

# At the margins of grammar: Verb particles in first sentence position

Gert-Jan Schoenmakers & Ad Foolen

Radboud University, Nijmegen

Certain linguistic phenomena are located at the boundaries of grammaticality. One example is the topicalization of the particle in German and Dutch particle verb constructions, as in (1) and (2). Such structures typically occur in highly specific environments, such as sarcasm, poetic or professional registers, literature, or as part of a fixed expression. They are therefore generally not accepted unconditionally by native speakers and hard to find in corpora. Still, they are not rejected at first sight either. Descriptions in the standard reference grammars of German and Dutch suggest that, as long as there is an appropriate context, these sentences are usually ‘OK’.

- (1) *Fest steht* momentan nur der Termin  
fixed stands at.the.moment only the appointment (Duden 2005:892, item 131376)
- (2) *Mee gaan* dit jaar alle leerlingen uit de vierde en de vijfde klas.  
with go this year all students out the fourth and the fifth class (ANS, §21.3.4.3ii)

Factors identified in the linguistic literature to affect the acceptability of such structures include the distance between the particle and the verb (e.g. Zeller 2003), and the *semantic transparency* between them – defined as the extent to which the particle is semantically autonomous and contrastable (Trotzke et al. 2015). Trotzke et al. (2015) investigated the acceptability of particle verb structures in German in a rating task, manipulating the factors PARTICLE-VERB ADJACENCY and PARTICLE TRANSPARENCY. Participants indicated on a six-point scale how likely it was that the sentences were correct transcriptions of a conversation in a noisy bar. The authors find that semantic transparency plays a significant role, but must conclude that sentences in which the particle alone was fronted received likelihood ratings at the low end of the scale. Interestingly, they observe that “in case of non-transparent particle verbs occurring non-adjacently, the judgments vary considerably” (Trotzke et al. 2015: 418).

Although the Dutch prefield is rather flexible (Bouma 2008), it is less flexible than the German prefield (Abraham 2003; Jentges 2012; a small-scale corpus study of our own). In this talk we present a replication of the rating experiment for Dutch, using stimulus items as in (3).

- (3) a. Alle leerlingen zijn *meegegaan*. all students are with.gone (in situ, adjacent)  
b. *Meegegaan* zijn alle leerlingen. with.gone are all students (fronted, adjacent)  
c. *Mee* zijn alle leerlingen *gegaan*. with are all students gone (fronted, non-adjacent)

On the basis of the literature we hypothesize that Dutch fronted verb particles are less acceptable than German ones. We reflect on the differences between these languages in acceptability of the paradigm in (3), and the variation between speaker intuitions about the fronted non-adjacent condition (3c). We will also discuss the difference between reference grammar descriptions and native speaker intuitions of a linguistic phenomenon at the margins of grammar.

## References

- Abraham, W. (2003). Niederländisch. In Th. Roelcke (Ed.), *Variationstypologie* (pp. 66-97). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Bouma, G. (2008). *Starting a sentence in Dutch: A corpus study of subject- and object-fronting*. PhD Groningen.
- Duden (2005). *Duden, die Grammatik: unentbehrlich für richtiges Deutsch* (7th ed., vol. 4). Mannheim u.a.: Dudenverlag.
- Haeseryn, W., Romijn, K., Geerts, G., Rooij, J. de, & Toorn, M. van den. (1997). *Algemene Nederlandse spraakkunst* (2nd ed.). Groningen/Deurne: Martinus Nijhoff/Wolters Plantyn.
- Jentges, S. (2012). Grammatisch und semantisch korrekt, aber dennoch nicht perfekt! Schriftliche Textproduktionen niederländischer L2-Lernender des Deutschen. In U. Preußner & N. Sennwald (Eds.), *Literale Kompetenzentwicklung an der Hochschule* (pp. 235-244). Frankfurt u.a.: Peter Lang.
- Trotzke, A., Quaglia, S., & Wittenberg, E. (2015). Topicalization in German particle verb constructions: The role of semantic transparency. *Linguistische Berichte*, 244, 407-424.
- Zeller, J. (2003). Moved preverbs in German: Displaced or misplaced? In: G. Booij & A. van Kemenade (Eds.), *The Yearbook of Morphology* (pp. 179-212). Dordrecht: Kluwer.