PARTITIVITY, DEGREES AND POLARITY

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ABSTRACT

Universal quantification over parts of a whole may develop into a device for expressing high degree. In the present paper, this phenomenon is illustrated with a number of negative polarity constructions originating from partitive quantification: 1. the Dutch die hele 'ce entier' and 2. the pseudo-partitive alternation. The latter construction is described in some detail, a number of semantically-defined verb classes are identified which play a central role in the alternation, and a condition of gradability is proposed which restricts the alternation to verbs expressing a degree. In addition, it is shown that some so-called minimizers have a strong affinity with the pseudo-partitive construction. Many aspects of the analysis can be carried over to German or French.

RÉSUMÉ

La quantification universelle sur les parties du tout peut devenir une manière d'exprimer le (haut) degré. Dans cet article, ce phénomène est illustré à l'aide de deux constructions de polarité négative résultant de la quantification partitive: le néerlandais die hele 'ce entier' et l'alternation pseudo-partitive. Cette dernière construction est décrite en plus de détails. En plus, j'identifierai quelques classes de verbes définies par la sémantique qui jouent un rôle central dans cette alternation, et suggérerai une condition de 'gradabilité' qui limite l'alternation aux verbes exprimant un degré. Il est également montré que quelques expressions 'minimisantes' ont une grande affinité avec la construction pseudo-partitive. Il est intéressant de constater que beaucoup d'aspects de cette analyse peuvent être transférés du néerlandais à l'allemand et au français.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the area of quantification, one may distinguish between quantification over individuals (regular first-order quantification) and quantification over parts of individuals (mass or partitive quantification). Partitive quantification can be done in various ways: compositionally, by using partitive prepositions and mass quantifiers (cf. *all of me, some of the cake, none of the tea*), or lexically, in case the language has special partitive quantifiers. The latter type of mass quantification is exemplified by the Dutch quantifiers *heel* "whole, entire(ly)" and *half* ("half") :

(1) *a. heel Groningen*
    whole Groningen
    "all of Groningen"
  b. heel het dorp
    whole the village
    the entire village"
  c. half Groningen
    half Groningen
    "half of Groningen"

Often, quantifiers may be used to quantify over parts of individuals as well as the individuals themselves. This is the case, for example, with English *all*, cf. *all boys, all of the church.*

A striking property of mass quantification is the ease with which it may turn into a means for expressing degrees. Many adverbs originally quantifying over all parts of a whole develop into adverbs of degree (cf. also Klein 1998 on this point). This is clearly the case with *totally*. While *totally wet* or *totally naked* may be inter-preted as predicating of every part of some object or body that it is wet or naked, the same cannot really be said of *totally stupid*. When I call Jones totally stupid, I do not mean to say that every part of Jones is stupid, but rather, that he has the highest degree of stupidity. For adjectives such as *wet* or *naked*, which distribute over parts of individuals, there is a natural link between universal quantification over parts and high degree: the highest degree of wetness is reached when every part is wet, and the highest degree of nudity is reached when every part is naked. For predicates which do not distribute over parts, such as *stupid* (after all, when somebody is stupid, this is a property of the whole person, and not to be ascribed to any of his or her parts), this mapping from universality to high(est) degree may be extended metaphorically, and so adverbs such as *totally* have gained an additional use as degree adverbs in many languages.

Let me rephrase this in a more formal way. For quantification over parts of an individual i, we may assume a lattice $L = \langle A, \subseteq \rangle$, such that $i \in A$ and for every $x \in A$: $x \subseteq i$. For degrees, let us assume a closed interval [0;1], with 0 as the minimal degree and 1 as the maximal degree, and for all x in the interval: $0 \leq x \leq 1$. An order preserving transfer would map i, the least upper bound of A onto 1, the highest endpoint of the scale. We could then state the following. Let *wet(j,d)* denote that the individual j is wet to some contextually specified degree d. Then the statement (2)

(2) $\forall x \subseteq j$: *wet(x,d)*

may be interpreted as entailing (3):

(3) *wet(j,1)*

In this paper, I want to explore some of the connections between mass or partitive quantification and the expression of degree, focussing mainly on what I will term the Dutch *partitive alternations*. However, before doing so, I would like to briefly review another Dutch phenomenon, recently discussed by Marcel den Dikken (2001a,b), where partitive quantification and high degree expression come together.

