

DEONTIC MODAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN DUTCH WITH *ZOU KUNNEN* 'COULD, MAY'

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Abstract: *Deontic modality is best described in terms of acceptability or necessity of a state of affairs on account of an authoritative person (possibly the speaker), institute or a set of rules and regulations. In Dutch the verbal combination *zou kunnen* 'could, may' can be used to express deontic modality, though it is primarily used to express hypothetical ability and possibility, otherwise known as respectively dynamic and epistemic modality.*

*In this paper, the possibility of treating these deontic usages of *zou kunnen* will be viewed in terms of construction grammar. In construction grammar language is viewed as a network of constructions, units of form and functions consisting of lexical and/or syntactic information. Two types of deontic *zou kunnen* were found: a type designating acceptability and a type expressing indirect speech acts. They may be assigned separate constructions.*

Key words: Deontic modality, Construction grammar, constructions, Dutch, '*zou kunnen*'.

Resumen: *La modalidad deóntica se describe de mejor forma en cuanto a la aceptabilidad o necesidad de un estado de las cosas (condiciones) por una persona autorizada (posiblemente el hablante), un instituto o un conjunto de reglas y normas. En holandés, la combinación verbal *zou kunnen* 'podría, puede' puede ser utilizada para expresar modalidad deóntica, aunque se usa ante todo para expresar habilidad hipotética y posibilidad, conocida de otro modo como modalidad dinámica y epistémica respectivamente.*

*En este artículo, se enfoca la posibilidad de tratar estos usos deónticos de *zou kunnen* desde la perspectiva de la gramática de construcciones. En la gramática de construcciones el lenguaje se percibe como una red de construcciones, unidades de forma y funciones que consisten en información léxica y/o sintáctica. Se encontraron dos tipos de *zou kunnen* deóntico: un tipo que designa aceptabilidad y un tipo que expresa actos de habla indirectos. Se les podrá asignar construcciones distintas.*

Palabras clave: Modalidad deóntica, Gramática de construcciones, construcciones, holandés, '*zou kunnen*'.

1. Introduction

In this paper I present an attempt at treating deontic modality within the framework of construction grammar among others presented by GOLDBERG (2003) and KAY & FILLMORE (1999). More specifically, the aim of this paper is to study deontic cases of the Dutch modal verb combination *zou kunnen* 'could, may'. This combination contains the past tense of the auxiliary verb *zullen* 'will, shall' and the infinitive of the verb *kunnen* 'can'.

First, I will enlighten the notions of deontic modality and construction grammar. In section 2, I will show the results of a corpus search for different types of modality involving *zou kunnen*. The cases of deontic modality following from this study will then be examined in the light of construction grammar. I will argue that different kinds of deontic interpretations result from different constructions.

2. Background

2.1 Deontic modality

Modality is not the most sharply outlined research area in linguistics. There is no clear definition of the field and researchers do not agree on how to divide the area. The tradition of COATES (1983), for instance, divides the modal domain in two: epistemic modality and root modality. This is not a very productive division, though. Example (1) shows ambiguity between a permissive reading and a possibility reading. The government could allow you to go to certain places in the countryside or circumstances could make it possible to go to certain places. In a root-epistemic division this ambiguity would be lost as example (1), in either interpretation, would be judged as an instance of root modality.

(1) *Where you can go in the countryside.*

The domain of root modality should be split in two. One part is called deontic modality and identifies «the enabling or compelling circumstances external to the participant as some person(s), often the speaker, and/or as some social or ethical norm(s) permitting or obliging the participant to engage in the state of affairs» (VAN DER AUWERA & PLUNGIAN 1998: 81). The other part is called dynamic modality and exists of examples where the subject-referent is judged to have certain capacities or possibilities of his own or enabled by the circumstances of the state of affairs.

