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Interpreting particles in dead and living languages : a construction grammar approach to the semantics of Dutch ergens and Ancient Greek pou

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CHAPTER 2

Research questions and introduction to *ergens*

2.1 Introduction

If we were to ask Dutch speakers out of the blue what *ergens* means, they would say something like *at some place*.¹ This is not surprising, as *ergens* is the general word for somewhere/anywhere in Dutch.² An example can be found in (1).

- (1) Ik realiseerde me ineens dat ik het mes niet zomaar ergens neer kon
I realized me suddenly that I the knife not just ERGENS down could
leggen.
put.

(De grijpgrage handjes van mijn dochttertje kennende voorzag ik onaangename gevolgen.)

Suddenly, I realized that I could not just put the knife down anywhere (*ergens*). (I knew the grabby little fingers of my little daughter too well, not to foresee unpleasant consequences.)³

However, there are many examples in which this locative interpretation is impossible. For instance in example (2), a locative interpretation is very unlikely, because a location in the physical world does not seem to be appropriate in this context. The

¹This was tested on 8 native Dutch speakers, who all answered immediately with a description of the indefinite locative interpretation.

²Unlike English, Dutch does not have the possibility to differentiate between somewhere and anywhere.

³From: CGN comp-o/nl/fn001047.

interpretation of *ergens* in this example can be paraphrased by *in (some part of) my mind*. Interestingly, we find in the paraphrase another locative element *in* that does not refer to a place in the physical world. Something locative seems to have remained in this interpretation, although it seems to refer to a place in someone's mind.⁴ As we will see in chapter 3, one can even add *inside* to *ergens* without any change to the modal interpretation.

- (2) Maar toch, toch had ik vroeger ergens óók altijd geloofd dat
 But still, still had I when I was a child ERGENS also always believed that
- mijn moeders verhaal maar een verzinsel was, een
 my mother's story only a figment of her imagination was, a
- sprookje zoals alle andere die ze me had verteld, alleen zonder
 fairy-tale like all others that she me had told, only without
- “zij leefden nog lang en gelukkig”.
 ‘they lived ever after long and happily’.

But still, when I was a child I had *ergens* also believed that my mother's story was only a figment of her imagination, a fairy-tale like all the other ones she had told me, only without ‘and they lived happily ever after’.⁵

Apart from this modal interpretation, *ergens* has yet another use:

- (3) Maar hebben jullie niks meegemaakt vandaag? Ik bedoel we moeten 't
 But have you nothing experienced today? I mean we must it
- toch wel ergens (1) over kunnen hebben wat echt ergens (2) over
 PTCL PTCL ERGENS (1) about can have what really ERGENS (2) about
- gaat toch of niet?
 goes PTCL or not?

But did nothing happen to you today? I mean, we should be able to find something (*ergens*) to talk about that is really meaningful, shouldn't we?^{6 7}

The indefinite *ergens* is also used as the indefinite object of a preposition, instead of *something*, as in both instances of *ergens* in example (3). This is not to say that it is impossible to use *iets* ‘something’ in this kind of situation, but it is just not the standard way to do it. When a Dutch speaker wants to use an indefinite pronoun

⁴A location in someone's mind is of course a mental space. This last term is also a technical term from Mental Space Theory (Fauconnier, 1994 [1985]). In chapter 5 we will come back to this and discuss *ergens* from within Mental Space Theory.

⁵From: Dorrestein (2003).

⁶Adapted from: CGN comp-a/nl/fn000555.

⁷To improve readability, the examples that were used in the surveys have been adapted. Restarts were taken out as well as agreement mistakes. In addition, all examples that were used had 9-15 words on each side of *ergens*, while still being complete sentences.

which depends on a preposition, the locative indefinite adverb will be used instead of the indefinite pronoun *something*.

The three uses above are the ones mentioned in the standard Van Dale dictionary of Dutch, which paraphrases the modal interpretation as *in enig opzicht, onder zeker aspect* ‘in some respect’. The largest scientific dictionary of Dutch, the *Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (WNT), in an article published in 1917, does not mention the modal option, but it does give a temporal use paraphrased as ‘ever’. This use is not present in the synchronic corpora used in this study.⁸ What is present, though, is a more concrete temporal use which is more comparable to a metaphorical extension from place to time as in (4). Although *at some point in time* is a very common metaphor, the paraphrase that is used in the dictionaries for locative *ergens, at some place*, cannot be used in this context.

- (4) Speaker 1: Wanneer heeft ze toen ook alweer haar rijbewijs gehaald?
When has she then also again her drivers license got?

