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Leiden**
The Netherlands

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Fortuin, E.L.J.

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Let's take the Cinque hierarchy one step further (by doing semantics)

A reply to Barbiers

Egbert Fortuin

Universiteit Leiden

E.Fortuin@hum.leidenuniv.nl

1. Introduction

The goal of my paper was to show that the data about the placement of adverbs have to be explained with reference to semantics and pragmatics, a perspective which, in my view, was underdeveloped in Barbiers (2018). In his response, Barbiers acknowledges the importance of that perspective by saying that “the syntactic explanation and the semantic explanation are two sides of the same coin”. Furthermore, Barbiers further contributes to our understanding of the data at hand, although he could take the semantic perspective a step further.¹ Barbiers presents the examples in (1) to illustrate that rules such as “the adverb can be interpreted in the matrix clause because there is not any possible interpretation of the adverb in the embedded clause” must be incorrect:

- (1) *Ik zei [dat het tegen Jan/hardop mooi weer is]. (example 6b in Barbiers 2022)

I said that it against Jan/aloud nice weather is.

The crucial point, however, is that adverbs such as *hardop* ‘aloud’ need to occur next to the predicate they modify, but *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’ can be placed more freely in the complex clause with a number of predicates because it indicates the attitude of the speaker with respect to the speech act. This also means that with predicates such as *denken* ‘think’, there is an inherent

¹ In some cases, Barbiers attributes a standpoint to me which I do not hold, for example that *denk eerlijk gezegd* ‘think honestly’ would be more natural or more frequent than *denk altijd* ‘always think’ as in his examples (3) and (4). I will not discuss these misunderstandings here.

relationship between *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' having scope over the whole proposition, and *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' having scope over the proposition in the complement clause only: if you think something in all honesty, then *honestly* also applies to the content of the thinking (and vice versa). As such, placement in the complement clause does not give rise to confusion with respect to its interpretation in the same way as with adverbs such as *hardop* 'aloud'. This is not to say, however, that there are no restrictions on the use of *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly', or that different placements of *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' are associated with the same function. The rules of placement of *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' are sometimes quite difficult to capture, which, I would argue, has to do with the subtlety of the combinatorial possibilities of meanings, and the function of prosody and intonation. This is also the case for the examples in (2) for which Barbiers argues that a semantic-pragmatic approach cannot explain why *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' can occur at the beginning of the matrix clause as in (2a) and (2b), but not in the complement clause as in (2c) and (2d) (examples 9 in Barbiers 2022):

- (2) a. **Eerlijk gezegd** weet ik niet of ...
honestly know I not whether ...
'Honestly, I don't know whether ...'
- b. **Eerlijk gezegd** weet ik al dat ...
honestly know I already that ...
'Honestly, I already know that ...'
- c. *Ik weet niet of ze **eerlijk gezegd** komt.
I know not whether she honestly comes
'Honestly, I do not know whether she will come.'
- d. *Ik weet al dat ze **eerlijk gezegd** komt.
I know already that she honestly comes
'Honestly, I already know that she will come.'

Even though *eerlijk gezegd* in sentences with *weten* 'know' most often occurs in the matrix clause or at the end of the whole complex construction to indicate its scope over the whole proposition, sentences where *eerlijk gezegd* occurs in the complement clause are not ungrammatical. Sentence (2c) is somewhat marked, but the same sentence becomes more natural if we add *nog wel* 'still' as in (3):

- (3) Ik weet niet of ze **eerlijk gezegd** nog wel komt.
I know not whether she honestly still comes
'I do not know honestly speaking whether she will still come.'

I think this has to do with the meaning of *eerlijk gezegd*, which expresses roughly something like:

Eerlijk gezegd: “I (or the author who knows what the subject is thinking) am now telling you how I really (without holding back any information) think about it (expecting you (the addressee) not to know/anticipate this).”

By using *nog wel* the speaker more clearly goes against the expectation of the addressee that the event in the complement clause will still occur, which makes it a better fit with *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’, and makes placement in the complement clause possible. The occurrence of *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’ in the complement clause is also possible in sentences where the (topicalized) complement clause occurs before the matrix clause as in (4a) (suggesting that the scope of *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’ is established without any interference from the matrix verb *weten* ‘know’, similar to its use on non-complex sentences), and also with *toegeven* ‘admit’, which is usually classified as a factive verb:

- (4) a. Mercedes en Hamilton zijn een goed team,
 maar of ze **eerlijk gezegd** de beste zijn, weet ik zo net nog niet ...²
 but whether they honestly the best are, know I precisely not
 ‘Mercedes and Hamilton are a good team, but whether they are the best, I honestly do not really know/I rather doubt.’
- b. Ik geef toe dat het **eerlijk gezegd** best wel prettig is om eens zonder
 jetlags te werken.³
 I admit that it honestly rather prt pleasant is to once without jetlag
 to work
 ‘I admit that, to be honest, it is quite nice to work without a jet lag
 for once.’

