Phrasal and clausal comparatives in Dutch

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This paper presents a new analysis of Dutch comparatives and argues that they should be classified into *phrasal* and *clausal* comparatives (as e.g. Hankamer (1973) argues for English). Arguments for this classification come from differences in case marking and island effects. Merchant (2009) notes the same island effects in Greek comparatives, and by applying his analysis to Dutch we can explain the differences between the Dutch phrasal and clausal comparatives. Crucial in this analysis is the ellipsis of underlying structure, not only in the reduced clausal comparative, but also in the phrasal comparative, which reflects the similarity in their interpretation.

Keywords: Dutch comparative constructions, clausal comparatives, phrasal comparatives, syntactic islands, ellipsis, syntax

1. Introduction

In the Dutch pronominal system nominative is reserved for subjects and accusative for objects (Zwart 2011: 17-20). However, in the Dutch comparative construction where the comparative marker is followed by a single DP, we see that both nominative and accusative pronouns can be used, see (1).[1] This variation in case marking is not found when the comparative marker is followed by a clause, see (2).[2]

(1) Ik   ben beter dan jij /   jou.   *dan+DP*
     I.NOM am better than you.NOM you.ACC
     'I am better than you.'

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1. ACC = accusative, CLAUSAL = clausal comparative marker, NOM = nominative, PHRASAL = phrasal comparative marker

2. I only discuss examples with personal pronouns, because only here case marking is visible in Dutch.

   (2) Ik   ben beter dan (dat) jij /   *jou   bent.   *dan+clause*
        I.NOM am better than that you.NOM   you.ACC are
        'I am better than you are.'

In (2) the pronominal following *dan* can only have the case that is assigned to it by INFL/Tense, namely nominative. The comparative marker *dan* has no effect on case marking: *dan* is 'case transparent' in this construction. In (1) *dan* seems to either be case transparent (*dan jij),* or it seems to assign accusative case (*dan jou).*

    The discrepancy between (1) and (2) is often used by prescriptivists to argue that the accusative case following the comparative marker is wrong (e.g. Genootschap Onze Taal 2011, Taalunie 2015). However, its use is very frequent in everyday language and the data in (3)-(8) show that there is a structural difference between comparatives with a case transparent *dan* and a *dan* that assigns accusative case that is in need of an explanation.[3]

    We saw that in (1) the personal pronoun can be marked with accusative case while it has the function of subject of the implicitly understood predicate. This leads to an ambiguity when we compare participants of transitive predicates, as in (3).[4]

   (3) Jan slaat Suzan vaker   dan jou.   *dan+DP*
        Jan hits Suzan more.often than you.ACC
        Interpretation 1: 'Jan hits Suzan more often than he hits you.'
        Interpretation 2: 'Jan hits Suzan more often than you hit her.'

While we expect case marking in Dutch to disambiguate between an object and a subject reading of the personal pronoun following *dan*, this does not happen. However, the counterpart of (3) with a nominative pronoun, see (4), is never ambiguous and the full clausal counterparts also have only one interpretation, see (5)-(6).

   (4) Jan slaat Suzan vaker   dan jij.   *dan+DP*
        Jan hits Suzan more.often than you.NOM
        Interpretation: 'Jan hits Suzan more often than you hit her.'

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3. The form of the comparative marker is also a point of variation in Dutch comparatives, because next to *dan als* is also used. For literature on the use of *als* versus *dan*, see Paardekooper (1950, 1970) and Stroop (2010). In the rest of the examples I use *dan*, but for a great number of speakers (especially in a number of Dutch dialects) *als* (or a phonological equivalent such as *as*) is also possible or even preferred.

4. There is inter speaker variation in this construction: all speakers accept the construction where *dan* is case transparent, but not all speakers accept *dan* as accusative case-assigning element. When checking the interpretation of the transitive comparative with native speakers, I noticed that the ambiguity in the transitive constructions is only present for speakers who accept the use of the accusative pronoun in the intransitive *dan+DP* comparative (1).

(5) Jan slaat Suzan vaker   dan hij   jou   slaat.   *dan+clause*
     Jan hits Suzan more.often than he.NOM you.ACC hits
     'Jan hits Suzan more often than he hits you.'

(6) Jan slaat Suzan vaker   dan jij   haar   slaat.   *dan+clause*
     Jan hits Suzan more.often than you.NOM her.ACC hit
     'Jan hits Suzan more often than you hit her.'

Another area where the difference between the use of the accusative or nominative pronoun is visible is when the underlying clause in the comparative construction is an island clause, see (7)-(8).[5]

(7) *Ik   lees meer boeken wanneer Jan ze   aanraadt dan jou.
      I.NOM read more books   when   Jan them suggests than you.ACC
     (Intended: 'I read more books when they are suggested by Jan than when they are suggested by you')

(8) Ik   lees meer boeken wanneer Jan ze   aanraadt dan jij.
     I.NOM read more books   when   Jan them suggests than you.NOM
     Lit.: 'I read more books when they are suggested by Jan than when they are suggested by you.'