Weet je dat nog? Speaker 2: Ergens in 't najaar. Speaker 1: Oktober of
Know you that still? ERGENS in the fall. October or

zo hè? Speaker 2: Ja, oktober, november dacht ik ook.
so PTCL? Yes, October, November thought I also.

Speaker 1: When did she pass her drivers license exam back then? Do you still remember? Speaker 2: *Ergens* in the fall. Speaker 1: October or something, isn't it? Speaker 2: Yes, I also thought something like October, November.⁹

The locative interpretation is not only metaphorically extended to a temporal one, but also more generally to a point on a scale as in example (5).

- (5) Enkele gevallen zei minister Van Boxtel en daarmee bedoelt ie ergens
Several cases said minister Van Boxtel and with that means he ERGENS

tussen de vijf en de tien gevallen van illegaal namaken.
between the five and the ten cases of illegal reproduction.

Several cases minister Van Boxtel said and by several cases he means *ergens* between five and ten cases of illegal reproduction.¹⁰

This last use implies that the speaker is not very precise. A comparable use which evokes less of a scale is found in example (6). In this example, we may paraphrase *ergens* with the interpretation *about/around*.

- (6) Ik speel orgel vanaf mijn tiende ergens, ik heb tot mijn achttiende
I play organ from my tenth ERGENS, I have until my eighteenth

⁸The following corpora were used in this study: the Corpus Gesproken Nederlands (CGN), the Eindhoven corpus and a corpus of novels. For a more elaborate description see chapter 5.

⁹Adapted from: CGN comp-a/nl/fn000393.

¹⁰Adapted from: CGN comp-f/nl/fn007187.

veel les gehad, hoewel met twee - drie jaar onderbreking.
many lesson had, although with two - three years interruption.

I have been playing the organ from about ten years old *ergens*, until my eighteenth birthday, I took many lessons, though with a break of two - three years in between.¹¹

In total, we have now seen six different uses of *ergens*. This raises the question of how an addressee knows which interpretation to choose.

2.2 Research questions

The main question in this part on *ergens* will be how a language user decides on his interpretation of *ergens* when so many possibilities are available. What knowledge of the language does a language user need, and what kind of properties of the context are required for a specific interpretation? These are not easy questions. As Riemer (2010, 227) states:

”In natural language[,] sentences [which are ambiguous because they contain polysemous items [EK]] do not typically create confusion. Why not is still a mystery. We do not yet know how humans succeed in picking the right senses of ambiguous words: the relevant psychological processes are simply not at all understood.”

In the coming chapters, I will focus on the properties of the context of *ergens* and see whether we can link people’s interpretation to the presence of specific features of the context. For this study, I will use both surveys and corpus data. In addition, I will try to find out whether the regularities that were found on the synchronic level, can be explained by the historical development of the interpretations of *ergens*.

Theoretically there are many ways people may disambiguate *ergens* using the context. For this study, I have considered three options.

1. A default based approach: The language user assumes *ergens* is interpreted as locative, unless the context forces him to think otherwise.
2. A context based approach: The language user uses his knowledge of the context¹² to determine the interpretation. If there is no context or the context is ambiguous, he will just guess.
3. A combination of both: If there is no context the language user uses as default the most concrete interpretation (i.e. locative). In other cases, his knowledge of the context will be used to decide.

¹¹From: <http://s12.invisionfree.com/organist/ar/t2314.htm>.

¹²By knowledge of the context, I mean both communicative knowledge and conventions as well as knowledge of linguistic conventions and constructions.

As we will see in the coming chapters, there are some indications that the last option could account best for the results of the surveys on *ergens*. However, further research will show whether this conclusion is generalizable over other poly-interpretable forms as well.

In chapter 3, three surveys will be discussed. In these surveys, we will compare the interpretations of *ergens* in minimally modified examples¹³ from a corpus, with the interpretations of the same sentences when very little context was provided and when the context was modified. On the basis of the results we will propose a generalization on which properties of the context lead to which interpretations.

In chapter 4, the generalizations on the properties of the context that seemed to make the difference in the surveys will be tested against more corpus data. In chapter 5, we will look at the pragmatic properties of the examples of *ergens* in the corpora.

In chapter 6 we will investigate whether the types of context that were distinguished in the synchronic corpus also played a role in the historical development of the various interpretations of *ergens*.

¹³Restarts were taken out as well as agreement mistakes. In addition, all examples had 9-15 words on each side of *ergens*, while still being complete sentences.