2. A SPECIAL KIND OF NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEM: DUTCH *DIE HELE*

The Dutch string *die hele* "that entire/that whole", with *hele*, the inflected and adjectival variant of *heel*, can be used for quantification over parts of an individual, as in (4) below:

(4) *die hele vent was nat*
    that entire guy was wet

where the meaning simply is: every part of that guy was wet. However, the same expression may also be used as a negative-polarity item, occurring to the left of negation:

(5) *Ik ken die hele vent niet.*
    I know that entire guy not
    "I don't know that guy at all"

Note that the string *heel die vent*, normally equivalent with *die hele vent*, cannot be used in this way as a polarity item and only has the literal meaning "all of that guy."

Just as before in the case of adverbs such as *totally*, we may view this phenomenon as involving a transfer from universal quantification over parts to the expression of a high degree. However, due to the influence of

negation (scale reversal, cf. e.g. Fauconnier 1975), the least upper bound is now mapped onto the zero point, so that the semantic import of (5) will be as in (6):

(6) *Know(I,g,0)*

where *I* denotes the speaker and *g* the guy referred to.

Some of these ideas, in particular the need for quantifiers to be mapped onto degree scales, will be explored in the following sections of this paper in connection with the Dutch partitive alternations, in particular what I will call the pseudo-partitive alternation.

3. THE DUTCH PARTITIVE ALTERNATIONS

Dutch can be shown to have two types of verb alternations involving the partitive preposition *van* "of". Although my main interest will be with the second of these alternations, I find it useful to briefly discuss the other as well, for the purposes of comparison. By a verb alternation, I mean a diathesis alternation in the sense of Levin (1993).

3.1. Partitive Alternation A

As in other languages, Dutch has a very restricted group of verbs which may appear as transitives or as taking a prepositional phrase with *van* "of" instead of the direct object:

(7)   *V NP ≈ V van NP*
     (a)   Jan at de kaas   - Jan at van de kaas
             Jan ate the cheese - Jan ate of the cheese
     (b)   De kat dronk de melk - De kat dronk van de melk
             The cat drank the milk - The cat drank of the milk

Among the few words belonging to this class are *eten* "eat", *drinken* "drink", *nemen* "take" and *snoepen* "to eat (said of candy and sweets)". To indicate that this particular alternation is not restricted to Dutch, I give English, German, and French versions of Genesis 3, verse 6, with the relevant part in boldface:

   (c) And when the woman saw that the tree was good for
      food and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to
      *be desired to make one wise, she **took of the fruit** thereof, and*
      did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.
   (d) Und das Weib schaute an, daß von dem Baum gut zu essen wäre
      und daß er lieblich anzusehen und ein lustiger Baum wäre,

*weil er klug machte; und **sie nahm von der Frucht** und aß und gab ihrem Mann auch davon, und er aß.*

*(e) La femme vit que l'arbre était bon à manger et agréable à la vue, et qu'il était précieux pour ouvrir l'intelligence; elle **prit de son fruit**, et en mangea; elle en donna aussi à son mari, qui était auprès d'elle, et il en mangea.*

To be fair, though, one should say that the alternation is no longer current in English, where it has a distinctly archaic flavor. A striking property of the partitive alternation is that it obeys the so-called Partitive Constraint:

(8) *Partitive Constraint (Barwise and Cooper 1981, Hoeksema, ed., 1996)*

*The nominal constituent following the partitive preposition must be definite or specific indefinite: one of the boys, one of us, one of several boys, *one of any boys, *one of boys.*

This is illustrated by the following example, where we see that a bare noun may not follow the partitive preposition:

(9) **De kat dronk van melk (cf. 8b above)*
The cat drank from milk

The other type of alternation, which I will call Alternation B, or the Pseudo-partitive alternation, not only differs from type A in the kind of verbs that are involved, but in other respects as well, such as the applicability of the Partitive Constraint.

3.2. Partitive Alternation B (or Pseudopartitive alternation)

Whereas the earlier partitive alternation was restricted to transitive verbs, we will see that type B, or the pseudopartitive alternation, not only involves transitive but also some intransitive verbs. In the case of transitive verbs, the direct object is replaced by an indefinite pronoun and a prepositional phrase, in the case of intransitive verbs, the subject is replaced by an indefinite pronoun and a prepositional phrase.