2.2. Construction grammar

In construction grammar (CROFT & CRUSE 2004, GOLDBERG 2003, KAY & FILLMORE 1999) language is viewed as consisting of a network of different constructions, pairings of form and meaning. This approach allows idioms like *it's raining cats and dogs* to be independently stored in the lexicon as pairing of form and meaning. Constructions, however, do not need to be made up out of lexical items only. «A construction is a syntactic configuration, sometimes with one or more substantive items (...) and sometimes not.» (CROFT & CRUSE 2004: 247) Every language consists of a unique taxonomy of constructions mutually connected. «Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist.»(GOLDBERG 2003: 219)¹ Kay & Fillmore (1999) for example showed how the pattern *What's X doing Y* can successfully be treated as a construction.

In the remainder of this paper, I will investigate the possibility of treating different deontic examples with the modal verb combination *zou kunnen* ‘could (be), may’ as constructions.

3. Corpus search

The modal verb combination of *zou kunnen* ‘could (be), may’ can be used to express all three types of modality stipulated above. Example (2) shows *zou kunnen* in a dynamic sense. This sense can roughly be paraphrased as ‘to be able to in theory’. In this sense, *kunnen* is responsible for the dynamic reading and *zou* adds a theoretical element. Example (3) shows the speaker’s estimation of the likelihood of the state of affairs being true and thus constitutes an example of epistemic use.² Example (4) shows that *zou kunnen* can also be used in a deontic setting of acceptability. In (4) the acceptability of a name in general is in question. The context of the utterance made clear that *Xandra* does not refer to a person in particular.

(2) *'t enige wat me s to zou kunnen storen als ik dat ...*
‘the only thing that could disturb me’

(3) *dat zou best wel 'ns kunnen hoor.*

‘that might just be’.

(4) *(de naam) Xandra {zou} wel kunnen.*³

‘(the name) Xandra is acceptable’

Investigating the various uses of the modal combination *zou kunnen* ‘could (be), may’ I selected 250 utterances of *zou kunnen* from the Eindhoven Corpus and 250 utterances from the Corpus Spoken Dutch. When classifying the utterances into epistemic modality, dynamic modality and deontic modality, a lot of instances were found to be ambiguous. For instance, example (5), which displays ambiguity between a dynamic reading and deontic reading.

(5) *maar dat ik het als het enigszins mogelijk is dat ik het heel erg fijn zou vinden als ik in dit team zou zou kunnen blijven spelen.*

‘but if it’s in any way possible I would very much like to be able/ be allowed to play in this team.’

The translation already shows that there are two ways of interpreting (5). The deontic interpretation of (5) would involve a deontic source, like the management of a football club, that could allow the participant to stay in a certain team. The dynamic interpretation would involve circumstances inside or outside the participant making it possible for the participant to stay with a certain team. For such ambiguous cases I had to install an extra category for deontic-dynamic cases and an extra category for epistemic-dynamic cases.⁴

Speakers, according to GRICE (1975), are expected to be cooperative towards hearers. That means that among other things, speakers should not make ambiguous statements. Since *zou kunnen* alone may convey different modal meanings, it is expected that there are enough clues in the linguistic context of *zou kunnen* for the hearer to arrive at the intended reading.

4. Types of deontic *zou kunnen*

Only four cases out 500 examples of *zou kunnen* were judged to be deontic. A reason for this may be that the extra linguistic setting for these utterances is quite fixed and maybe not very well represented in a corpus. Another reason could be that there are numerous other ways – other constructions – to communicate the same meaning.

4.1. Acceptability type

In addition to the type described in the section above, there was one more to be found in the corpus. This one has a non-controlling subject referent and no infinitival complement. The tenor of these examples is, as can be seen in (6) and (7), that what is given as the subject is considered to be acceptable or not acceptable in the light of a set of rules.

(6) *(de naam) Xandra zou wel kunnen.*

‘(the name) Xandra would be acceptable’

(7) *je hebt mensen die een moestuintje hebben eigenlijk met een verontreiniging waarbij dat niet zou kunnen.*

‘there are people with a vegetable garden with an unacceptable pollution rate.’

A feature that these two examples share is the presense of an affirmative (*wel*) or a negative adverb (*niet*). Without it, the acceptability reading is less strong as shown by (8).

(8) *(de naam) Xandra zou kunnen*

‘(the name) Xandra is an option.’

(9) *Xandra zou wel kunnen.*⁵

‘Xandra would be available’

Another feature for this type is that the subject is not animate. An animate subject for (6), would result in a dynamic reading like in (9).