So why are (3) and (4) better than (2d)? The meaning of *eerlijk gezegd* ‘honestly’ is more compatible with a context where the speaker admits (not to know something), than with a context where the subject expresses that

2 <https://www.gpfans.com/nl/f1-nieuws/64938/brawn-verwacht-fikse-uitdaging-voor-verstappen-hamilton-is-momenteel-onfeilbaar/>

3 <https://www.ad.nl/dossier-topverhalen-uit-de-drechtsteden/denice-zag-haar-droom-werkelijkheid-woorden-maar-toen-kwam-corona-ineens-was-alles-anders-a0c1946d/>

(s)he knows something as in (2d). If one wants to combine these meanings, this is only possible by putting *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' in the matrix clause as in (2b) to make fully clear that *eerlijk gezegd* 'honestly' has scope over the whole proposition, even though this specific construction with *al weten dat* 'already know that' (based on data from the internet where I found just two examples) itself is not commonly used either, in contrast to sentences like (2a). An editor rightly pointed out that prosody also plays an important part in the placement of *eerlijk gezegd*, but prosody alone is not sufficient to explain the data. Compare for example the following sentences, which in each case can be pronounced with an intonational pause:

- (5) a. Ik weet dat, eerlijk gezegd, de toestand niet acceptabel is.⁴
 'I know that, honestly speaking, the situation is not acceptable.'
 b. Eerlijk gezegd, de toestand is niet acceptabel.
 'Honestly speaking, the situation is not acceptable.'
 c. *Ik weet al dat ze, eerlijk gezegd, komt.
 'I know already that she, honestly speaking, comes.'
 d. *Eerlijk gezegd, ze komt.
 'Honestly speaking, she comes.'

The more the speaker admits that she has in fact a particular opinion or evaluation of something, the better the placement of *eerlijk gezegd* in the complement clause is (see (5a)). The more the speaker reports about a fact that she knows, the less acceptable the placement is (see (5c)). In this case, the same phenomenon occurs if the expression is put before the same clause without matrix verb and pronoun *dat* 'that' (see 5b and 5d).

It would be interesting to find out whether the restriction on the use in the complement clause is a universal phenomenon, as predicted by the Cinque-type approach advocated by Barbiers. I suspect that it largely is, since meanings (and the way to combine) are often very similar cross-linguistically. There may, however, be language-specific differences between form-meaning elements, and word order rules. This can be illustrated with Russian *čestno govorja* 'honestly' or literally 'said honestly'. This expression can occur at

4 I would like to thank Karen De Clercq for pointing out this example.

the beginning of a sentence, or at the end of a sentence.⁵ With the verb *znat* ‘know’, it can also occur in the complement clause:⁶

- (6) a. potomu čto my znaem, čto, **čestno govorja**, vy èto zaslužili.⁷
 because we know that honestly speaking you that deserved
 ‘because we know that, honestly, you deserve it.’
- b. U menja net neobxodimosti, čtoby nosit’ masku,
 potomu čto ja znaju, čto, **čestno govorja**, maska osobo ne pomožet.⁸
 because I know that honestly speaking mask much not helps
 ‘I don’t need to wear a facemask because I know that honestly, a
 mask won’t help much.’

The explanation given in Barbiers (2022) (“a matrix factive verb originates and remains in a syntactic position above/to the left of the relevant adverb, such that the adverb will never take scope over that factive verb”) by itself has no explanatory power for such data and needs to be supplemented with additional rules for the Russian data.

It is also interesting to compare the placement of *eerlijk gezegd* to *eigenlijk* ‘actually’, which expresses a very similar meaning, but which has the meaning component of ‘if you really look into it closely’, without, crucially, the meaning component which inherently involves the speech act. *Eigenlijk* ‘in

5 Because of the free word order of Russian, the expression can also be found immediately after a topicalized element, for example:

(1) *Da i čašku, čestno govorja, ja nadejus’ skleit’ po vozvraščenii,*
 yes and cup-acc honestly said I hope glue.together.inf upon return
 ‘And I hope to glue back together the cup upon my return.’ (source: Valery Popov. Free swimming // *Zvezda*, 2003, taken from the Russian National Corpus)

This order is not possible in Dutch (**Het kopje eerlijk gezegd hoop ik te lijmen als ik terug kom*).

6 According to the rules of Russian writing, the expression *čestno govorja* is put between comma’s here, as it would be the case if it occurred elsewhere in the sentence. The use of comma’s does not necessarily reflect a pause. This means that the expression can be pronounced without specific intonational or prosodic marking which sets the expression apart from the rest of the sentence. Nevertheless, intonation and prosody do play an important part in the placement of adverbs in both Russian and Dutch.

