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Modal particle or emerging inflection?

The Dutch 'success imperative' revisited

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Dutch has a construction consisting of a verbal part and something else: ˈwɛrksə 'enjoy your work' (< *werk* 'to work'), ˈrujzə 'enjoy your rowing' (< *roei* 'to row'). According to accepted wisdom, this 'success imperative', as it is known in the literature, consists of an imperative and a pronoun *ze* 'them'. The paper challenges the standard analysis and investigates two alternatives: an imperative form plus a modal particle, and a verbal stem plus an inflectional ending.

Keywords: morphology, imperative, modal particle, inflection, dummy pronoun

Introduction

Dutch has a peculiar construction exemplified in (1) (examples are given in phonetic transcription to prevent or postpone analytical bias):

(1) a. ˈwɛrksə   'enjoy your work'   (< werk 'to work')
     b. ˈrujzə   'enjoy your rowing'   (< roei 'to row')

The construction consists of a verbal part and an element *sə* or *zə*. In the linguistic literature, it is usually rendered as two words (*werk ze*), but in spontaneous, unedited writing (for instance, on social media), one-word spellings (*werkze, werkse*) may be at least as frequent (cf. below).

Since Corver (1995) and Coppen (1997, 1998), the construction has been known as the 'success imperative'. Semantically, the construction functions as a kind of friendly directive "used to express the wish that the Addressee will enjoy the action described by the verb" (Keizer & Honselaar 2013). It can be used when "the addressee has the intention to perform a certain action and […] the speaker expresses his [sic] wish that this action will be performed to the satisfaction of the addressee" (Broekhuis & Corver 2018). Usually, the action is appreciated positively by the speaker. "Moreover, the action involved is [often] habitual in nature; one

could not say *spring ze*! 'jump well' to someone who is planning to jump from a table he is incidentally standing on, but it is perfectly acceptable to say it to someone who is planning to do some springboard diving" (Broekhuis & Corver 2018).

The first mention of the construction that I am aware of is in Baarslag (1952); Van Dale (1970) is the first source with the beginning of an analysis. This dictionary takes *ze* to be the third-person plural personal pronoun in its phonologically reduced form, functioning as a dummy object.[1] It moreover observes that the construction is restricted to colloquial language, which complies with my own intuition.[2] The construction does not exist in the neighboring Germanic languages German and English.

The Van Dale dictionary, Corver, Coppen, as well as the standard grammar ANS (Haeseryn et al. 1997) all analyze the construction as an imperative form plus *ze*:

(2) $werk_{\text{V-imp}}\ ze_{\text{Pron-3pl.acc}}$

Note that /zə/ is realized as /sə/ after voiceless consonants (as in (1a)), but as /zə/ in other phonological environments (as in (1b)). This variation can be ascribed to the well-known phenomenon of progressive voice assimilation: the voiced sibilant /z/ becomes voiceless after a voiceless obstruent (cf. *drijfzand* /drɛifsant/ 'quicksand' and *dekzeil* /dɛksɛil/ 'tarpaulin').

The ANS grammar claims that the construction is relatively rare in Belgium. This claim is supported by Figure 1, which is based on a search in over seven hundred million twitter messages ('tweets') via https://twinl.surfsara.nl/.[3]

Note that most hits are from the larger cities in the midwest of the Netherlands (the "Randstad", comprising Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, among others). Far fewer hits are from Flanders.

The literature (Corver 1995; Coppen 1998; Broekhuis & Corver 2018) shows that success imperatives are subject to several syntactic constraints. First, the verb must be (pseudo-)intransitive in order to be able to occur in the success imperative.

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1. "In vernacular expressions as dummy object" ("in gemeenz. uitdr. als loos object"): *eet ze, maf ze,* 'eat, sleep well'. This analysis is echoed in the entry *zij* 'they' (dated 1995) of the large historical dictionary *WNT* (De Vries & Te Winkel 1884–1998), which reports that no attestations of the construction before 1921 were found.