Just as in IDT1, *zou* is not an obligatory component. In this case it marks that the state of affairs is judged to be hypothetical.

So far, the following features have been found for this construction:

1. Subject referent is inanimate

2. *Zou* ‘would’ is not obligatory present
3. *Kunnen* ‘can’ alone may be interpreted as deontic
4. Affirmative or negative adverb
5. No infinitival complement
6. A set of moral, ethical, esthetical etcetera rules in the extra linguistic context

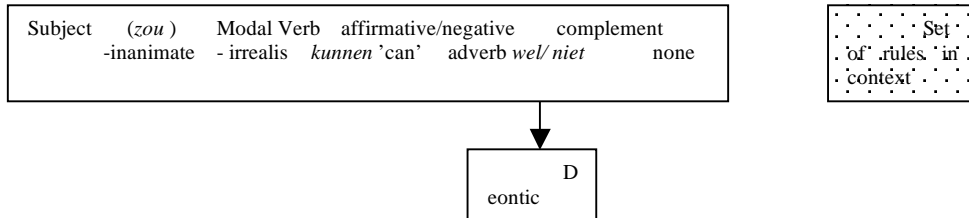


Figure 2. Sketch of construction acceptability construction

Figure 2 shows all features listed above. *Zou* ‘would’ is represented in parentheses to show that it may be inserted if the speaker wishes to give an account of the acceptability of a hypothetical situation instead of an actual situation. The set of rules is given separately though, interestingly, the speaker does have the possibility to give the set of rules, for instance by means of ‘volgens...’ ‘according to...’ Further research on the relation between contextual features and constructions will provide better insights on how to represent contextual features like these.

4.2. Indirect directive type 1

Looking at the four examples found in the corpus, there seems to be a clear division between two kinds. First, in this section the kind with a controlling subject and an active complement will be dealt with. This kind will be called the indirect directive type 1 (IDT1). Examples (10) and (11) state the two instances I found.

(10) *na ik wou uh ik dacht dat jij aan de lange muur zou kunnen begin.*
 ‘Well, I thought, you could start on the long wall.’

(11) *oh nee maar oh nee maar je j ja je kunt daar wel uh nee die rails zou je kunnen ophangen.*
 ‘No, well, yes, you could there, well, you could hang up that rail.’

Both examples were found in the Corpus Spoken Dutch and show that the referents are human and 2nd person. Furthermore, the complement contains an action verb. The addressees will know what is meant by ‘the long wall’ and ‘that rail’ in the particular extra linguistic context of the utterance.

The status of these indirect directives as a construction is, to say the least, questionable. The examples above, for instance, don’t only have a directive reading, they also still have a literal reading as illustrated in (12). The difference between (10) & (11) and (12), however, is the presence of a so called deontic source: a person or authority obliging the subject to perform the task stated in the infinitival complement. In both instances, the deontic source is the speaker of the utterance. Instead of using an imperative, the speaker chose to direct the subject in an indirect manner.

(12) *Jij zou aan de lange muur kunnen beginnen, want jij bent lang. Ik ben daar te klein voor.*
 ‘You could start on the long wall, because you are lengthy. I’m too small for that wall.’

Using the verbal combination *zou kunnen* is not the only possibility in these cases. One could also use the verb *kunnen* alone, though the utterance would be less polite as shown by

(13). The speaker could also use the verb *mogen* ‘be allowed to’ alone or more politely, in combination with *zou*.

(13) *Jij kunt aan de lange muur beginnen.*

‘You can start on the long wall.’

(14) *Jij kunt aan de lange muur beginnen.*

‘You may start on the long wall.’

(15) *Jij zou aan de lange muur mogen beginnen.*

‘You may start on the long wall.’

So far, the following features of this type are:

1. A human subject, typically 2nd person
2. An infinitival complement denoting a event.
3. A deontic source, typically the speaker
4. The modal verb *kunnen* or *mogen* with or without the politeness marker *zou*
5. The possibility of adding the particle *misschien* ‘maybe’

A sketch of this construction type is given by figure 1. *Zou* ‘would’ and *misschien* ‘maybe’ are represented in parenthesis indicating that they may be inserted by the speaker for reasons of politeness. A deontic source is not present in the utterance, but is present in the extra linguistic context of the utterance. Therefore, the deontic source is in a separate box outside the construction. How this contextual information is intertwined with the formal specifications of a construction, however, remains open for further research.

