

The modal ambiguity of *door* and *voor* PP-constructions in Dutch

An experimental study

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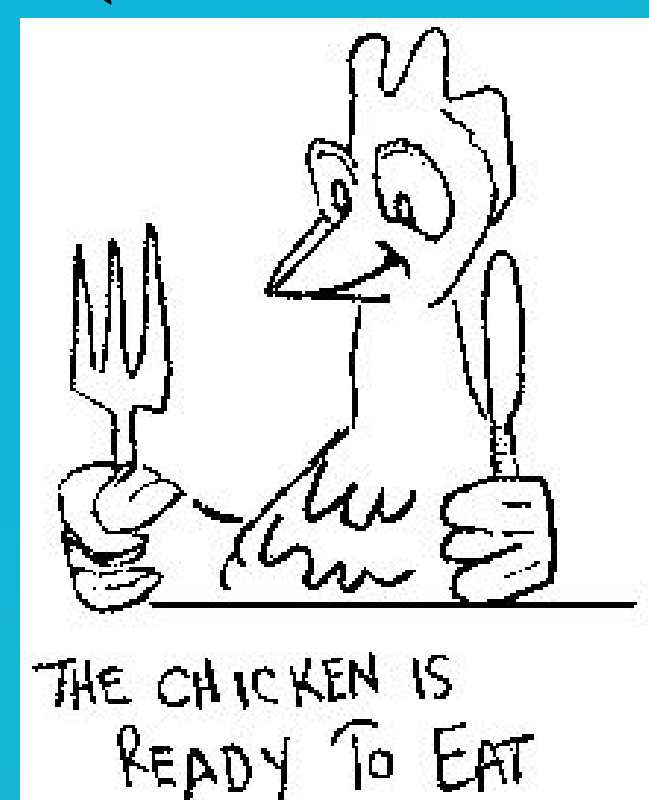
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1. Background: modal ambiguities

- **modality**: a semantic concept that “covers notions such as **possibility, necessity, probability, obligation, permission, ability, and volition**” (Barbiers and van Dooren 2017: 2)

- modality can be expressed by:

- modal verbs
- imperatives
- verbal inflection
- modal adverbs
- modal particles



- however, modals are not always unequivocal → they can be **ambiguous**, i.e. have more than one meaning → consider the following sentence:

- (1) *Jan moet schaatsen.* (Broekhuis et al. 2012: 129)
Jan must.3SG skate.INF
‘Jan must skate.’

- the example above is modally **four-fold ambiguous**:

- (i) Jan definitely wants to skate. (→ dispositional)
- (ii) Jan has the obligation to skate. (→ directed deontic)
- (iii) It is required that Jan skate. (→ non-directed deontic)
- (iv) It must be the case that Jan skates. (→ epistemic)

2. Infinitives

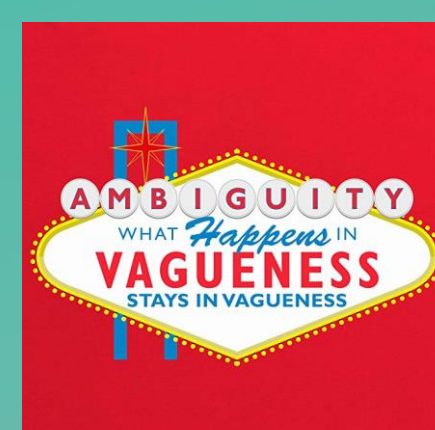
- **modal infinitives**: (te + -en constructions) are ambiguous → they can either express **obligation** or **ability**, thus example (2) will have two available readings:

- (2) *het te lezen boek* (Broekhuis et al. 2012: 73)
the to read.INF book
a. ‘the book that **must** be read’
b. ‘the book that **can** be read’

- modal infinitives can also function as predicates, like in the following sentence:

- (3) *Dit boek is gemakkelijk te lezen.*
this book is easy to read.INF
‘This book **can** be read with little effort.’

Note that in this case, only the ‘can’ interpretation is possible!



3. Framework

- Bennis 1990:

- (4) *Deze som is op te lossen*
this sum is PRT to solve.INF

- a. This sum is to solve → obligation
- b. This sum can be solved → ability

- it might seem to be easy to disambiguate this: Bennis suggests that we add ‘door’ or ‘voor’ PP-complements:

- (5) *Deze som is voor Henk op te lossen*
This sum is for Henk PRT to solve.INF
‘This sum can be solved by Henk’
(6) *Deze som is door Henk op te lossen*
This sum is by Henk PRT to solve.INF
‘This sum must be solved by Henk’

- (5) and (6) native speaker responses cast doubt on the **unambiguity of these sentences** → our aim is to find out

4. Goals and methods

- questionnaire: asking native speakers
- online, Google form
- **forced choice**
- task: sentences modified with *door* ‘by’ and *voor* ‘for’ complements → to choose from two possibilities, a sentence that expresses ability → inserted word: *kunnen* ‘can’, and the other that denotes obligation → inserted word: *moeten* ‘must’

- introductory part of the survey: personal questions: **dialect** → in order to see if answers can be differentiated by sociolinguistic factors
→ e.g. in the case of Flemish: is it influenced by French that has an impact on our research?

5. Findings (questionnaire in progress)

- early results (by 37 respondents) show that both *door* and *voor* are modally **AMBIGUOUS** → however, further feedback is needed!

References

- Barbiers, Sjef, and Annemarie van Dooren. 2017. “Modal auxiliaries.” In: Everaert, M. and van Riemsdijk, H. (eds.): *The Wiley Blackwell companion to syntax. Second edition*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
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