

A constructionist account of the *weg*-construction(s) of Afrikaans

Preference for a 20-minute-slot

In a series of articles from the early 2000s, Verhagen (2002, 2003a,b) has presented a constructionist account of the syntax and semantics of the Dutch argument structure construction exemplified in (1), labeled the *weg*-construction after the obligatory presence of the NP *een weg* ‘a way’ in the construction’s object slot. Semantically, this Dutch construction closely resembles the English *way*-construction discussed by Jackendoff (1990) and Goldberg (1995), among others, see ex. (2): both constructions denote an event in which the subject referent creates and traverses a (spatial or metaphorical) path, despite obstacles or difficulties. Formally, however, the Dutch pattern is (formally) ditransitive, also including a reflexive indirect object that is co-referential with the subject, whereas the English pattern is monotransitive, with a single, possessively marked object NP. Constructions that are relevantly similar to the Dutch and English constructions in (1) and (2) – formally and/or semantically – have been noted in several other (mostly Germanic) languages as well, see e.g. Toivonen (2002) on Swedish, Sveen (2002) on Norwegian, and Pedersen (2013) on German and Spanish.

- (1) *Meer dan tachtig gevangenen hebben zich een weg naar de vrijheid **gegraven** uit een van Brazilië's best beveiligde gevangenissen.* (Open Sonar corpus)
(2) *He made a string of enemies as he **elbowed** his way to success.* (Corpus of Contemporary American English)

The examples from the Taalkommissiekorpus in (3) show that Afrikaans, too, displays the possibility of encoding directed motion events by means of a construction with an NP object with *weg* ‘way’ or *pad* ‘path’ that denotes the spatial or metaphorical path that is traversed by the subject referent.

- (3) a. *Lula (60), wat sy pad **gebaan** het van vakbondpolitiek tot die leierskap van die wêreld se vierde grootste demokrasie, het swaar geleun op sy charisma om hom verkies te kry.* (Non-fiction, non-academic, newspaper)
b. *... golwende lang gras op die vlaktes soos 'n see waardeur die ruiters vir hulle 'n pad moes **baan**.* (Fiction, prose)
c. *Hy **druk** vir hom 'n pad **oop** deur die protesterende seuns tot by sy jong vriend wat teen die voordeur se kosyn leun, totaal uitgeput.* (Non-fiction, non-academic, books)
d. *... terwyl hy sy weg deur flardes gesprekke en vlae lagbuie na die stampvol onderdak en die kroeg toe **baan**, bly die beeld van haar ryp, gul mond voor sy oë dans.* (Fiction, prose)
e. *Ek **voel** vir my 'n weg **oop** tussen al die dae van my verlede.* (Fiction, prose)
f. *Met haar hand in myne vasgeklem, **beur** ek 'n weg **oop** na vars lug buite.* (Fiction, prose)

The present paper presents the first extensive corpus-based investigation of such patterns in Afrikaans. The overall aim is to elucidate the formal and semantic differences and similarities with the Dutch and English constructions in (1) and (2), from a constructionist theoretical perspective. We will focus primarily on the following three clusters of subtopics:

- The variation between *weg*, *pad* and occasionally even other nouns (see 4 below for an example with *baan* ‘track, course’) as lexical fillers of the object slot. Afrikaans allows more variation in this regard than (present-day) Dutch and English. An interesting question, for instance, is whether the *pad* and *weg* patterns occur with the same ranges of verbs and directional phrases; if they do not, this could be indicative of subtle semantic differences.
- The variation between the “English-style” pattern with a possessively marked *pad*- or *weg*-phrase (as in 3a and 3d), the pattern with a reflexive pronoun marked with the default object preposition *vir* (as in 3b, 3c, 3e), which more closely resembles the *weg*-construction of present-day Dutch in that the pattern includes a beneficiary argument, and the simple transitive pattern with just an indefinite determiner in the *weg/pad*-object (as in 3f). In older texts, the reflexive pattern is occasionally also found without *vir*, i.e. with a bare indirect object pronoun, as in (5) below, but this may have been a “Dutchism”.
- The frequent presence of the resultative particle *oop* ‘open’, as in (3c, 3e, 3f), which seems to underscore the force-dynamics involved (i.e., obstacles have to be removed in order to “clear” the path). The Dutch and English constructions in (1) and (2) do not feature a similar element, though, for Dutch, Verhagen (2003a: 40ff) also discusses a different, *non-reflexive weg*-construction in which the equivalent particle *can* be present, as in *Hij liet de weg voor onderhandelingen open* ‘He left the way for negotiations open’. We will look into the question whether the use of *oop* in Afrikaans instances such as (3c,e,f) can be traced back to such patterns.

(4) *Die ontsnapte water het vir hom 'n baan geskep al op die laagliggende dele in die noordwaartse rigting.* (Internet example)

(5) *Deur dié stukke het [Willem Postma] hom as volksman geopenbaar, het hy hom 'n weg gebaan na die hart van die Vrystaatse volk ...* (Totius in *Die Huisgenoot*, 1921)

An important recurrent question in all of this is whether the different attested formal patterns should be seen as distinct argument structure constructions. The data for the investigation are drawn primarily from the Taalkommissiekorpus, with additional data culled from the Internet as well as from a self-compiled corpus of newspaper language.

References

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