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On the (non)loss of polarity sensitivity Dutch *ooit*

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1. Introduction: polarity sensitivity and historical linguistics¹

Historical linguistics has never paid much attention to the problems surrounding the origin and development, and subsequent demise, of negative polarity items (short: NPIs).² In part, this can be attributed to the general neglect of polarity sensitivity in linguistics until the advent of generative grammar (in particular the important work of Klima, cf. Klima 1964). The phenomenon itself appears to have been well-known in traditional philology, as is evident from frequent comments in larger dictionaries that certain words are restricted to, or have special meanings in, negative, interrogative or conditional contexts. Yet they were not studied in much detail, even in such monographs as Jespersen (1917).

NPIs form a **covert category**, to use a term due to Whorf (1956). They do not carry on their sleeves the information that they have a restricted distribution, and it takes considerable effort to realize that certain items are indeed polarity sensitive, unless one has access to the lexicographer's stack of file

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² Perhaps the best-known case of the loss of polarity sensitivity is that of so-called positive *anymore*, a typical feature of a number of American dialects, which has been studied by dialect-geographers and sociolinguists (e.g. Labov 1975).

cards, from which such information may be readily induced. It is perhaps for this reason, that comments on polarity sensitivity were mainly to be found in dictionaries, rather than grammars, in the pre-generative era.

Nowadays, a good deal is known about polarity items, and the characteristic properties of the environments in which they occur (cf. von Bergen and von Bergen (1993) or van der Wouden (1994) for recent surveys). For the historical linguist, the foundation is available for further study of polarity sensitivity as it evolves over time.

An important part of any such investigation must concern itself with matters of lexical semantics. When we cast even a brief cross-linguistic glance, we notice at once the existence of recurring sets of polarity items, characterized by a common lexical meaning. For instance, the typological study of indefinite pronouns in Haspelmath (1993) reveals that languages all over the world tend to have polarity sensitive indefinite pronouns. On the other hand, I am not aware of any languages where the definite article is polarity sensitive, or where some personal pronouns are restricted to negative contexts.

The example of indefinite pronouns is not unique. Just consider the fact that German, Dutch and English have all independently developed a polarity sensitive modal verb expressing deontic necessity. In each language, the origin of the modal is a different one, but the meaning and the distribution of the items are strikingly similar. I am referring here to German *brauchen* (in its use as a deontic modal auxiliary verb), Dutch *hoeven* and English *need*, as exemplified in (1a–c).

- (1) a. Du brauchst nicht zu kommen
 b. Je hoeft niet te komen
 c. You need not come

Studies by de Haan (1994) and van der Wouden (1996) have shown that polarity sensitivity in the domain of deontic modality is not restricted to the Germanic languages.

The above remarks should sound familiar to students of grammaticalization. It is a recurrent finding that the grammaticalization process which turns lexical items into grammatical formatives, is not semantically arbitrary in that just any old expression can be recruited for the expression of some grammatical feature, but rather, that grammaticalization always proceeds in well-circumscribed lexical domains.

Other characteristic features of grammaticalization, as identified for instance in Traugott and Heine (1991), can be shown to apply to polarity items as well.

One such feature is **semantic bleaching**. The original meaning of an expression is generalized or changed to a more general domain. I will give one example to illustrate this semantic bleaching. Many languages have idioms meaning 'anybody' in polarity sensitive contexts. Thus consider the following sentences from a variety of European languages:

- (2) a. Es war kein Schwein da German
 there was no swine there
 'There wasn't anybody around'
- b. Es war nie ein Aas da German
 there was never a carrion there
 'There wasn't anybody around'
- c. Er was geen kip Dutch
 there was no chicken
 'There wasn't anybody'
- d. Er was geen hond Dutch
 there was no dog
 'There wasn't anybody'
- e. Der er ikke en kat der veed det³ Danish
 there is not a cat that knows it
 'There isn't anybody that knows it'
- f. Il n'y a pas un chat French
 there was not a cat
 'There wasn't anyone'
- g. There wasn't a living soul around English

Note that the concrete, literal meanings of these idioms vary widely, from 'carrion' to 'living souls', and from 'dogs' to 'cats', but the polarity sensitive reading is typically more general, and more abstract. I do not know of languages where polarity sensitive items meaning, say, 'dog', are used to indicate pigs or chickens. Polarity sensitive idioms appear to be far more restricted in the meanings that they express than idioms in general.

