

# When contrasting polarity, the Dutch use particles, Germans intonation



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## Abstract

This study compares how Dutch and German, two closely related languages, signal a shift from a negative to a positive polarity in two contexts, when contrasting the polarity relative to a different topic situation (In my picture the man washes the car following after In my picture the man does not wash the car, henceforth polarity contrast) and when correcting the polarity of a proposition (The man washes the car following after The man does not wash the car, henceforth polarity correction). Production data show that in both contexts German speakers produced Verum focus (i.e., a high-falling pitch accent on the finite verb), while Dutch speakers mostly used the accented affirmative particle *wel*. This shows that even lexically and syntactically close languages behave differently when it comes to signalling certain pragmatic functions. Furthermore, we found that in polarity correction contexts, both affirmative particles and Verum focus were realized with stronger prosodic prominence. This difference was found in both languages and might be due to a secondary (syntagmatic) effect of the information structure of the utterance (absence or presence of a contrastive topic).

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## 1. Introduction

Natural languages offer a variety of linguistic means to encode the semantic and pragmatic contribution of utterances. In this paper we investigate the use of intonation and particles to contrast an utterance's polarity; our study is cross-linguistic and compares two closely related West Germanic languages, Dutch and German. More specifically, we analyze utterances that assert a claim that was previously denied, as in the B-utterances in the German examples (1) and (2) (accents are marked by capitals).

### (1) Polarity contrast

A: Auf meinem Bild hat das Kind nicht geweint. ("In my picture the child did not cry")

B1: Auf meinem Bild HAT das Kind geweint. ("In my picture the child DID cry")

B2: Auf meinem Bild hat das Kind SCHON/WOHL geweint. ("In my picture the child did INDEED cry")

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## (2) Polarity correction

A: Das Kind hat nicht geweint. (“The child did not cry”)

B1: Das Kind HAT geweint. (“The child DID cry”)

B2: Das Kind hat SCHON/WOHL geweint. (“The child did INDEED cry”)

In example (1), speakers A and B assert that similar descriptive properties (i.e., a child having cried) apply or do not apply with respect to different picture-situations (in Klein’s (2008) terms ‘topic situation’, see also Horn (1985)). If the topic is new or contrastive, the claims with negative and positive polarity do not exclude each other (henceforth ‘contrast’, see Umbach, 2004). On the other hand, the two speakers talk about the same situation in example (2). Here, the topic is maintained and speakers are making negative and affirmative claims about the same topic situation (e.g., the same picture); that is the claims are mutually exclusive (henceforth ‘correction’, see, Umbach, 2004).<sup>1</sup>

The cross-linguistic comparison of German and Dutch polarity contrast marking is interesting as both languages are considered ‘assertion-oriented’ (Dimroth et al., 2010): Speakers of such languages tend to overtly mark the contrast between negative and affirmative assertions, whereas speakers of Romance languages, for instance, usually highlight the contrast between other information structure units (e.g., the topics) in the same contexts.

Despite the similarity between German and Dutch assertion marking, there appear to be differences in their linguistic realization. Speakers of German have been argued to use Verum focus in these contexts, that is an accent on the finite verb (e.g., Höhle, 1988, 1992). More specifically, Höhle argues that the verb is associated with a VERUM operator, which becomes prominent when the verb is accented (Höhle, 1992: 114). In the B1-utterances of examples (1) and (2) Verum focus is marked by a pitch accent on the finite auxiliary (indicated by capitals). The term Verum focus is motivated by the proposal that it is the truth of the proposition that is in focus (Höhle, 1988, 1992).<sup>2</sup> Other accounts (Klein, 1998, 2006; Lohnstein, 2012), on the other hand, assume that the accent on the finite verb highlights the assertive relation between the topic and the comment of the utterance. Finiteness expresses assertion and tense. Therefore, the accent on the finite verb can induce, among others, an assertion contrast (Klein, 1998), or lead to a “focus of affirmation” (Bolinger, 1983); in this paper we concentrate on this particular function of accented finite verbs.

In addition to intonation, Dutch and German are equipped with affirmative particles<sup>3</sup> (e.g., Dutch: *toch, wel*; German: *doch, wohl, schon*) whose precise meaning contributions are still under discussion (e.g., Foolen, 2006; Hogeweg et al., 2011). Notably, some of these particles can take the same function as Verum focus; the affirmative function of these particles in contrastive and corrective contexts is linked to the accented version only (see Hogeweg, 2009; Sudhoff, 2012 for recent analyses along these lines). Apparently, the use of such affirmative particles is more widely acknowledged for Dutch than for German. For the Dutch particle *wel*, Sudhoff (2012: 105) even assumes that “focus on this particle is in fact an instance of Verum focus”. However, to date there is only very little comparative experimental evidence to lend direct support to these language-specific preferences in marking polarity contrast and correction, a gap which this paper aims to fill.

Before we turn to the empirical studies, we revise previous studies on polarity marking in both languages.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Affirmative particles

In this section we focus on the Dutch affirmative particle *wel*. Recent contributions by Hogeweg (2009) and Sudhoff (2012) suggest that the stressed variant of the Dutch affirmative particle *wel* should be considered as positive counterpart of the negation *niet* and is hence similar to Verum focus. Hogeweg (2009) investigates a corpus containing *wel* in corrective, contrastive and a variety of other contexts and shows that there is always an explicit or implicit negation in the preceding context. The author comes to the conclusion that “the stronger the negation in the context, the stronger *wel* has to be to ‘undo’ that negation” (2009: 535, single quotes added). The idea of prominence as an indicator of the extent of “undoing” a context negation is appealing for corrective contexts. However, it is difficult to extend the claim to contrastive contexts, in which it is not the function of the particle to “undo” the negation, but rather to signal the contrastive relation between the affirmative statement and the preceding negative one. The different functions of the affirmative particle

<sup>1</sup> See also Dik et al.’s (1981) notion of ‘expanding’ for contrast and ‘replacing’ for correction.

<sup>2</sup> Different approaches concerning the semantic properties and the syntactic implementation of a VERUM operator as well as its relation to other types of foci are under discussion (see, for instance, all contributions in Lohnstein and Blühdorn, 2012; Repp, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See also the terms polarity particles (Sudhoff, 2012), assertion-related particles (Klein, 2012) or Westheide’s (1985) *Konversationskonnektiv mit Widerspruchscharakter* (“discourse connective with contradictory character”).

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