

En en is níet wat we dachten: A Flemish discourse particle

Aim. The present paper argues that the Flemish particle *en* has hitherto been misanalysed, mostly as a marker of negation or polarity, and proposes a new analysis taking seriously a number of previously unnoticed properties. The paper presents evidence that *en* is a discourse particle introducing a kind of ‘comment’ on the negative proposition, marking it as unexpected to the speaker or/and addressee. It is argued that this interpretive effect is not encoded syntactically, contrary to previous analyses of this particle, but instead pragmatically construed.

Background. Spoken Flemish (Southern Dutch) allows the apparently optional use of a particle *en* in finite negative clauses (a.o. Haegeman & Zanuttini 1991, Haegeman 1995). Historically, *en* is a negation marker: Flemish/Dutch has undergone Jespersen’s cycle (JC), the diachronic development of the expression of negation by which an original negator (Common Germanic *ni* > *ne* > *en*) is first joined by a reinforcing element (*niet* < Old Dutch *niuuēht* ‘nothing’), which then turns itself into the standard expression of negation and ultimately replaces the old one (a.o. Burridge 1993, Beheydt 1998). At the intermediate stage of JC, which seems to be optionally preserved in spoken Flemish, negation appears to be expressed twice, or rather, by a discontinuous bipartite particle *en...niet*. Haegeman (1995), applying Pollock’s (1989) NegP hypothesis to West Flemish, analyses *en* as the realization of the functional head Neg^o.

Interpretive properties of *en*. While it does occur in negative clauses, Present-day Spoken Flemish *en* has a number of properties that dissimilate it from a negation marker. Haegeman (2002) has therefore proposed that instead of a negation marker, (West) Flemish *en* is a polarity marker and more recently, Breitbarth & Haegeman (2010) have argued that *en* encodes polarity emphasis or polarity focus. There is evidence, however, that these analyses of *en* also fail to account for all of its properties.

① *En* is not a marker of negation. It cannot express negation on its own (a.o. Haegeman 1995); in all examples given below, *nie(t)* ‘not’ (*niemand* ‘no one’ etc.) is obligatory.¹

② *En* has a specific pragmatic function, which speakers often describe as ‘emphatic’. This is clear in (1) and (2). Unlike many polarity emphasis phenomena cross-linguistically (cf. e.g. Martins 2007, Hernanz & Batllori 2010), however, *en* is not a main/root clause phenomenon (a.o. Hooper & Thompson 1973), (4a-3a)

③ *En* adds a speaker-oriented evaluation of the clause it appears in, plus various contextually determined emotional shades of meaning such as defiance (3a), surprise (4a) or irritation (3a,4a).

④ Despite its speaker-orientation, *en* can also not be analysed as a (strong) evaluative adverb (or more broadly Speaker Oriented Adverb (SpOA)) such as *surprisingly* or *oddly*. While *en* is licit in conditional clauses (3a) and interrogative contexts (4a), evaluative adverbs, being PPIs like all SpOAs (Nilsen 2004, Ernst 2009), are not (3b,4b).

Analysis. The current paper argues that *en* is a discourse marker adding expressive meaning to the ‘normal’ descriptive content of a clause, and which is not part of the propositional meaning of the clause. In this respect, its function is similar to what has been proposed by Kratzer (1999) for German *ja*, which adds roughly ‘as you may well know’ to a proposition. As a first approximation, to be refined presently, the additional

¹ We follow Ryckeboer (1986) in taking elliptic (negative) replies involving vicarious *doen* ‘do’ as (near-)fossilized expressions, not productive negative clauses, unlike Van Craenenbroeck (2004: part II).

meaning *en* adds to a proposition could be summed up as a hearer-related ‘as you may not know’ or a speaker-related ‘which is unexpected’ (plus some emotional overtones).

We argue that this behaviour of *en* can best be captured using a Relevance Theoretic approach, according to which discourse markers encode procedural meaning, that is, they are processing instructions to the hearer on how to integrate the containing utterance within the ongoing discourse context (a.o. Blakemore 1987, Sperber and Wilson 1993, Kroon 1995, Aijmer 2002). We propose that by using *en*, the speaker signals that the negated proposition is in conflict with one or more propositions that are salient in the discourse context, and we assume that any additional emotional overtones of surprise, irritation, defiance etc. are then determined contextually. Syntactically, *en* is a historical remnant, once expressing negation/polarity, now devoid of any conceptual meaning. We argue that *en* is a strong NPI, thus restricted to negative contexts. It is a bound morpheme selecting a finite verb, encoding procedural meaning only.

The advantage of not treating *en* as functional head or a sentence modifier is that the current approach can capture its speaker-orientation without predicting it to be a root phenomenon. Under the proposed perspective, the diachronic development of *en* is also explained: after losing its syntactic independence, the original negator eventually lost its conceptual meaning, making it an extreme case of grammaticalisation. Ironically, this turns around one of the oft-cited aphorisms of grammaticalisation theory: Faarlund’s (1989:71) assertion that “Today’s syntax may be the product of yesterday’s discourse pragmatics” – based on Givón’s (1971:413) slogan “Today’s morphology is yesterday’s syntax”: in case of *en*, yesterday’s syntax happens to have turned today’s pragmatics.

Examples

- (1) A: Geef me nen keer Valère zenen telefoon. B: k’**en** een-k ik Valère
give me once Valère his phone number I=EN have=I I Valère
zenen telefoon nie.
his phone not
‘Can you give me Valère’s phone number?’ ‘– I don’t have Valère’s number.’
- (2) Ze moeten niet denken dat ge in een Vlaamse gemeenteraad Frans
they must not think that you in a Flemish council.meeting French
kunt spreken. Dat en gaat niet!
can speak that en goes not
‘They should not think that you can speak French in a Flemish council meeting.
That’s out of the question!’
- (3) a. Wa ga je gij doen van uw leven a je niet **en** trouwt?
what go you you do of your life if you NEG EN marry
‘What are you going to do with your life, if you don’t marry?’ (Neuckermans 2008:99)
b. *What are you going to do with your life if you oddly don’t marry?
- (4) a. **En**-ee-j gie doa niemand gezien?
EN=have=you you there no.one seen
‘Did you (really) not see anyone there?’ (Haegeman 2007:15,fn.3)
b. *Did you surprisingly not see anyone?