

# Preposed adverbial phrases in Dutch texts

## Evidence for the Left–Right Principle or for Linear Modification?

Frank Jansen

Utrecht University/Uil-OTS

### 1. Introduction

Dutch adverbial phrases can be found in sentence initial position, and somewhere in the middle of the main clause. Under what conditions do they occupy those positions in actual texts? There are at least two principles that are relevant to derive predictions from: the Left–Right Principle (LRP) and Linear Modification (LM). After a few remarks on both principles in Sections 2 and 3 respectively, and on the method used in 4, I will present some evidence that LM is more important in sports articles, the text genre under study (Section 5). Another phenomenon that fits better in an LM than in an LRP-explanation is the fact that other adjuncts, especially predicate adverbials are sentence initial rather frequently. (Section 6). In the final section I will give some arguments that preposed adverbial phrases, being writer-oriented, are used to convey opinions in a more or less concealed way, which fits better in an LM than in an LRP-explanation.

### 2. The Left–Right Principle

The order of constituents in Dutch sentences obeys the functional sentence perspective, as the Prague School linguists called it, or the Left–Right Principle (LRP) as it is called in the comprehensive grammar of Dutch, the ANS (Haeserijn et al. 1997: 1238):

Left–Right principle: In many sentences the elements that are less important from an informative point of view precede the elements with a greater informative value (my translation FJ<sup>1</sup>)

The ANS (1997: 1235) illustrates this LRP with the following example (my translation):

- (1) (a) Yesterday I went to Arnhem. (b) There I met Annemieke. (c) She had bought a violin. (d) That, she intended to give to Wilma.

(1b) starts with *there* which refers to *Arnhem* in (1a) and ends with *Annemieke*, which is new information and therefore more important from a communicative point of view. The next sentence (1c) starts with *she*, which refers to *Annemieke* (given) and ends with *a violin* (new), and so on.

Several deviations from the LRP have been observed in the literature. The ANS (1997: 1280) mentions one with respect to adverbial phrases: disjuncts (modal adverbial phrases) prefer a sentence initial position. One of the examples is:

- (2) Waarschijnlijk heeft hij gisteren een ongeluk gehad  
Probably he had an accident yesterday

The disjunct *waarschijnlijk* ‘probably’ is writer-oriented: it gives information about the opinion of the writer, in this case: how probable the writer thinks that the state of affairs expressed in the remainder of the sentence is.

Two other word order phenomena are discussed in the ANS (1997: 1276 ff) as special cases of the LRP, though they can also be considered as deviations from this principle. The first has to do with ‘frame creating adjuncts’ (of which time and place are explicitly mentioned) like *met Sinterklaas* ‘at Santa Claus’ in (3):

- (3) Met Sinterklaas krijgen de kinderen snoepgoed  
At Santa Clause the children get sweets

*Met Sinterklaas* introduces the frame in which the state of affairs described in the remainder of the sentence is relevant. The idea of frame creating elements seems to be borrowed from Clark and Clark (1977: 34). The problem with this concept is that they assume that every sentence initial phrase is automatically frame creating and suggest that phrases occupying other positions are not. This idea is difficult to test in an empirical way. Why should it be that *met Sinterklaas* in (3)a is not frame creating?

- (3) a. De kinderen krijgen met Sinterklaas snoepgoed.  
The children get sweets at Santa Clause

And, if (3)a is really not frame creating, how could we prove this?

The ANS’ second special case of the LRP that is relevant here, are conjuncts (adverbial phrases which connect two sentences). Conjuncts (like *moreover* and *in the first place*) have a preference for the first position, as the example of the ANS shows:

- (4) Hij is niet erg slim. Bovendien is hij nog lui ook  
He is not very smart. Moreover he is lazy

What *moreover* and other conjuncts do, is to help the reader understand the relational relevance of the sentence they introduce for the entire text. In my opinion

this is a good argument to consider them as frame creating as well. Just like time and place adverbial phrases create frames in expository texts, sentence connectors create frames in argumentative texts.

