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Poor weak *het* ‘it’ and agreement patterns in pronominal clefts

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a novel analysis of the exceptional agreement patterns in pronominal *het* ‘it’-clefts with the order *het*-copula-pronoun in Dutch. We argue that the complex interaction in clefts between case, agreement and word order can be explained from the radical featural defectivity of *het* ‘it’: *het* ‘it’ has a third person (3p) feature, but no case, number, strength and gender features. We show that *het* ‘it’ is different from all personal pronouns in the major dialect groups of Dutch in that it never shows any case distinction. The absence of case on *het* ‘it’ makes it possible and necessary for the pronoun to occur in the nominative in a cleft. Similarly, the absence of number in the feature specification of *het* ‘it’ makes plural agreement with the pronoun possible and necessary in clefts. Finally, we show that Standard Dutch has two subgrammars, one of which has the additional requirement that the finite copula agree in person with both *het* ‘it’ and the pronoun.

KEYWORDS Dutch dialects; case; pronouns; clefts; agreement

1. Introduction

Dutch and the language varieties closely related to it, spoken in the Dutch language area covered by the present-day Netherlands and Belgium, are among the continental West-Germanic languages that have largely lost their case systems. Already in the period of Old Dutch (before 1200 AD) the original case systems with distinctions between nominative, genitive, dative and accusative case were on their way out as a consequence of a deflection process. This process was more or less completed in the 19th century (cf. van der Horst 2008). The only remnants of the old case system are found in the pronominal systems, with systematic distinctions between nominative, oblique and possessive (if possessive can be called a case form at all), and in fixed expressions such as *in de loop der tijd* ‘in the course of time’ (genitive) and *te uwen kantore* ‘at your office’ (dative).

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This paper demonstrates the relevance of case and the nominative-oblique distinction in modern varieties of Dutch by analyzing the complex interactions between pronominal form, case, verbal inflection, grammatical function and word order. Some complex interactions are illustrated in (1) (observations from Ackema and Neeleman (2018)).

- (1) a **Het ben ik die het antwoord weet.*
 it am I.NOM that the answer knows
 ‘It is me who knows the answer.’
- b %*Het is ik die het antwoord weet.*
 it is I.NOM that the answer knows
 ‘It is me who knows the answer.’
- c *Het was ik die het antwoord wist.*
 it was I.NOM that the answer knew
- d *Ik ben het die het antwoord weet.*
 I.NOM am it that the answer knows

To be able to understand and explain these patterns we first need to know which grammatical features (e.g., person, number, gender, case, strength) and feature values (e.g., 3_P, plural, neuter, oblique, weak) constitute the pronominal systems of modern varieties of Dutch. We will do this by comparing the pronoun systems of the major dialects areas.

A finding crucial for the analysis of pronominal clefts is our observation that *het* ‘it’, which is traditionally analyzed as the 3_{SG.N} personal pronoun, does not show a case distinction in any of the dialects under consideration. For all other personal pronoun types, there is at least one dialect that makes a case distinction. We assume that this is not accidental and take this to mean that *het* ‘it’ does not have a case feature at all. *Het* ‘it’ is also distinct from the other pronouns in that it never shows a strong-weak distinction. Since 3_{SG.N} *het* ‘it’ is also lacking possessive and reflexive forms that are not syncretic, we argue that it does not belong to the paradigm of personal pronouns. It is part of the proximate, distal, neutral pronoun/determiner paradigm *dit* ‘this’, *dat* ‘that’, *het* ‘it’ (neuter gender) and *deze* ‘this’, *die* ‘that’, *de* ‘the’ (common gender).¹ We argue that *het* only has a 3_P feature and is underspecified for case, number and also for gender, taking neuter to mean absence of gender. We then show how this underspecification helps to explain the pattern in (1).

¹The distinction between proximate-distal-neutral also classifies the locative pronouns *hier* ‘here’ – *daar* ‘(over) there’ – *er* ‘there’.

2. Pronoun systems in the Dutch language area – an overview

2.1. Introduction

We provide a description in this section of the relevant aspects of the pronominal systems of the major dialect areas of Dutch. [Figure 1](#) shows these major dialect areas. The data that this section is based on were collected with written questionnaires sent to linguists that speak the relevant dialects. The tasks in the questionnaires include both judgement tasks and cloze tasks. We have checked whether the data collected in this way were in agreement with the Dutch dialect data available in MIMORE, three databases of dialects of Dutch. When certain data were missing from the survey, we add MIMORE data to complement them, whenever available. The actual variation is more subtle and richer within these major dialect areas (cf. Barbiers et al. 2005, SAND Volume 1; Goeman et al. 2008, MAND Volume 2), but for the purposes of this paper, a description of the most common patterns per dialect area will do.

2.2. Pronoun system of standard Dutch

The pronoun system of Standard Dutch, which we take to be representative for most Hollandic dialects in the west of the country (indicated by ‘Dutch’ on the map in [Figure 1](#)), is given in [Table 1](#).² There are two properties that cross-classify the pronouns: nominative vs. oblique case and strong vs. weak. Three pronoun types in the paradigm do not show these distinctions: (i) the 2_{PL}_{POLITE} pronoun is invariantly *u*; (ii) the 2_{PL} form is invariably strong and does not show a case distinction: *jullie*; (iii) *het* ‘it’ is invariably weak and does not show a case distinction.