2. Cf. the preceding footnote.

3. In order to get better results, I searched for "*werk ze OR werkze OR werkse OR werk se OR eetze OR eet ze OR eetse OR eet se OR slaapze OR slaap ze OR slaapse OR slaap se*" in a period of almost three years, and found 120000 hits in 713140757 tweets between 3/28/2015, 12:00:00 AM and 2/27/2018, 10:46:00 PM. Cf. Van der Wouden (2014) for a description of the method used.
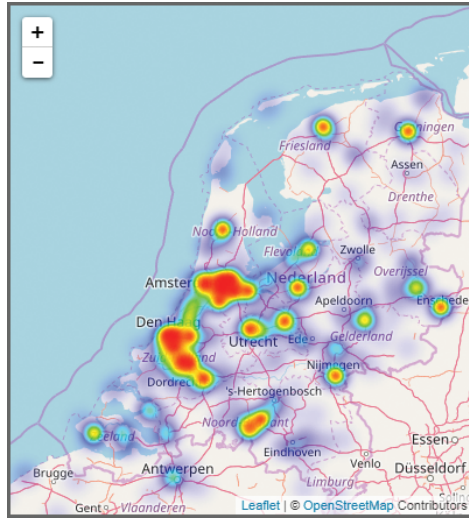
Figure 1. The distribution of the success imperative according to twitter data

(3) a.   Slaap ze!
          sleep ZE
          'Sleep well!'

     b.   Eet ze!
          eat ZE
          'Eat well!'/'Eat them!'

     c.   #Verorber ze!
          consume them/*ze
          'Consume them!'

     d.   Eet (*ze) je brood!
          'Eat your sandwiches!

In the case of pseudo-intransitives, the element *ze* can never be used if the direct object is present: *Eet (*ze) je brood*! 'Enjoy eating your sandwiches!' In the literature, this is taken as an argument that *ze* functions as a syntactic object.

  Second, although unaccusative verbs can be used in regular imperatives, they cannot be used in the success imperative construction.

(4)   Regular imperative   Success imperative
     a.   Kom/Blijf hier!   * Kom/Blijf ze!
          come/stay here   come/stay ZE
     b.   Vertrek nu!   * Vertrek ze!
          leave now   leave   ZE
     c.   Sterf!   * Sterf ze!
          die   die ZE

This observation is presented in the literature as an argument that *ze* is a pronominal object that needs to be syntactically licensed (by means of a theta-role and/or abstract case), which unaccusative verbs cannot do.[4]

Finally, although they can be used in regular imperatives, verbs taking a complementive or a verbal particle are not possible in success imperatives.

(5)   Regular imperative   Success imperative
   a.   Eet ze   op!   *Eet ze op!
        eat them up   *eat ZE up
   b.   Lees ze   voor!   *Lees ze voor!
        read them aloud   *read ZE aloud
   c.   Verf ze   groen!   *Verf ze groen!
        paint them green   *paint ZE green

The standard analysis sketched above is not without problems. Firstly, the verbal form could also be analyzed as the stem of the verb rather than the imperative form, as the distinction is usually impossible to make in Dutch. There is exactly one Dutch verb that has an imperative form that is formally distinct, namely the completely irregular verb *zijn* 'to be' (whose imperative form is *wees*), and that verb is impossible in this construction, possibly for semantic reasons, as *zijn* is not an activity verb.

Secondly, there is little evidence for the status of *ze* as a personal pronoun: in the literature it is stated rather than proven.[5] At first sight, the evidence against this part of the analysis is rather strong. Why would an intransitive verb that never takes a pronominal complement, suddenly be accompanied by a non-subject pronoun in this construction, a pronoun moreover that has no clear references? Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.[6]

Generative solutions have been proposed by Corver (in terms of spelled-out incorporated expletive arguments of non-ergative verbs, along the lines of Hale & Keyser 1993) and Coppen (assuming a small clause argument à la Hoekstra 1984,

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4. For a subset of speakers, a modifying adverb *lekker* 'nice' can be added to the success imperative: *eet ze lekker*. This may be a combination or contamination of the two constructions *eet ze* 'enjoy your meal' and *eet lekker* 'enjoy your meal'. One also finds *eet ze met hapjes* 'eat them with little bites'.

5. Broekhuis & Corver (2018): "It is not a priori clear, however, whether we are dealing with an object pronoun in the success imperative, given that *ze* is then typically non-referential and may also occur with intransitive verbs like *slapen*".

