

The syntax and semantics of Dutch diminishers

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Abstract. This article studies the syntax and semantics of so-called diminishers, i.e., designators of a low-level degree. More specifically, we focus on the Dutch diminishers *wat* ‘what’, *een beetje* ‘a little bit’, and *ietwat* ‘somewhat’. Based on the distribution of these elements, we distinguish three different types of constituents: DPs, DegPs, and QPs. Diminishers of the DP type can act as direct objects, while DegPs and QPs can be distinguished from each other in their ability to appear to the left of the article. Regarding their semantics, we show that diminishers are sensitive to the meaning—more specifically, the polarity—of the constituent they modify. They denote a point on a scale that is a small distance upward from the endpoint of that scale or—in the case of open scales—a norm proposed as desirable on that scale.

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1 Introduction

The Dutch *wh*-item *wat* ‘what’ can function as an indefinite pronoun (see Postma 1994 for discussion); an example is given in (1):

- (1) Jan heeft wat gekocht.
 John has what bought
 ‘John bought something.’

This type of example is part of a larger cross-linguistic pattern that involves indefinites that are either syncretic with, or morphologically derived from, *wh*-words (Haida 2007). A use that typically gets less attention, however, is one whereby the same pronoun can also be used as an adverbial modifier, for example to modify a verb:

- (2) Ik heb dat huis wat schoongemaakt.
 I have the house what cleaned
 ‘I cleaned the house a bit.’

Given that *schoonmaken* ‘to clean’ is a two-place predicate, and the two argument positions are already filled by *ik* ‘I’ and *dat huis* ‘that house’, respectively, the word *wat* ‘what’ functions as an adverbial adjunct which indicates degree. Semantically speaking it marks a low degree, the scalar scope of which is at the bottom end of a scale.

In a number of Dutch dialects, the form of the pronoun used in these contexts differs from that of the interrogative pronoun. Consider in this context the following sentences from the Wambeek dialect (Flemish Brabant):¹

- (3) {Wad / *Ewad} ejje gezien? (Wambeek Dutch)
 what / EWA have.you seen
 ‘What did you see?’
- (4) Ik em dad ojsh {*wa / ewa} preuper gemokt. (Wambeek)
 I have that house what / EWA clean made
 ‘I cleaned the house a bit.’

1. All further dialect examples in this article are from this dialect.

In adverbial contexts the interrogative form *wa* ‘what’ is not used, but the form *ewa*.² Degree markers like *wat* in (2) and *ewa* in (4) are called diminishers (Bolinger 1972).³ These diminishers are the central topic of this paper. We examine their properties in more detail and propose a theoretical analysis for them.

The article is structured as follows. In section 2 we discuss the syntax of diminishers. Based on the distribution of a number of degree indicators in Dutch, we distinguish between three different types of constituents: DPs, DegPs, and QPs. Section 3 deals with the semantics of diminishers. We show that diminishers are sensitive to the meaning—particularly the polarity—of the constituent they modify, and we formulate a generalisation that describes this distribution. Section 4 summarises the main findings of the article.

2 The syntax of diminishers

2.1 The data: distribution

In addition to *what*, the Dutch reference grammar ANS (Haeseryn et al. 1997: 896) lists a whole series of low-degree adverbial modifiers: *een (klein) beetje* ‘a little bit’, *een tik(kelt)je* ‘a bit’, *een ietsje* ‘a bit’ (lit. a something.DIM), *een ietsiepietsie* ‘a tiny bit’, *een weinig* ‘a little’, *ietwat* ‘somewhat’, *iets of wat* ‘somewhat’, etc. In this section we make a systematic comparison between *wat* ‘what’, *ewa*, *een beetje* ‘a little’, and *ietwat* ‘somewhat’. We thereby reduce the list of the ANS somewhat in order to keep things manageable.⁴ This comparison will reveal both distributional differences and similarities between the different types of modifiers. Those findings will then serve as input for our syntactic analysis of diminishers.

2.1.1 Context 1: degree adjunct with verbal predicates

As already indicated in section 1, both *wat* ‘what’ and *ewa* can be used as degree adjuncts, i.e. as modifiers of a verb (transitive or intransitive). As can be seen from the following examples, this applies to all expressions

2. The final consonant of this pronoun can be realized as [t], [d] or Ø. We regard this as surface variation, which we will not dwell on any further.

3. Nouwen (2013: 205) uses the term *L-adverbs*, but because the modifiers we discuss in this paper are not necessarily adverbial, we prefer the more general term diminishers.