In these examples we see that when *dan* assigns accusative case to its DP complement (7) this complement cannot have its origin in an underlying island clause, while this is possible when *dan* is case transparent (8).

The data introduced above show that we cannot dismiss the use of the accusative pronoun in (1) as substandard. We need to account for the ambiguous interpretation of the transitive comparative and our analysis has to explain the structural difference that lies at the base of the difference in island effects.

While previous research on comparative constructions acknowledges that there are two different types of comparative constructions, e.g. Hankamer (1973), Hoeksema (1984), Hendriks (1995), Broekhuis (2013), the contrast in island effects is not accounted for in these analyses. For English, Hankamer (1973) argued that there are two types of *than:* one a preposition taking a single DP as its complement in *phrasal comparatives,* the other a subordinating particle taking a full or reduced clause as its complement in *full* or *reduced clausal comparatives.* For Dutch, however, Broekhuis (2013: §4.1.3) argued that all *dan+DP* comparatives are reduced clausal comparatives, and that *dan* cannot be a preposition as

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5. Note that (8) has two possible interpretations where we compare either *ik* with *jij* or *Jan* with *jij.* Only this last interpretation has a syntactic island underlying the comparative construction, and there appears to be some inter-speaker variation as to the ability of this interpretation: only some speakers get both possible interpretations.

in English. Broekhuis then explains the use of the nominative pronoun in (1) by claiming that the *dan+DP* comparative is derived from the clausal comparative in (2) by an ellipsis operation, but this leaves the possibility of the accusative pronoun in (1) unexplained.

These analyses for Dutch and English comparatives by Hankamer (1973) and Broekhuis (2013) cannot account for the data introduced here. However, the Dutch data show a number of similarities with Greek comparatives. In particular, Merchant (2009) noted that a difference in island effects is also present in Greek comparative constructions. His analysis takes this into account and posits underlying structures in both phrasal and clausal comparatives to explain these island effects. I propose to apply Merchant's analysis to the Dutch data and based on the similarities between Dutch and Greek I furthermore propose a classification of the Dutch comparative constructions where the *dan+DP* comparative with an accusative marked pronoun is classified as a phrasal comparative and the comparative where *dan* is case transparent as a reduced clausal comparative, in line with Hankamer's classification of English comparatives.

2.   Similarities between Dutch and Greek comparatives

Merchant's (2009) analysis for Greek comparatives is based on the difference between Greek phrasal and (reduced) clausal comparatives, see (9)-(10).[6]

(9)   I   Maria   pezi kiθara kalitera apo   ton
      the.NOM Maria.NOM plays guitar better   than.PHRASAL the.ACC
      Gianni.
      Giannis.ACC
      'Maria plays the guitar better than Giannis.'   (Merchant 2009: 136)

(10) I   Maria   pezi kiθara kalitera ap'oti   (pezi kiθara)
      the.NOM Maria.NOM plays guitar better   than.CLAUSAL plays guitar
      o   Giannis.
      the.NOM Giannis.NOM.
      'Maria plays the guitar better than Giannis (plays the guitar).'
                                                          (Merchant 2009: 135,138)

As can be seen in these examples, Greek has different comparative markers for phrasal comparatives *(apo)* and clausal comparatives *(ap'oti),* which makes it easy

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6. Glosses follow the cited source, but are adapted to standard glossing rules where necessary.

to keep the two construction types apart.[7] While *apo* assigns accusative case to its complement, *ap'oti* is case transparent.

We already saw a difference in island effects in the Dutch comparatives and Merchant observed that this difference is also present between the Greek phrasal and clausal comparatives. This is illustrated in (11)-(12).

(11) *Perisoteri anθropi menun sto   kratos pu kivernai o   Putin
       more   people live   in.the state that governs the.NOM Putin.NOM
       apo   ton   Bush.
       than.PHRASAL the.ACC Bush.ACC
       (Intended: 'More people live in the country that Putin governs than live in
       the country that Bush governs.')   (Merchant 2009: 151)

(12) Perisoteri anθropi menun sto   kratos pu kivernai o   Putin
      more   people live   in.the state that governs the.NOM Putin.NOM
      ap'oti   o   Bush.
      than.CLAUSAL the.NOM Bush.NOM
      Lit.: 'More people live in the country that Putin governs than live in the
      country that Bush governs.'   (Merchant 2009: 150)

These Greek comparatives with an underlying island clause resemble the Dutch constructions where an underlying island clause is possible when *dan* is case transparent (as with *ap'oti),* but not when *dan* assigns accusative case (as with apo). We also see other similarities between the Dutch and Greek comparatives, namely in case marking—both languages have a case transparent comparative marker and an accusative assigning one—and in the form of the comparative marker where *dan dat* is similar to *ap'oti,* which translates literally to *from that.*

3.   Classifying Dutch comparatives

Based on these similarities between Dutch and Greek, I propose the following classification of the Dutch comparative constructions:

(13) Ik   ben beter dan jou.   *phrasal comparative*
      I.NOM am better than you.ACC
      'I am better than you.'

