The interpretation of the Dutch particle *wel**

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1. Introduction

In an internet forum[1] that discussed a newspaper article about the death of a famous Dutch journalist I found the following example:

(1) *Willem Oltmans zal **wel** in stilte begraven worden*
  'Willem Oltmans will be buried in silence'

One of the commentators to the forum mentions that he finds the use of the word *wel* in this example very inappropriate. "Was he such a noisy man?" he wonders. This comment led forum members to begin a discussion about why the word *wel* is used here. One discussant put forward the idea that the word indicates that Willem Oltmans' body will *not* be put on display to a full Arena stadium (unlike the famous Dutch singer André Hazes who died just before Willem Oltmans). Another person suggested that the way he would be buried is contrasted with the image of his rather turbulent life which is discussed in the remainder of the article. Finally someone suggested that the word *wel* indicates a contrast between the fact that he would be buried in silence and the fact mentioned in the previous sentence (not cited on the forum) that a public website had been created where people could offer their condolences.

 Wel could be called the positive counterpart of *niet* 'not'. When children disagree about a certain fact they often use those two words as recurring arguments: *wel(les) , niet(es), wel(les), niet(es)* 'it is, it is not, it is, it is not'. Because the affirmative meaning of a sentence is the unmarked one, adding the particle[2] *wel* has to have another reason than just creating a positive meaning. Often this reason is to stress the affirmative nature of the sentence, which then creates a relation of contrast with a negative counterpart. In other situations this contrastive meaning is less obvious, or even absent:

(2)   *Ik had misschien **wel** vijftien seconden echt zwart voor m'n ogen*
      'For maybe even fifteen seconds it was really black in front of my
      eyes'[3]

In (2), *wel* is connected to the quantifier *fifteen* and seems to indicate that the speaker thinks fifteen seconds is a lot. Another different function of *wel* is illustrated in (3):

(3)   *Nee lijkt me **wel** leuk*
      'No it seems OK'

The speaker expresses with (3) that something seems OK to him, neither good nor bad. *Wel* functions as a moderator to the predicate *leuk* 'nice', and weakens its meaning.

There is an additional use of *wel* that can be quite confusing for non-native speakers of Dutch: both *wel* and *niet* 'not' can be used adjacent to each other. This use is only possible in questions or other *wh*-phrases. In (4) the speaker simultaneously asks how fast the hearer rides his bike and also utters his surprise over the speed he already presumes:

(4)   *Hoe hard fiets jij **wel** niet?*
      (Gee), how fast do you ride you bike?

The forum discussion is induced by a problem with the interpretation of *wel* in sentence (1). Most of the time, however, no problems occur in the interpretation of sentences containing *wel*. Stress plays an important role in the interpretation of the particle. Otherwise, when *wel* is used in written language without intonational clues, the different meanings of *wel* form a hierarchy in interpretation according to their strength.

In this paper I will give an analysis of the interpretation of *wel* in example (1). I will begin this article by describing the meanings of the word *wel* that qualify for becoming the actual interpretation of it in (1). I will make clear how the different interpretations form a hierarchy. After that I will elaborate on how this hierarchy affects the interpretation of the word *wel* and how this can be analyzed in an Optimality Theoretic framework. I will show that the strongest interpretation that is compatible with the context will be the interpretation attributed to an occurrence of the word *wel*.

2. Hierarchy

I investigated the use of *wel* in the Dutch language by means of the Spoken Dutch Corpus (CGN)[4]. The occurrences of *wel* I examined can be classified into several groups according to their meaning or the effect they have on the sentence.

Sassen (1985) argues that *wel* in some uses can be seen as the lexical representative of a double denial. This property is most obvious when *wel* is used to contradict a previous denial as in (5):

> (5)　*Ik kijk niet neer op studenten helemaal niet nee*
> 　　　'I don't look down on students, not at all, no'
> 　　　'Yes we do look down, yes we do'
> 　　　*Ja wij kijken **wel** neer jawel*

In Hogeweg (2005) I argue that all uses of *wel* are a response to a denial in the context. The strength of the negation in the context varies for the several uses of *wel*. My hypothesis is that when the negation in the context is strong, *wel* has to be strong as well. According to that strength the possible interpretations of *wel* form a hierarchy. In this section I will discuss the interpretations of *wel* that can be considered suitable candidates for the occurrence in (1) and I will explain how they form a hierarchy according to their strength. (For a complete list of the uses of *wel* and their place in the hierarchy I refer the reader to Hogeweg 2005)

2.1 Correction

Wel is strongest when it is used as a correction as in (5). *Wel* is a response to a negation that is explicitly present in a previous utterance. It is used to contradict a previous utterance.

