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Once upon a time in Dutch

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Introduction

This paper deals with the Dutch particle *eens* (to be glossed ‘once’ most of the time) and some of its homographs. Given that our investigations fit into the larger enterprise of establishing a comprehensive overview of the modal particles in Dutch as it is spoken in The Netherlands and Belgium (to be published in the form of some lexicographic product in due time) we will primarily be concerned with *eens*’s usage as a modal particle. Following the advise of Weydt & Hentschel (1983) and others, however, we will not neglect other usages of *eens*.

1 On the history of *eens*

Eens started off as an adverbial genitive of the numeral *een* ‘one’ (WNT 3, 3848 ff.). Its original meaning was ‘once, one time’ (examples from WNT):

- (1) a. Zy en handelt den spinrock nau *eens* ter weken.
she NEG handles the distaff hardly once per week
‘She hardly takes the distaff once a week.’
- b. Een held mag meer dan *eens* zyn liefde laten blyken.
a hero may more than once his love let seem
‘A hero may show his love more than once.’

All other usages of *eens* supposedly derive from this usage.¹

Before we start our discussion of the various usage possibilities of *eens*, we would like to briefly touch upon the question with how many words *eens* we are dealing. Let us assume that the conjunction *eens* (see section 2.2) belongs to another word class than the adverbial *eens*. We will, however, postpone to some other occasion our decision on

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¹Adjectival *eens*, on which some more in section 2.5 below, also stems from the genitive singular of the numeral, probably from a combination such as *eens zins* ‘of one opinion’.

whether or not the adverb *eens*, the modal particle *eens* and the focus particle *eens* are all one and the same word. But it should be kept in mind that the focus particle *eens* always carries stress, whereas the modal particle, if only by definition, is never stressed.

2 Various types of *eens*

In this section, we will briefly discuss the various types of *eens* that should be distinguished: the adverb, the derived use as a conjunction, two types of particles, and an adjectival use. In the next section, some more attention will be paid to modal particles in general and to the modal particle *eens* in particular.

2.1 The adverb *eens*

Little attention need be paid to the adverb *eens*. Two major usages can be distinguished, a numerical one (2a) and a temporal one, which can roughly be paraphrased as ‘one time’ and ‘at a certain moment in time’, respectively. The latter can be used both retrospectively (2b) and prospectively (2c):

- (2) a. Zij controleert haar e-mail eens per week.
she checks her e-mail once per week
‘She checks her e-mail once a week.’
- b. Eens had ik een geheime liefde.
once had I a secret love
‘Once, I had a secret love.’
- c. Eens zal de mens in vrede leven.
once will the man in peace live
‘One day, men will live in peace.’

From our current perspective, the biggest problem posited by the adverb *eens* is to distinguish it from the other usages of *eens*. Especially the temporal use of the adverb and the modal particle are very much alike. In (2) we gave, for expository purposes, only examples with the adverb in sentence-initial i.e. topic position. This position is by definition not available for the particle, because it always bears stress, whereas modal particles cannot be stressed (cf. below). When one is dealing with real life cases in written text, it can be extremely difficult to decide between these two. For example, a prototypical Dutch fairy-tale might start as follows:

- (3) Er was eens een koning die zeven zonen had.
there was once a king who seven sons had
‘Once upon a time, there was a king who had seven sons.’

In cases such as this, *eens* may or may not carry stress, but it usually does not. This could be taken as an argument that it is a modal particle. Still, the word has some temporal meaning – so it might be an adverb as well. The bottom line will probably turn out to be that there is no sharp distinction between adverb and modal particle, or at least that there is some grey area between the two categories.

2.2 The conjunction *eens*

Various temporal adverbs can function as conjunctions, i.e., they can be used to introduce a subordinate clause, both in English and in Dutch:

- (4) a. *Once* the lady has left, we can have another beer.
b. *Nu de dame vertrokken is*, kunnen we nog wel een biertje nemen.
now the lady left is, can we yet PART a beer take
'Since the lady has left, we can have another beer.'

