DO in English, Dutch and German: An introduction

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Between March and July 1995, a series of Bible fragments were published in the Dagblad Tubantia/Twentsche Courant from the projected translation of the Dutch Bible into the dialect of Twente, a region in the east of The Netherlands. Readers of the newspaper had been asked to comment on the translations, an invitation which produced an overwhelming response. One of the objects of many readers’ criticism was the occurrence of periphrastic door “do”, which had been employed regularly by the translators as a kind of “extra addition” to the sentence:

We gebruikten nogal eens het werkwoord “doon” als een soort extra toevoeging. Bijvoorbeeld in “etn doon” [i.e. “etn, em, do”]. Veel lezers vinden dat kinderachtig klinken, maar het valt niet te ontkennen dat het nogal vaak voorkomt. We zullen het zoveel mogelijk weglaten. (2 September 1995, p. 8)

The use of the construction was criticised because to many readers it sounded “childish”; nevertheless, the translators argue, it is extremely common in the dialect. By way of concession to their readers, they promise in their comment to avoid this periphrastic construction as much as possible in their translations.

The passage quoted here illustrates a number of important points. To begin with, it shows that periphrastic door as in the construction etn doon – that is, as it occurs in affirmative declarative sentences in which it serves as a tense carrier – is a feature of the Twents dialect (see also Cornips, this volume); more importantly perhaps, the quotation shows the extent to which the usage is stigmatised by speakers of the dialect itself, so much so in fact that the translators give in to their readers’ criticism by offering to remove it as much as possible from the final version of their translation. Periphrastic DO occurs in many dialects of Dutch, though it is not part of the standard language (Nuijten 1962; see also Cornips 1994b:283). What is more, the auxiliary shows up briefly in the early stages of the language acquisition process of native speakers of standard Dutch (Schaerlaeken 1977:158; Tieken-Boon van Oostade 1990:19), while even parents

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1This passage may be translated as follows: “We often used the verb ‘doon’ as a kind of extra addition. For example in ‘etn doon’. Many readers believe that this sounds childish, but it cannot be denied that it is rather frequent. We will leave it out as much as possible”. We are grateful to Rolf Bremner for pointing this passage out to us.
apparently adopt DO when addressing their very young children (Giesbers 1983–84:60). The same situation is found in present-day German: periphrastic tun is a characteristic of many dialects of German but not of the standard, and according to Hausmann (1974:173) many German children have to unlearn the construction when they enter school. And the construction is likewise heavily stigmatised in Germany today (see Eroms, this volume). The reason for the stigmatisation of the construction in Dutch and German is obvious: it is the tension between the standard and non-standard forms of the language, which is still felt very keenly today, which is responsible for furnishing the construction with a distinctly negative label: it is to be avoided at all cost.

The case of English is quite different: periphrastic do first made its appearance in the written language in the thirteenth century in affirmative declarative sentences (the use of periphrastic do as a pro-verb and as a causative is believed to be much older), while it subsequently developed a number of purely syntactic functions (for a useful overview of the chronology in these developments, see the graph in Stein 1990:12). Today, “empty” periphrastic do is obligatory in negative sentences and questions which do not already have an auxiliary verb, and this is apparently the case in the majority of the dialects of English. As in the case of English, periphrastic DO likewise has a long history in Dutch and German (see van der Horst and Fischer, both in this volume); we thus have to do with what Weinreich et al. (1968) call an “actuation problem” here. Why did the auxiliaries, which have a common Indo-European origin, develop differently in English on the one hand and Dutch and German on the other? The question is an interesting one, though as such not unique; see for example the case of the be going to+infinitive construction with respect to English as against standard German and Swedish, discussed by Danchev and Kytö (1994).

The present volume, which contains articles based on papers presented at the symposium “Do/doen/tun in English, Dutch and German: History and present-day variation” (Leiden, March 1996), addresses questions such as this one. In addition, it aims at providing contrastive data from the history of the periphrastic auxiliary in Dutch and German, but also from that of English itself, which may shed further light on a question which has occupied many scholars for quite a number of decades now: the origin of periphrastic do. Though many suggestions have been made in the past, ranging from a semantic approach (e.g. Denison 1985) to a generative syntactic (Roberts 1993:274–309) and a contact-universals one (Poussa 1990), no single solution to the problem of the origin of periphrastic do in English seems to have presented itself, and new suggestions are still being offered (Garrett forthc.).