2.2 Contrast

When *wel* is used to mark contrast as in (6) the negation is again explicitly present in the context. The contrastive *wel* is nonetheless weaker than the correcting *wel* because the content of the sentence containing *wel* is not in conflict with the content of the sentence containing the negation; *wel* is not used to contradict a previous utterance. In (6) *wel* marks the contrast between *wij* 'we', who do not know, and *professor Hoksbergen,* who does seem to know:

(6)   *Wij weten niet uh professor Hoksbergen schijnt dat **wel** te weten wij weten niet hoe belangrijk het is voor een kind om te weten wie zijn biologische vader is.*
'We don't know uhm professor Hoksbergen *does* seem to know that, we don't know how important it is for a child to know its biological father'

2.2 Implicit contrast

Wel can also mark contrast to something that is not explicitly stated in a previous utterance but that can be inferred from the context. Example (7) is part of a conversation between a mother and a daughter about a paper the daughter handed in for school. She was not satisfied with the quality of her paper and she lists a number of things that she could have done better. After that she utters (7).

(7)   *Ik had **wel** best wel veel bronnen*
'I did have quite a lot of sources'

In (7) the first occurrence of *wel* is used to mark the inconsistency with the forgoing and the current utterance. The aforementioned quality of the paper could suggest that she did not have a lot of sources as well or at least makes that a more plausible option than the contrary.   *Wel* is used as a reaction to that expectation. This use of *wel* is weaker and hence takes a lower place in the hierarchy than the latter uses. The negation is not literally present in a previous utterance but can only be inferred from the context. *Wel* does not contradict a previous utterance but dispels a possible assumption.

2.5 *Wel* indicating plausibility
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Another effect *wel* can have is that it weakens the affirmative strength of the sentence. In that case *wel* is combined with the verb *zullen* 'will'. The speaker expresses with *wel* that he expects the situation described by the sentence to occur or to be the case but that he is not totally sure about it.

(8)   *Hij zal **wel** bij een bank werken zal **wel** naar z'n werk op weg zijn*
'He probably works at the bank, he is probably on his way to work'

This use of *wel* differs form the previous uses. *Wel* in (8) is not uttered in response to a context that suggests the opposite of (8). I argue that this use of *wel* negates an internal denial. *Wel* reflects that *not* was taken into consideration and thereby shows the speaker is not totally sure about the proposition. When we talk about future events or other things we cannot be sure about, we have ideas about the probability of the expressed proposition being true. Sometimes many clues indicate the event or situation described by the proposition will happen or is the case. Even then we can not be sure about the truth of the proposition, but the opposite has become very unlikely. In the case of (8) above either he works at the bank or he does not. It must be one or the other, it cannot be somewhere in between. That is why I claim *wel* is a reflection of an internal evaluation by the speaker as to the truthfulness of a proposition

This use of *wel* is the weakest one in the hierarchy. The negation it negates is neither explicitly nor implicitly stated in the previous context. The negation should be seen as possibility that has been taken into consideration.

In this section I have shown that the different uses of *wel* have in common that that they function as a response to a negation in the context. That negation in the context might be explicitly stated, inferable from the linguistic or non-linguistic context or it can be a possibility taken into consideration. Dependent on the nature of the negation in the context, the uses of *wel* form a hierarchy. In the next section I will show how this hierarchy together with two well-known constraints in Optimality Theory brings about the interpretation of the particle in example (1).

3. The interpretation of *wel*

3.1 Optimality Theory

In Optimality Theory language phenomena are explained in terms of violable constraints. Because these constraints express very general statements with respect to language, they can be in conflict. The constraints can be ordered in a constraint hierarchy according to their strength. OT specifies the relation between the input and output. The output that best satisfies the ranked constraints emerges as the optimal output for the given input (Prince and Smolensky 1994). Optimality Theory is a competence theory that describes the grammatical knowledge of speakers. It should not be confused with a performance theory that describes the cognitive processes by which language is realized. An integration of the two levels is provided for in the theory. The optimization of the candidate outputs takes place at a lower, subsymbolic level. At that level an activation pattern is constructed that will realize an optimal symbolic structure. It is not the

case that alternative symbolic structures are actually build and evaluated on-line. (For more information and discussion on this matter I refer the reader to Smolensky and Legendre 2006)

My analysis concerns OT Semantics, first described by Hendriks and de Hoop (2001) and de Hoop and de Swart (2000). In OT semantics the input is an utterance and the output is an interpretation of that utterance. Zwarts (2003) was one of the first to apply this mechanism to the field of lexical semantics. Zwarts accounts for the interpretation of the polysemous word *round*. He argues that the meaning of *round* that is chosen is preferably the strongest, the most prototypical meaning that is compatible with the context in which it is used (following the proposals of Dalrymple et al. 1994 for the interpretation of reciprocals and Winter 2000). He formalizes this idea by means of two constraints in Optimality Theory, FIT and STRENGTH.

FIT: interpretations should not conflict with the (linguistic) context (Zwarts 2003)

FIT is a constraint that favors interpretations that do not conflict with the (linguistic) context over ones that do. If a possible interpretation does not fit the previous conversation or the context, it will not emerge as the optimal interpretation for the given utterance.