Eens possesses this possibility as well:²

- (5) a. Rusten doe ik wel, *eens* ik gestorven ben. (De Morgen)
rest do I PART, once I died am
'I'll have plenty of time to rest once I've died.'
b. *Eens* met de Range Rover gereden, ben je verloren. (De Gentenaar)
once with the Range Rover driven, are you lost
'Once you have driven the Range Rover, you're lost.'

This usage of *eens* is, as far as we know, restricted to the Belgian variant of Dutch (van der Wouden 1998). Further research is necessary to make clear its exact geographical distribution.

2.3 The focus particle *eens*

The element *eens* is found rather often in the company of negative elements; especially the combination with *niet* 'not' is quite frequent. The frequency of combinations with *eens* has grown over time (cf. section 3.2 below), but for instance in Bredero's *Spanish Brabander* of 1618, *niet eens* is already the most frequent combination: of all instances of *eens* in this play, 68% go by themselves, and 11% is accompanied by, and immediately adjacent to, *niet*. Here is an example:

- (6) hy treckt *niet eens* een oogje van mijn schoot. (Bredero, 1618)
he pulls not once an eye of my lap
'He keeps looking at my lap.'

²One also meets cases in which a temporal adverb functions as a sort of premodifier of a standard complementizer: *nu dat de dame vertrokken is* 'now that the lady has left'; *eens dat ik gestorven ben* 'once that I have died'. This combination may be the historical source of the usage of temporal adverbs as conjunctions.

In the earlier examples *niet eens* is found only with predicates denoting events, i.e., countable, bounded stretches of time (Vendler 1967; Verkuyl 1993). That is to say, interpretation as the adverb *eens* meaning 'once' is possible in all these cases.

Later, probably somewhere in the nineteenth century, but that is a topic under investigation, the combination *niet eens* develops an extended use in which it may also be combined with unbounded predicates such as statives. Translation with 'once' is impossible in these cases: here, *eens* rather functions as a focus adverb comparable to English *even*.³

- (7) a. ...mijn dorpje, dat zoo klein was, zóó klein dat het *haast niet eens* een dorpje heten mocht. (HaverSchmidt, 1880)
 my village, that so small was, so small that it almost not even a village mention might
 'My village that was so small that it hardly could be called a village.'
- b. Ze weten niet eens wat voetballen is.
 they know not even what football is
 'They even don't know how to play soccer.'

In the terminology of Hoeksema & Zwarts (1991), we may call *eens* a backward looking focus particle: it (immediately) follows *niet*, the element in focus.⁴

There is, however, reason to assume that the combination *niet eens* may be a single lexical item. A first argument in favour of this idea is the fact that no lexical material may intervene between *niet* and *eens*. Next, we observe that this *eens* – which in this usage invariably bears stress – only occurs together with *niet*.⁵ It does not combine with other negative operators, not even with the strongest, antimorphic ones (van der Wouden 1997b; Zwarts 1998).⁶ Finally, an example such as the following may be analyzed as showing a kind of Neg-raising (see, e.g., Horn & Bayer (1984)) in which both the negation and the focus particle have 'raised' into the matrix clause together – something one rarely or never finds with other combinations of negation and something else:

³In order to deal with certain scope ambiguities, Rooth (1985:ch.4) follows a suggestion of Fauconnier (1975) and postulates the existence of two focus particles *even* in English: a positive one (*someone even cleaned the bathroom*), and a negative polarity one (*the censorship committee kept John from even reading SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES*), the latter being restricted to negative contexts (van der Wouden 1997b). The focus particle *eens* would then be the Dutch counterpart of NPI *even*.

⁴Assuming a non-controversial view of Dutch phrase structure, this implies that *eens* does not c-command its associated target – a topic we will not elaborate on.

⁵Note that there is no restriction to *niet* having sentential scope: *niet eens* is also found inside constituents (e.g. PP: *met niet eens een blik van verstandhouding* 'with not even a knowing glance' – Matsier; DP: *na die eerste, niet eens zo belangrijke tempel* 'after that first, not even so important temple' – Nootboom) and in sentence-initial topic position (*niet eens de naam delen we* 'not even the name we share' – Noordervliet; *niet eens naar de bioscoop kon hij gaan* 'not even to the cinema could he go' – Hermans).

