900-1950 N=10	1950-1990 N=38	1990-2000 N=72
verbs of cognition	20%	6%	3%
verbs of indifference	10%	8%	4%
comparatives	30%	21%	14%
verbs of change	10%	6%	39%
nouns	20%	18%	21%
other	10%	41%	19%

Just as with *steek*, the most robust change appears to be a general increase of comparatives and verbs of change. This time, however, verbs of change are the more important category. Unlike *steek*, *spat* is also frequently combined with nouns. An example of such a combination is given in (22):

(22)   Er zat geen spat muziek in zijn body[8]

there sat no speck music in his body

"There wasn't a speck of music in his body"

4. Adverbial modifiers

Minimizers have much in common with adverbial modifiers. Just as minimizers, adverbial modifiers can be used to lend emphasis to a statement, and just as minimizers, they often show signs of semantic specialization, leading to increasingly-limited distributions.[9] I have already pointed out that some adverbial modifiers may originate from the same source as minimizers, and mentioned the various modifiers derived from terms for the devil or thunder and lightning as a case in point (cf. 5 above). In (23), I have listed the verbs which combine with adverbial expressions consisting of one of these modifiers + the word *goed* "good, well", with a number indicating the frequency of the combinations in my material:

(23)   donders/deksels/drommels goed

"thunder+s/lid+s/devilish+s good"

+	weten	"know"	62
	begrijpen	"understand"	8
	beseffen	"realize"	2
	zien[10]	"see"	2
	herinneren	"remember"	1

opletten	"look out"	1
snappen	"understand"	1
op de hoogte	"in the know"	1
in de gaten hebben	"be aware of"	1
uitleggen	"explain"	1
kennen	"know"	1

A very similar pattern of collocations is associated with the English adverbial expression *full well* (data from newspapers on CD-ROM: The Guardian and The Observer, 1995, The Washington Times, 1992-1993).

(24)   *full well* + verb:

know	98
understand	3
realize	1
expect	1
suspect	1

What emerges from this list is the same set of verbs that combine readily with *snars*, the ones I have termed verbs of cognition. So adverbial phrases may select for the same semantic classes as minimizers, showing a cross-categorial similarity between these types of degree expressions.

5.   Conclusions

I have argued that expletive minimizers are highly sensitive to the lexical semantics of the predicates they combine with. Various semantic classes are preferred by the Dutch minimizers studied in this paper, e.g. some pick out verbs of change, while others pick out verbs of cognition, or predicates of indifference. Similar classes of predicates are selected by various adverbial expressions in Dutch and English. The selectional restrictions of expletive minimizers are not stable, as they do not rest on the basic meaning of the word, but may rapidly develop, within the time span of one century. I have given evidence that minimizers show increasing semantic specialization, hence narrowing of their distribution, and not widening.[11] So far, this claim appears to be supported by the available evidence, but more work on more languages is needed to tell wether we are really dealing here with universally unidirectional developments of the kind outlined in grammaticalization theory (cf. e.g. Traugott and Heine 1991). In this connection, it is interesting to note that Hopper and Traugott (1993: 98) claim that narrowing of meaning appears to be absent in grammaticalization. Whether we want to view the developing collocational restrictions of minimizers as narrowing of meaning is questionable, but worth considering when we view lexical meaning not as an isolated property of individual words, but as contextual in nature.

With the advent of large-scale online corpora, the study of collocation relations is rapidly advancing. At the moment, very little is known about the ways in which these collocations come about and develop over time. This paper is a small contribution toward a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Notes

[1]

[2] Other European languages show parallel developments, cf. e.g. Horn (1998) for a discussion of current English minimizers of taboo origin.

[3] From A.M. de Jong, *Notities van een landstormman*, 1917.

[4] From H. Heijermans, *Kamertjeszonde*, 1894.

[5] From the homepage of the Feyenoord Fanatics, a group of supporters of the Rotterdam soccer team Feyenoord.

[6] Postma (1995) claims that verbs with true agentive subjects cannot combine with polarity items. In this connection, he notes a difference between the verbs *horen, zien* "hear, see" and their agentive counterparts *luisteren naar, kijken naar* "listen to, look at". While the former verbs allow minimizers, the latter do not: *geen bal zien/horen* "no ball hear/see = hear/see not a thing" versus *luisteren naar/kijken naar geen bal* "listen to/look at not a thing". While it is true that there are severe restrictions on the predicates which combine with minimizers, it is not so clear how to characterize them as a set in general terms. Postma's suggestion is too general, in that it would incorrectly block combinations of minimizers/taboo terms with predicates such as *praten met* "talk to":

(i)   Ik heb op het feestje met geen hond gesproken.

         I have at the party with no dog spoken

         "I have not spoken to anyone at the party"

[7] The numbers of the different verb classes are larger than those that can be inferred from table (14), because this time all occurrences of predicates were counted, including those combining with the types of minimizers explicitly excluded from table (14).

[8] From L.-F. Céline, Reis naar het einde van de nacht, translation of Voyage au bout de la nuit, Amsterdam, 1968.

[9] See Hoeksema and Klein (1995) for a discussion of distributional similarities among nonminimizing polarity-sensitive indefinites, and the adverbial phrase *as yet*.

[10] The verb *zien* is used in the two examples as a verb of cognition, meaning 'to understand', comparable to the use of English *see* in *I see your point*, and not as a verb of perception.

[11] Widening of distribution may be found with non-expletive minimizers, when the etymological meaning is lost through semantic bleaching. A case in point is French *ne .. pas*, which developed from an idiom meaning "not a step", restricted to verbs of motion, to the general marker of negation in French.

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