Failed grammaticalisation of a quantificational construction.

Changes in the use of *syn leven* 'ever' in Frisian between 1550 and 1800.

Abstract

This article investigates the rise and fall of the quantified expression syn leven *(lit. his life)* 'ever' between 1550 and 1800 in West Frisian on the basis of the Frisian Language Corpus. *Phonological and syntactic evidence is presented in order to argue that the expression was borrowed from Dutch. Occurrences of this construction are syntactically classified by the type of syntactic context in which they are found. Its distribution is compared to that of the near synonyms and rival expressions* ea *and* oait *'ever, which turn out to have a broader context of usage'. Furthermore, it is argued that the construction failed to undergo further grammaticalisation for syntactic and sociolinguistic reasons. As a result, it failed to become the unmarked way of expressing the semantic content 'ever'.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Outline

This article investigates some of the changes that took place in the use of the quantifying construction *syn leven* (lit. his life) 'ever' in Frisian between 1550 and 1800 in West Frisian. A global description will be presented of the variation involved in its usage. As will be seen, some of the variation targets the lexical shape of the quantifier. The question is discussed why the construction didn't grammaticalise into a single word, in competition with the near

synonyms *ea* and *oait*. Independent evidence from Sealter Frisian is provided in support of our analysis. In addition, it is claimed that sociologuistic and syntactic reasons conspired in preventing the grammaticalisation of *syn leven*. The outline of this article is as follows.

- Section 2 deals with the question how Frisian acquired this construction.

- Section 3 charts the syntactic distribution of this quantifying construction and compares it to the distribution of the unmarked quantifiers *ea* and *oait*, the near synonyms for *syn leven*.

- Section 4 investigates the question why the construction *syn leven* didn't grammaticalise to a single word.

- Section 5 investigates the question why the construction failed to become the unmarked way of expressing the semantic content 'ever'.

The proposed analysis of the construction's history is multidisciplinary in its scope, combining insights from syntax, semantics, phonology and sociolinguistics.

1.2. Data

Our data are taken from West Frisian. Frisian is a language family consisting of three minority languages: North Frisian (on the west coast in Germany near the Danish border), Sealter Frisian (in Saterland in the North West of Germany, close to Oldenburg) and West Frisian. West Frisian is a minority language spoken in the province of Fryslân in the North of The Netherlands. In the early Middle Ages, Frisian was spoken in the coastal area between the river Weser (near the city of Bremen) and the IJ (near Amsterdam). For socio-political reasons, part of the population switched to dialects of German and Dutch in the course of history, which explains why Sealter Frisian is separated from West Frisian by an area in which Low Saxon is spoken. Sealter Frisian is the only descendant from East Frisian, that was spoken in Germany west of the river Weser. North Frisian came into existence after two

waves of migration in the 8th and 11th centuries from the area in Germany where East Frisian was spoken (Århammar 2001). For more information about the history of the three branches of the Frisian language family, see the relevant articles in Munske's (2001, ed.) *Handbook of Frisian Studies*.

Our data stem from the period 1550-1800. This period used to be referred to as Middle Frisian, but nowadays the term Early Modern Frisian tends to be preferred; on the periodisation of Frisian, see De Haan (2001) and Versloot (2004). The source of our data is the Language Corpus Frisian, a corpus of which a beta version is available on the Internet.[1] It consists of written Frisian from between 1300 and 2000 as well as a sprinkling of runic Frisian.

The Corpus Early Modern Frisian (1550-1800) contains about a million tokens. It has been tagged for all types of agreement and the words have been brought under lemma's as well. Various spellings of the same word can be inspected; certain collocational properties of especially verbs have been made explicit; and various members of the same inflectional paradigm can be researched. Furthermore, information as to the source is available, such as author, date, dialect and so on. In short, the subcorpus has been extensively annotated with syntactic, semantic and bibliographical information. It contains all the early Modern Frisian which has survived the ruin of time.

1.3. Negative polarity

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[1] The address is: http://www.fryske-akademy.nl/tdb/.