Dutch orthography distinguishes between a weak form *t* and a strong form *het*, but the 3_{SG}_N pronoun is never strong in spoken Standard Dutch. It is, for example, impossible to have *t/het* in a position that requires new information focus (2a). Standard Dutch uses the distal pronoun *dat* ‘that’ in such syntactic contexts (2b). Since there is no distinction between weak *t* and strong *het* in spoken Dutch, we will use the form *het* throughout this paper.

Other peculiarities of the system are that the weak 3_{SG}_M pronoun *ie* can only occur enclitically and that the 3_{PL}_{STRONG} oblique pronoun *hun* ‘them’ is frequently used as a subject pronoun. The alternative *hen* is hardly ever used; according to prescriptive grammar it is the form required for the direct object and for complements of prepositions.

²We present the overviews of pronominal systems in this paper in alphabetic writing, with the exception of the schwa which is rendered as *ə*. Pronoun types that do not show a case distinction are marked in italics.

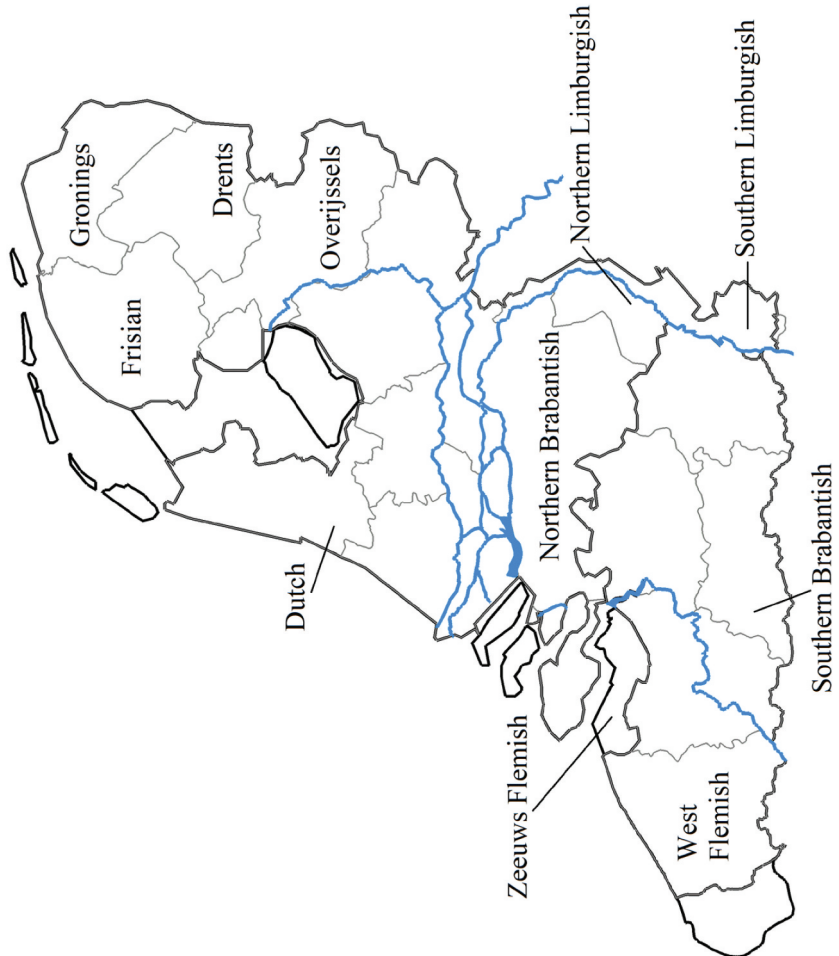


Figure 1. Major dialect groups in the Dutch language area + Friesian discussed in this paper.

Table 1. Pronoun system of Standard Dutch.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1 _{SG}	ik	ək	mij	mə
2 _{SG} (familiar)	jij	jə	jou	jə
2 _{SG} (polite)	<i>u</i>		<i>u</i>	
3 _{SG,M}	hij	ie	hem	əm
3 _{SG,F}	zij	zə	haar	ər
3 _{SG,N}		<i>het</i>		<i>het</i>
1 _{PL}	wij	wə	ons	
2 _{PL}	<i>jullie</i>		<i>jullie</i>	
3 _{PL}	zij/hun	zə	hun/hen	zə

We take the fact that *het* does not show any case distinction to indicate that it does not have a case feature specification.

(2) a **Ik heb gisteren 't / het gelezen.*

I have yesterday it.WEAK / it.STRONG read

b *Ik heb gisteren dat gelezen.*

I have yesterday that read

‘I have read that yesterday.’

2.3. Pronoun system of Frisian

The pronoun system of Frisian is given in Table 2 (from the Language Portal; Hoekstra 2019). Like Dutch, Frisian distinguishes between strong and weak and between nominative and oblique pronouns. It is also similar to Dutch in that there is no case distinction for the 2_{POLITE} pronoun, for the 3_{SG,N} pronoun and for the 2_{PL} pronoun. The 3_{SG,N} pronoun, orthographically *it* in Frisian, is a weak form. As in Dutch, there is no strong counterpart of *it* (Hoekstra 2019).