(10) *(i)   V NP ≈ V indef. pronoun van NP*
(ii)   NP V ≈ Indef. pronoun V van NP

An example of a transitive verb involved in the alternation is *geloven* "believe." In addition to the regular transitive use, as illustrated in (11a), it may also be used in the pseudopartitive construction (cf. (11b):

(11) *a. Ik geloof dat verhaal niet.*
I believe that story   not

"I don't believe that story"
  b. *Ik geloof niets van dat verhaal*
   I believe nothing of that story
   "I don't believe that story at all"

An example of an intransitive verb involved in the alternation is *deugen* "to be OK."

  (12) *a. Dat verhaal deugt niet*
     That story be-OK not
     "That story is not correct"
    b. *Er deugt niets van dat verhaal*
      There be-OK nothing of that story
      "That story is completely wrong"

The Partitive Constraint does not hold for the pseudopartitive construction, and so bare nouns can be found here after *van*. Compare example (13a) below, which contains an instance of the pseudopartitive construction, with sentence (13b), which has an occurrence of a regular partitive noun phrase as the object of *herkennen* "recognize":

  (13) *a. Ik snap niets van recursieve functies*
      I understand nothing of recursive functions
      "I don't understand recursive functions at all"
     b. Ik herkende een van *(de) recursieve functies
      I recognized one of *(the) recursive functions

Just as in the English translation, the direct object in (13b) strictly requires the presence of the determiner after the partitive preposition.

   A point worth making is that the indefinite pronoun and the prepositional group introduced by *van* do not have to form a syntactic constituent. This is evident from the joint testimony of various tests for constituency, such as topicalization and WH-clefting. Example (14a) below shows that the string consisting of the indefinite pronoun and the prepositional group does not topicalize as a unit, while example (14b) shows that it cannot be the focus constituent of a WH-cleft either:

  (14) *a. *Niets van recursieve functies begrijp ik.*
      Nothing of recursive functions understand I
    b. *Wat ik begrijp is niets van recursieve functies
      What I understand is nothing of recursive functions

I therefore assume that the direct object or subject is replaced by a prepositional phrase, while the indefinite pronoun forms a separate

complement of the verb, more specifically a measure phrase. Measure phrases are generally indefinite (cf. e.g. De Jong 1987).

Another point of even greater importance is the fact that the pseudo-partitive alternation, like verb alternations in general, is lexically restricted. Not all transitive verbs may undergo the alternation and appear in the pseudopartitive construction, nor may all intransitive verbs do so. In order to study the lexical restrictions in some detail, I collected several thousand natural occurrences of the pseudopartitive construction from written sources and classified them in a database along a number of dimensions, one of these being the verb involved. From this investigation, it appeared clearly that the alternation is not merely lexically-restricted, but also typical for certain semantic domains. If a verb undergoes the alternation, then chances are that its synonyms are likewise subject to the alternation. This sensitivity to lexical semantics is typical of many types of verb alternations (cf. Levin 1993, and the references cited there). Among the Dutch verbs, a large class consists of verbs of cognition such as the ones meaning 'to understand', 'to mean', 'believe.' However, it does not appear possible to find a semantic characterization for the entire class of verbs that are involved. Rather, the class can be subdivided into a number of coherent, well-defined groups, but the groups themselves do not share a recognizable set of semantic properties. In addition to transitive and intransitive verbs, it appears that some predicative adjectives may undergo the alternation, as well as some modal infinitives and a number of verbal idioms. A list of the most frequently used verbs, adjectives and verbal idioms in the pseudopartitive construction is to be found in (15) below (taken from a total of 87 predicates):

(15) *Most frequently used predicates in a corpus of 2262 occurrences of the pseudopartitive construction with the preposition* van.