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7. The comparative marker *apo* also functions as a preposition with the meaning *from* and according to Merchant (2009) *oti* is the external head of certain free relative clauses, but it also functions as a regular complementizer that can be translated as *that* (Kapetangianni 2010).

(14) Ik   ben beter dan jij.   *reduced clausal comparative*
      I.NOM am better than you.NOM
      'I am better than you.'

(15) Ik   ben beter dan (dat) jij   bent.   *full clausal comparative*
      I.NOM am better than that you.NOM are
      'I am better than you are.'

With this classification, the full clausal comparative with …*dan jou bent,* (2), is not expected because (13) is not derived from the same underlying source as (14). Crucially, the two similar constructions that were introduced in (1) as variation within one comparative construction, are now classified as two different constructions.


4. Merchant's (2009) analysis of Greek comparatives

Merchant's (2009) analysis for the Greek comparatives is based on his analysis of island effects in ellipsis, because the difference in island effects in the comparatives is similar to the difference in island effects between sluicing and VP ellipsis.

For Merchant (2001, et seq.), ellipsis is the result of an *E feature* on a functional head F signaling to PF to delete F's complement. To explain why VP ellipsis is sensitive to islands and sluicing is not, Merchant (2004, 2008) claims that intermediate traces of illicit (island-violating) movement that survive PF-deletion cause a crash, not the movement itself. The difference between VP ellipsis and sluicing is that with VP ellipsis an illicit trace remains in the higher TP, while in sluicing the whole TP including illicit traces is elided. Section (4.1) – (4.2) illustrate Merchant's ellipsis analysis applied to the Greek comparatives.

4.1 Greek reduced clausal comparatives

Greek reduced clausal comparatives are not island sensitive and this resembles the island-insensitivity found in sluicing. The correct analysis must result in deletion of all the illicit traces of movement, and Merchant (2009) proposes the structure in (16) for reduced clausal comparatives with an island, see (12) (elided material is indicated between angled brackets '⟨⟩').
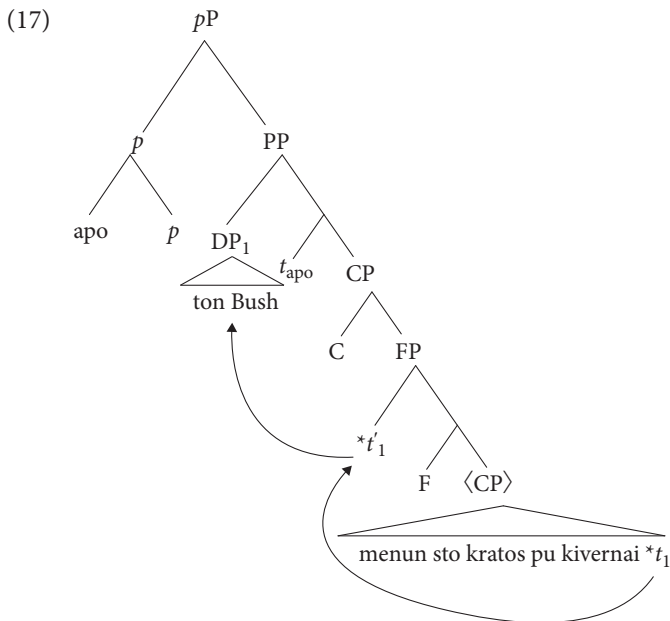
(16)
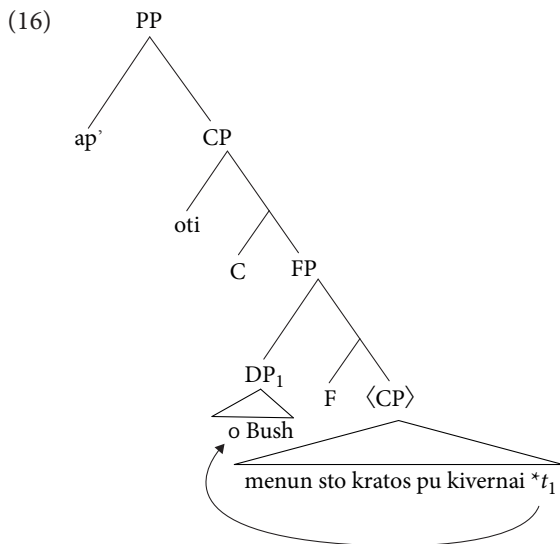
The trace $(*t_1)$ of the island-violating movement from the DP *o Bush* is inside the elided CP, so this structure is fine. Furthermore, the case-transparency of *ap'oti* follows, because case is assigned by the predicate of the underlying clause. Note that in this analysis, the complexity of the comparative marker is reflected, and both parts of the marker have their own function: *apo* functions as preposition, selecting a clause with the complementizer *oti*.