⁶In the colloquial language one also finds *geeneens*, consisting of *eens* and the quantifier-like *geen* 'no', e.g. *het doet het geeneens* 'it doesn't even work' – Pinter.

- (8) Achteraf denk ik *niet eens* dat Mattes het door had. (Rood)
retrospectively I not even think that Mattes it through had
'Retrospectively I think that Mattes didn't even see through.'

For the remainder of this paper, nothing hinges on the exact lexical representation of *niet eens*.

2.4 The modal particle *eens*

The modal particle *eens* never bears stress. Unstressed elements in Dutch are often reduced. In the case of *eens*, the vowel becomes schwa, the nasal segment first becomes suprasegmental (nasalisation of the vowel) and disappears next; the result is /@s/ or even enclitic /s/. In written text one often finds spellings such as *es*, *'ns* or *'s*, especially in less formal writings.

More on the modal particle *eens* in section 3.

2.5 The adjective *eens*

For completeness sake, we should also briefly mention the adjective *eens*. It is always stressed, and can only be used predicatively in combination with expletive *het* 'it' and a copula. If the copula is a form of *zijn* 'to be', the combination means 'to agree', with the copula *worden* 'become', the meaning is 'to reach (an) agreement'.

- (9) a. Ze zijn het eens.
they are it EENS
'They agree'.
b. (Na een lange sessie) zijn ze het eens geworden.
(after a long session) are they it EENS become
'After a long session they have reached an agreement.'

3 Modal particles

In languages such as German, Dutch, the Scandinavian languages, Finnish, classical Greek and Hungarian one finds words, usually rather small and often unstressed, with a more or less fixed position in the sentence, whose meaning is rather context-dependent and often difficult to describe (Foolen 1993:29-30). *Modal particles* is one of the more popular terms to refer to these elements (Foolen 1996). It turns out to be difficult to give a useful definition of modal particles, and they are often stated in negative terms: modal particles are restricted to certain positions in the sentence, they seldom or never bear stress, and usage as modal particle is usually not the only possibility (cf. van Baar (1997)). The contribution of modal particles to the semantics of the sentence, if any, is not so much at the propositional level – they seldom influence the truth value of the

sentence – but rather at other meaning levels, such as the illocutionary force of the utterance (cf., e.g., Jacobs (1991)). In English and French, modal particles are relatively rare, perhaps for syntactic reasons (Abraham 1991). The combination of the last two facts makes it sometimes very hard to translate Dutch (or German or ...) sentences with modal particles into English faithfully.

3.1 *Eens* as a modal particle

In order to get at least some impression of the contribution of the modal particle *eens* may have to the meaning of an utterance, consider the sentences in (10):

- (10) a. Kom eens een borrel halen!
 come once a drink get
 ‘You might drop by for a drink.’
 b. Ik ga eens naar bed
 I go once to bed
 ‘I think I’ll go to bed now.’

In a directive such as (10a), *eens* weakens the imperative force of the utterance (much more on modal particles in directives in Vismans (1994)): the variant in the example is in fact an invitation in the form of an imperative. As an invitation, the variant without the modal particle (*kom een borrel halen*), i.e., as a full-fledged imperative, is quite strange.

In declarative sentences such as (10b) the illocutive strength of the utterance is weakened by *eens* as well. With the modal particle, the sentence is much less assertive than without it. By using the particle, the speaker seems to suggest that (s)he doesn’t need a lot of argumentation to stay up a little longer.

On the basis of the two examples in (10) one might be inclined to analyze *eens* as a modifier of illocutionary operators, as it can weaken both the imperative power of imperatives and the assertive power of assertions. Assume this to be a correct description of what is going on in these examples. Then it is surprising that *eens* cannot be used to reduce the illocutive force of questions and threats. One can imagine all kinds of polite questions (leaving the hearer some freedom to answer or not) or not-so-serious threats, but one cannot get them using *eens*.⁷

- (11) a. Hoe laat is het (*eens)?
 how late is it (once)
 ‘What time is it?’

⁷Note that *wil je eens kijken* ‘will you once look’ is not a question but a directive: ‘please take a look’; in *mag ik eens kijken* ‘may I once look, can I have a look’ the modal takes scope over the modal particle (it can be paraphrased as *vind je het goed, dat ik eens kijk* ‘do you agree that I take a look’), so the modal particle can never have scope over the question operator. Note moreover that certain combinations of modal particles may be fine in the sentences in (11).