The intended reading might not follow directly from the utterance. There are two ways to get to the intended deontic reading represented by the two arrows downwards. The first way is represented by the grey arrow. An utterance with these features gets a directive reading instantly. The other possibility is represented by the black arrows. An utterance first gets a dynamic reading leading to a directive reading by means of a conversational implicature. Figure 1, in that case, does not represent a directive construction, but a dynamic construction. Both ways are not exclusive, though. They may exist simultaneously, especially because the dynamic reading of examples like (6) is still available. On the other hand interpreting (6) dynamic and not acting on it would be perceived as rude indicating that the speaker is aware of the conventionality of the indirect speech act.

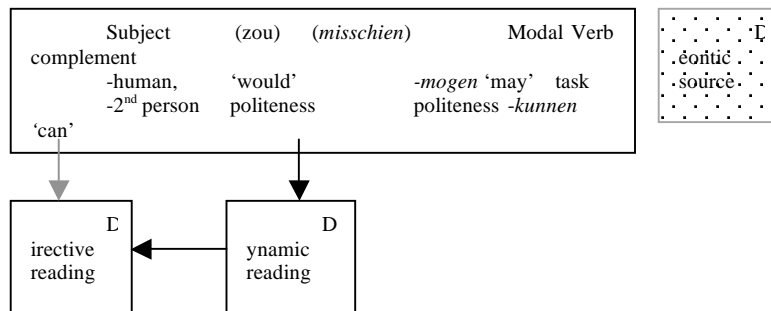


Figure 1. Sketch of possible Indirect Directive construction

4.3. Indirect directive type 2

There was one case that I had expected to find in the corpus, but interestingly did not find. STEFANOWITCH (2003) pointed me in the direction of Indirect Speech Acts (ISA’s) that

have the form of a question, but have the illocutionary value of an imperative. Turning to Google, I found, among others, the examples cited in (16) and (17).

- (16) *Gemompel vanaf onder aan de trap: "Martine! Martine!". Mijn huisbaas. "Zou je kunnen kijken of je TV het nog doet? Ik heb hier net een draadje doorgeknipt."*
 ‘Mumbling downstairs: “Martine! Martine!” My landlord. “Could you please check if the TV is still working? I’ve cut a wire here.”
- (17) *Zou je in het vervolg de (belangrijke) ritten in een tabel kunnen zetten? Dat is wat overzichtelijker.*
 ‘Next time, could you put the (important) races in a table? That would be more surveyable.’

These ISA’s use the template of a question, but in the context a question about someone’s abilities could never be intended. Just like in the case of IDT1 in section 4.1, via Grice’s maxims one could easily deduct the intended meaning of obligation. As there’s no unpredictable meaning, this type would not qualify as a construction. There is however, a feature that may be taken as evidence in favor of a construction status (i.e. independent storage). In these cases one could also add politeness adverbs like *alsjeblieft* ‘please’ or, for that matter, less polite interjections like *verdomme* ‘damned’.

- (18) *Zou je in het vervolg misschien de ritten in een tabel kunnen zetten?*
 ‘Could you, maybe, put the races in a tabel next time?’
- (19) *Zou je in het vervolg alsjeblieft de ritten in een tabel kunnen zetten?*
 ‘Could you please put the races in a table next time?’

There are more features shared by IDT1 and IDT2. The subject is human and typically 2nd person.. The complement contains an activity verb presenting a clear task and there is a deontic source, typically the speaker, in the extra linguistic context. A difference between IDT1 and IDT2, next to the fixed form of the second type, is the choice of verbs. Instead of *mogen* ‘be allowed to’, another option for this type is the use of the verb *willen* ‘want to’.