Table 2. Pronoun system of Standard Frisian.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1 _{SG}	ik	ək	my	my
2 _{SG} (familiar)	do/dû	(də)	dy	dy
2 _{SG} (polite)	<i>jo</i>	<i>jə</i>	<i>jo</i>	<i>jə</i>
3 _{SG,M}	hy	ər	him	əm
3 _{SG,F}	sy/hja	sə	har	sə
3 _{SG,N}		<i>it</i>		<i>it</i>
1 _{PL}	wy	wə	ús	
2 _{PL}	<i>jim(me)</i>		<i>jim(me)</i>	
3 _{PL}	sy/hja	sə	har(ren)	sə

2.4. Low Saxon Pronouns

Like Dutch and Frisian, the Low Saxon pronouns distinguish nominative and oblique, and strong and weak. Gronings (Table 3) is like Dutch in that the 3SG.N pronoun does not show a case distinction and is always weak. It is unlike Dutch in that it has morphologically simplex forms for 2PL. 2PL does not show a case distinction.

Drents (Table 4) does not have a polite form. The 3SG.N pronoun is like Gronings and Dutch in that it does not show a case distinction and is always weak.

Like Drents, Overijssels (Table 5) does not have polite forms. Like Dutch, Frisian, Gronings and Drents it only has a weak form for 3SG.N and no case distinctions for this form. The strong nominative 2PL and 3PL pronouns are morphologically complex. 2PL does not show a case distinction.

Table 3. Pronoun system of Gronings.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ik	ək	mie	
2SG (familiar)	doe	∅ (pro)	die	doe
2SG (polite)	ie		joe	
3SG.M	hai	ər	hom	'm
3SG.F	zai	sə	heur	
3SG.N		het		het
1PL	wie	w	os	
2PL	joe	jə	joe	
3PL	zai	sə	heur	s

Table 4. Pronoun system of Drents.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ik	ək	mij	
2SG (familiar)	ie	jə	oe	
2SG (polite)				
3SG.M	hij	ə	hum	'm
3SG.F	zij	zə	heur	
3SG.N		het		het
1PL	wij	wə	oeze/oens	
2PL	ie/jullie		oe/jullie	
3PL	zij/zullie	zə	zullie	zə

Table 5. Pronoun system of Overijssels.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ik	ək	mie	
2SG (familiar)	iej	jə	oe	
2SG (polite)				
3SG.M	hee	e	hum	əm
3SG.F	ziej	zə	heur	
3SG.N		het		het
1PL	wiej	wə	oons	
2PL	ieluu	ie	ieluu	
3PL	zieluu	sə	heer	sə

2.5. Franconian pronouns

The Franconian pronominal systems are also characterized by the nominative-oblique distinction and the strong-weak distinction. All Franconian dialects only have a weak form for 3SG.N which does not show a case distinction. The systems of North-Limburg (Maasbracht) (Table 6) and South-Limburg (Waubach) (Table 7) are nearly identical. Unlike the Low-Saxon dialects, 2PL does show a case distinction.

Northern Brabantish (Table 8) does not have a polite form. It differs from the Limburgish Franconian systems in that it has morphologically complex forms for 2PL and 3PL. Unlike the simplex Limburgish counterparts, these forms do not show case distinctions.

Southern Brabantish (Table 9) has morphologically complex plural pronouns for all persons. They all end in *-le(n)*, which is historically derived from *lieden* (cf. Barbiers et al. 2005, SAND Volume 1, section 2.3.5). These complex plural pronouns do show case distinctions.

Zeeuws Flemish (Table 10) has complex forms for 2PL and 3PL and the choice between the Standard Dutch form or a complex form containing *ulder*. There are no case distinctions in these complex forms.

West-Flemish (Table 11) has morphologically complex forms for 1PL, 2PL and 3PL and each of these show case distinctions.

Table 6. Pronoun system of Northern Limburgish.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ich	ch	mich	
2SG (familiar)	dich/duu	də/sə	dich	
2SG (polite)	geer			
3SG.M	hèè	ər	hem	əm
3SG.F	zii	sə	heur	ər
3SG.N		het		het
1PL	weer	wə	os	
2PL	geer		uch	
3PL	zii	sə	heur	sə

Table 7. Pronoun system of Southern Limburgish.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ich	ch	mich	
2SG (familiar)	doe	də/sə	dich	
2SG (polite)	dir			
3SG.M	heë	ər	hem/dem	əm
3SG.F	zie	zə	heur	ər
3SG.N		het		het
1PL	vier	ver	oos	
2PL	ier		uch	
3PL	zie	zə	hu:n	zə

Table 8. Pronoun system of Northern Brabantish.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ik	ək	mij(n)	mə
2SG (familiar)	gij	gə/də	jou	oe
2SG (polite)				
3SG.M	hij	ie	hem	əm
3SG.F	zij	zə	haar	ər
3SG.N		<i>het</i>		<i>het</i>
1PL	wij	wə	ons	
2PL	<i>gullie</i>		<i>(j)ullie</i>	
3PL	<i>zullie</i>	<i>zə</i>	<i>zullie</i>	<i>zə</i>