As the title of the present volume indicates, the interest of the articles may be

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2 One additional article has been included here, i.e. the one by Ryckeboer, which previously appeared, in Dutch, in a Festschrift for V.F. Vanacker (Ryckeboer 1986).

3 For a survey of a number of the main views until the late 1980s, see Tieken-Boon van Ostade (1990). See also Stein (1990).
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identified as historical on the one hand (Poussa, van der Horst, Verhagen and Fischer) and contemporary in the sense of dealing with variation in present-day dialects of English, Dutch and German on the other (Klemola, Eroms, Ryckeboer and Cornips). Patricia Poussa thus presents a case for combining two theories for the origin of periphrastic do in English, the causative origin and the Celtic substratum theories. While the causative origin of do has been situated in the East of England, where this use of do may have been reinforced by large Flemish settlements, western dialects of Middle English may have undergone considerable Celtic influence through contact with Wales. Poussa views the adoption of periphrastic do as a bridging strategy, used in order to facilitate communication between dialects with different verb morphologies. A condition for such a development would be extensive contact between the two dialect areas, which Poussa attributes to the considerable social interchange there must have been as a result of Edward I’s campaigns during the latter half of the thirteenth century.

Joop van der Horst discusses the earliest history of the Dutch cognate of the English periphrastic auxiliary, doen. He goes into the question why Dutch doen did not develop similar grammatical functions to those of periphrastic do in English. While during the Early Middle Dutch and Early Middle English periods (or even earlier) the originally full verb developed the characteristics of a causative auxiliary verb, grammatical differences emerged. The English auxiliary lost its causative function around the beginning of the Modern English period and instead gradually developed its current use in negative sentences, in sentences with subject-verb inversion, as a pro-verb and in emphatic sentences (the so-called NICE properties of do). By providing evidence concerning the development of two related verbs in Middle Dutch, i.e. doen and laten, Van der Horst argues that in the thirteenth century doen developed in such a way as to block the rise of any NICE properties in this verb.

Arië Verhagen observes that addressing the topic of doidoentum in English, Dutch and German in itself poses an important conceptual problem. In doing so, it is assumed that in some sense we are talking about the same element, while at the same time the reason for making such a small element a topic of discussion is that its use over different languages and different periods shows large amounts of variation. Verhagen puts the question as to what an analysis which simultaneously aims at accounting for unity and diversity should look like. He proposes an answer to this general question by reviewing some theoretical consequences of an analysis of a specific issue, viz. that of changes in the use of causative doen in Dutch over the last three centuries.

Annette Fischer concentrates on the use of the tun periphrasis in Early New High German, i.e. the time when complex restructuring processes in the whole system of periphrastic verb forms and new functional allocations are taking place. In this period, the auxiliary verbs haben, sein and werden receive their specific grammatical categorisation. The question arises as to what the particular role of the auxiliary tun in this reorganisation of the verbal system may have been. Another question dealt with is whether the characteristics of tun periphrasis in the modern dialects and the colloquial
language, such as polyfunctionality, optionality and latency, hold good for the Early High German period too. To answer these questions, Fischer examines the types of occurrence of *tan* periphrasis, their grammatical forms and their respective functions in a number of selected Early New High German texts, concluding that the polyfunctionality of *tan* periphrasis does not seem to have emerged in the course of its historical development, but to have probably existed from the beginning.

Juhani Klemola's article deals with the supposed habitual use of periphrastic *do* in south-western dialects of English English. An analysis of nineteenth and twentieth-century sources – the former being descriptive and the latter empirically based – produced no evidence for this meaning of *do*. An analysis of his own corpus, however, which is compiled on the basis of the *Survey of English Dialects* tape-recordings and fieldworker handbooks and the tape-recordings from the Somerset Rural Life Museum, showed that if a distinction was made into present and past forms of *do* a habitual meaning was indeed attested: while present-tense *do* is never used in a habitual sense, the past tense of the auxiliary does occur as a habitual marker in the majority of cases, though it is also found in other, non-habitual semantic environments. Although in the German language area periphrastic *tan* was widespread and generally accepted between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, it came to be stigmatised by speakers from the lower social classes; around the same time it developed into a marker of regional usage as well. These developments, according to Hans-Werner Erom, barred the construction from receiving a place in the grammar of Standard German, the prestige variety. Erom's contribution focuses on present-day German and other, especially Low German, dialects. In Bavarian, according to Eroms, periphrastic *tan* is the unmarked construction for the subjunctive and in Low German for the indicative in subordinate clauses. Leonie Cornips studied the vernacular spoken in Heerlen, a town situated close to the German border in the southeast of the Netherlands. She correlates the use of periphrastic *tan* in the dialect with the variables education and occupation of the speakers, finding a relationship between these variables and the use of the construction as an avoidance strategy for the inflection of complex verbs, as well as when they occur along with modifiers which normally indicate habitual meaning in Standard Dutch. H. Ryckebroer presents an investigation into the highly restricted use of the auxiliary *doen* in southern Dutch dialects, i.e. Dutch dialects spoken south of the rivers Rhine, Waal and Meuse in the Netherlands and in Belgium. Despite the fact that in the literature on these dialects the periphrastic use of *doen* is never mentioned, the auxiliary was actually attested in previous centuries, though no longer so in the present day. Ryckebroer has encountered the use of *doen* only in tag questions. In the conclusion to his article, he offers links between developments in the Southern Dutch dialects with the past history of periphrastic *do* in English.

