

## Near synonymy in partially specific constructions as evidence for the lexicon-syntax continuum

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### Outline

- Constructions
- Potentiality
- V-BAAR and IS TE V
  - previous work: corpus data & experiment
  - similarities
  - differences
- Conclusion and open questions

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### Constructions

- A construction is a form-meaning pairing (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Croft 2003, Boas 2003, 2008)
- Forms may be lexically specific or underspecified
- Constructions can be completely abstract (SUBJ V OBJ RESULT) but also contain specific words (SUBJ V'S TIME AWAY)
- Constructions are *instantiated* in fully specific phrases and utterances (*she drank the pub dry, he danced the night away*)
- Speakers are assumed to have specific instantiations stored alongside more abstract patterns

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 **Potentiality**

- The notion that something is possible
- Various alternative formulations in Dutch
- Expressed by the speaker
- NB: not always noteworthy; expression is a reflection of speaker's evaluation
- In this contribution focus on two constructions expressing an entity X (subj) can undergo event Y

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 **The V–BAAR and IS TE V constructions**

V-BAAR:

- Derivational affix, more or less equivalent to –able
- E.g. *leesbaar* – *read-able* (legible)  
*Dit handschrift is leesbaar*  
*This handwriting is legible*

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 **The V–BAAR and IS TE V constructions**

IS TE V:

- Modal infinitive construction, no direct English equivalent (compare: *X is hard to find*)
- E.g. *is te verdedig-en* - *is to defend-INF* (is defensible)  
*Deze opinie is te verdedig-en*  
*This opinion is to defend-INF*  
*This opinion is defensible*

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 **The V–BAAR and IS TE V constructions**

Previous work:

- Corpus analysis, using the 10-million word Corpus of Spoken Dutch (CGN)

|                    | Types | Tokens |
|--------------------|-------|--------|
| Predicative V-BAAR | 171   | 1282   |
| IS TE V            | 229   | 1108   |

- 174 only found with IS TE V;
  - 116 only found with V-BAAR;
  - 55 are used in both constructions
- Acceptability experiment, using novel instantiations of both constructions

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 **V–BAAR and IS TE V: similarities**

**Corpus data:**

- all verbs take at least two arguments
- first argument is usually a (human) agent: expression of possibility for someone to do, carry out or achieve V
- second argument is either Patient (usually a noun denoting a physical object) or a Theme (usually a mental entity, e.g. a thought or desire)

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 **V–BAAR and IS TE V: similarities**

**Corpus data:**

- In many cases, the difficulty or ease is explicitly indicated through an adverb of degree
- Some examples of constructional priming

*Je moet dat denken opgeven alsof alles meetbaar, voorspelbaar en beheersbaar is.  
You need to give up on the thought that everything is measurable, predictable and controllable.*

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### V-BAAR and IS TE V: similarities

**Experimental data:**

- 1) Verbs with Agent-Patient (Patient may be optional) are significantly more acceptable than with other thematic roles
- 2) Verbs with Stimulus-Experiencer roles are dispreferred with both constructions

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### V-BAAR and IS TE V: differences

**Corpus data:**

- 1) Collostructional analyses: very little overlap in lists of verbs attracted to each construction
- 2) Distinctive collexeme analysis: V-BAAR has a somewhat smaller range; IS TE V is the natural home for verbs that take clausal complements
- 3) Semantic analysis: IS TE V seems to express more often an assessed or hedged potentiality.

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### V-BAAR and IS TE V: differences

**Verbs found with both constructions:** some cases of clear lexicalization of at least 1 verb+construction combination

**ETEN (eat)**  
 Eetbaar – edible, not poisonous; usually said of (natural) products, plants etc., often refers to generic characteristic:  
*Zijn deze besjes eetbaar? Are these berries edible?*

Is te eten – tasty, nice flavour; usually said of prepared foods, meals etc., nearly always as an assessment by the speaker  
*De soep is hier echt niet te eten! The soup here is really awful*

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 **V–BAAR and IS TE V: differences**

**Verbs found with both constructions:** some cases of clear lexicalisation of at least 1 verb+construction combination:

NB:

- > ≠ synonymy at the level of this instantiation
- > lexicalization ‘matches’ with overall factual-assessed potentiality difference
- > non-lexicalized meaning is still accessible:

*Ze vervangen het door een nepcadeau, iets dat niet is te eten.  
Researchers trick female flies by replacing food with a fake gift, something that is inedible*

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 **V–BAAR and IS TE V: differences**

**Verbs found with only one construction:** some lexicalization, often in line with the factual – hedged distinction

**BESCHIKKEN** (have available for one’s use) + -BAAR  
*ik heb woensdag ook nog de hele dag beschikbaar  
I also still have all of Wednesday available*

**HOPEN** (hope) + IS TE  
*Nu, t’is te hopen dat ze niets neemt met talen dan, he?  
Now let’s hope she won’t choose anything with languages, right?*

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 **V–BAAR and IS TE V: differences**

**Experimental data:**

- 1) When a sentence contains an explicit stance marker, e.g. ... *denk ik (I think..)*, IS TE V is sign. preferred
- 2) NB: overall higher acceptability ratings for IS TE V

**Interim hypothesis:** the main semantic difference between the two constructions is the distinction between *factual* and *assessed or hedged* potentiality

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 **Factual and assessed potentiality**

- Significant differences in acceptability task, clear examples in instantiations with semantic specialization, but...

1) Speakers can manipulate, portray potentiality as factual, use/exaggerate their authority etc.

BEANTWOORDEN (answer)  
*Deze vraag is onbeantwoordbaar*

*This question is un-answer-able*  
 - There is no answer vs. I do not have the answer

...the lexical items are part of the construal speakers impose on a situation or event

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 **Factual and assessed potentiality**

- Significant differences in acceptability task, clear examples in instantiations with semantic specialization, but...

2) Difference between positive declaratives and negative mood

BELOPEN (tread/run/reach by foot)  
*Deze pass is niet te belopen voor Bosvelt*  
*Bosvelt [a soccer player] cannot reach this pass*

*Een mooi parcours dat volledig vlak en heel goed beeloopbaar is*  
*A beautiful course which is completely flat and very runnable*

...fact vs. assessment is not always equally relevant. Annotation can be difficult

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 **Factual and assessed potentiality**

- Significant differences in acceptability task, clear examples in instantiations with semantic specialization, but...

3) Verbs ranked high in collostructional analysis with V-BAAR lend themselves to persuasive behavior, are gradable

Sign. attracted to V-BAAR (a.o.):  
 Aanvaarden (accept)  
 Vertrouwen (trust)  
 Voorstellen (imagine)

...the general distinction between the two constructions cannot be (completely) attributed to the specific verbs they co-occur with

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 **Factual and assessed potentiality**

- Significant differences in acceptability task, clear examples in instantiations with semantic specialization, but...
- 4) Instantiations with IS TE V are often used to present clear-cut truths, even if the V is gradable

*Het is niet te geloven*  
*It is unbelievable*

...but: hedging adverbials are very common with IS TE V instantiations and relatively rare with V-BAAR

*Dat is moeilijk te geloven, toch?*  
*That is hard to believe, right?*

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 **Conclusions**

- Overlap in verbs found with both constructions
- The choice between V-BAAR and IS TE V is often 'forced' by
  - > Lexicalization
  - > Grammatical context (more modifiers, sentential complement = better fit for IS TE V)
  - > Constructional priming
- Similar issues at play for both constructions (at the level of gen. construction and specific instantiations) -> evidence for lexicon-syntax continuum
- Constructions are largely synonymous, but IS TE V seems better suited for hedging (near synonymy indeed!)

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 **Questions**

- Synonymy at the level of (partially) abstract constructions:
  - > Interaction with slot fillers: hard to pin down source of semantic differences. Undoable?
- Observed differences are tendencies:
  - > Are tendencies part of the constructions' meaning? Is this empirically measurable?
- Semantic differences are (pragmatic?) nuances:
  - > Are these linguistic analyses reliable?

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Thank you!

If you have any questions, comments or suggestions, do not hesitate to get in touch

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