4.2 Greek phrasal comparatives

The standard analysis for phrasal comparatives is more puzzling in light of the island violations, because how can these violations appear in the absence of movement? Merchant (2009) answers that there is movement and underlying structure involved in these structures, in a way similar to VP ellipsis, where an illicit trace of movement survives after ellipsis, explaining the island effects. Merchant proposes the structure in (17) for phrasal comparatives involving an island, see (11).[8]

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8. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, the term 'phrasal comparative' is a bit of misnomer with this new clausal analysis. However, I will continue to use this term in the rest of the paper to keep the link with previous literature on this construction.

(17)

pP
  p
    apo
    p
  PP
    DP₁
      ton Bush
    tapo
    CP
      C
      FP
        *t′₁
        F
        ⟨CP⟩
          menun sto kratos pu kivernai *t₁

In order to have an extra trace of movement $(*t'_1)$ outside of the ellipsis clause, Merchant adds a pP shell above CP, so that the DP must make an additional movement step, along with movement of the comparative marker apo.[9,10] When the CP is deleted, the trace indicative of illicit movement remains in the specifier of F and this results in a PF-uninterpretable structure.

The benefit of this analysis is that it captures the PP-like behavior of the phrasal comparative marker, but at the same time it posits the same clausal structure as in the reduced and full clausal comparatives, reflecting the similarities in their interpretation. Another important aspect of this analysis is that it explains the difference in case marking between the phrasal and clausal comparatives. In the phrasal comparatives the DP is assigned case by *apo* in the pP, overriding the case that was previously assigned to the DP inside the TP.[11]

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9. The extra movement step of the DP is necessary because otherwise *apo* cannot assign case and the structure would crash.

10. Arguments for the existence of a layered PP structure, based on unrelated constructions, are given by among others Svenonius (2008) and Pantcheva (2008), and arguments for the presence of a layered PP structure in Dutch are given by e.g. den Dikken (2010) and Koopman (2000).

11. Merchant elaborates on this property of case assignment referring to work by Béjar & Massam (1999), who show based on evidence from Niuean that this process of overriding case must be available in some languages.

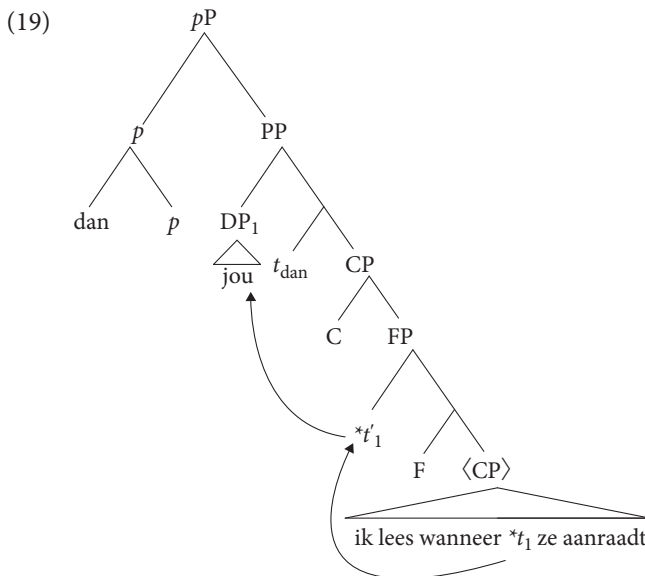## 5.   Merchant's (2009) analysis applied to Dutch

5.1   Dutch phrasal comparatives

If we analyze the Dutch phrasal comparatives based on Merchant (2009), we get the structure in (18) for the phrasal comparative in (13).