### 3. Linear modification

Bolinger (1965 (= 1952)) introduced another principle for word order: linear modification. This concept pertains to the effect of the position of phrases on their semantic interpretation: sentence initial phrases have an open interpretation, but as phrases occur more to the right, their interpretation is more constrained. Bolinger demonstrates linear modification with a wealth of examples. However, some of these demonstrations are rather vague. In the case of (5) for example, he observes how ‘slowly colours the entire process of backing’:

- (5) Slowly he backed away

In other examples, like (6) the opposite is the case. Though Bolinger is able to describe the effects of LM concisely, this effect is limited to the semantics of just one word, *generally*, which makes it hard to use it for a generalized description of the effects of LM.

- (6) Generally he made himself agreeable (generally = as a rule)  
 a. He made himself agreeable generally (generally = in all respects)

Verhagen (1998) demonstrates an analogue effect for some Dutch adverbial adjuncts, which have a modal interpretation in sentence initial position, and a manner interpretation in other positions:

- (7) Natuurlijk werd de plaag toen door iedereen bestreden  
 Naturally the plague was controlled by everyone at that time  
 a. Toen werd de plaag door iedereen natuurlijk bestreden  
 At that time the plague was ? by everyone with natural means

What was lacking, was a description of the LM-phenomenon in a general and precise way. It was Pardoën (1998) who filled this gap. She describes the effects of LM in terms of ‘dependent’ versus ‘independent conceptualisation’. Every phrase Y, occurring to the right of a phrase X, is conceptualised dependent of X, but X is conceptualised independent of Y. Pardoën herself does not discuss the preposing of adverbial phrases in the light of her theory, but this can easily be done in the following way. In the following minimal pairs the awkward one is (8)<sup>a2</sup>:

- (8) Op een domme manier wilde Alex Jorge helpen  
 In a stupid way Alex wanted to help Jorge  
 a. <sup>?</sup>Alex wilde op een domme manier Jorge helpen  
 Alex wanted to help Jorge in a stupid way

The contrast is caused by the fact that *op een domme manier* is writer-oriented in (8): It is the writer who is responsible for the opinion that the way Alex wanted to help Jorge is stupid. In (8)a however, the adjunct is subject-oriented: it is Alex himself who wanted to help stupidly. This contrast in scope is in line with Pardoens' interpretation of LM in that the adverbial phrase in (8a) is conceptualised dependently of the phrase to the right of it *Alex wilde* and independently in (8). The fact that LM explains the contrast in a straightforward way, makes it an interesting competitor to LRP. In the remainder of this paper I will show that LM provides in fact a better basis for understanding the use of preposed adverbial phrases in texts than LRP.

#### 4. Method

What are the effects of LRP and LM in actual texts? To answer this question, I analysed the main clauses with adverbial phrases of sport stories that appeared in the daily *de Volkskrant* in the fall of 2001. I assessed the position of the adverbial phrase (preposed or not), their information value (new versus given or presupposed (in the sense of Birner and Ward 1998)).

Then, I assessed the scope of the adverbial phrases (writer-oriented or oriented to the grammatical subject or other phrases). I did this by creating minimal pairs for every sentence, by postposing the adverbial phrases in sentences where they occupied the initial position and preposing the adverbial phrases in midsentence position. Finally I evaluated the acceptability of both sentences in their context and assessed the differences in meaning between the sentences.

#### 5. Results for disjuncts, conjuncts and frame creating disjuncts

As for disjuncts, fragment (9) is an example where LRP and LM do opposite predictions about what should be the most acceptable order of constituents:

- (9) (Deels was Adriaanse daar (de afbraak van Ajax, FJ) debet aan.) Naar internationale maatstaven bracht hij een elftal op de been dat zich louter aanvallen ten doel stelde — en intussen de verdediging verwaarloosde.

(*de Volkskrant* 9–8–01)

(Partly it (sc Ajax' demise, FJ) was Adriaans' fault.) By international criteria he formed a team with an offensive goal alone — and neglected the defence.