Table 9. Pronoun system of Southern Brabantish.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ikke	ək	mou	
2SG (familiar)	gou	gə/d	ou	
2SG (polite)				
3SG.M	ij	əm/n	hem	əm
3SG.F	zij	sə	heur	
3SG.N		<i>het</i>		<i>het</i>
1PL	wijlen	wə	ons	
2PL	gijlen		ijlen	
3PL	zijlen	zə	eelen	zə

Table 10. Pronoun system of Zeeuws Flemish.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ik	'k	mij	-mə
2SG (familiar)	jij/gij	də/gə	jou	ou
2SG (polite)				
3SG.M	hij	ie	hem	əm
3SG.F	zij	s	haar	ər
3SG.N		<i>het</i>		<i>het</i>
1PL	wij	wə/mə(n)	oeze/oens	
2PL	<i>jullie/gulder</i>		<i>jullie/gulder</i>	
3PL	<i>zij/zulder</i>	<i>zə</i>	<i>zulder</i>	<i>zə</i>

Table 11. Pronoun system of West Flemish.

	Nominative		Oblique	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
1SG	ik	'k	mijn	m
2SG (familiar)	gie	jə	joen	ui
2SG (polite)				
3SG.M	hie/hemie	əm/ən	hem	əm
3SG.F	zie	zə	heur	ər
3SG.N		<i>het</i>		<i>het</i>
1PL	wieder	m	uus	
2PL	gieder		junder	
3PL	zieder	zə	hunder	zə

2.6. Some generalizations

The description above reveals three exceptionless generalizations:

Exceptionless generalizations:

- All varieties distinguish between nominative and oblique case and between strong and weak pronouns.
- 3_{SG.N} is the only pronoun type that does not show any case distinction in any of the varieties.
- All varieties only have a weak form for 3_{SG.N}.

Given these generalizations, it may well be mistaken to classify 3_{SG.N} *het* ‘it’ as a personal pronoun in the varieties of Dutch. We add to this that, as far as we know, there is not any non-syncretic possessive or reflexive form related to 3_{SG.N} *het* ‘it’ in the varieties of Dutch either. We will not discuss this observation in detail here. Altogether, these generalizations suggest that 3_{SG.N} *het* ‘it’ in the varieties of Dutch is not part of the paradigm of personal pronouns but rather of the paradigm *dit* ‘this’ (proximate) – *dat* ‘that’ (distal) – *het* ‘it’ (neutral), which has the common gender counterpart *deze* ‘this’ – *die* ‘those’ – *de* ‘the’. The proximate and distal forms in these paradigms serve both as pronouns and as determiners. If this classification is correct, it is also no longer a surprise that *het* ‘it’ is inherently weak and does not have a strong counterpart. Etymologically, *het* is the reduced form of *dat*, while *de* is the reduced form of *die* (Philippa et al. 2003-2009).

The analysis proposed here raises the question as to why *de* is the only member of this paradigm that cannot be used as a pronoun, unlike *het*. This follows if neuter gender in Dutch means absence of gender. If *de* were a pronoun, its common gender feature could not be checked, as only nouns with an inherent common gender feature can provide the relevant feature. No such problem arises for the pronominal use of *het* if this form does not have a gender feature at all.

In conclusion, poor weak *het* lacks the features case, strong, gender, and, as we will see in section 3.2, number. Since it triggers 3_P agreement on finite verbs, on a par with full noun phrases, we assume that it does have the feature 3_P.

3. Agreement patterns

3.1. Introduction

We will now show that the exceptional agreement patterns found in pronominal *het* ‘it’ clefts in Dutch follow from the radical featural underspecification of *het*. These clefts have recently received some attention in the literature, see for

instance Ackema and Neeleman (2018). The judgements that are reported vary to some degree; in particular, there is disagreement on the status of (3a,b), where a 1/2SG pronoun is the pronominal pivot of the cleft.

- (3) a % *Het is ik die achter de juf zit.*
 it is I that behind the teacher sit
 b % *Het is jij die achter de juf zit.*
 it is you.SG.NOM that behind the teacher sit
 ‘It is me/you who is sitting behind the teacher.’
 c *Het is hij die achter de juf zit.*
 it is he that behind the teacher sits
 ‘It is him who is sitting behind the teacher.’

We have conducted a questionnaire study in order to address the disparity of judgements on Dutch *het*-clefts, focusing on structures of the form ‘*het*-copula-pronoun’ (clefts where the pronoun precedes the copula, and both orders involving a full noun phrase, are unambiguously grammatical). Participants were asked to rate the cleft sentences on a 5-point Likert-scale. All cleft sentences were preceded by a one or two sentence context, which provided a natural focus for the pronominal pivot. Furthermore, the verbs we used in the relative clause do not visibly inflect for person (either because the verb stem ends with *-t*, the verb is a modal, or in past tense) as we found that this inflection influenced judgements. Participants received instructions on the intonation of the test items. The questions we report on here, including the context, can be found in the [Appendix](#).

The questionnaire was filled in by students who are all native speakers of Standard Dutch. We report on the results from 36 participants, of which the majority filled in all the questions (2 participants were excluded because they gave low ratings on all test items). In the remainder of this section, we discuss and analyze the data we found in our questionnaire study on *het*-clefts.

