

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

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


 **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

 **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)

 **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


 **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*

 **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?*

 **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

 **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

 **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 beloopbaar is
A beautiful course which is completely flat and very runnable

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


 **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


 **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?

 **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!)

 **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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