The phrase *syn leven* is a negative polarity item or a free choice item, depending on the definition which is adhered to.[2] There is terminological disputation among semanticists about the definition of these two terms (cf. Giannakidou 2001, 2002 and the references given there), which need not concern us here. Negative polarity items tend to occur in negative sentences, as in (1a) below:

(1) a. Nobody ever heard of them again

     b. * I ever heard of them again

In (1a), the negative constituent in subject position, *nobody*, licenses the negative polarity item *ever*. These examples are straightforward, but negative polarity items also occur in sentence types which cannot directly be characterised as negative, such as rhetorical questions:

(2) a. Dick running for president? Who ever heard of him?

     b. Dick running for president? Nobody ever heard of him.

The negative character of rhetorical questions can be brought out by a paraphrase as in (b) above. The formal definition of 'negative' is a subject of ongoing debate among semanticists (see Van der Wouden 1994, Zwarts 1995, Giannikidou 2001, 2002 and others). They attempt

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[2] Negative polarity items and/or free choice items were studied in Fauconnier (1975), Ladusaw (1979), Van der Wouden (1994), Zwarts (1981, 1995), among others. Hoeksema (1983, 1986), Hoeksema & Klein (1995) and De Swart (1991) drew attention to the fact that words of exclusion such as *than, as, before, if, deny that,* and relative pronouns preceded by a superlative introduce sentences in which negative polarity items may be found. Goldberg (2006:171-173, 178-181) notes that polarity is a constructional property in the case of Subject-Aux Inversion in English.

to find a definition such that it exhaustively covers the syntactic contexts in which negative polarity items are found. This set of contexts may vary from language to language and from negative polarity item to negative polarity item.

Free choice items have the property that they can occur in certain non-negative contexts, such as the word "any" in the following example:

(3) a. Pick any card you want

  b. Anything he does he does well

Sometimes, the same lexical item can be used either as a negative polarity item or as a free choice item, as happens to be the case with the word "any". (3b) illustrates that a free choice item can be very close in meaning to a universal quantifier such as *every*.[3] No stand is taken here on the issue of the formal definition of these items. For the sake of convenience, the construction being studied here is referred to as being negatively polar. Important to the research reported here is the fact that such items show a restricted distribution, occurring only in certain syntactic environments while being excluded in others. Thus section 3 charts the set of syntactic contexts in which the phrase *syn leven* is found. Section 2 below argues that the construction entered the Frisian language as a loan from Dutch.

2. How did Frisian acquire the construction?

The quantifying construction *syn leven* consists of the noun *leven* 'life' preceded by a 3SG masculine possessive pronoun. Interestingly, the construction comes in two forms. It can either be built around the noun *leven* or around the noun *libben*.

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[3] Haspelmath (1993:369) notes that free choice items are regularly a diachronic source for universal quantifiers.

The noun *leven* exhibits phonological characteristics of Dutch. The letter v, here representing the phoneme /v/, does not occur in intervocalic position in native words in Early Modern Frisian. West Germanic /β/, a voiced bilabial fricative, became /v/ in Old Frisian (1250-1550) in intervocalic position and was absorbed in the preceding vowel, creating diphthongs or long vowels. In geminates, West Germanic /b/ survived after degemination in examples like *libben*. As a result of these developments (from Siebs 1901:1266ff), intervocalic /v/ was absent in native words in Frisian. This pattern was sometimes obscured by the operation of analogy and by the introduction of loanwords which were sometimes slow to adapt to Frisian phonology due to the influence of Dutch. Thus there are a few Early Modern Frisian cases in which an intervocalic /v/ is found such as *leven, wiven 'wives, women'*. These can plausibly be argued to be due to Dutch influence for the following two reasons. These are homophonous to Early Modern Dutch *leven, wiven,* and they have competitors such as *libben* and the diphthongized variant *wijuen*, which do exhibit Frisian vocalism.