3.2. Results and analysis, part I

Both (4a) and (4b) received a score of 1.9 out of 5, while (4c) received 3.4.³ This means that the order⁴ *het*-copula-pronoun is ungrammatical when the copula agrees in person with the pronoun, unless the pronoun is 3P.

³Note that these are grammatical when *het* is replaced by the demonstrative *dat* ‘that’. In that case, we follow Ackema and Neeleman (2018) in that *ik* is in the subject position and controls agreement, and that *dat* is in the position of contrastive topics (in theoretical terms: *dat* is in SpecCP, *ik* is in SpecTP).

⁴In the order Subject-Vfin in the present tense, Dutch has distinct forms for 1P.SG and 2P.SG: *ik ben* ‘I am’ vs. *jij ben-t* ‘you are’. In the inverted order, this distinction is lost: *ben ik* ‘am I’ and *ben jij* ‘are you’.

- (4) a *Het ben ik die achter de juf zit.* (1.9)
 it am I that behind the teacher sit
 b *Het ben jij die achter de juf zit.* (1.9)
 it are.SG you.SG.NOM that behind the teacher sit
 'It is me/you who is sitting behind the teacher.'
 c *Het is hij die achter de juf zit.* (3.4)
 it is he that behind the teacher sits
 'It is him who is sitting behind the teacher.'

Our results show that this difference in acceptability between 1/2P on the one hand and 3P on the other is lost in the past tense:

- (5) a *Het was ik die verkleed was als clown.* (4.4)
 it was I that dressed was as clown
 b *Het was jij die verkleed was als clown.* (4.1)
 it was you.SG.NOM that dressed was as clown
 c *Het was hij die verkleed was als clown.* (4.3)
 it was he that dressed was as clown
 'It was me/you/him that was dressed up as a clown.'

The facts in (4) and (5) can be explained if we assume that in pronominal *het*-clefts with the order *het*-copula-pronoun, *het* is always in subject position and dictates person agreement with the copula. The sentences in (4a,b) are ungrammatical due to the fact that the copula agrees with the pronoun rather than with the 3P feature of *het*. This problem does not arise in (5a,b), as the copula does not show any person distinctions in the past tense in Dutch; we have *ik was* 'I was'; *jij was* 'you were', *hij was* 'he was'.⁵

This explanation raises two questions: (i) Can it be shown that *het* is always in subject position in sentences with the order *het*-copula-pronoun, given that Dutch main clauses also allow non-subjects to occur in the clause initial preverbal position? (ii) If *het* is always the subject in such clauses, then how is it possible that the pronoun, which is not in subject position, has nominative case, given that subjecthood, agreement and nominative case normally go hand in hand in Dutch?

⁵This predicts that if a language does have a person distinction in the past tense, the equivalents of (5a,b) should be ungrammatical. Frisian is such a language and, indeed, (i) is ungrammatical, thus supporting our claim. We thank Eric Hoekstra for pointing this out.

(i) **It wie ik dy't ferklaaid wie as clown.*
 it was I who-that dressed was as clown.

We will address the first question here and discuss the second question at the end of this subsection. A constituent that precedes the finite verb in Dutch main clauses can be either a subject or a contrastive topic. It has been known since at least Travis (1984) and Zwart (1997) that clause initial contrastive topics can only be strong. (6a-d) illustrate that the weak pronoun *je* cannot be clause initial (6c), unless it is a subject (6d).

- (6) a *Ik heb jou/ je gezien.*
 I have you.SG.OBL.STRONG/you.SG.WEAK seen/
 b *Jou heb ik gezien.*
 you.SG.OBL.STRONG have I seen
 c **Je heb ik gezien.*
 you.SG.WEAK have I seen
 ‘I have seen you.’
 d *Je/ jij ziet mij.*
 you.SG.WEAK/you.SG.NOM.STRONG see me
 ‘You see me.’

We have claimed in section 2 that *het* is an inherently weak element. This claim is supported by the observation that non-subject *het* cannot be in clause initial position (7b).⁶

- (7) a *Ik heb het gezien.*
 I have it seen
 b **Het heb ik gezien.*
 It have I seen
 ‘I have seen it.’

It follows from these observations that *het* in the order *het*-copula-pronoun is always the subject; because it is weak it cannot be a contrastive topic. The subject *het* triggers 3_P agreement. The sentences in (4a,b) are ungrammatical because the copula shows 1/2_P agreement.

We have seen that the difference in acceptability between *het*-copula-pronoun clefts with a 1/2_P pronoun and with a 3_P pronoun does not arise in the past tense, because the past tense singular form of the copula does not show any person distinctions. Put differently, since *het* only has a 3_P feature and since the past singular copula does not have a person feature, no agreement problem arises.

⁶In theoretical terms: clause initial *het* is in SpecTP, fronted contrastive topics are in SpecCP.

The copula does not show any person distinctions either in the plural of the present tense: *wij zijn* ‘we are’, *jullie zijn* ‘you.PL are’, *zij zijn* ‘they are’. No person agreement problem arises, but the copula agrees in plural with the pronominal pivot (8d).