The articles in this volume focus on three West-Germanic languages only. English, Dutch and German, however, are by no means the only languages in which periphrastic *do* is found. Gunnel Tottie, for instance, informed us that present-day Swiss German has
some interesting *nuo* constructions (personal communication), while another language in which the periphrastic auxiliary occurs is Frisian. Thus, in Western Lauwers, a dialect of Frisian, *dwaan* occurs combined with a topicalised infinitive, as in

\begin{align*}
(1) & \quad \text{smoke dochter net} \\
& \quad \text{to smoke did he not} \\
& \quad \text{"he did not smoke".}
\end{align*}

In East Frisian (Saterlands), instances such as example (2) are found:

\begin{align*}
(2) & \quad \text{we do our language respect} \\
& \quad \text{"we respect our language".}
\end{align*}

Possibly, the origin of this construction was influenced by contact with Low German. Only a few instances of periphrastic *dwaan* have been attested in Old Frisian, while the causative use of *dwaan* seems a later development (see Treken-Boon van Ostade 1990:15). In Modern Frisian the verbs *lifte* “let” and *meitse* “make” are used as causative auxiliaries, as in examples (3) and (4):

\begin{align*}
(3) & \quad \text{ik liet hem strofelje} & \text{I let him stumble} \\
& \quad \text{"I let him stumble"}
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
(4) & \quad \text{in stien makke dat er strofelje} & \text{a stone made that he stumbled} \\
& \quad \text{"he stumbled over a stone".}
\end{align*}

In earlier periods, *lifte* and *dwaan* had co-occurred as causative auxiliaries. From all this it is clear that further research into other language areas may well produce profitable results, both from the point of view of the description of the periphrastic auxiliary in these languages and their dialects themselves as from a comparative perspective.

Cornips (1994b:284–285) argues that the occurrence of the auxiliary *doen* in Dutch dialects is a much underresearched area, observing that empirical research would show that current opinions as to the supposedly empty syntactic status of *doen* will very likely have to be revised considerably. In this light it would be interesting to find out, for example, whether the use of *doen* in the dialect of Twente is indeed as superfluous as the Bible translators seem to believe. Cornips (1994b) shows that in Heerlen Dutch

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*The following brief account is based on information kindly provided to us by Jarich Hoelestra from the Frysk Akademy in Ljouwert.*
periphrastic *doen* has a clear syntactic function (see also Cornips, this volume); likewise, the occurrence of *doon* in Low German is restricted to subsentences (Rohdenburg 1986). Though a systematic investigation into the geographical spread of the construction in the Dutch language area has thus far never been undertaken, the archives of the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam contain a wealth of information on the use of the construction in many different dialects of Dutch. It is therefore also the aim of the present volume to stimulate further systematic research in that area.

Eroms (this volume) argues that in present-day Bavarian the periphrastic is in the process of acquiring new stylistic values. The use of periphrastic *tun* is thus apparently no longer subject to the former constraint of social stigmatisation. Presumably this development is due to the greater acceptance nowadays of non-standard forms of language. In the light of the recent official recognition of the Dutch dialects of Nedersaksen and Limburg as regional languages (in 1995 and 1997, respectively), it may well be the case that, like *tun*, the Dutch periphrastic will similarly lose the stigma associated with its use. If such a change does indeed occur, we would take this opportunity to predict that in the second edition of the Dutch Bible translation all the instances of *doon* which have now been removed will be restored.

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5We were informed of this by Jo Daan a number of years ago already.