- b. Ben je (*eens) ziek?
are you (once) ill
'Are you ill?'
- c. Ik maak je (*eens) dood⁸
I make you once dead
'I'll kill you.'

We will not try to give an exhaustive overview of all usage possibilities and meaning shades of *eens* here. What we will do instead is pay some attention to the combinatorics of *eens*.

3.2 Combinations of *eens* with other modal particles

Modal particles tend to form clusters (Hoogvliet 1903; Thurmair 1991), and in *eens* this tendency is extremely strong, as simple counts on text corpora show. On Monday February 23d, 1998, we did a search for *eens* on the internet, using the search engine Hotbot.⁹ In total, the machine could find 78,083 addresses with *eens*.¹⁰ The table in (12) shows that combinations with *nog* (a temporal particle: 'still, yet'), *wel* (an emphatic particle, among other things), negation *niet* (cf. section 2.3 above), *maar* ('but'), *weer* ('again'), *ook* ('also') and *al* ('already') are quite frequent; together these collocations amount to ca. 80% of all instances of *eens* on the internet!

(12) **seven frequent combinations with *eens***

combination	# Hotbot	perc.
total	78083	100
nog eens	17587	23
wel eens	17190	22
niet eens	8698	11
maar eens	7149	9
weer eens	4949	6
ook eens	4280	5
al eens	3037	4

Note that *eens* usually occupies the final position in particle combinations: only *even* 'briefly, for a short time' and the complex *een keer* 'one time' may follow *eens*.¹¹ de Vriendt *et al.* (1991) offer a semantic explanation for this fact (cf. als Haeseryn *et al.* (1997)).

⁸This sentence is fine with adverbial *eens* in sentence-initial position: *Eens maak ik je dood*.

⁹Address: <http://www.hotbot.com>. As far as we know, the word *eens* exists in Dutch only; the internet addresses rendered by Hotbot give no reason to assume otherwise.

¹⁰The counts may be polluted somewhat by the adjective *eens*, but we know from a much smaller corpus (Uit den Boogaart 1975) that it is completely outnumbered by the adverb/particle *eens*, and is therefore negligible.

¹¹The same holds for *eventjes*, a diminutive form of *even*.

Eens is usually the final or penultimate element in larger clusters of modal particles. The following classical example from Hoogvliet (1903) may serve as an illustration:

- (13) Geef de boeken *dan nu toch maar 'es even* hier.
give the books then now yet but once briefly here
'Now give us finally the books.'

We have the impression, without strong quantitative evidence so far, that collocations with *eens* are becoming more frequent and more diverse over time. This impression, however, is mainly based on written sources. Given the standard idea (see, e.g., Foolen (1993)) that modal particles occur more in spoken language than in written language, and more in informal text types than in formal ones, the increase in the number of modal particles we seem to observe may be due to not to language change, but to the fact that in general the difference between spoken and written language has decreased and society as a whole has become less formal.

Nothing, however, precludes the possibility that we are dealing with real language change here. And in order to understand *eens*'s increasing tendency to form clusters with other modal particles, one might think of a functional explanation along the following lines. Modal particles are, per definition, unstressed. As was said in 2.4 above, the modal particle may be reduced to schwa plus /s/. Given the rules of Dutch phonology, the modal particle may go unnoticed in certain phonological environments. An example is given in (14):

- (14) a. Hij is eens opgepakt wegens diefstal, heb ik gehoord.
he is once caught for theft, have I heard
'He's been caught for theft before, I've heard.'
b. Hij is 's opgepakt wegens diefstal, heb ik gehoord

Dutch has no geminates, so the combination of *is* plus *eens* in its maximally reduced form in (14b) will sound exactly like *is* all by itself. Stacking other modal particles on top of it may then help *eens* to gain some phonological weight, in order to convey the intended meaning to the hearer. And given compositionality, different modal particles will help *eens* in expressing its various meanings or meaning shades.

In the remainder of this section, we will focus on two combinations with *eens*: the very frequent *nog eens*, which has quite a long history, and the rare *best eens* (our internet search yielded only 299 occurrences), which is a recent development: we have found no examples before the 1960s.

