A corpus-based constructionist approach to the diachrony of Dutch postpositions

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Within Germanic languages, Dutch – especially Hollandic and therefore Standard Dutch – takes a unique position as regards the use of postpositions. The main functional area of postpositions is the expression of so-called trajectivity (Draye 1992): In a construction such as *de berg op* 'onto the mountain' the adpositional object of reference (*berg* 'mountain') denotes the place where a movement towards a certain target takes place, i.e., the path. The postposition signals the direction of the movement towards a target (in this case, the top of the mountain). Trajectivity, according to van Bree (2010), therefore includes both the central meaning of movement on a specified path and a secondary, implied meaning of directionality.

I investigate the grammaticalization process of postpositions, from postnominal adverbs into semantically specified adpositions, coinciding with the loss of case morphology in Dutch. A corpus study using prose and scientific texts from 1300 until 1900 was conducted, with data retrieved from the Corpus Middelnederlands as well as selected texts from the DBNL database, comprising texts from the whole of the Dutch-speaking area on the European mainland. The development of adverbs into postpositions was traced. Starting point is the postnominal occurrence of adverds in constructions of the form [*ter/ten* N_{Dat} Adv], the future object of reference (path) being a noun in dative case following the cliticized preposition *te* (as suggested by van der Horst 2008). Possible source adverbs include *af* 'from, down', *door* 'through', *in* 'in', *om* 'around', *op* 'on, onto', *over* 'over', *uit* 'out of'.

Throughout the course of Early Modern Dutch, with early signs in Middle Dutch, there is a gradual switch from adverb to postposition, resulting in grammaticalized constructions of the form [*de/het* N P] and starting in constructions which contain the adverbs *door* and *om*. It becomes clear from the data that postpositions, not only diachronically but also synchronically, prefer certain reference objects which can serve as actual paths (e.g., *berg* 'mountain' is a batter path than *schoot* 'lap'). Moreover, certain adverbs, too, are less compatible with the primary semantics of postpositional constructions. Generally, "ideal" postpositional constructions include a path and a postposition which together foreground path-movement, but not telic/perfective semantics, and thus only imply directionality instead of highlighting it. Hence, *in* 'in, into' and *uit* 'out of' only grammaticalize into postpositions somewhat later, through what seems to be an analogical drift.

On a last, cross-linguistic note, similar constructional preferences as those in the grammaticalization process of Dutch postpositions can be observed in contemporary German. An online survey reveals that speakers of German find constructions such as *den Berg hinauf* 'onto the mountain' unproblematic, whereas *?die Kirche hinein* 'into the church' is regarded as strictly ungrammatical.

References

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