

Deflection and arbitrary reference

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1. In the generative tradition diachronic arguments usually take the following form: a particular claim in the synchronic (generative) theory is supported by the fact that it also explains a diachronic development in a language. For instance, if the Head Parameter relates a diverse set of facts, it is expected that if a language changes from one setting of this parameter to another, the whole array of related facts follows. In this paper I will follow a somewhat different type of argumentation, which has a more comparative character and which makes use of the fact that closely related languages sometimes follow the same diachronic development, though with a different speed.

It has been observed already by Van Haeringen (1956), for instance, that with respect to its morphology, and in particular with respect to its inflectional system, Dutch is in between English and German. Interestingly, in all the examples discussed by Van Haeringen, we can show that the inflectional system was (much) richer in earlier stages of these languages. The following pattern seems to hold:

(1) Deflection in West Germanic

	English	Dutch	German
Present:	–	±	+
Past:	++	++	++

In other words, the speed of deflection is clearly different in these three related languages. This state of affairs offers an interesting methodology. If for some particular fact, at first sight not related at all to inflection, the +/– pattern in (1) shows up, there is a good reason to see if this fact could not be related to deflection.

2. I will apply this strategy to the phenomenon of arbitrary reference, hardly discussed in the literature on the languages under discussion and poorly understood. Dutch has a special overt pronoun for arbitrary reference, namely *men*, etymologically related to the word *man* ‘human being’. I will show that this pronoun has a couple of very remarkable characteristics that set it apart from other pronouns and other strategies to express arbitrary reference. For instance, the referent has to be <+human>, no extensions are possible, the pronoun can only appear in a sentence with a finite verb which is 3rd person singular, it does not have an object variant and it is partly parasitic on the paradigm of male, singular pronouns, and partly on a plural paradigm. Some of these characteristics agree with arbitrary reference being a kind of default, but the total result is rather curious from a paradigmatic point of view.

Basing myself on several corpora I will show that Dutch *men* is very much on the decline. In Middle Dutch it was still very productive, but in the twentieth century *men* becomes more and more a word used in academic, written Dutch. Other strategies take over (for instance, (impersonal) passives, non-specific use of *je* ‘you’). It is therefore no surprise that we do not find *men* in Dutch spoken by children, as can be shown in CHILDES corpora. Apparently, in modern Dutch *men* is acquired very late (if at all).

3. The English and German counterpart of *men*, i.e. *man/men* in (Old/Middle) English and *man* in German seem to have exactly the same properties as Dutch *men*. However, whereas the English pronoun disappeared in the fifteenth century (cf. Los 2002 for discussion), I will show that German *man* is still very productive, again basing myself on several corpora. As expected, therefore, we find *man* being used by children before age 4, in contrast to Dutch *men*, suggesting that *man* is still very much part and parcel of the core system. We can

conclude that the system of arbitrary pronouns of the *men/man* type shows exactly the +/– pattern in (1).

4. This state of affairs makes it possible to review earlier explanations for the decline of *men/man*. For instance, a relation with the loss of V2 (as suggested by Los 2002) might seem plausible for English, but it does not seem crucial, given that V2 does not disappear from Dutch, whereas *men* does. To explain the situation in Dutch by referring to ‘English influence’ (as Paardekooper 1991 does), might seem handy, but clearly does not work for the disappearance of *men/man* in English itself. In contrast, the strategy suggested in section 1, suggests that the crucial factor behind the decline of this pronoun should be the same in the languages under discussion and could very well be related to the inflectional system. In fact, the analysis given in section 2 does precisely this: the marked paradigmatic status of *man/men* makes it very vulnerable.

Time permitting, I will suggest that the speed of deflection is ultimately reducible to factors that undermine the relation of language learning children with frequent and consistent positive evidence (language contact, child L2 and adult L2 acquisition). The prediction we make is that *man/men* does not survive as a pronoun of arbitrary reference in (semi) creoles based on the West Germanic languages (unless, of course, the problems with the paradigmatic status are solved). This prediction is correct, as I will show

5. The explanation given obviously leads to a new question. If *men/man* is paradigmatically marked, then why did it ever come into existence? Basing myself on work by Cabredo Hofherr (to appear), I will argue that the special paradigmatic status of *men* is a result of deflection of a pro drop system. The Germanic languages were presumably pro drop languages. There are good reasons to assume that arbitrary subjects were not overt and agreed with the 3rd person singular in this stage. Gradually overt subjects were required; the word *man/men* ‘human being’ supports the arbitrary construction by leaving as much as possible in tact of the older construction (3rd person singular etc.). Apparently ‘UG’ allows several strategies to express arbitrary reference; a particular choice may be marked economically, but nevertheless the optimal answer to cope with the existing input as much as possible. If the relation with the input is for some reason frustrated, more economical choices will show up

References

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