The only example from Dutch of this type of construction I could find is the following sentence which contains a coordinative type of ellipsis: *Ik weet dat ik niet mag uploaden en eerlijk gezegd dus ook niet weg mag geven* (lit. I know that I can’t upload and honestly speaking therefore also not give away). (<https://www.optelsom.nl/21-websites-waar-je-gratis-ebooks-kunt-downloaden.html>)

7 <http://sport-uzao.ru/objects/2017-12-13-11-50-35/1646-spin-city/>

8 <https://www.objectiv.tv/objectively/2020/09/17/harkovchane-vyskazalis-po-povodu-ka-rantinnyh-trebovanij/>

fact' always pertains to the meaning element in its vicinity, and can occur in the complement clause with *weten dat* 'know that':

- (7) Je weet vast al wel dat wij **eigenlijk** familie van de apen zijn.⁹
 you know certainly already prt that we actually family of the apes are
 'Certainly you already know that we are family of the apes.'

In (8) with coreferent subjects a different placement is associated with a different function:

- (8) a. Hij wist niet meer of hij **eigenlijk** nog wel van haar hield.
 'He didn't know anymore whether he actually still loved her.'
 b. **Eigenlijk** wist hij niet meer of hij nog wel van haar hield.
 'Actually, he didn't know anymore whether he still loved her.'

If *eigenlijk* is placed in the complement clause it pertains to the content of the knowing of the subject such that (8a) can be interpreted as indicating the perspective of the subject ('He did not know anymore whether he really still loved her'). In the matrix clause, it has scope over the whole proposition, such that in (8b) it is interpreted in such a way that it indicates the perspective of the speaker/author ('If you really think about it, he did not know anymore whether he still loved her').

In some cases, Barbiere (2022) sees no semantic explanation at all, whereas I think such an explanation is quite easy to come up with. Consider the following example provided by him with the adverb *weer* 'again' (his example 12; compare also his example 11b):

- (9) a. Ik denk [dat ik weer ziek ben], (#maar ik ben nooit eerder ziek geweest).
 I think that I again sick am, but I am never earlier sick been
 'I think that I am sick again, (#but I have never been sick before).'
 b. Ik denk weer [dat ik ziek ben], (maar ik ben nooit eerder ziek geweest).
 I think again that I sick am, but I am never earlier sick been
 I. 'I think again that I am sick (but I have never been sick before).'
 II. 'I think that I am sick again.'

Barbiere writes that it is unclear how the semantic account could explain why certain adverb types surfacing in the matrix clause can have an embedded

9 https://maken.wikiwijs.nl/bestanden/174172/Van_aap_tot_mensbronnen.doc+&cd=2&hl=nl&ct=clnk&gl=nl&client=safari

interpretation, given that the matrix interpretation (cf. 9b-I) does not imply the embedded interpretation (cf. 9b-II), and prefers his syntactic raising analysis. But from a semantic perspective the difference in (9) is in fact quite straightforward. In (9a) *again* modifies *be sick/ill* in the complement clause, presupposing that the speaker has been ill before. This presupposition is part of the compositionally derived meaning of complement clause and cannot be cancelled. In (9b) *again* modifies *think*, the matrix verb in the main clause, presupposing that the thinking has occurred before. The sentence itself says nothing about the question whether the content of the thinking is correct or not and consequently whether the situation ‘be sick’ has occurred before or not. Put differently, the Dutch construction *denken dat* ‘think that’ in itself does not provide any information about the question whether the information given in the embedded clause, the content of the thinking, is true or not. People can think things which are incorrect. This is of course a semantic issue, which has to do with the meaning of *denken* ‘think’. As sentence like the following with the verb *realiseren* ‘realize’ would be less or not acceptable:

- (10) Ik realiseer me weer dat ik ziek ben, (?maar ik ben nooit eerder ziek geweest).
 I realize again that I am sick, but I am never earlier sick been
 ‘I realize again that I am sick, (?but I have never been sick before).’

The only way to make sense of this sentence, would be to understand it in such a way that the speaker has been sick for some period, forgot about this, and now realizes again that she is sick. This period of being sick was the first time that the speaker ever has been sick.

As such in (9b), whether or not the speaker has been sick before is an interpretation, and not something which is part of the meaning of the construction, even if one can think of ‘different versions of the world’, such that both interpretation I and interpretation II are possible. No complicated and unmotivated syntactic raising analysis is therefore needed to understand these data. In order to accept this, one does, of course, also need to abandon the theoretical starting point that interpretations of constructions have to be analyzed in terms of placement and movement of linguistic elements (see also Fortuin 2021 for a discussion). Also in the other examples provided by Barbiers, I think a more systematic and more in-depth semantic-pragmatic approach can provide useful insights into the data. Only as a last resort, the use of purely syntactic theory internal rules such as ‘repair’ (as proposed in Barbiers 2018) should be applied.

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