6. This phrase was made popular by Carl Sagan, but the idea was already articulated by scholars like Laplace and Hume (cf. https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Extraordinary_claims_require_extraordinary_evidence).

yet with a silent predicate) (cf. also Broekhuis & Corver 2018). These analyses are claimed to neatly explain the distributional and semantic peculiarities of the construction. However, they rest heavily on theoretical assumptions that are not shared by everyone. Moreover, there are still a number of properties of the construction that have to be stipulated, because they do not follow from the structure or from the semantics of the constituting parts (cf. Keizer & Honselaar 2013). Finally, if the construction is simply part of core grammar, without any construction-specific peculiarities, it remains unexplained why the construction does not exist in English or German, or why it is much more frequent in the Netherlands than in Belgium. The framework simply lacks the means to express that kind of information, it would need to be stipulated somewhere else. This could be seen as a kind of "cryptoconstructionalism" in the sense of Culicover:[7]

> The standard approach […] in MGG ['Modern Generative Grammar'] is to assume that there are operations that derive the phonological form and the semantic interpretation from the syntactic structure ('syntactocentrism'). […]
> I suggest here that in order to successfully apply the derivational mechanisms of MGG, it is necessary to stipulate details of form-meaning correspondences, much the same as constructions do. To the extent that the derivational mechanisms are not independently motivated, analyses that use them with such stipulations are 'cryptoconstructional'. If there is no value added by the derivations, they do not explain anything. Occam's Razor suggests that cryptoconstructional analyses should be dispensed with in favor of more transparent and direct constructional analyses.   (Culicover 2017)

A historical explanation has also been offered for the standard analysis with *ze* 'them' as a third person pronoun. According to Coppen (1997), the "Onze-Taal-scheurkalender" of that year claims that the construction has developed from a transitive verb construction, as exemplified in (6):

(6) *Lekkere aardbeien!   Eet ze!*
     Nice   strawberries! Eat them

Through a kind of semantic bleaching of the pronoun, impersonal *ze* allegedly came into being, which the language user started to associate with wishes for success. Analogy should explain the following use with intransitive verbs; what remains unexplained, however, is that the use of the construction is currently restricted to these intransitive verbs.

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7. Along the lines sketched by Corver (2016), one might say that the success imperative is a case of emotive language and thus typically an instance of marked language. This, however, doesn't solve the problems sketched.

Talking about the success imperative "construction", note that we are indeed dealing with a construction in the Construction Grammar sense (cf. e.g. Goldberg 1995): a pairing of a form and a meaning. Generative approaches tend to focus on the structure alone, the semantics does not get enough attention – as there is hardly any room to articulate it. The success imperative is a construction with a fixed part – *ze* or *se* – and a variable, verbal part. Whatever the origin of *ze*, the meaning of the whole is not a compositional function of the meaning of the parts put together locally – it is a property of the construction as a whole that is somehow stored in the mental lexicon or the "constructicon" of the native speaker of (northern) Dutch, as it is part of his/her linguistic competence.

This fact will be taken as a point of departure for the rest of this paper, in which two other possible analyses of the success imperative construction will be discussed: that *ze* is to be analyzed as a modal particle (Keizer & Honselaar 2013, cf. also Foolen 1993 and Vismans 1994), and that *ze* is to be analyzed as an inflectional ending.

Alternative analysis 1: *Ze* as a modal particle

The first alternative analysis to be pursued is not so very different from the standard analysis, in that the verbal part is also taken to be an imperative. However, *ze* is not analyzed as a pronoun, but as a particle. Dutch, as well as the other continental Germanic languages, has a rich inventory of modal particles that typically are unstressed, have a stressed counterpart in another word class, and are found in the middle field (cf. e.g. Abraham 1981; Foolen 1993; Van der Wouden 2002). Directives, including those with the imperative, are often accompanied by one or more modal particles that mitigate or reinforce the directive force (particles in **bold**):

(7)   Modal particles in directives   (after Vismans 1994)
    a.   Schiet **een beetje** op
        Hurry a   bit   up
        'Hurry up a bit'
    b.   Doe de deur **even**   dicht
        Do   the door a-while closed
        'Just close the door, will you?'
    c.   Wil je   **wel eens** maken dat je   wegkomt?
        Will you well once make   that you away come?
        'Just get the hell out of here!'

d.   Geef de boeken **dan nu   toch maar eens even**   hier
     Give the books   then now yet   but   once a-while here
     'Just give me the books, will you?'   (Hoogvliet 1903)

Actually, bare infinitives without any modal particle are relatively rare in Dutch. Vismans argues that this is due to the egalitarian character of Dutch society, in which hardly anyone is in a position to give orders to an addressee (apart from hierarchical situations in institutional settings such as the army, schools, and parent-child interaction).