Another aspect of grammaticalization is a shift from objective reference-based meanings to subjective meanings which involve aspects of speaker

³ From Jespersen (1917).

attitude. In particular, emotional intensity tends to be conveyed by polarity items. There is a distinct feeling that the sentences in (2) express their meaning in a more emotional or emphatic way than their more neutral translations. Although the class of negative polarity items is not uniform in this respect, and contains items with different rhetorical functions or stylistic connotations, these more subjective aspects of polarity items cannot be overlooked, in particular because they seem to constitute the *raison d'être* of many polarity items. Why would so many of these idioms be used at all, unless it is for added rhetorical force or greater stylistic variation?

A further striking feature of polarity items is the phenomenon called **layering** in Traugott and Heine (1991): next to the grammaticalized use, older, more literal uses stay around. This is the case with *need* and *brauchen*, which have, alongside their use as a negative polarity modal verb, another, not polarity sensitive use as a main verb. Layering makes it difficult to detect polarity items in a corpus. The polarity sensitive uses tend to hide among a host of sometimes closely related non-sensitive uses. A number of fairly intricate cases are discussed in Hoeksema (1994).

Finally, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, we must bear in mind that grammaticalization is **unidirectional** (see Traugott and Heine (1991), and specifically for semantic change Traugott (1990)). There is a steady stream, across the languages of the world, from lexical items to grammatical formatives, but only a trickle, if even that, in the other direction. For polarity items, the assumption of unidirectionality predicts that words may acquire polarity sensitivity, but cannot lose it. If they appear to lose it, this should be the result of layering: a polarity sensitive use may be lost (polarity items can and often do become obsolete), whereas the original use is kept. In this paper, I look at a likely candidate for the refutation of the unidirectionality hypothesis, and show that it is actually compatible with the general assumptions of grammaticalization theory.

2. The story of *ooit*

One case where polarity sensitivity is mixed with a non-sensitive use is the topic of the present paper, the Dutch temporal adverb *ooit* 'ever'. My initial interest in this adverb came from a belief that it constitutes a fine example of the loss of polarity sensitivity. Until the 1960s, the standard language only used *ooit* in the classical environments of polarity items, such as the scopal domain

of negation, the antecedents of conditional clauses, questions of both the yes/no and the *wh*-type, comparative clauses, restrictive relative clauses in universal or superlative noun phrases, clauses introduced by the negative preposition *zonder* 'without', complements to so-called adversative or negative predicates like *onwaarschijnlijk* 'unlikely' or *betwijfelen* 'to doubt', clauses introduced by *voor* 'before', and complements of the degree adverb *te* 'too'. The syntactic distribution of *ooit* exactly mirrored that of its counterparts in English and German, the adverbs *ever* and *jemals*, cf. the examples in (3).

- (3) a. Niemand heeft het ooit geweten
'Nobody ever knew it'
b. Iedereen die hem ooit gekend heeft, weet het
'Everybody that ever knew him knows it'
c. Hij vertrok, zonder ooit om te kijken
'He left without ever looking back'
d. Hij is te slim om ooit terug te keren
'He is too smart to ever return'

Nowadays, this picture has changed. *Ooit* is frequently used in clauses that are not, in any way, negative or otherwise conducive to the well-being of negative polarity items. The examples in (4) illustrate the modern usage:

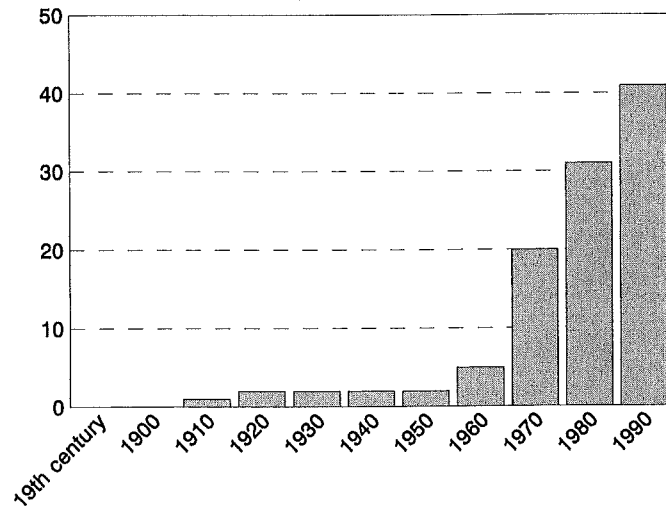
- (4) a. Jan heeft het ooit geweten
Jan has it once known
'Jan once knew it'
b. Hier stond ooit een molen
here stood once a mill
'A mill stood here, once'

