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# The distribution of preverbal *en* in (West) Flemish: Syntactic and interpretive properties<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The present paper consists of two parts. We first show that the Flemish preverbal morpheme *en* in negative sentences differs from superficially similar items in other languages such as French both in terms of distribution and in terms of interpretation: Flemish *en* is dependent on finite Tense and conveys contrastive focus on the negative polarity of the clause. In the second part of the paper, we develop a new syntactic analysis of *en* and argue that although *en* syntactically encodes (low) focus, the contrastive effects associated with it are pragmatically inferred through the interaction of the focal interpretation with the discourse context. That is, we conclude that focus and contrast can be dissociated and that not all expressions of contrast are syntacticized.

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## 1. Introduction: aim and scope of the paper

All the Germanic languages have gone through what is generally referred to as Jespersen's cycle (cf. [Jespersen, 1917](#)), the diachronic development in which the expression of sentential negation, originally expressed by one preverbal element (stage I), first enters a bipartite stage (stage II) which combines the preverbal marker and an additional component (which starts out as an optional reinforcer before it becomes obligatory) and finally reaches a stage in which the erstwhile reinforcing element survives as the canonical marker of sentential negation (stage III).

Standard Dutch completed the transition from stage II to stage III by the 17th century ([Burridge, 1993:190f](#)), but many Flemish varieties of Dutch retain to this day what seems to be the original preverbal marker of negation.<sup>4</sup> (1) shows two

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<sup>4</sup> For extensive discussion we refer to, among others, [van der Auwera and Neuckermans \(2004\)](#), [Zeijlstra \(2004\)](#) and [van der Auwera and De Vogelaer \(2009\)](#) for Flemish dialects in general, to [Haegeman \(1995, 1998, 2000, 2002\)](#), [Haegeman and Zanuttini \(1991, 1996\)](#) and [Haeberli and Haegeman \(1999\)](#) for West Flemish, and to [De Caluwe \(2007\)](#), [Breitbarth and Haegeman \(2010\)](#) for the Flemish *tussentaal*, the supradialectal colloquial variant of Dutch which is used in informal situations by a majority of Flemish speakers.

examples from our corpus of attested occurrences of *en* in natural speech/conversation,<sup>5</sup> illustrating the use of preverbal *en* in the West Flemish (WF) dialect of Lapscheure.

- (1) a. k=een al overal gezocht in us en k'en vinden ze nievers.  
I=have already everywhere searched in house and I=EN find her nowhere  
'I have looked for it everywhere in the house and I just don't find it anywhere.'  
(MJL, Lapscheure, 11.06.2008)
- b. k=stungen der 5 meter van. K=en zagen em nog niet.  
I=stood there 5 meters off. I=EN saw him yet NEG  
'I was 5 meters away (from the car) and I still didn't see it.'  
(AH, Lapscheure, 11.09.2011)  
[Context: out on a field, it was dark and the car the speaker had to return to was black.]

In the generative literature (for instance Haegeman, 1995; Haegeman and Zanuttini, 1991, 1996, or Zeijlstra, 2004), data such as these were commonly analyzed as evidence that WF (and other Flemish dialects displaying the preverbal particle) are somehow still in stage II of Jespersen's cycle, implying that a WF example such as (2a) is much like its French counterpart in (2b), which is likewise a remnant of Jespersen's Cycle<sup>6</sup>:

- (2) a. Ik **en** kennen dienen vent **niet**.  
I EN know that man NEG  
'I don't know that guy.'
- b. Je **ne** connais **pas** cet homme.  
I NE know NEG this man.  
'I don't know that man.'

In both languages the particle is licensed by a clause-mate n-word: let us assume that *en* carries an unvalued negative feature [*u*Neg] which has to be licensed under agreement with a clause mate n-word.

- (2) c. Ik **en** kennen hier **niemand/ \*eentwien**.  
I EN know here no one/ someone  
'I don't know anyone around here.'
- d. Je **ne** connais **personne/\* quelqu'un** ici.  
I NE know no one/ someone here.  
'I don't know anyone around here.'

As has been discussed in the literature (Haegeman, 1995, 2000, 2002), there are important distributional differences between Flemish *en* and French *ne*. The better known differences are that while French *ne* is available in non finite clauses, the Flemish 'counterpart' *en* is not (3), and that while French *ne* can be licensed across clause boundaries, this is not possible for its Flemish counterpart (4).<sup>7</sup>

- (3) a. Prière de (**ne**) pas marcher sur la pelouse. French  
please to (NE) NEG walk on the grass  
'Please do not walk on the grass!'
- b. Nie ip t=gas (**\*en**) lopen, asteblief! Flemish  
NEG on the=grass (\*EN) walk, please  
'Please do not walk on the grass!'
- c. Mee Valère da nie gekocht te (**\*en**) een  
With Valère that NEG bought to (\*EN) have  
'Valère not having bought that, ...'

<sup>5</sup> This is a collection of currently 109 sentences that we have collected in personal conversations between 2008 and 2013 and which we continue to expand.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the (West)Flemish situation might be ascribed to intense language contact between (West)Flemish and French. Such contact is independently revealed by numerous and widespread lexical borrowings, as well as in the phonetic and prosodic properties (see De Schutter, 1999; Ryckeboer, 1991, 2004; Noske, 2005, 2007a,b; Haegeman, 2009) and in patterns of syllabification (Noske, 2007b). However, while not excluding that language contact may have played a role in the retention of preverbal *en* in (W)F, the distribution and interpretive effect of *en* in present-day (W)F negative sentences differs from that of preverbal *ne* in present-day French negative sentences.

<sup>7</sup> For French see Kayne (1984) and Rowlett (1998). For an account see Haegeman (2000, 2002).

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