

Dutch Syntax



Matthew Fritzier

This article uses basic sentences of Dutch and English to compare the syntax of the two languages. By analyzing basic word and clause structure, headedness, question formation, and tree analysis, the author is able to draw on personal experience to demonstrate similarities and differences between Dutch and English. The author clearly illustrates these comparisons using examples in both languages.

Introduction

The Germanic language Dutch is the national language spoken in the Netherlands, Flanders, and Suriname and is the official second language in three islands in the Dutch Antilles. There are approximately twenty-three million native speakers of Dutch, sixteen million of which live in the Netherlands. The information contained in this paper is based on the knowledge I obtained during the two years I lived in the Netherlands, supplemented with some research. This paper discusses the similarities and differences between the Netherlands' official dialect, *Algemeen Beschaaft Nederlands* (ABN, or Dutch), and English. Each section contains a description of certain syntactic features and is followed by several examples that illustrate those principles.

Word Order and Clause Structure

Dutch is a subject-verb-object (SVO) language. In its basic word order, Dutch is almost identical to English. Example 1 shows a simply Dutch sentence whose elemental structure is identical to English. This structure is also true for Dutch phrases, with the exception of auxiliary verb phrases that are discussed later. The order of Dutch phrases is organized based on semantics, rather than on grammatical category. This order is as follows: Subject, First Verb, Time, Object, Manner, Place, All other Verbs, Infinitive phrase [SvTOMPvI], as shown in Example 2. With the exception of verbs, all of the components may be either a word or a phrase. Manner corresponds with how something is done (e.g. slowly, with a hammer) and infinitive phrases correspond to why something is done. Infinitive phrases have *om* as their head, which translates roughly as the phrase “in order to.” These phrases would be an adjunct to the final VP.

In addition to word order, Dutch is similar to English in one form of its negation. Dutch has two main negation words: *niet*,

which negates verbs, and *geen*, which negates nouns. Example 3 shows the use of *geen*, which precedes the noun it negates. However, Dutch is different from English in its second form. Example 4 shows *niet*, which follows the verb it negates.

1. Ik goie de bal
 I throw the ball
 I throw the ball

2. Ik ga nu met m'n hond langzaam naar de winkel om melk te kopen
 I go now with my dog slowly to the store to buy milk
 I'm slowly going to the store with my dog to buy milk

3. Ik lust geen kaas
 I desire no cheese
 I don't like cheese

4. Ik wil niet mijn kamer schoonemaken
 I want not my room to clean
 I don't want to clean my room

Headedness

Dutch is a head-initial language. Basic word order has the head preceding all other words as shown in Examples 1 and 2 above. Dutch exclusively uses prepositions, which indicate head-initial languages, as shown in Example 5. Like English, Dutch may have either the possessor noun construction or the generative n-possessor construction, a characteristic of head-initial languages (Examples 6 and 7). The latter, which is shown in Example 7, is far more common. Relative clauses in Dutch always follow the noun, as shown in Example 8, which is again indicative of head-initial languages.

5. Ik speel met m'n vrienden
 I play with my friends
 I play with my friends
6. Mijn vader is niet oud
 My father is not old
 My father is not old
7. Maar het boek van m'n vader is echt oud
 But the book of my father is really old
 But my father's book is really old
8. De vis die mijn moeder at
 The fish that my mother ate
 The fish that my mother ate

(Example 8 is actually ambiguous and can also be translated as “The fish that ate my mother.”)

Questions

Dutch questions are quite different from English ones. Dutch yes/no questions have a T to C movement. Examples 9 and 10 show that the first verb in a Dutch sentence, either main or auxiliary, moves to C. Because this verb is inflected for tense, it is clear that first the verb moves to T and then T to C movement occurs. Example 11 shows that Dutch does not have a dummy *do*, but rather uses subject-verb inversion to form many simple yes/no questions. Again, this verb is inflected for tense, which shows that there is T to C movement.

One similarity in Dutch and English question formation is the basic *wh*- question structure, as in Example 12, which has the *wh*- word at the beginning of the sentence. Dutch *wh*- questions move the *wh*-word from the end of a sentence to the beginning of the sentence in the same way that English does. This is shown in

Examples 13 and 14, with 13 indicating a standard question and 14 an echo question. The same evidence that shows movement in English is applicable to Dutch.

9. Ga je naar de winkel
Go you to the store
Are you going to the store
10. Ben je al naar de winkel gegaan
Are you already to the store gone
Have you already gone to the store
11. Ken jij de muffin man
Know you the muffin man
Do you know the muffin man
12. Waar is de winkel
Where is the store
Where is the store
13. Naar welke winkel wil je dat ik ga
To which store want you that I go
Which store do you want me to go to
14. je wil dat ik ga naar welke winkel
You want that I go to which store
You want me to go to which store

Tree Analysis

Dutch differs greatly from English in its movement of words within phrases. Example 15 shows that all verbs following the first one are moved to the end of the sentence. Example 16 shows that most conjunctions (all except *maar*, *en*, *of*, *want*, and *dus*) move all verbs, including the first, to the end of the sentence. Our minimalist structure can easily handle such movement. It seems reasonable to assume that conjunctions and verbs have some feature which signals verbs to move down in a similar way. We know C has [+Q] or [+wh] which can signal verbs to move up; however, when verbs move to the end of the sentence, the order of the VP itself changes and becomes head final. Our system has always dealt with movement of words from one phrase to another, but never the movement of words within a phrase. One possible connection between Dutch and English could be drawn: English currently allows prepositions at the end of sentences, as shown in the translation of Example 13. This syntactic principle is not defined, but the principle that allows proposition movement in English could account for verb movement in Dutch.

15. Hij zou mij zijn geheim moeten vertellen
 He would me his secret must tell
 He should tell me his secret
16. Ik weet dat zij wilt dat ik haar mij geheim vertelt
 I know that she wants that I her my secret tell
 I know that she wants me to tell her my secret