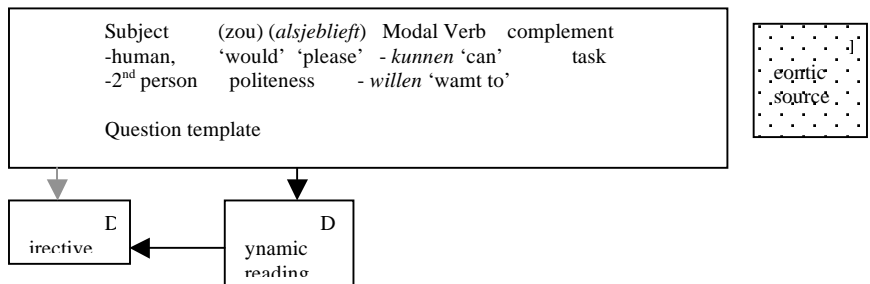


figure3. Sketch of IDT2 construction

4.4. Ambiguous cases

In the corpus 46 cases of ambiguity between a deontic and a dynamic reading were found. To discuss all 46 ambiguous cases I found at length here would be beyond the limits of this paper. However, I will make some general statements. Most ambiguous cases involve a controlling subject and an active complement. This is the case in 29 out of 46. This is no surprise as most dynamic cases⁶ have these properties. Two questions that arise here are why aren’t these examples just dynamic and secondly, why aren’t these examples just deontic?

In most cases, the second question can be answered by means of a missing deontic source in the utterance. Since speakers use indirect speech acts to cloak a direct, face threatening,

speech act, this is not surprising. The hearer will have to deduce from the (extra linguistic) context whether a statement is in fact a directive or a dynamic expression.

The first question may be answered by looking at the features of IDT1. If an example has one or more of those features, hearer without the right context could be persuaded in the direction of an indirect speech act. In (20), for instance, *discuss politics* is an activity and the referent of the subject is human. A deontic reading is possible provided the presence of a deontic source in the context.

(20) *ja verder zou je 't over politiek kunnen hebben*
'yes furthermore you could discuss politics'

5. Conclusion

A corpus search for different usages of *zou kunnen* suggested two deontic interpretations that may be given a construction status. Decisive here is the possibility of adding extra linguistic contextual features to a construction like information about the relation between subject-referent and speaker. If the situation is such that the speaker may be considered a deontic source, then a deontic reading is the communicated reading.

A challenge for future research in construction grammar, then, is to incorporate context as a pragmatic component in the specification of constructions.

Sources

Internet

Example (1)

http://www.direct.gov.uk/LeisureAndRecreation/IdeasForYourSpareTime/IdeasForYourSpareTimeArticles/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4018825&chk=jTlwys

Example (2)

<http://www.factorvleiden.nl/text/4b2a5cc9-252.html>

Example (17)

http://www.10e.nl/archives/archive_2004-m01.php

Example (18)

<http://www.sportone.nl/artikel.php?id=41279>

Corpus Spoken Dutch

Example (3) fn000276.22

Example (4) fn000259.45

Example (5), (13) fn000272.138

Example (6) fn000413.245

Example (7) fn000248.108

Example (8) fn000254.479

Example (14) fn000334.22

Notes

¹ Frequency has also been mentioned as a ground for considering a syntactic pattern a construction, though it is not clear how frequent a construction needs to be to be stored. Inderivable semantic or syntactic features seem to make a stronger case for construction-hood.

² Note that there are three modal particles (*best, wel, eens*) and an interjection (*hoor*) in this utterance. They are all untranslatable and typically Dutch. In this case, they have a decisive effect in favour of an epistemic interpretation. Without the particles and the interjection a dynamic interpretation would also be possible. Particles and interjections like *hoor* play a disambiguating role between dynamic and epistemic meaning.

³ *Wel* in this utterance is not used as a particle, but as an affirming adverb.

⁴ I found there to be no ambiguity between epistemic and deontic cases. An explanation for this might be found in the observation by Nuyts & Van Ostayen (2004) that deontic and epistemic modality might have developed from dynamic modality simultaneously.

⁵ This combination of a controlling subject and no complement is a candidate for a dynamic construction, considering its specific reading of availability of the subject for a specific event.

⁶ The dynamic reading of modals is equal to Coates (1985) core meaning.

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