(18)
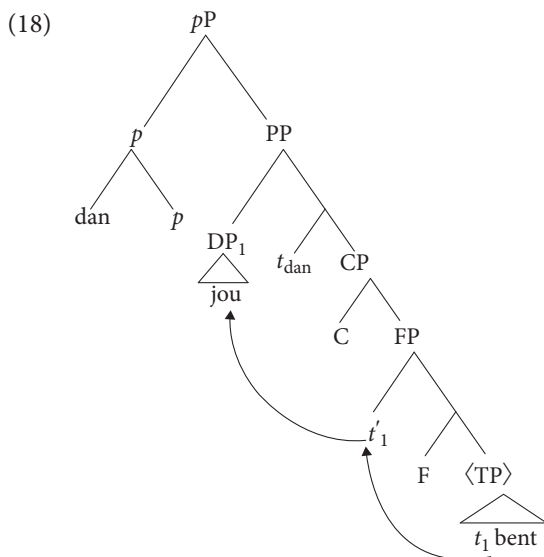
The case marking was an important reason to analyze this Dutch structure as a phrasal comparative and not as a reduced clausal comparative. Merchant's analysis puts the personal pronoun in the local domain of the preposition *dan,* so that *p* assigns accusative case to the pronoun, correctly capturing the Dutch data. Note that the personal pronoun is generated in a TP where it presumably was assigned nominative case through agreement with the predicate. We thus have to assume that multiple case assignment in Dutch is possible and that it is the more local case that is realized on the DP at PF.
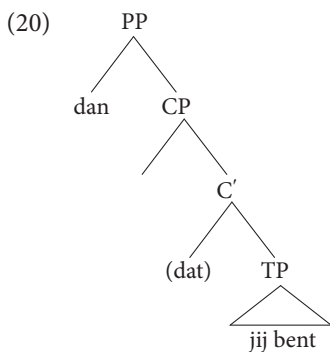
Crucial in this analysis is that even though this is a phrasal comparative, there is an underlying clausal structure. This is necessitated by the island effects which show that the personal pronoun has to undergo movement out of an underlying clause. In the above example, the personal pronoun moves inside the *p*P, out of a TP that is not an island, so there are no illicit traces of movement. If we look at the structure for the phrasal comparative involving an island, see (19) for the sentence in (7), we do see this illicit movement trace higher than the ellipsis site, just as in the Greek example in (17).

(19)

```
                    pP
                  /    \
                 p      PP
               /  \    /  \
             dan   p  DP₁   \
                     /‾‾\   CP
                   jou  t_dan  / \
                            C   FP
                               /  \
                            *t′₁   \
                                  F  ⟨CP⟩
                            ik lees wanneer *t₁ ze aanraadt
```


The illicit trace of the movement step of the DP to its final position remains after ellipsis causing a crash at PF, because only the complement of F, the functional head bearing the E feature, is elided.
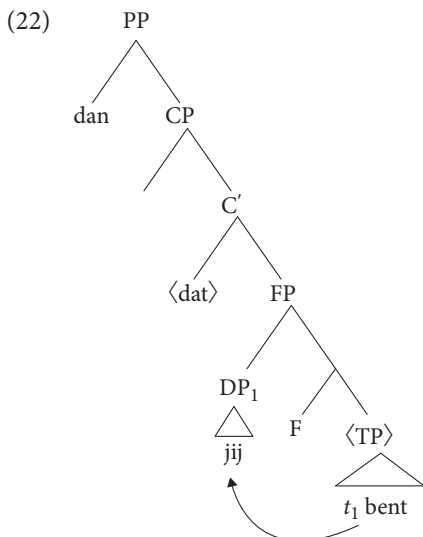
5.2 Dutch (reduced) clausal comparatives

If we apply Merchant's (2009) analysis of clausal comparatives to the Dutch full clausal comparatives, see (15), we get the structure in (20).

(20)

```
            PP
          /    \
        dan    CP
              /  \
                  C′
                 /  \
             (dat)   TP
                    /‾‾‾\
                   jij bent
```


Two important differences with Greek is that *dat* is always optional in Dutch full clausal comparatives while *oti* cannot be left out, and that *dat* is never possible in reduced clausal comparatives, see (21), while *ap'oti* is required in Greek, cf. (10).

(21) *Ik   ben beter dan dat jij.
       I.NOM am better than that you.NOM
       ('I am better than you.')

To get the correct structure for the reduced clausal comparative in Dutch we need
to make sure *dat* is deleted when there is ellipsis of the lower clause. The structure
for Dutch reduced clausal comparatives is given in (22).

(22)

If we now look at the reduced clausal comparative with an island in the lower
clause, cf. (8), we get the structure in (23).

(23)
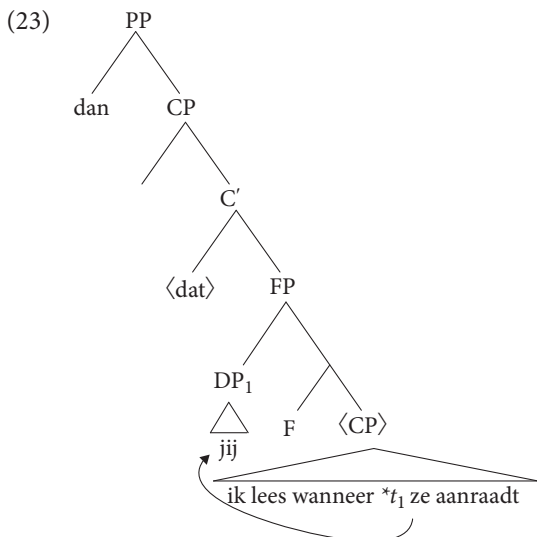
We see here that the only trace of island-violating movement is inside the elided CP, resulting in a PF-acceptable structure.