   Along these lines, *ze* in the success imperative may be taken as a modal particle in its own right. Incidentally, this is exactly the proposal by Keizer & Honselaar (2013). Working within the framework of Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008), they write

(8)   We propose that this element [*ze*] be regarded (synchronically) as a particle
      triggered by an optative Operator on the Imperative Illocution.
                                                    (Keizer and Honselaar 2013)

Without going into all the details of the Functional Discourse Grammar, we can interpret this analysis as boiling down to the claim that *ze* is a particle that modifies the directive/imperative force of the utterance and makes it into an optative, something semantically comparable to the utterances in (9):

(9)   Optative[8]
      Γένοιτο ταυτα 'may that happen' (classical Greek)
      Lev**e** the koningin 'may the queen live long' (Dutch, note the archaic form of
      the verb)
      Long live the queen (English)

Keizer & Honselaar (2013) stress "that the […] construction carries considerably more (discourse-pragmatic) information than has been assumed" in earlier analyses. "Existing descriptions and analyses of the construction", they write, "do not, for instance, provide a full account of its discourse function (as a wish at the end of a conversation), nor do they include the requirement that the action designated by the verb must have been mentioned in the immediately preceding discourse".[9]

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8. https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optatief

9. It is not clear whether the wording in (8) is meant to suggest that the success imperative is supposed to be equivalent to a true optative. Note that the few true morphological optatives that Dutch still has, lack the properties quoted in this paragraph: the prime discourse function of *leve de koningin* 'long live the queen' is not as a wish at the end of a conversation, and its usage does not require that the action designated by the verb (i.e. living) has been mentioned in the immediately preceding discourse.

Apart from a reference to the *WNT* (cf. above), Keizer & Honselaar do not speculate on the historical origin of *ze* in the success imperative. It would, however, not be the first time that modal particles developed out of (reduced forms of) pronouns. The most obvious case in point is the so-called ethical dative (cf. Wegener 1989):

(10) a. Ik ben **me** toen boos geworden!
        I   am me then angry become
        'Man, did I get angry then!'
     b. Toen heb ik **me** de kinderen toch een huiswerk   gegeven
        Then have I   me the children yet   a   homework given
        'I gave the children a lot of homework then, mind you'

The historical dimension aside, *ze* in the success imperative appears to be a rather standard, well-behaved modal particle: it is unaccented, its position appears to be somewhere in the middle field, and it clusters with certain other elements that clearly qualify as modal particles.

(11) Eet ze   dan maar
     Eat them then but
     'OK, enjoy your meal'

The order of the alleged particles seems to be according the generalization (De Vriendt & Van de Craen 1986; De Vriendt, Vandeweghe & Van de Craen 1991) that (originally) deictic elements come before 'truly' modal particles, which themselves precede (originally) quantificational elements.

(12) deictic > 'truly modal' > quantificational
     Geef de boeken **dan nu toch maar eens even** hier
     Give the books then now yet but once a-while here
     Just give me the books, will you?   (Hoogvliet 1903)

Recently, another etymology for *ze* in the success imperative has been put forward by Norbert Corver, who suggests that the element *ze* may be derived from the deictic adverb *zo* 'such, in that way'.[10]

(13) a. roei zo 'this is the way to row'
     b. roei ze 'enjoy your rowing'

Zo is quite a frequent word in current Dutch, with many functions, but this alleged reduced form is not found in other constructions than the success imperative.

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10. Corver articulated this idea at various occasions; the last time I heard him say this was 7 December 2017 in Leiden. As far as I know, it is not in print (yet).

A drawback of analyzing *ze* as a (modal) particle in the success imperative is that there is no independent evidence for this status: I do not know of any cases of *ze* as a particle outside the success imperative construction.