4. Another reason is that, based on a preliminary investigation, we suspect that the modifiers we do discuss are representative of the full range of distributional behaviours; comparing more items would probably not reveal any new patterns. However, a more thorough investigation should confirm or disprove this suspicion.

we examine here:⁵

- (5) Ik heb dat boek {wat / een beetje} bekeken.
 I have that book what / a bit watched
 ‘I leafed through that book a bit.’
- (6) De klachten vanuit de gemeenschap verscherpten zich
 the complaints from the community sharpened REFL
 ietwat de afgelopen dagen. (CHN)
 somewhat the past days
 ‘The complaints from the community have intensified somewhat recently.’
- (7) Ik bezien daunen boek ewa. (Wambeek Dutch)
 I watch that book EWA
 ‘I leaf through that book a bit.’
- Wat* ‘what’, *ewa*, *een beetje* ‘a bit’, and *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ can all fulfil the grammatical function of degree adjunct.
 The same distribution emerges when they modify an inherently reflexive verb.
- (8) Hij heeft zich {een beetje / wat} geschaamd.
 he has REFL a bit / what shamed
 ‘He was a bit ashamed.’
- (9) En het bleek opnieuw in 2004 toen het tot Groen! herdoopte
 and it appeared anew in 2004 when the to Groen! rebaptised
 Agalev zich ietwat herstelde. (CHN)
 Agalev REFL somewhat recovered
 ‘And it appeared again in 2004 when the party Groen!, renamed from the earlier Agalev, recovered somewhat.’
- (10) K em ma ewa vergist. (Wambeek Dutch)
 I have REFL EWA erred
 ‘I made a slight mistake.’

These modifiers show the same picture with verbs that select prepositional objects:

5. Unless otherwise stated, the examples in this article are based on the judgments of the authors of this piece and the native speakers they consulted. However, in cases of doubt—which turned out to be especially common with *ietwat* ‘somewhat’—we also consulted the Corpus of Contemporary Dutch (*Corpus Hedendaags Nederlands*; <https://chn.ivdnt.org>). Examples we extracted from that corpus are labeled ‘CHN’.

- (11) Hij heeft {een beetje / wat} naar tv gekeken.
 he has a bit / what to tv looked
 ‘He watch a bit of tv.’
- (12) Om één reden slechts, omdat hij ietwat op mijn overleden
 for one reason only because he somewhat on my deceased
 vader lijkt. (CHN)
 father resembles
 ‘Only for one reason, because he resembles my deceased father a bit.’
- (13) IJ trekt ewa op mè vauder. (Wambeek Dutch)
 he pulls EWA on my father
 ‘He looks a bit like my father.’

In this first context, then, i.e. as adverbial modifier of degree, all expressions under discussion behave the same.

2.1.2 Context 2: degree adjunct with nonverbal predicates

The second context we want to focus on involves adverbial modification in non-verbal predicates. A first instantiation of this are adjectival predicates that combine with a copular verb. As shown in (14) and (15), all modifiers under consideration here are well-formed in this context.

- (14) Die broek is {wat / een beetje / ietwat} lang.
 that pants is what / a bit / somewhat long
 ‘Those pants are a bit long.’
- (15) Dei broek is ewa lang. (Wambeek Dutch)
 that pants is EWA long
 ‘Those pants are a bit long.’

Note that the combination of modifier and adjective can be fronted together, suggesting that they do indeed form one constituent:

- (16) {Wat / een beetje / ietwat} (te) lang is die broek.
 what / a bit / somewhat too long is that pants
- (17) Ewa (te) lang is dei broek. (Wambeek Dutch)
 EWA too long is that pants

The modifiers can also co-occur with prepositional constituents that are used predicatively, at least insofar as those PPs have a gradable meaning:

- (18) Ze was {wat / een beetje / ietwat} in de wind.
 she was what / a bit / somewhat in the wind
 ‘She was slightly drunk.’
- (19) Ze was ewa van ee melk. (Wambeek Dutch)
 she was EWA off her milk
 ‘She was a bit lost.’

When the PPs in question have a locative meaning, the modifiers are excluded:⁶

- (20) *Ze is {wat / een beetje / ietwat} in Rome.
 she is what / a bit / somewhat in Rome
- (21) *Zis ewad in Rome. (Wambeek Dutch)
 she.is EWA in Rome

Finally, the predicative constituent can also be a DP, albeit not any kind of DP. The following examples contain a predicative DP that itself contains a gradable adjective:

- (22) Hij is {wat / een beetje} een rare kerel.
 he is what / a bit a strange fellow
 ‘He’s slightly weird.’
- (23) Achteraf word je ietwat een linkse softy. (CHN)
 afterwards become you somewhat a leftist softie
 ‘In the end you become somewhat of a leftist softy.’
- (24) IJ is ewa ne skouë pee. (Wambeek Dutch)
 he is EWA a strange man
 ‘He is a slightly weird man.’