Transitive   *Intransitive*

begrijpen "understand"   *blijken "turn out"*
bespeuren "notice"   *deugen "be good"*
geloven "believe"   *kloppen "be correct"*
snappen "understand"   *komen "come"*
menen "mean"   *over(blijven) "remain"*
merken "notice"   *terechtkomen "turn out"*
verstaan "understand"   *worden "become"*
zich aantrekken van "care"   *aan "true"*
terechtbrengen "achieve"   *heel blijven "remain intact"*
kunnen "can"   *waar "true"*
heel laten "leave intact"   *bekend "known"*

Modal Infinitives

> *te bekennen "to be noticed"*
> *te bemerken "id"*
> *te bespeuren "id"*
> *te merken   "id"*
> *te zien   "to be seen"*

The fact that both transitive and intransitive verbs are involved, and that for the former, the alternation concerns the direct object, while for the latter it concerns the subject, might prompt the suggestion that the phenomenon is related to the notion *ergativity* (Perlmutter 1978, Burzio 1986). According to Perlmutter, some intransitive verbs (the ones he terms *unaccusative*) have subjects that are underlyingly objects. The generalization could then be that the pseudopartitive alternation affects underlying objects only. However, this possibility is highly doubtful in view of the fact that standard tests for unaccusativity do not identify all intransitive verbs undergoing the alternation as unaccusative. Besides clearly unaccusative verbs such as *terechtkomen* (which forms its perfect with the verb *zijn* "to be", rather than *hebben* "to have") we also find clearly unergative verbs such as *deugen* "be good" (which forms its perfect with *hebben* rather than *zijn*).

3.3. The Gradability Condition on the Pseudopartitive

Rather than going over the above list in more detail, I will show the effect of lexical restrictions in a number of lexical domains such as modal verbs and verbs of cognition.

First, consider the class of modal verbs. As in German, but quite unlike English, Dutch modal verbs can be used transitively, with direct objects such as *dat* "that" which may denote actions, rather than objects or persons. Cf. (16a) below:

> (16) *a. Ik kan dat niet*
> *I can that not*
> *"I cannot do that/I am incapable of it"*

> *b. Ik kan er   niets   van*
> *I   can there nothing of*
> *"I cannot do that at all/I am totally incapable of   it"*

Example (16b) shows the possibility of undergoing the pseudopartitive alternation. However, when we compare *kunnen* with the modal verb *mogen* "may, be allowed to", we see that the latter does not appear in the pseudo-partitive construction:

> (17) *a.   Ik mag dat niet*

> *I may that not*
> "I may not do that"
> b.   *Ik mag er   niets   van.*
> *I may there nothing of*

Next, consider the cognition verb *begrijpen* "to grasp, to understand" and compare it with another verb denoting a cognitive state, *zoeken* "to seek, to look for". As we see illustrated in (18), the former may undergo the pseudo-partitive alternation, whereas the latter verb may not:

(18) *a. Ik begrijp   dat niet*
    I understand that not
    "I don't understand that"
  b. Ik begrijp   er   niets   van
    I understand there nothing of
    "I don't understand a thing of it"
(19) *a. Ik zoek dat niet*
    I seek that not
    "I am not looking for that"
  *b.*Ik zoek er   niets van.*
    I seek there nothing of

The above differences between *kunnen* "can" and *mogen* "may", and between *begrijpen* "understand" and *zoeken* "seek," are not arbitrary, but predictable, once we realize the importance of the degree nature of the pseudopartitive construction, and the gradability this requires on the part of the verb. As Bolinger (1972: 160) already noted, verbs, just like adjectives, can be divided into gradable and nongradable items, and the way to tell which is which is by studying the adverbs of degree which accompany them. In Dutch, one of the adverbs of degree in use with verbs is *goed* "good, well", an expression which, just like *well* in English, or *bien* in French, can be used both as a manner adverb (meaning "in a good way") and, with verbs, as a degree modifier (cf. Kennedy and McNally 1999 for a discussion of English *well*).

When we compare *begrijpen* and *zoeken* with regard to their effect on *goed*, we see an immediate and striking difference.