The following facts can be gleaned from a study of the frequency of *syn leven* and *syn libben* in the Corpus Early Modern Frisian. The construction with the meaning 'ever' occurs 64 times.[4] The numbers for *syn leven* versus *syn libben* are as follows:

(4)

POSS PRONOUN + leven 'ever'   :   28 x

POSS PRONOUN + libben 'ever' :   36 x

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[4] Some sources occur twice or more in the Corpus Early Modern Frisian, because reprints, which may differ slightly from the original, have been included. The numbers have been corrected so that two or more identical occurrences (spelling apart) count for one occurrence.

However, the nouns *leven / libben* can of course also be used outside this construction in their literal meaning 'life' as in sentences like 'She has a wonderful life'. A count was also made of how often *leven* and *libben* are found in the corpus if they are not used in the quantificational *ever* construction:

(5)

leven 'life' : 0 x

libben 'life' : 409 x

What this shows is that *syn leven* 'ever' was indeed borrowed from Dutch. However, the word *leven* 'life' as such was not borrowed, but rather the quantificational construction *syn leven* as a whole, tied to the meaning 'ever'. Apparently, this didn't affect the distribution of the Frisian lexical item *libben* in its meaning 'life'. The fact that a construction as a whole got borrowed with a specific semantic interpretation is a case in point for frameworks like construction grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006, Verhagen 2007, among others) and cognitive grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991, among others), which take constructions to be basic elements of grammar having psychological reality.

What then is the relation between the two constructions *syn leven* and *syn libben*? The chronology of the two variants throws light on this question:

(6)   Oldest attestations

Syn leven: 1614, 1641, 1675[5]

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[5] One occurrence of *syn leven* can in fact be found before 1550 in a text containing annals and memories of Edo Jongama. It can be dated with certainty to the time span between 1513-1536 (Carasso-Kok, 1981:251, in her overview of medieval chronicles and hagiographies). The text has been published by Gerbenzon (1965:68-75).

Syn libben: 1671, 1675

These facts point to a scenario in which *syn leven* was first borrowed from Dutch. Later some speakers of Frisian brought it in line with Frisian phonology by changing the word *leven* for *libben*. However, both forms continued to exist side by side, and there are even examples of one and the same writer using either construction.

Frisian, being a minority language, should not be viewed as a monolithic entity. It rather involves a spectrum of which one end is 'Frisian' and of which the other end shades off into Dutch. Hence there may be competition between two forms of the same expression, one being more Frisian (*syn libben*), the other being more Dutch (*syn leven*). Such a state of affairs is well-known from creole languages, which also exhibit a spectrum of which one end shades off into a standard language. The same happens with dialects, where dialect-specific words without cognate in the dominant language compete with and are replaced by words which can be derived from the standard language by applying certain phonemic equivalence rules.

The construction *syn leven* thus came into existence as a borrowing from Dutch, which was later given a Frisian jacket to bring it into line with Frisian phonology, thus creating the variant *syn libben*. In the next section, the distribution of the construction in Early Modern Frisian will be examined in detail. The use of *syn leven* will be set off against that of the near synonyms *ea* and *oait*.

3. Syntactic distribution

The text is riddled with Dutchisms, which makes it doubtful whether this occurrence is characteristic of Frisian. Because of this doubt, this occurrence has not been included in the frequency counts. If it is accepted, then the time lag between *leven* and *libben* is even larger than suggested in the text.

Negative polarity items have a restricted syntactic distribution, and this holds true of *syn leven / libben* as well. In Early Modern Frisian, all occurrences of this construction occur in the following syntactic environments:

- Clauses with sentence negation

- Rhetorical questions

- Comparative relatives

- Exclamatives

- Following the universal quantifier *all*

An example of each of these construction types is given below:

(7) Clause with negation

Goenacht   mijn lieve Hoonne, mijn leven sioegh   ick   dy   neat weer

good.night   my   dear dog   my   life   see   I   you   not   again

'Good night, my sweet dog, never in my life will I see you again.'

(8) Rethorical question

Wa het   sijn   libben   herd fen   socke   botte   dingen

who   has   his   life   heard of   such   terrible   things

'Who ever heard of such terrible things?'

