Cover Page

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CHAPTER 7

Conclusion part II

In the introduction to this part, chapter 2, the following three questions were posed. The first two questions pertained to the synchronic properties of *ergens* and the third was of a more diachronic nature.

1. How does a language user decide on the interpretation of *ergens* when so many options are available?

2. What knowledge of the language does a language user need and what kind of properties of the context are required for a specific interpretation?

3. Are the contextual properties of *ergens* that trigger a modal interpretation synchronically the same as the ones that played a role in the development of the various interpretations of *ergens*?

The answers to these questions are all based on the study of *ergens.* Therefore, we cannot automatically generalize the results to other words or other languages. Further research will show whether the conclusions hold for other words and other languages. However, there are several results that may be expected to carry over to other words or particles and others that are confined to *ergens.* Therefore, the results of the synchronic study of *ergens* will be discussed in different sections, one section on the general conclusions and one on the conclusions that are specific to *ergens.* This will be followed by a section on the diachronic development of *ergens.*

7.1   Conclusions synchronic *ergens*

7.1.1   General results

The question of how language users decide on the interpretation of a form when so many options are available, was divided into subquestions. One of the subquestions was whether language users really interpret forms in the same context in the same way, since it may be that there are differences between individuals in this respect. In section 3.4.2, we found that, in general, people tend to agree on the interpretation of *ergens*. In section 3.4.4, we saw that ambiguity between modal and non-modal interpretations of *ergens* is very rare. This suggests that the variation between individuals with respect to their interpretations of *ergens* is not very large.

However, there was some variation in the interpretations. The next step, which we took in section 3.5.3, was to see whether the variation would differ if the amount of context was changed from 9-15 words on either side of *ergens* to only two words on either side (survey 1 versus survey 2). Somewhat surprisingly, the variation did not increase if the subjects had less context even though the interpretations themselves did change.

The next subquestion was whether we may link variation in the interpretation of a sentence between participants with the degree of uncertainty indicated by participants on a Likert scale. We found that there is a strong correlation between the level of uncertainty and the amount of variation. Therefore, if we combine this result with the result from the previous paragraph, we have to conclude that less context does not make participants less certain about their interpretation.[1]

Now we turn to question (2) above: What does a language user need to know of his language and what needs to be in the context in order to interpret a specific instance of *ergens*? One of the subquestions was whether native speakers use default strategies while interpreting *ergens*. The main result, which was discussed in section 3.5.2, was that native speakers do seem to use default strategies if there is no hint whatsoever in the context as to how to interpret *ergens*. However, in section 3.6.2 it was shown that if there is some context, but this context is ambiguous, participants do not seem to use the same strategy as in the cases without context. If there is no indication in the context as to how to interpret *ergens*, they will interpret it as locative. If there is some context, but this context is not decisive, the participants tended to choose the modal option. More generally, subjects preferred the overall interpretation (goal domain), for instance a metaphorical interpretation, over the literal interpretation (source domain) e.g. a locative interpretation.

In the previous paragraph we talked about indications in the context of how to interpret *ergens*. This already indicated that the context of *ergens* played an important role in the interpretation of *ergens*. Comparison of the interpretations of survey 1 and

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[1]This runs contrary to the general comments of the participants, who wrote down several times that they found it difficult to decide on the interpretation of *ergens* when they had only little context, whereas these comments were not present in the survey in which the participants had more context. However, this difficulty did not seem to influence participants' judgement as to how certain they were of their interpretation of specific sentences or the variation in their interpretations.

2 showed that triggers[2] in the direct context of *ergens* may play an important role in disambiguation. However, some triggers may override other, less important triggers as was shown by changes in the interpretation when the more important trigger was deleted.

Triggers in the context were not the only thing that influenced the interpretation of *ergens*. The overall fit of an interpretation into the situation described also influenced the interpretation of *ergens*. This is probably also one of the reasons for semantic change as we will see below.

7.1.2 Results specific to *ergens*

In the previous section on the general conclusions on synchronic *ergens*, we concluded that triggers play an important role in the interpretation of *ergens*. Each interpretation seemed to feel at home in contexts with particular characteristics. These characteristics do not need to be present all at the same time, but at least one of them is generally found in the context of a form with a specific interpretation. This shows that there is reason to assume that interpretations can generally be distinguished by their own contextual features. Even the locative interpretation, which is the original and the most frequent interpretation has clear contextual characteristics. This suggests that language users are normally guided in their interpretation of *ergens* by these contextual characteristics. For more concrete meanings, contextual triggers show an obvious connection between the interpretation and the semantic value of the trigger itself. However, as was shown in the surveys, the presence of these triggers seems to play an important role in the choice for an interpretation, partly because the presence of, for instance, locative triggers may lead to the exclusion of a modal interpretation or vice versa. This means that knowledge of the triggers for a locative interpretation is also needed if a language user wants to decide on the interpretation of modal *ergens*. Therefore, we need to include the locative cases in our study of *ergens* if we want to know how people decide on its interpretation.

