

# The long tail of Jespersen's Cycle in Flemish dialects: Continuity, change, and linguistic recycling

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All extant Germanic languages have gone through Jespersen's Cycle (1) (Jespersen 1917), but they have done so at different speeds. While High German already reached stage III by 1300 (Jäger 2008: 149f.), English between 1350 and 1420 (Wallage 2005: 195), and Low German between 1450 and 1550 (Breitbarth 2014a: 44), Northern Dutch only completed the change in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Burridge 1993:190f., Van Koppen 2019), and Southern Dutch (Flemish, Brabantic, Limburgish) varieties only began dropping the old preverbal marker of negation as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Beheydt 1998).

## (1) Jespersen's Cycle in Dutch

Stage I	> Stage II	> Stage III
<i>ic en weet het</i>	<i>ic en weet het niet</i>	<i>ik weet het niet</i>

While socio-linguistic factors play a role in these different speeds (cf. the papers in Nevalainen & Rutten 2012, Walkden & Breitbarth 2019), it has also been noted that the preverbal marker in those Southern Dutch varieties where it still persists today seems to have acquired new meanings, possibly accounting for the diachronic stability (Breitbarth & Haegeman 2010). Besides pleonastic uses in weak negative polarity contexts (Neuckermans 2008, Barbiers et al. 2008) (2), Neuckermans (2008) also mentions (rare) uses outside (weak or strong) NPI-contexts (3).

## (2) *Je moet niet komen voordat ik geschreven en heb.* you must not come before=that I written EN have

'You must not come before I have written.' (N141 Kortrijk, Barbiers et al. 2009:60)

## (3) *Ze pakte eu portefeuille waar da=se eu sleutelke in en doet.* she took her purse where that=she her key.DIM in EN puts

'She took her purse where she puts in her little key.'

(O248 Halle; Neuckermans 2008: 176)

Breitbarth & Haegeman (2014; 2015) have noted that the old preverbal marker *en* seems to express that the proposition it occurs in is unexpected for the speaker or the addressee. In (4), for instance, the speaker implies that just a brief contact passing by someone should not be expected to lead to an infection, but in her case, it invariably does.

- (4) *ik kom eenen tegen met buikgriep, k'en en der van* I come one against  
with stomach bug I=EN have there of

‘I meet someone with a stomach bug: I pick it up.’ (I124p Lapscheure; L.Haegeman, p.c.)

In the current paper, I look at new transcriptions (cf. Ghyselen et al. 2020) of recordings of spontaneous dialect speech from the ‘Voices from the past’-collection<sup>1</sup> with the aim of

- (i) charting the use of *en* in (historical)<sup>2</sup> Flemish dialects,
- (ii) arriving at a refined analysis of the semantic and pragmatic properties of *en*, and (iii)  
proposing a new analysis of the diachronic development of this particle.

I will show that

- (i) the geographic distribution confirms earlier findings by Koelmans (1967), which were based on much older data, showing a diachronically stable situation at least during the last 100 years,
- (ii) *en* can be analysed as an emergent mirative strategy, but not (yet) a full-blown mirative marker (cf. Aikhenvald 2012 and literature cited therein), and that
- (iii) this analysis lends further support to Walkden’s & Breitbarth’s (2019) application of Trudgill’s socio-linguistic typology to different scenarios of diachronic syntactic change and continuity, in that it represents a case of additive complexification in exactly the socio-linguistic scenario in which one would expect it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dialectloket.be/geluid/stemmen-uit-het-verleden/>.

<sup>2</sup> The recordings were made in the 1960s and 1970s, the speakers are all born around 1900.

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