*Adriaanse* has been mentioned in the previous sentence and this character is as Ajax' coach the theme of the story. The *internationale maatstaven* are new information. Therefore, the LRP forces us to predict that (9)a is superior to (9):

- (9) a. Hij bracht naar internationale maatstaven een elftal op de been dat zich louter aanvallen ten doel stelde — en intussen de verdediging verwaarloosde.  
He formed by international criteria a team with an offensive goal alone — and neglected the defence.

In fact, this revised version (9)a turns out to be inferior to the original (9). The reason is that (9)a invites the interpretation that coach Adriaanse used international criteria when he formed a purely offensive team, which makes (9)a a positive remark or a compliment for Adriaanse. However, the intended meaning of (9) is: when the writer applies international criteria to Adriaanses team, he would characterize it as purely offensive (and because offensive teams are vulnerable, this was a very risky approach). This makes (9) a critical remark or reproach at Adriaanse.

The following fragment is a nice example of what happens when LRP and LM make different predictions in the case of a frame-creating adjunct:

- (10) (In de herfst van zijn loopbaan, met het vizier meer dan ooit gericht op die ene medaille die hem nog ontbreekt, weet Rintje Ritsma zich voor een delicaat Olympisch vraagstuk geplaatst.) In een veld van specialisten zoekt de alleskunner naar een prooi waarop zijn jacht het meeste kans van slagen heeft.  
(*de Volkskrant* 12–11–01)  
In the fall of his career, with his sight more than ever focussed on the only medal he does not have, Rintje Ritsma (a Dutch skating hero, FJ) faces a delicate Olympic problem.) In a field of specialists the all rounder looks for a prey which gives him a chance of success.

The *alleskunner* is the same person as *Rintje Ritsma*, which is the subject of the previous clause and the theme of the article, and has by consequence the status of given information. *In een veld van specialisten* has not been mentioned before, so it is new, which is also signalled by the indefinite article *een*. These are enough reasons to predict in line of LRP a word order with *de alleskunner* before the adjunct:

- (10) a. De alleskunner zoekt in een veld van specialisten naar een prooi waarop zijn jacht het meeste kans van slagen heeft  
The all rounder looks for a prey that gives him a chance of success, in a field of specialists.

A comparison of (10a) with (10) makes clear that the revision (10)a is inferior, because it conveys a non intended meaning, viz. that the all rounder choses a field of specialists as his search area, while the intended meaning is that it is the field of specialists from where the all rounder is searching. This contrast in meaning is predicted by LM: the reader cannot but implement the information of ‘the all rounder is searching’ in his interpretation of ‘in a field of specialists’. In (10) this information is not available yet.

Conjuncts follow the same pattern as disjuncts and adjuncts, as fragment (11) demonstrates:

- (11) (En winnen doet Ajax. (...) Gisteren tegen FC Groningen wonnen (1–4) de Amsterdammers voor de achtste keer op rij, de Europese optredens inclus.) Bovendien moest doelman Grim slechts drie tegentreffers toestaan.  
(*de Volkskrant* 1–10–01)  
(And Ajax keeps winning. (...) Yesterday against FC Groningen the Amsterdam team won (1–4) for the eighth time, including the European performances.) Moreover keeper Grim had to take just three goals.
- a. Doelman Grim moest bovendien slechts drie tegentreffers toestaan.  
Keeper Grim had moreover to take no more than three goals.

Revision (11)a invites the interpretation that keeper Grim had very few setbacks and on top of that only three goals. The intended purport of (11) is that the author gives an extra argument that Ajax is doing well lately.