I have tracked the emergence of non-sensitive *ooit* in a large collection of attested occurrences of this word, which were entered into an electronic database. This database now contains some 12,300 records, each representing one occurrence of *ooit*. The occurrences were taken primarily from literary sources. The corpus is temporally stratified, and has more than 1,000 occurrences for each decade after 1930, and contains data from all areas of the Netherlands and the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

Figure 1 depicts the rise of non-sensitive *ooit* as a percentage of total uses. For each decade, the beginning year is indicated, so the data point labelled "1980" actually corresponds to the period 1980–1989. Note that until the 1960s, the use of non-sensitive *ooit* is marginal and stable. By the 1970s, the

new usage was firmly established, but its frequency kept on climbing in the 1980s up to the present day.

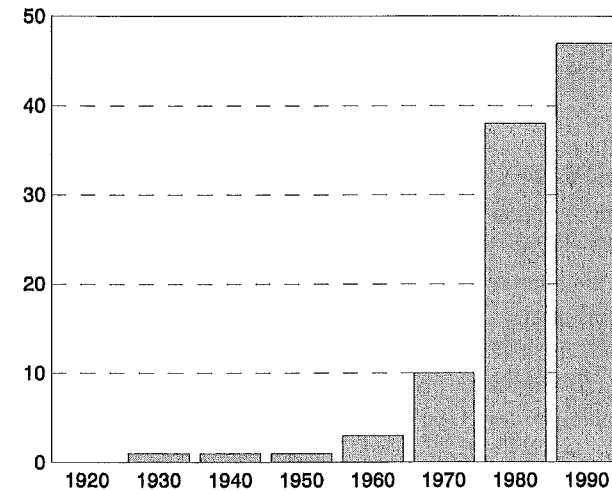
Figure 1. Non-polarity sensitive uses of *ooit* as a percentage of total usage



One consequence of the new usage is the possibility of topicalization. Like other indefinite NPIs, polarity sensitive *ooit* cannot be used in sentence-initial position, presumably because it is outside the scope of negation in that position. Non-sensitive *ooit*, on the other hand, does not have to be within the scope of negation, and indeed, it is frequently topicalized. In figure 2, I show the increase in topicalization. Note how the curve by and large mirrors that of the previous figure.⁴

⁴ As Anthony Kroch pointed out to me, this follows as a special case from what he has termed the **Constant Rate Hypothesis** (Kroch 1989), according to which changes in progress do not spread from context to context, but show a constant rate of change in all environments. In the present case, topicalization environments simply mirror the overall change in all environments.

Figure 2. Topicalization of *ooit* (per 1000)



Investigation of the rare cases of non-sensitive *ooit* before 1960 reveals that they come from southern parts of the Netherlands and Belgium, more precisely: Brabant and Limburg. In these parts, the local dialects have traditionally had a non-sensitive use of *ooit*. This can be learned from old dialect-dictionaries such as Hoeffft's dictionary of the dialect of Breda, from 1836. When this particular use came about is not known, but we know from the dictionaries of Breda (Hoeffft 1836), Antwerp (Cornelissen 1938) and the Kempenland area (de Bont 1958) that this usage was widespread in the area in the 19th century. Dialect atlases made in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s show no uses of non-sensitive *ooit* in the northern, eastern and western dialects, but a good deal of it in the adjacent southern areas of Brabant and Limburg (cf. Blancquaert and Pée 1925). Flanders, it appears, did not have it. Speakers from Brabant and Limburg used non-sensitive *ooit* not just in their dialect, but also in their regional variety of the standard language.