(9) Comparative relative

It is zok   maol praat az ik mijn   leven heard   hab!

it is such   crazy talk   as I my   life   heard   have

'It is such crazy talk as I never heard before'

(10) Exclamative

Nou   hab   ik mijn leven! … hoe   bijtinke dij   Minschen   't!

now   have   I   my   life …   how   think   those people   it

'Well upon my life! … How do those people think of it!'

(11) Following the universal quantifier *all*

Wa   iensen   stelt   Is all   zijn   leuen ien   tieeff

who   once   steals   is all   his   life   a   thief

'Whoever steals once is a thief for all his life.'

It is not surprising that a negatively polar construction like *syn leven / libben* is found in sentences with a negation. Correspondingly, it is absent in plain, affirmative sentences. Rhetorical questions are questions which imply a negative answer. In that sense, it is not surprising either that negative polarity items may occur in them. There are also a few examples of the construction occurring in comparative relatives. This may seem surprising, but note that the clause in (9) has a negative implication which may be paraphrased as: 'I never heard such crazy talk in all my life.' For the fourth category, exclamatives, it is not obvious how to establish a link with negation. These exclamatives express a strong emotion of surprise; possibly, the link with negation is a negative implication like 'I would not have expected this', but this is not straightforward.[6] In the fifth category, the construction occurs as the complement to the universal quantifier *all*. This is not a syntactic environment that is intuitively negative. However, formal theories of semantics such as Zwarts (1981) consider this to be a negative environment.

The table below lists the frequencies of the five types of syntactic environment cross-classified for *syn leven* and *syn libben*.

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[6] According to Abels (2004), exclamatives can have the same denotation as questions, while differing with respect to the presuppositions that are associated with them, and it is possible to treat exclamatives as rhetorical questions.

(12) Table:

	syn leven	*syn libben*	**totals**
clauses with negation	19	16	35
rhetorical questions	4	15	19
comparative relatives	2	1	3
exclamatives	2	1	3
after universal quantifier	1	3	4
totals	28	36	64

Both variants occur in the same types of syntactic environments. The differences in the numbers are not significant, except for the rhetorical questions. *Syn libben* occurs significantly more often in rhetorical questions than *syn leven*.[7] It is not clear why this difference should exist between the two variants. If it is true that *syn libben* is 'more Frisian' than *syn leven*, although both belong to the Frisian language, then the use of rhetorical questions could be more characteristic of (spoken) Frisian than of Frisian that has been influenced by (written) Dutch.

In the next section, we will return to the issue of the construction's syntactic behaviour in order to explain why it didn't grammaticalise so as to become the unmarked way of expressing the semantic content 'ever'.

4. Why the construction *syn leven / libben* didn't undergo further grammaticalisation

4.1. Relative lack of lexical freezing

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[7] P = 2,7 % by Fischer's Exact Test, http://www.langsrud.com/fisher.htm.

Grammaticalisation is a term that may have many meanings (Lehmann 2002:8ff). Following Lehmann (2002:17), grammaticalisation is taken to change analytic constructions into synthetic ones (cf. also Hopper & Traugott 2003:31). This can also be referred to as *morphologisation*. This section investigates the question whether the construction underwent morphologisation, and if so, to which extent.

The construction *syn leven / libben* consists of a possessive pronoun and a noun. The possessive pronoun agrees in person and number with the subject of the sentence in the majority of cases. Some examples are given below:

(13) The possessive pronoun agrees with the subject

(a)   1SG

   ick hie   t   oors mijn leven neat ljæuwd

   I had   it else my   life   not   believed

   'Otherwise, I would never have believed it.'

(b)   2SG

   du hefste   my   dijn leven soo   folle wille neat joon

   you have   me   your life so   much fun   net   given

   'You never gave me so much pleasure.'

(c)   3SG

   hij zoe   't zijn libben   net   dwaan!

   he   would   it his   life   not   do

   'He would never do it!'