What is common to the fragments (9)–(11) is that adverbial phrases with new information must precede other phrases although they refer to given information. There are also cases where adjuncts have a position in mid sentence in spite of the fact that they refer to given information. An example is:

- (12) (De onvermijdelijke treffer viel na dertien minuten. (...)) Adriaanse kon zijn ploeg in die fase slechts verwijten dat het niet ruimer afstand nam van RKC.  
(*de Volkskrant* 15–10–01)  
(The inevitable strike came after thirteen minutes. (...)) Adriaanse could only reproach his team in this phase that it did not widen the gap with RKC
- a. In die fase kon Adriaanse zijn ploeg slechts verwijten dat het niet ruimer afstand nam van RKC  
In this phase, Adriaanse could only reproach his team in this phase that it did not widen the gap with RKC

*In die fase* refers to the period of time just after the *onvermijdelijke treffer*. By consequence it is given. But (12)a turns out to be inferior to (12). A tentative explanation is that the author wants to express in the first place that the team could have made more goals in this phase of the match. In other words, the hypothetical reproaches of Adriaanse have a rather metaphorical status. The preposing of *in die fase* in (12)a relates that phase directly to Adriaanse, thereby directing the attention of the reader to Adriaanses reproaches instead of the teams goals.

As I did not find any example of a sentence with a preposed adverbial phrase where the LRP had won at the expense of LM, the following conclusion seems to be inevitable: The Left–Right Principle fails, Linear Modification prevails.

Why should this be the case? The two principles belong to different linguistic levels. LM is a semantic principle: It is about the relation between an expression and the state of affairs it describes. Formulating in accordance with LM makes the relation optimally transparent, therefore this principle makes the expression more **effective**. The LRP on the other hand is a communicative principle: It is about the relation between the expression and the text processing abilities of the reader. Formulating according to the LRP makes the interpretation process more **efficient**.

Effectiveness takes precedence over efficiency. Enhancing efficiency is useless if it does damage to the intended meaning. So, a writer has first to assess whether two expressions have the same meaning, only thereafter he can try and evaluate which one is easiest to understand.

## 6. Other frequently preposed adjuncts

The adverbial phrases mentioned in the ANS and the previous section are not the only ones with a preference for the first position. See for example (13), with the adjunct of circumstance *met ruim 13 duizend toeschouwers*:

- (13) (De frustraties zaten na afloop diep.) Met ruim 13 duizend toeschouwers broeide de Galgenwaard als zelden tevoren, waardoor de vroeg opgelopen achterstand als een mentale knock-out werkte. (*de Volkskrant* 19–10–01)  
 (The frustrations were great after the match.) With more than 13 thousand spectators the Galgenwaard was brewing as seldom before, which made the early defeat feel like a mental knock out.
- a. De Galgenwaard broeide met ruim 13 duizend toeschouwers als zelden tevoren, waardoor de vroeg opgelopen achterstand als een mentale knock-out werkte.  
 The Galgenwaard was brewing as seldom before with more than 13 thousand spectators, which made the early defeat feel like a mental knock out.

The rewritten version (13a) is perfect but it has an interpretation that is slightly different from (13): the huge amount of spectators is presented as a feature of the stadium *Galgenwaard*, while in the original (13) the amount of spectators is presented as an argument why the stadium was brewing.

There is one category preposed adverbial phrases that is very frequent in the sports articles: predicate adverbials. Fragment (14) is an example:

- (14) (Zelfverzekerd zette de koploper RKC opzij met herkenbaar en solide voetbal: 0–2.) Steeds minder onder de indruk van zijn onverwachte koppositie trok Ajax zich steeds minder aan van de imponerende reeks ongeslagen thuiswedstrijden van opponent RKC. (*de Volkskrant* 15–10–01)  
 (Self-confident the frontrunner (sc Ajax) pushed RKC aside with recognizable and reliable soccer: 0–2) Every moment less impressed by its unexpected top position, Ajax did careless and less about the impressive series of unbeaten home matches of its opponent RKC.
- a. Ajax trok zich steeds minder onder de indruk van zijn onverwachte koppositie steeds minder aan van de imponerende reeks ongeslagen thuiswedstrijden van opponent RKC.  
 Ajax did care less and less about the impressive series of unbeaten home matches of its opponent RKC, every moment less impressed by its unexpected top position.