(20)   Gradability Condition

Verbs undergoing the pseudopartitive alternation must be gradable, i.e. combinable with adverbs of degree, such as *goed*.

a.   weinig begrijpen van   =   niet goed begrijpen
    little   understand of   not well understand
b.   weinig zoeken van ≠   niet goed zoeken

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		little	search	of		not well search
	c.	weinig	kunnen	van =		niet goed kunnen
		little	can	of		not well can
	d.	weinig	mogen	van ≠		niet goed mogen
		little	may	of		not well may

The equalities and inequalities in (20) are meant to show two things: the inherent degree nature of the pseudopartitive and the nongradable character of verbs such as *search* and *may*. If I understand little of a problem, the degree of my understanding it is a low one. If, on the other hand, I understand much of it, I can be said to have a high degree of understanding. The gradable nature of *understand* or its Dutch counterpart *begrijpen* is evident from the fact that *niet goed begrijpen* "not understand well" refers to the degree of understanding, not necessarily to the manner of understanding. On the other hand, *zoeken* "search", does not appear to be gradable. The combination *niet goed zoeken* "not seek well" can only point at the manner of searching, not to some degree of search intensity.

A similar point can be made regarding the modals *kunnen* "can" and *mogen* "may." Ability is inherently gradable, whereas permission is not. Hence it makes sense to combine *kunnen* with the degree adverb *goed*, whereas *mogen* can't be modified by this adverb:

(21) *Ik kan/*mag dat goed*
      I can/ may that well*
      *"I am quite capable at it/*I am very allowed to do it"*

To bring out more clearly the difference between the degree and the manner reading of *goed*, we can even add a true manner adverb:

(22) *Ik kan goed slecht acteren*
      I can well badly act
      "I am good at acting badly"

(23) *Jij kunt goed goed luisteren*
      you can well well listen
      "You are good at listening well"

As the examples in (24) are intended to show, the gradability condition is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. Thus the verb *hate*, which is gradable, since hatred comes in many degrees (cf. (24c) below), does not appear in the pseudopartitive construction. Other commonly used gradable verbs which do not appear there are *willen* "want", *meevallen* "be better than expected," *tegenvallen* "be worse than expected."

(24) a. *Ik haat existentialisme*

  I hate existentialism
b. **Ik haat er niets van*
  I hate there nothing of
c. *Ik haat existentialisme zeer/een beetje*
  I hate existentialism much/a little

3.4. The Polarity-Sensitive Character of the Pseudopartitive

A striking characteristic of the pseudopartitive construction is its strong association with nonaffirmative environments, in particular negation. While this association is not absolute in most verbs, we see a clear and undeniable preference for negative environments over positive ones. This is illustrated by the data in table (25) below, where three of the most common verbs in the construction are compared. If the list of environments appears larger in the case of *begrijpen* than it does for the other two verbs, this is no doubt to be ascribed to the greater frequency of the former, in combination with the paucity of certain environments.

(25) *Negative Association of the Pseudopartitive Alternation*

  a. *begrijpen* *"understand" (N=363)*
    negation *85%*
    conditional *2%*
    question *2%*
    little *5%*
    without *1%*
    affirmative *4%*

  b. *kunnen* *"can, be able to (do)" (N=61)*
    negation *88%*
    little *5%*
    affirmative *7%*

  c. *geloven* *"believe" (N=152)*

    negation *97%*
    question *1%*
    little *2%*
    affirmative *-*

Note that in the above table, the verb *geloven* "believe" stands out as being more strictly sensitive to polarity than the other two. I do not know why this is so. Another point worth remarking is that *geloven* is polysemous. One may believe a person or a proposition or story. Only in the latter case is there good evidence for gradability. One may believe a certain proposition to a certain degree (hence the possibility of degree adverbs such as *strongly,*

firmly, deeply, thoroughly etc. - for some reason, *well* is not available as a degree modifier) but not a person. Compare:

(26) a. *I strongly believe that there is life outside our galaxy.*
 b. **I strongly believe you.*

For the same general reason, only the nonpersonal use of *geloven* undergoes the pseudopartitive alternation. Compare (27) with (28):

(27) a. *Ik geloof dat verhaal absoluut niet.*
 I believe that story absolute not
 "I don't believe that story at all
 b. *Ik geloof niets van dat verhaal.*
 I believe nothing of that story
 "I don't believe a word of that story"
(28) a. *Ik geloof je absoluut niet.*
 I believe you absolutely not
 "I don't believe you at all"
 b. **Ik geloof niets van je.*
 I believe nothing of you
 "I don't believe a word of you"

I should stress that the pseudopartitive with its polarity-sensitivity is not restricted to Dutch. German has clear cases of an alternation involving *von* (the German counterpart of Dutch *van*), just as French has one involving the preposition *de* or the partitive clitic *y*. For instance, if one looks up the string "y comprends" in a search engine for the Internet, most instances will be negative (typically like those in (29a)), a few will be conditional or interrogative (as in (29b)), and hardly any are positive (like (29c)).