(8) a *Het is Marie die de wedstrijd gewonnen heeft.*

it is Mary that the game won has

‘It is Mary that has won the game.’

b *Het zijn de vrouwen die de wedstrijd gewonnen hebben.*

it are the women that the game won have

c **Het is de vrouwen die de wedstrijd gewonnen hebben.*

it is the women that the game won have

‘It is the women who have won the game.’

d *Het zijn/ *is wij/ jullie/ zij die de wedstrijd gewonnen hebben.*

it are.PL/is we/you.PL/ they that the game won have

‘It is us/you guys/them who won the game.’

We take this pattern to indicate that *het* does not have a number feature. In the complete absence of a number feature on the subject, the copula then agrees in number with the closest constituent available. This shows that agreement on the copula is obligatory if possible.

A parallel explanation can now be given for the fact that pronominal pivots have nominative case in Dutch *het*-clefts despite the fact that *het* ‘it’ is the subject. We take nominative to be the expression of finiteness, a property of the copula, on the pronoun. It was shown in [section 2](#) that *het* ‘it’ has no case feature. Assuming that the expression of nominative case is obligatory if possible, it is expressed on the pronoun in post-copular position. Thus, the absence of case on *het* ‘it’ explains the exceptional possibility to have nominative case on a non-subject (for comparable effects, see Sigurðsson and Holmberg (2008) on Icelandic dative-nominative constructions, and Coon and Keine (2020) on German copula constructions).

3.3. Results and analysis, part II

So far, the judgements and the results of the questionnaire have been uncontroversial. Present tense *het*-clefts with a 3SG copula and a 1SG or 2SG pronominal pivot are the cases where judgements in the literature diverge ((3), repeated as (9); cf. Ackema and Neeleman 2018). This divergence is reflected in our questionnaire. In contrast to the other questions, responses

to these clefts have a U-shaped distribution, with peaks at the very low ratings and the very high ratings. Based on this distribution, we consider it motivated to split the participants in two groups as follows. The “low rater” group gave low (3 or less) ratings for both clefts. The “high rater” group gave a 4 or 5 to at least one of the clefts. 14 participants are in the low rater group, 22 in the high rater group.

- (9) a %Het is *ik die achter de juf zit*.
 it is I that behind the teacher sit
 b %Het is *jij die achter de juf zit*.
 it is you.SG.NOM that behind the teacher sit
 ‘It is me/you who is sitting behind the teacher.’

We then compared the judgements on (9) to the minimally different (10), which is grammatical according to the judgements reported in the literature.

- (10) *Het is hij die achter de juf zit*.
 it is he that behind the teacher sit
 ‘It is him who is sitting behind the teacher.’

In the low rater group, the judgements for (11a,b) are drastically lower than for (11c), the former being comparable to the ungrammatical (4a,b).

- (11) a *Het is ik die achter de juf zit*. (1.8)
 it is I that behind the teacher sit
 b *Het is jij die achter de juf zit*. (1.9)
 it is you.SG.NOM that behind the teacher sit
 c *Het is hij die achter de juf zit*. (3.4)
 it is he that behind the teacher sit
 ‘It is me/you/him who is sitting behind the teacher.’

In the high rater group, there is no such difference; the ratings to (12a,b) are almost equal or even higher than the rating on (12c), comparable to the ratings of the unambiguously grammatical (5c).

- (12) a *Het is ik die achter de juf zit*. (4.2)
 it is I that behind the teacher sit
 b *Het is jij die achter de juf zit*. (3.7)
 it is you.SG.NOM that behind the teacher sit

- c *Het is hij die achter de juf zit.* (3.8)
 it is he that behind the teacher sit
 ‘It is me/you/him who is sitting behind the teacher.’

We conclude that the disparity of judgements in the literature corresponds to two different grammars. In the high rater grammar, the subject *het* determines 3P agreement on the copula. In the low rater grammar, it is required that the copula agree in person with both the subject *het* and the pronominal pivot.⁷

3.4. Agreement in Dutch *het*-clefts: a summary

We can now explain the full system of agreement in Dutch *het*-clefts with the order *het*-copula-pronoun on the basis of the following properties:

- *het* is always the subject and primarily determines agreement on the copula.
- *het* has the feature 3P, but no case, number, strength or gender features.
- Person, number and case agreement must be expressed when possible.
- Nominative is the expression on the pronoun of the finiteness of the copula.

The observations discussed in the previous sections follow from these properties.

(i) 1P and 2P agreement are not possible in the present singular, as opposed to 3P agreement, because the subject *het* imposes 3P agreement. This rules out, e.g., **Het ben ik die ...* ‘It am I who ...’

(ii) This person split is absent in the past tense because the past tense copula has no person distinctions. This rules in, e.g., *Het was ik die ...* ‘It was I who ...’

(iii) There is no person split in the plural either because the plural copula does not show any person distinctions.

(iv) The copula shows plural agreement with the pronominal pivot because *het* has no number feature. (iii) and (iv) together rule in, e.g., *Het zijn wij die ...* ‘it are.PL we who ...’

(v) The pronoun has the nominative form because *het* has no case feature.