Yet another suggestion I received was that *ze* in the success imperative might be a reduction of *zeg* 'say'. This imperative form certainly can be used as a particle (De Vriendt 1992), as in *dat wordt wel een grote verbouwing zeg* that becomes well a large renovation say 'That is going to be a really big renovation'. Like the other particles that derive from imperative forms, however, *zeg* usually functions more like a discourse particle, at least in the sense that it occurs at the beginning or the end of an utterance rather than in the middle of it, let alone cliticized to the verb.

Alternative analysis 2: *Ze* as an inflectional ending

Another analysis of *ze* in the success imperative is that it is an inflectional suffix, attached to the verb stem, with a weak directive or optative semantics. This line of thinking has not yet been proposed, as far as I know. While perhaps unlikely in light of the the general tendency of loss of inflection in the Germanic languages (Van Haeringen 1956; Weerman 1989), it would not be the first case of emerging inflection. For example, Zwicky & Pullum (1983) have argued that English negative *n't* behaves more like an inflectional suffix than like a cliticized variant of negative *not*. More recently, Jac Conradie (2017) concluded that in Afrikaans, a daughter language of Dutch, "the auxiliary *het* 'have' […] seems to have reached inflectional status in final position after verb clusters", given that *het* is used more often than all other auxiliaries put together and has an extremely high overall frequency, that final *het* is often reduced to [ət] and mostly unstressed, e.g. [xəsəŋ-ət] for *gesing het*, that it is inseparable from the past participle it governs, e.g. *dat sy die aria moes gesing het* (*gesing moes het) 'that she had to sing the aria', and that the participle is inserted after the particle *te* 'to' in full infinitives, e.g. *om te gesing het* 'to have sung' vs om *gesing te word* 'to be sung'".

The first argument in favor of an inflectional analysis of *ze* (or *se*) is naive spelling as found in twitter data (from http://www.let.rug.nl/gosse/Ngrams/ngrams.html). As Figure 2 shows, the spelling variants *werk ze* (two words, no voice assimilation) and *werkse* (one word, regular voice assimilation) are equally frequent. The one-word variant *werkze* (without voice assimilation) occurs far less often, and the two-word variant *werk se* (with assimilation) is virtually absent.

The data in Figure 2 can be taken as an argument that roughly half of the language users represented in the data take the form /wɛrksə/ to be a two-word combination, whereas the other half appear to see it as one word – an inflected form of *werk* 'to work'.

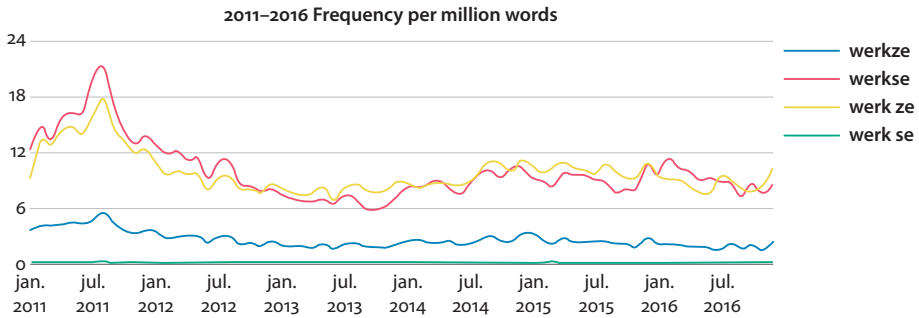**2011–2016 Frequency per million words**

Figure 2. The spelling of the success imperative according to twitter data

Zwicky & Pullum (1983) observe that in general, clitics can exhibit a low degree of selection with respect to their hosts, while affixes exhibit a high degree of selection with respect to their stems. If *ze* is a clitic element (be it a pronoun or a modal particle), it is still surprising that it is found only with a small subclass of all Dutch verbs (inseparable intransitives and pseudo-intransitives, excluding unaccusatives). If, on the other hand, *ze/se* is an inflectional ending, its peculiar distribution is in a sense comparable to that of the English negation *n't* that is found in around 20 forms only (such as *haven't, don't, can't, won't,* and *ain't*).[11]

Under the assumption that *ze* is an inflectional ending, the observation that the success imperative is impossible with the (archaic) plural imperative follows immediately, given that verbal inflectional suffixes (of the same semantic type) cannot be stacked in Dutch:[12]

(14) a. Werkt! $_{\text{imp-pl}}$ 'work!'
b. *Werkt $_{\text{imp-pl}}$ ze $_{\text{success-imp}}$

And given that clitics follow suffixes (Zwicky & Pullum 1983), order effects with modal particles (as exemplified in (11)) also follow: *ze* is always adjacent to the verb; particles follow.