Nog eens not only is a very frequent combination, it is also quite old. Several occurrences can be found in the oldest source we systematically looked at so far, Bredero's *Spanish Brabander* of 1618.

- (15) a. Ick seght noch eens op mijn burgherschop. (Bredero, 1618)
I say-it yet once on my citizenship
'I say it once again as a citizen.'

- b. Ay lieve leest dan noch iens Een Euangelytje uyt de schrift. (Bredero, 1618)
 ay dear read then yet once a gospel-DIM from the scripture
 ‘Pray dear, read me yet another gospel from the Scriptures.’

In these and many other examples, *nog eens* has an iterative meaning, which is not surprising in light of the semantics of *nog* and *eens*. There are, however, contexts in which this iterative meaning is absent:

- (16) a. Die jongen wordt nog eens professor.
 that boy becomes yet once professor
 ‘He’ll end up being a professor.’
- b. Deze elektronen draaien, als een tol, ook nog ’s om hun eigen as. (Krol)
 these electrons spin, like a top, also yet once around their own axis
 ‘In addition, these electrons also spin.’
- c. Als Wijdenes nog eens trouwt, zal hij het doen met een meisje uit zijn eigen kringen. (Du Perron)
 if Wijdenes yet once marries, will he it do with a girl from his own circles
 ‘If Wijdenes ever gets married, he’ll marry a girl from his own circles.’
- d. Vroeger babbelden we nog eens wat, maar nu geen woord meer. (Pinter)
 then babbled we yet once something, but now no word anymore
 ‘We used to have a talk once in a while, but not a word anymore now.’

To conclude our short introduction to the idiosyncrasies of *nog eens*, we present a usage of the combination that appears to be restricted to Belgium:

- (17) Het is vierentwintig jaar geleden dat in Hasselt *nog eens* een bisschop is gewijd. (tv BRT 26/10/97)
 it is twenty-four year ago that in Hasselt yet once a bisschop is ordained
 ‘The last time a bisschop was ordained in Hasselt was twenty-four years ago.’

A rather recent and rare collocation with *eens* is *best eens*. So far, this is the oldest occurrence we found:

- (18) ‘Het zou *best eens* kunnen zijn,’ voegde hij eraan toe. (Voskuil, 1963)
 it should best once can be, added he there-to to
 ‘It might be the case,’ he added.’

Best originates as an adverb of degree, the superlative of *goed* ‘good’. Starting as a term expressing a very high degree, it has recently developed a new use as a modal particle; if it still denotes any degree at all, it is a very moderate one (Klein 1997).

Best eens is not the only combination with *best*. One of the most interesting properties of *best eens* is that it is restricted to modal contexts – a restriction not shared by

all collocations with *best*: *best wel*, e.g., also occurs outside such contexts: *ik ben best wel moe* ‘I am quite tired’. (van der Wouden 1997a). Usually one finds *best eens* with the weak modal auxiliaries *kunnen* ‘can’, *mogen* ‘may’ or *willen* ‘want’, often in irrealis mood. Combination with the strong modal auxiliaries (*moeten* ‘must’, *hoeven* ‘need’, etc.) is excluded.

- (19) a. Dat mag ook best eens gezegd worden. (INL38 corpus)
 that may also best once said be
 ‘That is worth saying too.’
- b. *Dat moet ook best eens gezegd worden.
 that must also best once said be
- c. Daar zou het best eens droog kunnen blijven. (INL38 corpus)
 there should it best once dry can stay
 ‘And it might as well stay dry there.’

4 Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have discussed the Dutch adverb *eens* ‘once’ and its development into conjunction particle, focus particle and modal particle. From the perspective of theories of language change such as grammaticalization theory (Hopper & Traugott 1993), this development from a content word into some functional category (or categories) is not unexpected – although the exact details are not predictable either, of course. Many instances of *eens* still carry some meaning component ‘once, one time’, but this is often not too prominent. This seems to suggest that in developing from adverb into modal particles, *eens* has not lost all of its lexical meaning – which may have consequences for the definition of modal particles. But that is a topic to which we will return elsewhere.

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