5.2.1 *Optionality and ellipsis of **dat***

As mentioned above, *dan dat* in clausal comparatives behaves different from *ap'oti*: *dat* is either optional or obligatorily deleted when comparative ellipsis takes place, cf. (20), (22). However, the optionality of *dat* is not particular to comparatives. In other constructions *dat* also has this special status, see for example (24).

> (24) Ik   weet niet of (dat) hij   komt.
>   I.NOM know not if that he.NOM comes
>   'I don't know if he will come.'

This shows that deletion of *dat* is a separate operation from ellipsis in comparatives. What this operation entails is beyond the scope of this paper, but it does not interfere with the analysis proposed here.[12]

5.3 Dutch ambiguous transitive comparatives

Next to the intransitive comparatives, I introduced data on the interpretation of transitive comparatives when *dan* is followed by a single DP. The relevant data are repeated in (25)-(26).

> (25) Jan slaat Suzan vaker   dan jou.
>   Jan hits Suzan more.often than you.ACC
>   *Interpretation 1:* 'Jan hits Suzan more often than he hits you.'
>   *Interpretation 2:* 'Jan hits Suzan more often than you hit her.'

> (26) Jan slaat Suzan vaker   dan jij.
>   Jan hits Suzan more.often than you.NOM
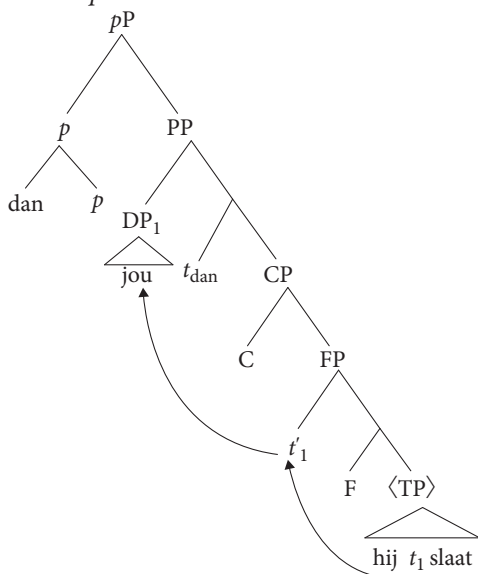>   *Interpretation:* 'Jan hits Suzan more often than you hit her.'

With the analysis for phrasal and reduced clausal comparatives illustrated above, the ambiguity of (25) follows naturally, because the underlying structure is ambiguous as well. The accusative case can be the result of case assignment by *dan* in the *p*P shell of a phrasal comparative, see (27), where the remnant DP can be the internal argument (a) or the external argument (b) in the underlying TP, or it can

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12. That ellipsis of *dat* is related to ellipsis of the lower clause is reminiscent of other operations depending on ellipsis, as in fragment answers and swiping. Proposals have been given that quite straightforwardly deal with this problem, e.g. Merchant (2004) and Aelbrecht (2009), that can be applied to the ellipsis analysis of comparatives.
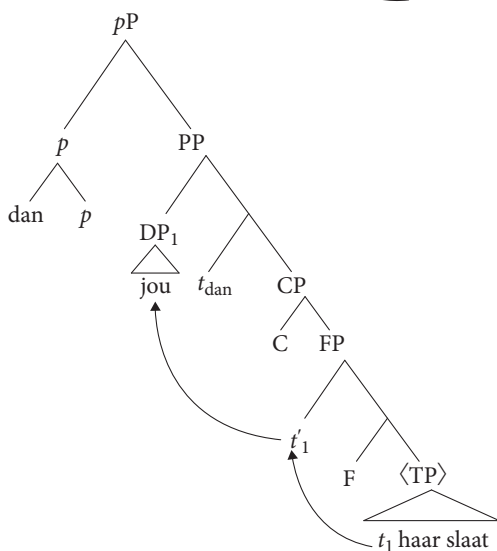
be the result of case assigned to the internal argument in the lower TP of a reduced clausal comparative, see (28).
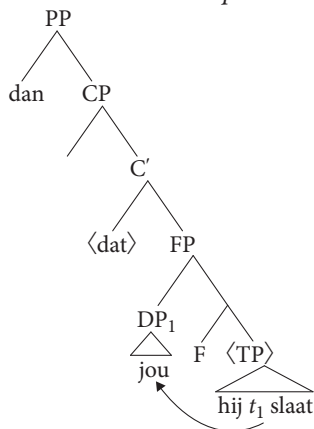
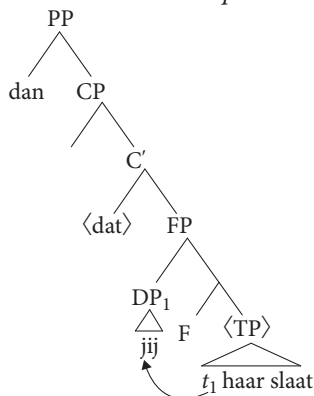(27)   *Phrasal comparative*

a.