(vi) The low rater grammar, as opposed to the high rater grammar, has the additional requirement that the copula agree in person with both *het* and the

⁷We were unable to connect these different grammars to regional differences. Also note that in contrast to the picture that emerges from the literature (cf. Ackema and Neeleman 2018), the “high rater” grammar seems to be the majority grammar among our participants.

pronoun. E.g., *Het is ik die ...* ‘it is I who’ is acceptable in the high rater grammar but not in the low rater grammar.

It will be clear that the featural underspecification of *het* is crucial for this explanation of the agreement patterns.

A conceivable alternative for this analysis would be to state the rule that the copula should always agree with both *het* and the pronoun. According to such an analysis, the high rater grammar would be exceptional in that it relaxes this requirement. However, it is clear from clefts with the order pronoun-copula-*het* that the features of the subject always determine agreement in Dutch. In this order the pronoun is the subject and it agrees in person, number and case with the copula. There is no requirement that *het* also agrees with the subject in such cases, in fact, agreement with *het* is impossible in this order. Cf. *Ik ben/*is het die heeft gebeld* ‘I am.1.SG/is.3SG it who has called’. We therefore do not adopt this alternative analysis.

3.5. Previous analyses of agreement in Dutch copular clauses

As mentioned in section 3.1, case and agreement in Dutch clefts have been discussed in the literature before. In this section we discuss the analyses by Ackema and Neeleman (2018), van Gelderen (1997) and den Dikken (2019), who all touch upon slightly different data and provide different analyses for it. We show that those analyses cannot account for the full set of data that is discussed in the current paper.

Ackema and Neeleman (2018) discuss agreement in clefts of the form *het*-copula-pronoun in Dutch. They require the copula to agree with both *het* and with the pronoun. This derives the “low rater” grammar, where we find a 1/2 vs 3 person split in the present tense singular (13): because the 1/2_P copula differs from the 3_P copula (*ben* vs *is*), there can always only be agreement with either *het* or the pronoun. This is similar to the analysis we proposed for the low rater grammar.

- (13) a %*Het is ik/jij die achter de juf zit.*
 it is I/you.SG.NOM that behind the teacher sit.
 b **Het ben ik/jij die achter de juf zit.*
 it am I/you.SG.NOM that behind the teacher sit
 ‘It is me/you that is sitting behind the teacher.’

Ackema and Neeleman also note that some speakers do accept (13a) (cf. our “high rater” grammar). They propose that this is the result of two independent deletion operations. The first operation deletes the features of the pronoun. This allows for agreement to be controlled by *het*, resulting in 3_P agreement, as in (13a). While this makes the correct prediction for clefts with singular

pronouns, it does not for clefts with a plural pronoun; the speakers that accept (13a) still require plural agreement in clefts with a plural pronoun (14).

(14) a *Het zijn wij die achter de juf zitten.*

it are.PL we that behind the teacher sit

b **Het is wij die achter de juf zitten.*

it is we that behind the teacher sit

‘It is us who are sitting behind the teacher.’

To account for this, Ackema and Neeleman refer to a second deletion operation, which deletes all person features (including the 3_P feature from *het*) in the context of a plural feature. This ensures that when the pronoun is plural, the copula also agrees as plural, as in (14a).

Although this analysis derives the facts, there are some problems. In order to derive the high rater grammar, Ackema and Neeleman invoke two independent deletion operations that are necessary to derive the full grammar. Since there is no connection between the deletion operations, we expect that there are also grammars where just one is active, giving rise to four grammars instead of two. There is no evidence for such grammars. In addition, the deletion operations do not seem to be independently motivated or necessary. Consider the operation that deletes person features in the context of a plural feature. Since there is just one agreeing copula for all plurals, the presence or absence of person features in the context of a plural feature is irrelevant. In our view, there is no reason to delete these person features when they do not have a function anyway. Our analysis is simpler in that it derives the difference between the low rater and the high rater grammar without deletion operations. It takes the low rater grammar to be marked and exceptional in that it requires person agreement with both *het* and the pronoun.

Van Gelderen (1997) discusses *it* (and its equivalents) in several languages, and concludes, like us, that in Dutch *het* is only specified as 3_P, but is not specified for number (she does not say anything about case). She uses this idea to account for the distribution of pronouns in a special type of Dutch *het*-clefts with oblique pronouns. These special clefts differ from the clefts we discuss in that the pronoun expresses old information rather than new information. Furthermore, they are typically not followed by a relative clause, and instead of main stress on the pronoun, the stress comes on the copula. This type of cleft is restricted to 3_P pronouns (both SG and PL). The copula agrees in number with the pronoun:

(15) a **Het is me!*

it is me

b *Het is hem!*

it is him

c *Het zijn ze!*
 it are them
 'It's me/him/them!'

Van Gelderen's analysis of these data is to some extent similar to the analysis we propose for *het*-clefts with nominative pronouns. In particular, our analysis shares with her analysis the idea that the copula agrees with both *het* and the pronoun; this allows for plural agreement on the copula in (15c). However, in the analysis by van Gelderen, the restriction of *het*-clefts with oblique pronouns to 3P pronouns is due to a more abstract ban on 1/2P features in these clefts, rather than the requirement that the copula agree with both *het* and the pronoun.⁸ Crucially, a general ban of this type does not work for *het*-clefts with nominative pronouns that we discuss in this paper, because we found that the person restriction is lifted when the copula agrees with both *het* and the pronoun.