STRENGTH: stronger interpretations are better than weaker interpretations (Zwarts 2003)

STRENGTH expresses that we should interpret utterances in the strongest way (also compare Blutner 2000, Zeevat 2000). STRENGTH should be considered a faithfulness constraint that favors more prototypical meanings over less prototypical meanings. FIT is ranked higher than STRENGTH. FIT is the contrary force which requires that the interpretation to be compatible with the context and hence is actually not the strongest interpretation most of the times.

3.2 *Wel* and the interaction of STRENGTH and FIT

Like the word *round,* the particle *wel* has several related meanings than can be ordered according to their strength. Therefore, the same two constraints can be applied to determine the interpretation of *wel.* In the previous section I described how the various uses of *wel* differ in strength. In accordance with that strength the following hierarchy exists in the interpretation of *wel:*

Correction >> Contrast >> Implicit contrast >> Probability

The constraint STRENGTH tells us that stronger meanings are better than weaker meanings. When *wel* is uttered we should, according to STRENGTH, interpret it as correcting a previous utterance. However, if no utterance is present in the context that states the opposite of the sentence containing *wel*, this leads to a violation of FIT. Hence 'correction' is not the optimal interpretation. Let's say one reads utterance (9).

(9)   *Het feestje zal wel leuk worden*
         The party will *wel* be fun

The constraint STRENGTH expresses we must interpret *wel* in the strongest way. However, this leads to a violation of FIT if in the previous context it is not stated that the party will not be fun. After 'correction', 'contrast' is the strongest interpretation. If there is statement that something else (e.g. the dinner) will not be fun, interpreting *wel* as creating contrast does not lead to a violation of FIT. In that case 'contrast' is the optimal interpretation, even if the interpretations ranked lower down the hierarchy are not in conflict with the context either. After all, interpreting *wel* with one of the lower ranked interpretations would lead to more violations of the constraint STRENGTH. *Wel* in sentence (9) in a context where it is said that *the dinner will not be fun* could for example still function as an indication of probability without violating FIT. However, interpreting *wel* that way violates STRENGTH three times (there are three possible stronger interpretations) whereas interpreting *wel* as creating contrast violates STRENGTH only once. Hence the optimal interpretation would be 'contrast'. This process of optimization is visualized in tableau 1. Let me note here again that it is not the case that interpreters consciously weigh all the possible interpretations of *wel* and pick the best. The interpretation that comes about is the result of the interaction of the two constraints at a level of automatic subconscious optimization.

'Het feestje zal *wel* leuk worden'	Fit	Strength
Correction	*	
☞ Contrast		*
Implicit contrast		**
Probability		***

Tableau 1: interpretation of *wel leuk*

Let us now return to the Willem Oltmans-example:

(1) *Willem Oltmans zal **wel** in stilte begraven worden*
'Willem Oltmans will be buried in silence'

The discussants did not interpret *wel* in the correcting sense because there is no previous sentence in the article that stated that Willem Oltmans would not be buried in silence. The forum members tried to find a fitting context for the contrastive reading. One discussant put forward the idea that the word indicated that Willem Oltmans would *not* be put on display in the Arena stadium, in contrast with André Hazes. Another person suggested that the way he would be buried was contrasted with his rather turbulent life. Finally someone suggested that the word *wel* indicated a contrast between the fact that he would be buried in silence and the fact mentioned in the previous sentence that a public website had been created where people could offer their condolences. The discussion nicely illustrates the interaction between STRENGTH and FIT. The discussants tried to create a fitting context for the contrastive interpretation. If none of the proposed options is considered suitable to form a contrastive relation with an element in (1), interpreting *wel* as creating contrast leads to a violation of FIT. Then the forum members would be forced to adopt a weaker interpretation. If the content of the article would raise the assumption that Willem Oltmans' funeral would not be held in silence, 'implicit contrast' would be a suitable candidate. Because of the presence of the verb *zullen* 'will' however, the interpretation of *wel* as indicating probability seems a plausible option in this case.

'Willem Oltmans……..'	Fit	Strength
Correction	*	
☞ ? Contrast	?	*
Implicit contrast	*	**
☞ ? Probability		*****

Tableau 2: interpretations of Willem Oltmans example

4. Conclusions

In this article I addressed the issue of the interpretation of the particle *wel*. By means of the Spoken Dutch Corpus I made an inventory of the (most common) uses of *wel*. Despite the great variation in the meaning, the interpretation of *wel*

causes no problem most of the time. The interpretation relies partly on the stress on *wel*. However, when written language is involved, I have shown that the hierarchy in the interpretation of the word together with two constraints determine the optimal interpretation within a context. The different uses of *wel* vary in strength according to the force of the negation they react on. The constraints STRENGTH and FIT make us pick the right interpretation within that hierarchy.

Notes

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1 The discussion can be found at:
http://www.mijnkopthee.nl/archive/2004/09/30/willem_oltmans_willem_oltmans_

2 Dependent on the classification one adopts, some uses of *wel* can also be categorized as adverbs.

3 All sentences used as an example except for (1) are taken from the Spoken Dutch Corpus.

4 This corpus contains about nine million words of contemporary standard spoken Dutch.

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