Non-modal uses of *ergens*:

- locative interpretations are frequently connected to locative markers (locative adpositions, locational verbs, locative adverbs)

- temporal interpretations are frequently connected to temporal markers (references to time, days, periods)

- scalar interpretations are frequently connected to scalar markers (e.g. *between*)

- *about/around* interpretations are frequently connected to (imprecise) scalar markers and other markers of imprecision (e.g. somewhere *around* thirty)

- the prepositional object is dependent on a preposition which does not yet have another argument

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[2]E.g. locative markers, mental state predicates etc. For a more specific description of the triggers that played a role with respect to *ergens* see the next section.

Modal uses of *ergens*:

- *feelings* interpretations are often connected to first person pronouns, mental state predicates and subjective predicates

- *point of view* interpretations are often connected to impersonal copula constructions, but they do have subjective predicate complements. In addition, they are often combined with adversative markers

- the *somehow* interpretation is frequently found with third person action verbs[3]

If we now zoom in on the specific functions of modal *ergens*, we find that the function of modal *ergens* seems to be to set up a (metaphorical) mental space. This is frequently used for explicit (i.e. a *point of view* intepretation) or implicit (i.e. a *feelings* interpretation) split-self constructions.

The modal interpretation of *ergens* does not seem to change between examples in which a metaphorical expression is explicitly present as in *ergens in my feelings* and ones in which the metaphorical expression is absent, as long as the context follows the tendencies described above. This raises the question as to how the modal interpretations have arisen. On the basis of the synchronic polysemies I have developed some hypotheses as to how these interpretations may have come about.

7.1.3   Synchronic indications for the diachronic development of *ergens*

There are several synchronic connections between the interpretations of *ergens*. Some of them can be seen from variation in the experimental results and others from metaphorical connections.

1. place > metaphorical place on a scale such as a temporal scale or other scales (e.g. *volgende week* ergens 'somewhere next week', somewhere between three and four centimeters)

2. scales, (see number 1) > imprecision marker with numbers (i.e. the about/around interpretation as in ergens *rond twee uur* 'somewhere around two o'clock')

3. place > metaphorical place within someone's feelings/mind, creating another point of view (e.g. Ergens *denk ik...* '*ergens* I think...)

4. an indefinite (metaphorical) place > by implication a situation about which not everything is known or understood, if that situation is in your own mental space this implies a lack of arguments to defend one's personal view (Ergens *vind ik dat...* '*Ergens* am I of the opinion that...)

For all of these connections there are examples that show ambiguities in this respect. An indication for the first change is the fact that other locative markers,

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[3]For an explanation as to why the *somehow* interpretation is considered modal, see page (9).

which do not have temporal implications if they are not combined with *ergens* may be added to an *ergens* phrase without any problems. This suggests that the metaphor is still actively evoked.

The second change is suggested to have taken place because of the fact that scales interpretations and about/around interpretations show a high degree of ambiguity. In addition, this type of marker (still) requires some sort of scale to be present in background.

The third development is both suggested by the fact that *ergens* is interpreted as *in someone's feelings or thoughts* by participants, which basically is a description of a metaphor and by the observation that the interpretations of the participants did not change if an explicit metaphor was added to a *feelings* example.

The fourth development is also suggested by ambiguities that are frequently present in examples of this kind. In many cases the information that something happened at some place is not relevant enough to be added purely for its own sake. Therefore, it is interpreted as a marker which expresses that the speaker is indicating that he is aware of the fact that he is providing imprecise information.

Several of these branches may have evolved relatively independently from each other on the basis of a locative interpretation, since in several cases the source of the modal interpretations seems to be the original locative interpretation in a slightly different context. The next step was to see whether there is diachronic evidence that proves or disproves these hypotheses based on synchronic evidence.

7.2   Conclusions on the diachrony of modal *ergens*

The main processes that seem to have led to modal *ergens* are metaphor and invited inferencing. The presence of the metaphor THE MIND IS A SPACE in combination with the interpretations of *ergens* as *in someone's feelings or thoughts/ from some point of view* suggests that the latter is the conventionalized version of the former, especially, because there are explicitly metaphorical examples that express a split-self.

This explicit metaphor is found in all periods investigated except for the Middle Ages. Before the 19th century examples that are not explicitly metaphorical are often ambiguous. This implies that the development of the *feelings* interpretation of *ergens* occurred far before the 1960s. Modal *ergens* is used regularly up to the present day.

Other modal interpretations may have developed via *invited inferencing*, that is, the over-interpretation of *ergens* in the types of contexts that were described in the synchronic part. The metaphorical use of modal *ergens* may have facilitated the interpretation of *ergens* as modal in underspecified contexts, but the development of the three types of modal *ergens* cannot be linked directly to each other.

The Flemish use of *ergens* with an indefinite article and a noun as a marker of imprecision is already found in that area in the 17th century. There are no Netherlandic Dutch examples of this use in the corpus.