Den Dikken (2019) does not explicitly discuss clefts, but specificational copular clauses, which give rise to similar agreement effects as clefts (though see Hartmann and Heycock (2019) for some qualifications; den Dikken makes the connection to clefts in his footnote 3). In particular, 1/2P agreement with a pronominal second DP in specificational copular clauses is impossible (33).

- (16) *...*dat de schuldige ik ben.* (den Dikken 2019)
 that the guilty.one I am
 '...that I am the guilty one.'

This is similar to the ungrammaticality of 1/2P agreement in *het*-clefts (cf. 4a,b). Furthermore, den Dikken considers (17) as ungrammatical as well. This resembles the "low rater" judgement for (18).

- (17) *...*dat de schuldige ik is.* (den Dikken 2019)
 that the guilty.one I is
 '...that I am the guilty one.'

- (18) %*Het is ik die achter de juf zit.*
 it is I that behind the teacher sit
 'It is me who is sitting behind the teacher.'

Den Dikken derives the observation in (16) as resulting from a restriction on person agreement: 1/2P agreement is only allowed when the pronoun and the verb are in a structurally local (Spec-Head) relation, whereas such a restriction does not apply to 3P agreement and number agreement. When

⁸Presumably, this ban is related to the pronouns being in oblique case.

the pronoun is the second DP in the copular construction, it is not in a local relation with the verb and therefore 1/2_P agreement is blocked, causing (16) to be ungrammatical. This reasoning can be applied to clefts as well: in clefts of the form *het*-copula-pronoun, *het* is in a local relation to the verb, but the pronoun is not. 1/2_P agreement with the pronoun is therefore not possible, resulting in the ungrammaticality of (4a,b).

While den Dikken does not explicitly discuss it, we can construct the following story for what happens with person agreement instead. Den Dikken proposes that a non-local 1/2_P pronoun behaves like a 3_P for agreement purposes (see his paper for motivation). In specificational copular constructions, the verb cannot agree with the first DP for independent reasons. Instead, it agrees with the second DP, which behaves like a 3_P for the purpose of agreement. This leads to 3_P agreement in (17). Given the parallel between specificational copular clauses and clefts, we might expect that this also holds for (18). This corresponds to our “high raters”, who judge (18) as grammatical, but it does not account for the judgement of the low raters on clefts and for example (17). Den Dikken’s account thus correctly derives the high rater grammar, but does not account for the observation that the low raters judge (18), and comparable specificational copular clauses, ungrammatical.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we looked at case in different varieties of Dutch, and how it informs us about the syntax of pronominal clefts. Our overview of case forms shows that the distinction between nominative and oblique is active for most pronouns in all of the dialects. Furthermore, a substantial number of pronouns in all dialects make a distinction between strong and weak forms. The exception to both generalizations is the 3_{SG.N} pronoun *het*, which only has a weak form and makes no case distinctions. Based on these deviations from the pronominal paradigm, we suggested that *het* does not belong to the paradigm of personal pronouns, and we concluded that *het* is underspecified for case, strength, gender, and number.

The conclusion that *het* is underspecified for all features except person is crucial for the analysis of *het*-clefts of the form *het*-copula-pronoun. Based on a questionnaire study, we show that 1/2_P agreement in those clefts is always ungrammatical. This follows from the feature specification of *het*, as *het* controls person agreement, always leading to 3_P agreement in these clefts. We furthermore showed that judgements on clefts with 3_{SG} agreement but a 1/2_{SG} pronoun vary and concluded that this corresponds to two different grammars of Dutch. The grammars differ in whether there is a stronger requirement that the copula agree in person with both *het* and the pronoun.

Apart from giving an overview of case forms across Dutch dialects, and providing empirical data and an analysis of the syntax of pronominal *het*-clefts, the contribution of this paper is that it illustrates that impoverishment of morphological distinctions, such as case distinctions, can have an effect on the syntax of a language.

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Appendix: Questionnaire sentences

Je kijkt met een vriend naar een oude klassenfoto en zoekt bekenden. Je vriend zegt: 'is het Jan die achter de juf zit?' Ineens zie je het. Je zegt:

'You and a friend are looking at a class picture. You are looking for people you recognize. Your friend says: 'is it John that is sitting behind the teacher?' All of a sudden, you realize who it is. You say:'

- | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|------|-----|--------|------------|------|--------|-----|---------|-----|
| (1) | Nee, | het | is | ik | die | achter | de | juf | zit |
| | no, | it | is | I | that | behind | the | teacher | sit |
| (2) | Nee, | het | is | jij | die | achter | de | juf | zit |
| | no, | it | is | you.SG.NOM | that | behind | the | teacher | sit |
| (3) | Ja, | het | is | hij | die | achter | de | juf | zit |
| | yes, | it | is | he | that | behind | the | teacher | sit |
| (4) | Nee, | het | ben | ik | die | achter | de | juf | zit |
| | no, | it | am | I | that | behind | the | teacher | sit |
| (5) | Nee, | het | ben | jij | die | achter | de | juf | zit |
| | no, | it | are.SG | you.SG.NOM | that | behind | the | teacher | sit |