The revision (14) a, which is more in accordance with the predictions of LRP, is inferior to the original. (14) is construed as a classical parallel construction. The structure and vocabulary of the first phrase (*Steeds ... koppositie*) is reflected in the main clause (*steeds minder*). The effect is that of a logical relation, where the predicative adverbial phrase is the cause and the remainder the consequence. It is the writer who is responsible for this combination of the information in the adverbial phrase and the main clause. This parallel construction loses its effect if the adverbial phrase and main clause are entangled the way they are in (14)a. Not only has the repetitious wording a horrible form effect, the content makes the impression of a tautology.

## 7. Preposed adverbial phrases are writer oriented

I argued for a difference in semantic scope between preposed adverbial phrases and adverbial phrases in a position after the verb (which is in second position) and its subject: non-preposed adverbial phrases invite an interpretation in the frame of the state of affairs which is described by the verb (and its subject), while this is not obligatorily the case in sentences with preposed adverbial phrases. While this way of characterizing has the advantage of being in accordance with Bolingers LM and Pardoens 'dependent conceptualisation', it has an obvious disadvantage as well: the preposed adverbial phrases are only defined in a negative way.

The next question is therefore: is it possible to say something more positively about the interpretation of the preposed adverbial phrases? My answer is a tentative yes: those phrases invite an interpretation as writer-oriented, as is demonstrated by many of the examples presented in the previous sections. More direct evidence can be derived from some tendencies in the wording of the preposed adverbial phrases: many of them contain a lexical element implicitly referring to the opinions of the writer, like *ogenschijnlijk* 'apparently' in (15) and *slechts* 'just' in (16):

- (15) (Niet alleen vormloosheid speelde Feyenoord parten.) Laks en ogenschijnlijk liefdeloos deden de miljonairs hun werk. (*de Volkskrant* 1–10–01)  
(Not only lack of condition affected Feyenoord.) Slack and apparently loveless the millionaires did their job.
- (16) (Met ruim 13 duizend toeschouwers broeide de Galgenwaard als zelden tevoren, waardoor de vroeg opgelopen achterstand als een mentale knock-out werkte.) Slechts tweemaal eerder beleefde FC Utrecht een vergelijkbaar ontzuenderende ervaring. (*de Volkskrant* 19–10–01)  
Just two times before FC Utrecht went through a comparably disenchanting experience.



We see in (15) also two lexical elements (*viz. laks en liefdeloos* ‘slack and loveless’) which express the writers opinions in an explicit way. Another example is *verbazingwekkend* ‘astonishing’ in (17):

- (17) (Hoogmoed won het van de realiteitszin.) Met verbazingwekkend weinig moeite profiteerde Celtic ervan. (*de Volkskrant* 9–8–01)  
(Pride beat the sense of reality.) With astonishingly little effort Celtic took advantage of it.

The proposed adverbial phrases signal in a subtle way that the text has the perspective of the writer. This brings us to my last question: what kind of communicative purposes give writers reasons to use these syntactic means?

This problem can be solved by comparing text genres with frequent preposing and text genres without frequent preposing. Having studied just one genre, sports articles, I can offer only a speculative answer at this moment. I selected sports articles to start with this investigation because it had struck me beforehand how many declarative sentences in those articles started with other phrases than the subject of the sentence. This impression has first to be corroborated by quantitative research<sup>3</sup>. But provided that this can be proven, the frequency of writer-oriented adverbial phrases might be related to the fact that the articles are only superficially to be characterised as objective reports about what has happened on the greens. Under this surface the texts are arguments: about the qualities (or — in most cases — lack of qualities) of team and coach. Proposed adverbial phrases give the writer the opportunity to convey his views rather implicitly and yet maintain the impression that they stick to the informative genre of the report.

## Notes

1. The English translations presented here and in the other examples is not always idiomatic as I kept the order of constituents as close to the Dutch order as possible.
2. Mike Huiskes observed (p.c.) that the contrast is most outspoken in the case of volitional predicates.
3. As this paper is a part of ongoing research in collaboration with R. Wynands on the empirical relevance of the LRP, we plan to compare the data in the sports articles with that of columns. I thank him, Mike Huiskes, Justine Pardoën and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on an earlier version.

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