

Expletive or event argument? The case of Dutch *er**

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1. The problem

1.1. Impersonal passives in German and Dutch

German and Dutch vary considerably with respect to the distribution of the expletives¹ *es* and *er*, respectively in impersonal passives. While German *es* is only allowed in sentence-initial position (1), the presence of Dutch *er* is much less restricted (2), in fact (apart from the sentence-initial position where it is obligatory), *er* seems to be completely optional.

- (1) a. *(Es) wurde getanzt. (German)
Expl was danced
“There was dancing.”/“People were dancing.”
- b. ... daß (*es²) getanzt wurde.
... that Expl danced was
“... that there was dancing.”/“... that people were dancing.”
- c. Gestern wurde (*es) getanzt.
yesterday was Expl danced
“Yesterday, there was dancing.”/“Yesterday, people were dancing.”
- (2) a. *(Er) wordt gedanst. (Dutch)
Expl is danced
“There is dancing.”/“People are dancing.”
- b. ... dat (er) wordt gedanst/gedanst wordt.³
... that (Expl) is danced/danced is
“... that there is dancing.”/“... that people are dancing.”
- c. Op het schip wordt (er) gedanst.
on the ship is (Expl) danced
“On the ship, there is dancing.”/“On the ship, people are dancing.”

* I'd like to thank Hans Kamp for kindly providing me with Dutch data and for discussing his intuitions with me.

¹ I use the term “expletive” here because *es* and *er* are standardly referred to as expletives and I always gloss *er* as Expl (expletive), no matter what its actual nature is.

² The presence of *es* can be grammatical, namely if *es* is a real pronoun standing for e.g. *das Ballett* ‘the ballet’.

³ I assume that *gedanst wordt* (i.e. the word order we find in German) represents the order derived in narrow syntax, while *wordt gedanst* is due to reordering at PF because the choice of word order is solely determined by prosody (Hans Kamp, p.c.).

1.2. Transitive Expletive Constructions (TECs) in German and Dutch

German and Dutch both allow for TECs and at first sight the constructions look identical in the two languages. They vary, however, in one important respect. In Dutch, we observe a Definiteness Effect (DE) with respect to the subject of a TEC, whereas no such DE is found in German TECs (contrary to what has often been claimed, cf. Cardinaletti 1990). The only requirement is that the subject be rather specific – *der Mann* ‘the man’ instead of *der Kanzler* ‘the chancellor’ in (3b) would be highly marginal.

- (3) a. Es haben einige Kinder Spinat gegessen. (German)
Expl have several children spinach eaten
 “Several children have eaten spinach.”
- b. Es hat soeben der Kanzler die Bühne betreten.
Expl has just the chancellor the platform entered
 “The chancellor has just mounted the platform.”
- (4) a. Er heeft iemand een appel gegeten. (Dutch)
Expl has someone an apple eaten
 “Someone has eaten an apple.”
- b. *Er heeft zo-even de kanselier het toneel betreden.
Expl has just the chancellor the platform entered
 “The chancellor has just mounted the platform.”

- These differences can be accounted for if *er* is analysed as the overt instantiation of an event argument.

2. Preliminary remarks – two subject positions in the Split-IP

- (5) a. Diesen Satz haben schon immer alle Studenten gehaßt. (German)
this sentence have already always all students hated
 “This sentence, all students have always hated.”
- b. *Diesen Satz haben schon immer die Studenten gehaßt.
this sentence have already always the students hated
- c. [?]Diesen Satz haben alle Studenten schon immer gehaßt.
this sentence have all students already always hated
- d. Diesen Satz haben die Studenten schon immer gehaßt.
this sentence have the students already always hated

Assuming that the adverbs occupy a fixed position, the above examples show that there are two subject positions in the *Mittelfeld*, one above the adverb and associated with definite

subjects (and marginally with indefinite and quantified subjects) and one lower than the adverb and associated with indefinite and quantified subjects, but never with definite subjects.

I propose that the lower position is SpecTP and the higher position SpecRefP (following Kiss 1996).

3. Expletive *es*

- *Es* is merged in SpecCP⁴, the sentence-initial position, to satisfy the V2 requirement if no other XP is merged in or moves to SpecCP.
- *Es* is a pure expletive. This means that, in German, it can only be merged in SpecCP.
 - ⇒ There is neither an empty counterpart of *es* (*pro* as assumed among others by Cardinaletti 1990 and Vikner 1995) in SpecTP nor can *es* move from an IP-internal position to SpecCP because
 - (i) SpecTP is always filled by (remnant) vP⁵
 - (ii) SpecRefP is not available for *es* because we can get definite DPs in TECs
 - ⇒ Therefore it is not surprising that *es* is not available in (1b), where SpecCP is not projected at all, and (1c), where SpecCP is filled by the adverb *gestern* ‘yesterday’.