A final argument in favor of an inflection analysis of the success imperative comes from Frisian, in which the construction does not exist natively according to my informants, that is, only as a calque from Dutch. One of my informants reported that he had heard someone say *wurk se*. Now note that Frisian verbal

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11. Taalprof (2015) mentions the option that *ze* is an inflectional ending but easily dismisses it on the grounds that it would be a new development that would be restricted to this particular construction.

12. On the other hand, inflectional suffixes from different semantic domains can be stacked, for example in the form *roeiden* 'rowed (pl)' in which we see the plural suffix -*n* following past tense -*de*.

inflectional morphology is somewhat more complex than its Dutch counterpart. The imperative form of the Frisian class II verb *wurk* 'work' is *wurkje* (Dyk 2018, Table 4), so the success imperative should be *wurkje se*. The attested form *wurk se* (or *wurkse*) is then either a complete (two-word) calque, or (more interestingly from our point of view) the speaker sees the success imperative construction as consisting of a verbal stem (in this case *wurk*) plus a suffix *se*.

Concluding remarks

This paper has discussed three analyses of the success imperative construction.

Interpreting the verbal part as an imperative form and *ze* as a pronoun is the approach with the oldest rights; Corver and Coppen reformulate it in generative terms, albeit not in the same way. This analysis is unsatisfying in that the semantics and the distribution of the construction do not follow and have to be stipulated. This analysis therefore has to be rejected as a form of cryptoconstructionalism in the sense of Culicover.

The second analysis that was discussed also assumes that the verbal part is an imperative form, yet sees *ze* as a modal particle. This approach can account for the data and fits the general picture of Dutch as a particle language. Again, the semantics and the distribution of the construction have to be stipulated, but that is common in the case of particles. For example, it is also necessary to assume that the mental lexicon of native speakers of Dutch contains the information that both *niet* 'not' and *zeker* 'certainly' can be used as particles in questions to seek confirmation for a conjecture. Likewise, it needs to be stipulated that whereas *niet* does this in V1 constructions (*Bent u niet Frans Bauer?* are you not Frans Bauer 'you must be Frans Bauer'), *zeker* can fulfill the same function only in V2 constructions (*U bent zeker Frans Bauer?* you are certainly Frans Bauer 'you must be Frans Bauer'). Analyzing *ze* as a modal particle covers the data, but it is rather boring, with little explanatory power and few interesting predictions.

The last approach analyzed *ze* as an inflectional ending with its own semantics, which of course combines with a verbal stem. This analysis was argued to account for semantics, distribution and word order effects, although it appears to go against the general Germanic (or even Standard Average European) tendency of deflection. It is also the most speculative of the alternatives discussed. Moreover, the restricted productivity of the construction does not follow straightforwardly from this analysis, but on the other hand, flection rarely applies completely across the board.

As a final possibility, we might even claim that all analyses discussed have their merit, and regard them as three consecutive phases in a process of language change

(grammaticalization): the success imperative construction may indeed have its roots in a combination of an imperative and a pronoun, and it is not impossible that either the structure proposed by Corver or the alternative by Coppen is still part of some native speaker's mental grammar. The reanalysis of *ze* as a modal particle would then be the first step towards grammaticalization, and this structure in turn may also be in the mental grammar of a number of Dutch speakers. The third analysis discussed above, in terms of a verbal stem and an inflectional ending, would then be the final grammaticalization step (for the time being). If this whole story is somewhere near correct, it is a beautiful illustration of Givón's dictum that today's morphology is yesterday's syntax (Givón 1971: 413). Pursuing this line of thought, however, asks for additional research into the history of the construction and its usage, which is beyond the scope of this contribution.

Acknowledgements

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