The spread of non-sensitive *ooit* to the northern regions and to Flanders is interesting from a sociolinguistic point because the new usage came from an area which is not economically or politically dominant. It happened at a time when the social barriers between the catholic, protestant and non-religious parts of the Dutch society were removed, and writers and journalists from the southern provinces started to become part of the mainstream. An originally catholic newspaper like the *Volkskrant* shed its clerical ties and became a

widely-read paper for the left wing of the society. It is likely that through such media, non-sensitive *ooit* made its way to the larger population. Non-sensitive *ooit* does not seem to have been stigmatized, even though it violated the established patterns of usage, and this may well have contributed to its rapid spread. Indeed, general awareness of the change in progress seems to have been low. I have found a number of letters to the editor in the periodical *Onze Taal*, which is devoted to the proper use of Dutch, complaining about this new usage, but on the whole it appears that many people were unaware of the change when it happened. This is at least the impression I get from speaking with older people about this matter. The change was noted quickly by lexicographers, such as the philologist Zaalberg, who wrote a brief article on the matter (Zaalberg 1977), in which he remarked that all dictionaries (with one exception) adapted their entries on *ooit* to accommodate the new usage in the 1970s, and that the change could be viewed as a welcome simplification of the grammar.

In general, changes in distribution of lexical items can be attributed to the lifting or addition of constraints. However, there is also another possibility here, not considered by Zaalberg, namely that *ooit* has developed an additional use, separate from the older NPI use, which has given this item a wider stage on which to play.

An anonymous reviewer asks whether the unidirectionality hypothesis does not preclude the emergence of this second use. In my understanding of unidirectionality, the only thing that would be precluded is the reversal of a process of grammaticalization in which an item becomes polarity sensitive, ensuing in gradual loss of sensitivity. In the present case, no such development is to be countenanced, if we can only show that the polarity sensitive use does not fade away and disappear, but remains present alongside a new, non-sensitive use. If the hypothesis is interpreted as saying that non-polarity items may never develop from polarity items, then the *ooit*-data are still potentially problematic. It is not known exactly whether non-sensitive *ooit* developed out of sensitive *ooit* in the southern Dutch dialects, but chances are that it did.

In order to show that there are indeed two separate uses to be distinguished, rather than a slow lifting of the polarity restriction on the use of *ooit* in general, I will first argue that polysemy within the semantic domain of indefinite temporal quantifiers is a quite common phenomenon (cf. Leuschner 1996), in order to suggest that the proposal is not implausible. *Ever*, for example, is polysemous. Besides its polarity sensitive use as an existential temporal

quantifier, it can also be used as a universal quantifier, in which case it is not polarity sensitive.

- (5) a. I have resented him ever since
 b. An ever increasing number have died of the disease
 c. He was ever eager to please

The distribution of non-sensitive *ever* is rather interesting in itself. It seems to be collocational in nature. Most common is the use in the expressions *ever since/ever after*, and with comparatives or *ing*-forms of verbs with a comparative meaning, e.g. *ever bigger*, or *ever increasing*. In other areas, the use of non-sensitive *ever* appears to be more archaic. Other clear cases of polysemy involve German *je* 'ever/each' (compare Grimm and Grimm 1877), French *jamais* 'ever/never', German *immer* 'always/ever', and Dutch *immer* 'always/ever' (until the 19th century).

I take it to be conceivable, then, that the emergence of *ooit* in non-polarity contexts is due to polysemy/ambiguity. However, the separate use that I postulate is not easily distinguishable from the polarity sensitive use, because it, too, is existential in nature. This makes it difficult to pinpoint a difference in meaning, whereas the difference between, say, the two uses of *ever* is much easier to establish. Nevertheless there are some subtle intonational differences which thus far had not been noted.

Polarity sensitive *ooit* has the unusual property of allowing emphatic lengthening of the vocalic part of the word.⁵

- (6) Als hij o-o-i-t in Parijs geweest is, eet ik mijn hoed op
 if he ever in Paris been is eat I my hat up
 'If he has EVER been to Paris, I'll eat my hat'

This type of emphasis is not to be confused with focus intonation. Focus is primarily expressed by a peak in pitch, not so much by lengthening. However, sensitive *ooit* may undergo excessive lengthening if the goal is to make the statement more emphatic. This feature, it has in common with the paradigmatically related adverb *nooit*:

⁵ This kind of emphatic lengthening is not restricted to just *ooit*, but can also be found with other expressions, such as the NPI *in jaren*: *Ik heb in ja:ren niet zo gelachen* 'I haven't laughed like that in years'. In general, it is a property of emphatic NPIs.