b.

(28) *Reduced clausal comparative*

```
              PP
            /    \
         dan      CP
                    \
                     C′
                   /    \
               ⟨dat⟩     FP
                       /    \
                    DP₁      \
                    / \   F   ⟨TP⟩
                   jou      /    \
                        hij t₁ slaat
```

Looking at these structures we see that the ambiguity stems from the possibility of analyzing (25) as a phrasal comparative. This explains why people who do not accept (13), have only one interpretation for the transitive comparative: they do not have the phrasal comparative structure.

That the transitive comparative with the nominative pronoun has only one interpretation for all speakers is reflected in the analysis: there is only one possible underlying structure for (26), see (29).

(29) *Reduced clausal comparative*

```
              PP
            /    \
         dan      CP
                    \
                     C′
                   /    \
               ⟨dat⟩     FP
                       /    \
                    DP₁      \
                    / \   F   ⟨TP⟩
                   jij       /    \
                         t₁ haar slaat
```

6.   Related puzzles

Another benefit of the analysis proposed here is that some Dutch prepositional constructions resembling the comparative construction can now be analyzed in the same way, reflecting their structurally similar behavior.

One of these prepositional phrases is *na* ('after').[13] In examples (30)-(31) the possible constructions with *na* are illustrated.

(30)   Ik   ga op vakantie na   jou.
       I.NOM go on holiday   after you.ACC
       'I go on holiday after you.'

(31)   Ik   ga op vakantie nadat   jij   op vakantie gaat.
       I.NOM go on holiday   after.that you.NOM on holiday   goes
       'I go on holiday after you go.'

These constructions are reminiscent of the phrasal comparative and full clausal comparative. One difference is that the reduced clausal construction is not possible with *na,* see (32).

(32)   *Ik   ga op vakantie na(dat)   jij.
        I.NOM go on holiday   after.that you.NOM
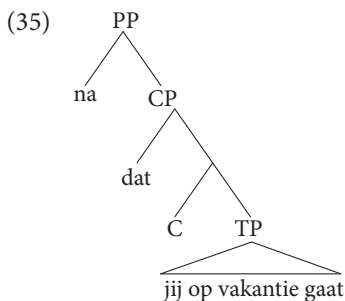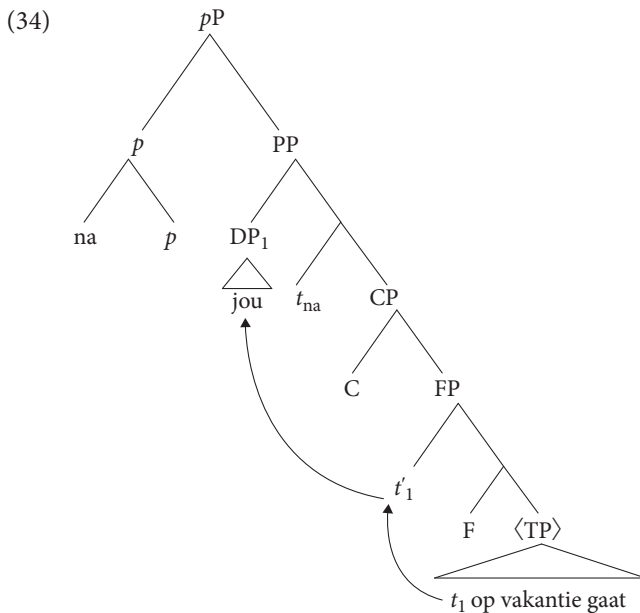   ('I go on holiday after you.')

The island effects that we find in the phrasal comparative are also replicated with *na,* see (33), which supports the idea to analyze these structures in the same way.[14]

(33)   *De foto's   van mij   werden geprint na   jou.
        the pictures of   me.ACC were   printed after you.ACC
       (Intended: 'The pictures of me were printed after the pictures of you.')

Here, movement out of an island in combination with the phrasal construction results in an unacceptable structure. These similarities are reflected when we use the analysis proposed above for the construction with *na,* as in (34) for the phrasal construction and in (35) for the clausal construction.