(d)   1PL

   It   slynnen   kinne wy   uwz libben   næt ney litte

the self.spoil   can   we   our   life   net   after   let

'We can never refrain from spoiling ourselves.'

(e)   2PL

Ried   ij   t   soo   naet, soo   rijed   ij   t   Ion   leuen naet.

guess   you   it   so   not   then   guess   you   it   your   life   not

'If you can't guess it like this, you will never guess it.'

(f)   3PL

(No examples.)

It is not the case that there is always agreement with the subject. Of all 64 examples, there are 5 which exhibit lack of agreement. In those cases, the possessive pronoun is either 1SG or 3SG, whereas the subject has different features for person and number. The remaining 59 examples exhibit agreement of the possessive pronoun with the subject.

The significance of these facts is as follows. For a construction to grammaticalise into a word, its shape must be lexically fixed, but the construction under discussion is not. The possessive pronoun covaries with the subject. For the construction to become fixed, the possessive pronoun must be invariant. Interestingly, the examples with a non-agreeing possessive pronoun are all from the end of the 18th century. It seems then as if the construction shows a slight development towards grammaticalisation, as indicated by the occasional freezing of the (non-agreeing) pronoun. Another sign of tentative grammaticalisation is that the possessive pronoun is never separated from the noun *leven / libben* by an adjective. It is otherwise quite normal for adjectives to intervene between a possessive pronoun and a noun within a noun phrase. The fact that this doesn't happen with syn *leven / libben* is a sign of grammaticalisation.

Lexical freezing of the syntactic construction is a precondition for morphologisation as a single word. The lack of lexical freezing of the possessive pronoun neatly correlates with the failure of the construction to grammaticalise into a single word. The split between *leven* and *libben* provides a further obstacle to grammaticalisation, on the plausible assumption that frequency is a factor promoting grammaticalisation. The two items each have only about half of the total frequency which would have been available for one item.

4.2. A related case

Kramer (1970) notes that the Sealter Frisian translation of "ever" is *siláårge*. He argues for the following etymology: *siláårge* > **silarege* > **siladege* > *sien Lääwdoage* 'his life days'. This example is comparable in its phrasal structure to the West Frisian quantifier *syn leven / libben*. There is a crucial difference: the Sealter Frisian construction froze the possessive pronoun, choosing the (unmarked) 3SG. Correspondingly, the construction could undergo further grammaticalisation, in the sense of morphologisation, and developed into a single word. Kramer reports that speakers of Sealter Frisian are nowadays unaware of the (historical) connection between *siláårge* and *sien Lääwdoage*, a sure sign of grammaticalisation. The fact that grammaticalisation in Sealter Frisian went together with the freezing of the possessive pronoun provides support for the idea that the agreeing (hence changeable) pronoun in the West Frisian equivalent was a factor blocking grammaticalisation.

5. Why didn't the construction become the unmarked way of expressing '(n)ever'?

5.1. Distributional restrictions

The construction *syn leven / libben* was not the only way of expressing the semantic content '(n)ever' in Early Modern Frisian. In the 17th century, the descendant of Old Frisian *aa*, that is

ea, was still in use. It was replaced around 1700 by *oait*, a borrowing from Dutch (*ooit*). The distribution of *ea* and *oait* was studied in ....[8] The table below summarises the distribution of *ea* and *oait* and compares it to that of *syn leven / libben*:

(14) Table of the syntactic contexts in which each item is found

	syn leven / libben	*ea*	*oait*
negation	35	0	27
rhetorical question	19	6	26
comparative relative	3	0	0
exclamatives	3	0	0
after universal quantifier	4	0	0
negative NP	0	5	35
words of exclusion *before, if, except, shame that*	0	10	31
relative clauses	0	14	11
Totals	60	35	130

What this table makes clear is that the construction *syn leven / libben* was apparently excluded in syntactic contexts which in themselves were relatively frequent. Thus, it couldn't occur in the following contexts, in which either *ea* or *oait* or both scored occurrences:

- sentences with negative NPs

- sentences introduced by words of exclusion

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[8] Reference deleted in order to maintain the writer's anonimity.