4. *Er* cannot (only⁶) be an expletive

- *Er* cannot be an expletive because it is not semantically empty as can be seen in (6) where the impersonal passives with and without *er* vary in interpretation.
 - (6) De voorstelling kwam maar heel stroef op gang.
the show came only very slowly on going
 “The show got off to very grinding start.”
 - a. Maar op het laatst werd gelachen.
but on the last was laughed
 “But in the end the audience laughed.”
 - b. Maar op het laatst werd er gelachen.
but on the last was Expl laughed
 “But in the end there were some people who laughed.”
 - ⇒ The implicit agent of impersonal passives without *er* (6a) is a contextually known or inferable entity (here: the audience of the show).
 - ⇒ The presence of *er* (6b) restricts the implicit agent to an indefinite subset of that entity (here: some people in the audience of the show).

⁴ For the sake of simplicity I use CP here. I assume, however, that we actually have a Split-CP (Rizzi 1997) with sentence-initial subjects and certain sentence-initial adverbs usually occupying SpecFinP, whereas sentence-initial objects have to occupy either SpecFocP or SpecTopP.

⁵ see section 7

⁶ see section 6.2.

5. The motivation: thetic sentences

- answers to the question *What happened?*, out-of-the-blue sentences
- Thetic sentences report on events. ⇒ All arguments of the verb are introduced as event participants. ⇒ No argument of the verb can serve as subject of predication. ⇒ Thetic sentences can optionally contain a location-goal argument (cf. *there* in *There arrived three men.*) (Cardinaletti 2002)
- Wrt to the *there*-construction as an example of a thetic construction Kiss (1996) proposes the following.

There constructions always predicate about a specific point in space and time: about “here and now”, or “there and then”. *There* may then be the spelling out of the deictically or contextually bound event argument referring to the given point in space and time, in which case it is expected to have the feature <+specific>.

Kiss (1996, 135)

- Following Kiss (1996) and Cardinaletti (2002) I propose that Dutch can optionally feature such an event argument and that this event argument is realised by *er*.

6. Er as an event argument

6.1. TECs – thetic sentences

- TECs are thetic sentences because the complete event is the predicate.
- In Dutch, TECs require an event argument.
 - ⇒ *Er* is merged in SpecRefP, the designated position for definite subjects (cf. Kiss’ (1996) assumption that the event argument carries the feature <+specific>) and moves to SpecCP.
 - ⇒ As SpecRefP is not available for the subject DP, we can only have indefinite subjects in TECs; hence the Definiteness Effect is accounted for. (If *er* were an expletive, i.e. merged in SpecCP, the Definiteness Effect could not be explained.)
 - ⇒ The Definiteness Effect reflects the thetic nature of these sentences which convey novelty of the situation.
- The analysis of *er* as an event argument, or in Cardinaletti’s (2002) terms as a location-goal argument, is supported by the fact that *er* is historically derived from the distal locative demonstrative *daar* ‘there’.
- Therefore the construction in question should not be called TEC (transitive **expletive** construction) but TEAC (transitive **event argument** construction) in Dutch.

6.2. Impersonal passives

- *Er* – if present – is merged in SpecRefP.
 - ⇒ Hence the implicit agent of an impersonal passive (leaving aside the question of how the implicit agent actually gets its interpretation) can only have the indefinite interpretation, i.e. the implicit agent can only refer to the indefinite subset of the contextually known or inferable entity.
 - ⇒ The specific interpretation of the implicit agent is only available if *er* is absent from the structure.

- In embedded clauses and in main clauses where some other XP occupies SpecCP, the presence/absence of *er* depends on the interpretation that is to be conveyed by the sentence.
- If no other XP occupies SpecCP, however, *er* is obligatory. As (7) only has an indefinite interpretation, I conclude that also in this case *er* is an event argument merged in SpecRefP. The only difference being that in this case the presence of the event argument is obligatory because it also assumes the function of an expletive. In other words, if the event argument *er* is not present and no other XP can satisfy the V2 requirement, the derivation will crash because there is no expletive *er* that could be merged directly in SpecCP (and which would therefore allow for a definite interpretation of the implicit agent).

(7) Er werd gedanst.
Expl was danced
 “Some people (at the party) were dancing.”, **not**: “All people (at the party) were dancing.”

7. Structural analysis

Illustrated with the derivation of (the slightly modified) example (3b):

- (a) Es betrat der Kanzler die Bühne. (synthetic tense)
 (b) Es hat der Kanzler die Bühne betreten. (compound tense)

- The internal argument DP is merged in SpecVP.
- vP is obligatory. The external argument is merged in SpecvP; vP, however, does not have a specifier if the verb is passive or unaccusative.
- In OV-languages (like German and Dutch) the finite verb moves to T and the (remnant) vP moves to SpecTP.

(i) a. [TP [vP der Kanzler die Bühne <betrat>] betrat <vP>]

(i) b. [TP [vP der Kanzler die Bühne betreten] hat [AuxP <hat> <vP>]]

- If the subject is definite/specific it moves to SpecRefP. In this case, the finite verb moves to Ref in main clauses, but stays in T in embedded clauses.
 [In Dutch, the event argument *er* (if present as, e.g., inTECs) is merged in SpecRefP ⇔ DE.]