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13. Due to space limitations I only discuss *na* but two other prepositions that behave in roughly the same way are *in plaats van* ('in stead of') and *voor* ('before'). An anonymous reviewer noted that judgments for the same construction with *in plaats van* might be different, because both *in plaats van jou* and *in plaats van jij* appear to be worse than *in plaats van Piet.*

**14.** Thanks to Güliz Güneş (p.c.) for suggesting this example.

(34)

```
                pP
              /    \
             p      PP
           /  \    /  \
         na    p  DP₁  \
               jou  t_na   CP
                         /   \
                        C     FP
                             /   \
                           t′₁    \
                                 F   ⟨TP⟩
                            t₁ op vakantie gaat
```

(35)

```
          PP
         /  \
       na    CP
            /  \
          dat   \
               C    TP
          jij op vakantie gaat
```

Interestingly, the ambiguous interpretation with transitive predicates is replicated for all speakers, which follows from the fact that the phrasal construction is the default for all speakers, see (36).

(36) Ik   sla Peter na   jou.
      I.NOM hit Peter after you.ACC
      Interpretation 1: 'I hit Peter after I hit you.'
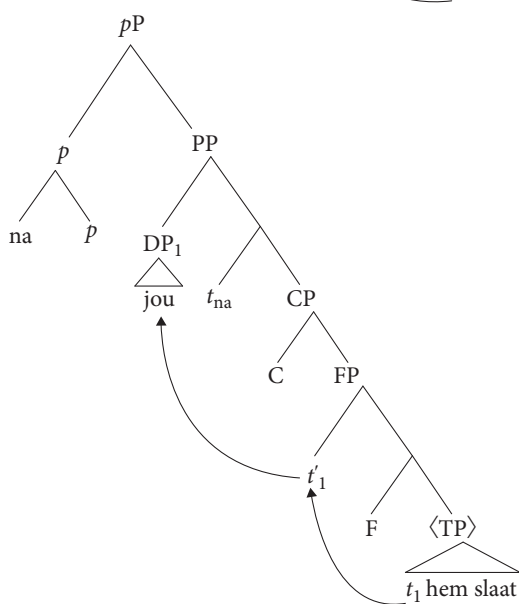   *Interpretation 2:* 'I hit peter after you hit him.'

The ambiguous interpretation can be accounted for in the same way as with the ambiguous comparatives, see (37).[15]

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15. Note that there is one less possible option because of the fact that the reduced clausal structure is not available with *na*.

(37) a.
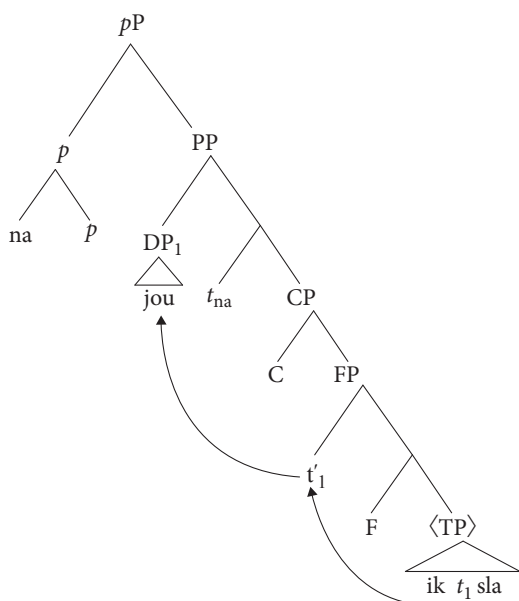
b.

7.   Conclusion

In this paper I presented a new analysis of Dutch phrasal and clausal comparatives using Merchant's (2009) analysis for Greek comparatives. Based on this analysis and similarities between the Greek and Dutch comparative constructions I proposed a new classification of the comparative data I started out with in section 1. I have argued that the construction where *dan* is followed by a single DP with accusative case is not a substandard version of the construction where *dan* is case transparent, but a separate construction, namely a phrasal comparative, while the construction with nominative case should be analyzed as a reduced clausal comparative. The benefit of this classification and subsequent analysis is that the differences in case marking and island effects between the two constructions are explained. The analysis furthermore explains the ambiguous interpretation of comparatives with transitive predicates. I have also shown that the analysis can be extended to a number of other constructions involving elements that behave similar to *dan* in the phrasal comparative, such as *na.*

Looking at the general questions playing a role in research on comparatives, in the analysis proposed here, in line with Merchant (2009), the comparative marker *dan* is analyzed as a preposition, but one that is always followed by a clausal complement, crucially also in the phrasal comparative. This analysis, which posits underlying structure for both comparative constructions, reflects the similarity in the interpretation of the different comparatives, while it at the same time accounts for their structural differences.

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