- relative clauses

This made the construction less flexible from a syntactic point of view than its rivals *ea* and *oait*. In addition, the construction couldn't score occurrences in these syntactic environments, which lowered its overall frequency. This wasn't compensated by the syntactic contexts in which only the construction was allowed to occur:

- comparative relatives
- exclamatives
- after universal quantifier

These contexts had low relative frequencies and therefore did not contribute much to raising the overall frequency of the construction. The construction had one big advantage over *ea*, which wasn't allowed to co-occur with sentence negation. However, this advantage disappeared in the 18th century when *ea* was replaced by *oait*, which was allowed in that environment.

Thus distributional restrictions prevented the quantified construction from competing optimally against *ea* and *oait*.

5.2. Sociologuistic restrictions

There is some evidence that the construction *syn leven / libben* was felt or came to be felt by writers to be substandard. The writer Gysbert Japix, who writes in a high register, is responsible for most of the textual material that survives from the 17th century (Breuker 1989). However, he never uses *syn leven / libben*. The most productive writer of the 18th century is Jan Althuysen, who translated most of the psalms. In the psalms, he never uses the

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quantified construction, but in lighter work he uses it a 2 times. In those examples, he employs the form *libben*.

The 18th century also saw the survival of a farce and of a comedy. The farce, *Waatze Gribberts Bruyloft* (1701), generally features *syn leven*. The comedy, *It Libben fen Aagtje IJsbrants* (1779), written by Eelke Meinerts, uses both *syn leven* and *syn libben*. Thus the construction has a tendency to show up in the lower register to which comedies belong and not in the high register of the psalm translations. This corroborates the idea that the construction was felt to belong to a lower register. The main rival of the construction, *oait*, does not show signs of being thus restricted. It may equally well show up in the psalm translations of Jan Althuysen as in the comedy of Eelke Meinerts. [9]

The construction was apparently felt to be subject to sociolinguistic restrictions, which helps to explain why it lost out against its 18th century rival, *oait*.

6. Concluding remarks

In this article, the distribution was investigated of the construction *syn leven / libben* in Frisian in the period 1550-1800. It was argued that the construction originated in Frisian as a loan from Dutch. Correspondingly, the variant *syn leven* shows phonological characteristics of Dutch. The form *syn libben* was adapted to Frisian phonology by replacing *leven* with native

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[9] In addition, there is some evidence that *syn leven* is slightly more substandard than the form *syn libben*. As a countryside language, Frisian may be expected to show a relative lack of social stratification. This is confirmed by the fact that Frisian at present (still) shows a lack of social stratification (Feitsma 1981). Thus *syn libben*, being 'more Frisian', would be less subject to substandardisation and social stratification than *syn leven*. The latter phrase would be more subject to the social stigma of the corresponding phrase in Dutch, being more similar to it. This is further confirmed by native speakers' intuitions that phrases which sound crude in Dutch sound less crude in Frisian.

libben. Evidence for this scenario came from the fact that the oldest attestations of syn *leven* predate the oldest attestations of *syn libben*, and from the fact that *leven* is only found in this construction, whereas *libben* is also found outside this construction. The distribution of the construction across syntactic environments made it clear that it was a negative polarity item. It was not, however, used in two relatively frequently occurring contexts: sentences with negative NPs and sentences introduced by a word of exclusion. Its rival *oait*, another loan from Dutch, characteristically showed up in such contexts. This may be one of the reasons why the construction didn't grammaticalise into the unmarked way of expressing the meaning 'ever'. In addition, evidence was presented that *syn leven / libben* was slightly substandard, which also contributed to its markedness as compared to its rival *oait*. The construction didn't become a single word because the possessive pronoun agreed with the subject of the sentence. In comparison, the possessive pronoun was fixed in Sealter Frisian, and the construction was frozen into a single word. Sociolinguistic, distributional and semantic-syntactic reasons conspired in order to prevent the grammaticalisation of this quantified construction in West Frisian.

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[10] Deleted in order to maintain the writer's anonimity.

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