**Register as a predictor for grammatical choices: a corpus-based study of the Dutch *om*-alternation**

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Grammatical alternations constitute an intriguing topic for linguistic theory, as the identification of the parameters motivating the distribution of grammatical alternatives can provide unique insights into the relation between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. In constructionist approaches to grammar, alternating grammatical patterns are seen as distinct “constructions”—i.e., conventionalized pairings of form and meaning/function—which do not only differ in their structural properties, but, by definition, also in their semantic and/or pragmatic properties (see e.g. Goldberg’s 1995:67 *Principle of No Synonymy*). However, the stylistic dimensions of constructional meaning have not received much linguistic attention so far (Biber 2012). Some existing multifactorial investigations of grammatical alternations do include register among the explanatory variables (e.g. Stefanowitsch & Gries 2008, Szmrecsanyi 2010). The operationalization of this register variable, however, is usually rather broad (i.e., just a binary distinction written vs. spoken) and the discussion largely limited to the reporting of an (overall) effect – e.g., a stronger presence of one of the grammatical alternatives in written compared to spoken language – without much attention being devoted to the situational characteristics of the registers in question that might explain this contrast, nor for what such register contrasts imply for the constructional semantics. By distinguishing the written registers fiction, journalistic texts, instructive texts and legal texts besides the spoken register of spontaneous conversation, we opt for a more fine-grained operationalization of register in this case study because we want to investigate the effects of register on the language user’s choice between alternating constructions in more detail.

The grammatical alternation under investigation is the variation between infinitival complements (=IC) with and without the prepositional complementizer *om* in Dutch, illustrated in (1) below, where the infinitival clause depends on a verb, a noun, and an adjective, respectively. When *om* is present, it functions as an explicit boundary signal. Some examples:

(1) a. *Ik beloof (om) op tijd te komen* ‘I promise *to* be on time’

b. *zijn neiging (om) alles uit te stellen* ‘his inclination *to* procrastinate everything’

 c. Ik ben blij (om) je te zien ‘I am glad to see you’

Existing research on the *om*-alternation suggests that the complementizer *om* can be added or omitted depending on different syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors. We will investigate the effects of register next to thirteen other factors, such as the agentivity of the implied subject in the matrix sentence and the IC, the mode of the matrix verb, the type of constituent that serves as the head of the IC and so on (ANS 1997, Vliegen 2001, SoD 2015) through a mixed-effects logistic regression analysis applied to a dataset of real-language examples culled from the non-translated part of the Dutch Parallel Corpus and the Corpus Gesproken Nederlands. Preliminary results showed not only a significant difference between spoken and written language, but also within the selected written registers for the choice between alternating constructions. By adding the features derived from the situational characteristics of the registers with the same preference to constructional meaning, we shed important new light on the stylistic dimensions of that constructional meaning.

References

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