(29) a. *Je n'y comprends rien/pas grand-chose*
 I not of-it understand nothing/not much
 "I do not at all/much understand it"
 b. *Si tu y comprends quelque chose, ..*
 If you of-it understand anything
 "If you understand a word of it, ..."
 c. *?J'y comprends beaucoup*
 I of-it understand much
 "I understand it well"

In English, the pseudopartitive appears to be in very limited use. With verbs such as *believe* or *understand*, but not for example *say,* it is possible to use the minimizing noun phrase *a word* in a manner closely related to the Dutch

examples (as has been shown already in the English translations of (27) and (29)). However, with regular indefinite pronouns, the result is usually awkward:

(30) a.   *Do you understand anything of it?
      b.   *I understand nothing of it.

3.5. Pseudopartitive Alternation with AAN

So far, I have only considered cases where the preposition marking the pseudopartitive PP is the default preposition *van* "of." As we will see in this section, there is a related alternation involving another grammatical pre-position, *aan*, which, among other things, is also the marker for the recipient in "dative" constructions. Usually, the verbs taking *aan* in the pseudopartitive construction differ in their lexical semantics from the ones selecting *van*, but there are a few verbs which may select either preposition, with little difference in meaning.

(31) a.   Dat verandert de situatie niet
           that changes the situation not
           "That does not change the situation"
     b.   Dat verandert niets aan de situatie
           that changes nothing to the situation
           "That does not change the situation at all"
(32) a.   Hij deugt niet.
           he OK-s not
           "He is no good"
     b.   Er   deugt niets   aan hem.
           there OK-s nothing to him
           "He is absolutely worthless/no good"

     c.   Er   deugt niets   van hem.
           there OK-s nothing of him
           "He is absolutely worthless/no good"

There are fewer verbs taking *aan* than there are taking *van*. In (33), a list of the most frequent verbs to be found with *aan* in the pseudopartitive is given, which will give some idea of the lexical classes involved. As you will see, some classes stand out, such as verbs of change. I have added the verbs *doen* "do" and *hebben* "have", which are unexpected here, since they are normally not gradable. However, in the pseudopartitive, these verbs have a special, gradable meaning (cf. the example in (34) below).

(33) *List of verbs taking aan in the pseudopartitive*

Transitive	*Intransitive*
afdoen "remove from"	*deugen "be OK"*
toevoegen "add"	*kloppen "be correct"*
veranderen "change"	*gelogen "lied, untrue"*
doen "do"	*verloren "lost"*
hebben "have"	*zich gelegen laten liggen "to be concerned with"*

(34) *Daar hebben we niets aan.*
there have   we nothing to
"That's no use to us at all"

(35) *Daar verander je weinig aan.*
there change you little   to
"There is little you can change about it.

4.   MINIMIZERS IN THE PSEUDOPARTITIVE CONSTRUCTION

"Minimizers" are expressions denoting minimal quantities or degrees and can be used as negative polarity items in many languages (cf. Pott 1833, Schmerling 1971, Bolinger 1972, Horn 1989, Hoeksema 2001, Postma 2001). Typical for these expressions is the scalar nature of their interpretation (Fauconnier 1975). For example, if some reader does not understand a syllable of what I am saying, then we may infer that he or she does not understand me at all. Hence we infer from a claim about an endpoint on some scale a much stronger claim about all points on the scale. Likewise, if you did not hesitate for a second, then by implication (a second being a minimal stretch of time) you did not hesitate at all. Thus the implications associated with minimizers such as *a word, a syllable, an iota, a second, a drop, a speck, a moment* etc., are comparable to those associated with superlatives such as *the slightest inkling, the least interest*.

When studying minimizers in their context, it is hard not to notice certain recurring patterns, such as a predilection for the pseudopartitive construction. In (36) below, some typical Dutch examples are presented. Note that I am assuming here that taboo terms also fall under the general heading of minimizers, denoting not necessarily items of minimal size or importance, but endpoints on a metaphorical evaluative scale. For instance, in Dutch one might say, instead of "I don't understand a word of it" something meaning "I don't understand a testicle of it."