(ii) a. [RefP [DP der Kanzler] betrat [TP [vP <der Kanzler> die Bühne <betrat>] <betrat> <vP>]]

(ii) b. [RefP [DP der Kanzler] hat [TP [vP <der Kanzler> die Bühne betreten] <hat> [AuxP <hat> <vP>]]]

- In main clauses the finite verb moves to C and some XP moves to SpecCP or expletive *es* is merged in SpecCP. In embedded clauses, the complementiser, e.g. *daß*, is merged in C.

[In Dutch TEC main clauses, the event argument *er* moves to SpecCP.]

(iii) a. [CP Es betrat [_{RefP} [_{DP} der Kanzler] <betrat> [_{TP} [_{VP} <der Kanzler> die Bühne <betrat>] <betrat> <VP>]]]

(iii) b. [CP Es hat [_{RefP} [_{DP} der Kanzler] <hat> [_{TP} [_{VP} <der Kanzler> die Bühne betreten] <hat> [_{AuxP} <hat> <VP>]]]]]

embedded clause:

(iv) a. [CP daß [_{RefP} [_{DP} der Kanzler] Ref [_{TP} [_{VP} <der Kanzler> die Bühne <betrat>] betrat <VP>]]]

(iv) b. [CP daß [_{RefP} [_{DP} der Kanzler] Ref [_{TP} [_{VP} <der Kanzler> die Bühne betreten] hat [_{AuxP} <hat> <VP>]]]]]

8. German again ... and open questions

- The distribution of *da* (which is equally of locative origin) slightly resembles that of *er*, as can be seen in (8).

- (8) a. ... daß da getanzt wurde.
 ... *that DA danced was*
 “... that there was dancing.”/“... that people were dancing (there).”
- b. Gestern wurde da getanzt.
yesterday was DA danced
 “Yesterday there was dancing.”/“Yesterday people were dancing (there).”

- The true nature of *da* is, however, hard to determine.
 - It is not devoid of meaning (as indicated in (8)) and can therefore not be an expletive.
 - It has probably not (completely) undergone the step from being a locative to being an event argument yet.
 - ⇒ Although *da* might also restrict the interpretation of the implicit agent, it still has a locative flavour (as indicated in (8)).
 - ⇒ If *da* cooccurs with a(nother) locative, it is either interpreted as a distal demonstrative (9a, c) or has a resumptive nature (9b, c).

- (9) a. Auf dem Schiff da wird getanzt.
on the ship DA is danced
 “On the ship over there there is dancing.”/“On the ship over there people are dancing.”
- b. Auf dem Schiff, da wird getanzt.
on the ship DA is danced
 “On the ship, there is dancing.”/“On the ship, people are dancing.”

- c. [Es ist bitter zu wissen, was er draußen verpaßt!]
 [it is bitter to know what he outside misses-out-on]
 ["It is bitter to know what he misses out on in the outside world."]

Während er hier einen streng geheimen Schlagbaum bewacht,
while he here a strictly secret barrier guards
 "While he guards a top secret barrier here

wird da draußen getanzt und geliebt und gelacht.

is DA outside danced and loved and laughed

out there, people are dancing, making love and laughing."

(from: Reinhard Mey, "Alle Soldaten woll'n nach Haus")

- The fact that *da* can occur together with a definite subject (even in constructions that look exactly like TECs) shows that *da* cannot be an event argument merged in SpecRefP.

- (10) Da hat der Ministerpräsident eine mitreißende Rede gehalten.
DA has the prime minister a rousing speech held
 "The Prime Minister gave a rousing speech."

The translation of *da* also constitutes a problem. On the one hand, – given the right intonation – (10) can express appreciation ("Wow! The Prime Minister has given a rousing speech."). On the other hand, *da* can simply spell out "there and then" like the event arguments identified by Kiss (1996) ⇒ "On that occasion, the Prime Minister gave a rousing speech."

- There are other instances where *da* seems to behave like an event argument. Imagine, for example, a teacher standing in front of a class and uttering the following sentences.

- (11) a. Wer hat gelacht?
 "Who has laughed?"
- b. Wer hat da gelacht?
who has DA laughed
 roughly: "Who has dared to laugh?"

In (11a), the teacher asks for the name(s) of the student(s) who laughed without any other semantic or pragmatic implications. So the question without *da* requires a definite referent as an answer.

In (11b), on the contrary, the teacher does not necessarily ask for names; instead (11b) is more or less a reproach which implies that some student(s) laughed, thus referring to an indefinite number of students out of a definite set of students.

- ⇒ While German *es* and Dutch *er* represent a clear-cut case of an expletive and an event argument, respectively, the nature of German *da* is less clear. *Da* is certainly not an

expletive but it has characteristics of both a locative adverb and an event argument. In addition, at least some of the features that make *da* look like an event argument can also be explained by its locative nature. Therefore we probably witness the locative *da* being reanalysed as an event argument.

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