- (7) Ik kom n-o-o-i-t weer
I come never back
'I will NEVER return'

However, non-sensitive *ooit* may not be lengthened, judging from the anomaly of (8):

- (8) #Ik ben o-o-i-t in Parijs geweest
I have at some point to Paris been
'I have been to Paris at some point'

This does not mean that non-sensitive *ooit* may not be focused. In (9), for instance, we have *ooit* in topic position, where a certain amount of intonational prominence is necessary:

- (9) Ooit kom ik terug
one day come I back
'One day I will return'

However, this prominence is expressed by higher pitch, not by length:

- (10) #O-o-i-t kom ik terug

The oddness of (10) is also found in (11), a negative question. In negative questions, only non-sensitive *ooit* may immediately follow *niet*, hence lengthening is not allowed:

- (11) Heb ik je niet ooit/#o-o-i-t in de Poelestraat ontmoet?
have I you not at some point in the Poelestraat met
'Haven't I met you in the Poelestraat at some point?'

Another intonational difference between the two uses of *ooit* is illustrated in (12–13):

- (12) a. Dat komt wel in orde, ooit
That comes OK at some point
'That'll be OK, some day'
b. Hier stond, ooit, een molen.
here stood, once, a mill

- (13) a. #Niemand was blij, ooit
nobody was glad, ever
b. #Niemand was, ooit, blij
nobody was, ever, glad
c. Niemand was ooit blij
nobody was ever glad

Here we see that non-sensitive *ooit* may appear right-adjoined to the clause, separated from it by comma intonation (12a), or parenthetically (12b). On the other hand, sensitive *ooit* may not be separated by an intonational break, but must appear within the intonational domain of the clause. In this respect, *ooit* differs from English *ever*, since the translation of (13a) is well-formed in English with an intonational break before *ever*. It should be noted that English is more generally different from Dutch in this respect. *Any*-indefinites may also be right-dislocated, unlike Dutch indefinite NPIs:

- (14) I don't want these guys on my ship, any of them
(15) *Ik wil deze knapen niet op mijn schip, ook maar iemand van hen
I want these guys not on my ship at-all anyone of them

Instead, one has to repeat the negation, in order to express the meaning of (14) in Dutch:

- (16) Ik wil deze knapen niet op mijn schip, geen van hen
I want these guys not on my ship none of them
'I don't want these guys on my ship, none of them'

This suggests that the domain of negation is partly defined intonationally in Dutch. Whatever the proper account may be, there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that polarity sensitive and non-sensitive *ooit* may be distinguished on the basis of their intonational properties. At the root of the distinction between the two *ooits* lies a rhetorical difference. In polarity contexts, *ooit* is used as an emphazier, whereas non-sensitive *ooit* is rather unemphatic. This difference is easy to perceive, but hard to pinpoint in formal terms, which is why I focused on the prosodic clues distinguishing the two uses. But it is hard to imagine why a language would prosodically distinguish two uses if there weren't a more basic rhetorical difference.

3. Conclusion

The Dutch temporal adverb *ooit* seems to have lost its restriction to negative contexts as a result of a new, separate usage which developed alongside its original polarity sensitive use. The result was not, however, simple loss of polarity sensitivity, but rather, an intricate but peaceful coexistence of a polarity sensitive and a non-sensitive use. The two can be distinguished semantically as well as prosodically and reflect a basic rhetorical difference between the use of *ooit* as an emphatic element which strengthens negation, and another use as a rhetorically neutral temporal indefinite. As such, this development does not constitute a simplification of the grammar, in that a lexical item loses a constraint on its distribution, but rather a complication: to the old usage, with its restricted distribution, a new usage is added. It is apparently possible for the language-learning child to distinguish among these uses, and to learn their distinguishing properties. For example, there is a very clear intuition on the part of native speakers that *ooit* may be topicalized freely, except when it is used as a polarity item. For the theory of language acquisition, this poses the interesting problem of how the restrictions are learned in the face of apparent counterexamples, and for historical linguistics, this case study should be a warning that apparent loss of polarity sensitivity may not be what it seems to be. The same caveat also holds for typological studies of the distribution of indefinites, as undertaken recently by Haspelmath (1993): it may be necessary to closely scrutinize prosodic properties of indefinites, before their distribution is analyzed.⁶

For grammaticalization theory, the main conclusion is that the recent changes involving *ooit* do not challenge the assumption of unidirectionality.

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⁶ See also Giannakidou (1993) for further illustration of this point.

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