(36) a. *Ik weet er geen bal van.*
I know there no ball of
"I don't know a thing about it"

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> b. We verstaan   er   geen woord van.
>   *we understand there no   word of*
>   "We don't understand a word of it"
> c. Ik verander er geen syllabe aan.
>   *I change there no syllable to*
>   "I am not changing a syllable [of it]"

Quite a few of these minimizers are now entirely idiomatic, and their original meaning no longer available to the average native speaker without an etymological dictionary, e.g. *zier*, originally a name for a tiny worm, now only in use as a minimizer (cf. Hoeksema 2001). Equally opaque, but of fairly recent origin (the oldest occurrence I have been able to track down dates from the mid-1970's), is the use of the noun *hout* "(piece of) wood" as a minimizer:

> (37) a. Hij kan er   geen hout van
>   *he can there no wood of*
>   "He is totally incapable (at it)"
> b. Hij begrijpt   er geen hout van.
>   *he understands there no wood of*
>   "He does not understand it at all"
> c. *Hij zei/deed/verstond geen hout.
>   *he said/did/understood no wood*

What is interesting about this particular minimizer is that it appears to be in use *only* with the pseudopartitive construction. In the table below, I present some corpus data regarding this item. Note that this preference is not due to some lexical-semantic preference for certain types of verbs, since a wide variety of verbs can be found with this item, including *kloppen* "be correct", *deugen* "be good," *begrijpen* "understand," and *bakken* "bake" (the latter verb has a metaphorical meaning "achieve" when used in the pseudopartitive construction), making it difficult to find a common semantic denominator.

> (38) *HOUT (N=105)*
>   *94%   in the pseudopartitive construction with* van
>   *3%   in the pseudopartitive construction with* aan
>   *3%   as a measure complement elsewhere*
>   *0%   as a regular object or subject*

By "regular object or subject" I mean that the expression can be replaced by something other than an indefinite pronoun. This is not possible in the pseudopartitive constructions or with other verbs requiring measure complements. When we compare the above data with the distribution of other minimizers, we see considerable variation. No other minimizer is so

strict in requiring pseudopartitive contexts. The more opaque taboo words *donder* "thunder" and *flikker* "faggot" tend to shun uses as regular subjects or objects, presumably because they lack any semantic features (apart from nonanimacy), whereas more transparant ones, such as *woord* "word" are commonly used as a regular subject or object with verbs of communication.

(39) *DONDER "thunder"   N=200*
> *21%   in the pseudopartitive construction with* van
> *5%   in the pseudopartitive construction with* aan
> *71%   as a measure phrase elsewhere*
> *3%   as a regular subject or object*

(40) *FLIKKER "faggot" N=80*

> *11%   in the pseudopartitive construction with van*
> *1%   in the pseudopartitive construction with aan*
> *70%   as a measure phrase elsewhere*
> *18%   as a regular subject or object*

(41) *WOORD "word" N=1248*

> *12%   in the pseudopartitive construction with van*
> *0.1% in the pseudopartitive construction with aan*
> *17%   as a measure phrase elsewhere*
> *71%   as a regular subject or object*

The behavior of *hout* can be seen as independent evidence for the linguistic reality of the pseudopartitive construction: if this minimizer selects this construction as its context, then clearly it must have a basis in reality.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Universal quantification over parts of a whole may readily develop into a device for expressing high degree. When this happens, a restriction to negative contexts may emerge. Many negative polarity items are employed for just this purpose, to express degree, either by emphasizing and strengthening (cf. Kadmon and Landman 1993, Israel 1996) or by mitigating and downtoning (Israel 1996). In this paper, several cases have been presented of negative polarity constructions originating from partitive quantification: 1. the Dutch *die hele X* "that entire X" construction, and 2. the pseudopartitive verb alternation. This verb alternation is described in some detail and contrasted with another verb alternation. I have argued for a lexical-semantic condition of gradability which restricts the set of verbs that may undergo the alternation. I have also shown that so-called minimizers (nouns expressing a minimal quantity or measure) may have a strong affinity with the pseudopartitive. It is assumed that many aspects of the analysis can be carried over to other languages such as German and French, but a more

extensive cross-linguistic study of the phenomenon still remains to be carried out.

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