That the presence of these degree modifiers is connected with the adjective is shown by the fact that the sentences get worse when we omit the adjective:

6. A reviewer notes that a sentence like *Ze is nog een beetje in Rome* ‘She’s still a bit in Rome’ is possible in a certain context, e.g. to indicate that although she is no longer physically, she is still in Rome in her mind. In such a case we interpret *in Rome zijn* ‘to be in Rome’ not as a locative, but as a gradeable property, comparable with the examples in (18) and (19).

- (25) a. ?*Hij is {wat / een beetje / ietwat} een kerel.
 he is what / a bit / somewhat a fellow
 b. ?*IJ is ewa ne pee. (Wambeek Dutch)
 he is EWA a fellow

That being said, these modifiers *can* appear with a DP without a gradable adjective, but only to the extent that this DP can itself be interpreted as a gradable property (Morzycki 2009; Constantinescu 2011). This is shown in the following examples, which are good despite the absence of an adjective:

- (26) a. Hij is een beetje een idioot.
 he is a bit an idiot
 ‘He’s a bit of an idiot.’
 b. IJ is ewa ne stoemerik. (Wambeek Dutch)
 he is EWA an idiot
 ‘He’s a bit of an idiot.’

In these examples the DP itself describes a gradable property, which is evidenced by the fact that we can replace it with a gradable adjective that preserves the meaning (*idioot* ‘idiot’, *stom* ‘stupid’). Cases with *wat* ‘what’ are also possible:

- (27) Hij is ook wel wat een {zeurpiet / piekeraar / moederskindje}.
 he is also PRT what a bore / worrier / mother.child
 ‘He’s also a bit of a bore/brooder/mother’s boy.’

Moreover, in this construction there also seems to be a preference for indefinite DPs. For example, our earlier examples (22) and (24) cannot appear with a definite article:

- (28) *Hij is {wat / een beetje} de rare kerel.
 he is what / a bit the strange fellow
 (29) *IJ is ewa de skouë pee. (Wambeek Dutch)
 he is EWA the strange man

However, definite DPs are not excluded, as the following examples show:

- (30) a. Hij is een beetje {de dorpsidioot / de intellectueel van
 he is a bit the village.idiot / the intellectual of
 dienst / de underdog}.
 service / the underdog
 ‘He’s a bit the village idiot/the go-to intellectual/the underdog.’
 b. Het is een beetje de schuld van de Belgen.
 it is a bit the fault of the Belgians
 ‘It’s a bit the Belgians’ fault.’
 c. Hij is een beetje de Bobbejaan Schoepen van Robot City.
 He is a bit the Bobbejaan Schoepen of Robot City
 ‘He’s a bit the Bobbejaan Schoepen of Robot City.’

It seems reasonable to assume that these DPs can be interpreted as gradable properties. Their degree-denoting character lies in the extent to which the subject approaches or does not approach the denotation of the predicate. The idea is that someone can either be not the village idiot at all (0%), or completely (100%), and that there are all sorts of gradations inbetween, so that someone could also be 20% or 50% the village idiot.

In sum, this second context distinguishes the modifiers only marginally: they can all occur with a predicative constituent, be it an AP, PP, or DP. The important limitation that applies here is that the predicative constituent must be able to have a gradable interpretation. This is usually the case with adjectives, but not always with PPs or DPs.

In combination with the first context, we see the common distribution of the modifiers under discussion here as the confirmation of an underlying unity in this category.

2.1.3 Context 3: direct object

As mentioned in section 1, the Standard Dutch *wat* ‘what’ can also be used as an indefinite pronoun. In that capacity, for example, it can fulfil the function of direct object. None of the expressions examined here allow this distribution, however:

- (31) Hij heeft {wat / *een beetje / *ietwat} bekeken.
 he has what / a bit / somewhat watched
 ‘He has watched something.’

- (32) *IJ bezied ewa. (Wambeek Dutch)
 he watches EWA
 INTENDED: ‘He is watching something.’

We deliberately choose a verb like *bekijken* ‘watch’, which is obligatorily transitive. The so-called pseudotransitive verbs, such as *eten* ‘eat’ in the examples below, can indeed occur in combination with these modifiers, but only in their capacity as a degree adjunct. Because of this, it can appear that *ewa/een beetje/ietwat* can act as a direct object, but this appearance is deceptive.

- (33) Hij heeft {een beetje / ietwat} gegeten.
 he has a bit / somewhat eaten
 ‘He’s eaten a bit.’

- (34) K em ewa geetn. (Wambeek Dutch)
 I have EWA eaten
 ‘I’ve eaten a bit.’

2.1.4 Context 4: premodifier in a nominal constituent

Wat ‘what’ and *ewa* can not only modify predicates, they can also occur as a quantifying premodifier in a noun phrase with a mass noun or a bare plural as head; *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ is rare in this context.^{7,8}

- (35) a. {Wat / Een beetje} melk heeft hij gedronken.
 what / a bit milk has he drunk
 ‘He drank a bit of milk.’
 b. {Wat / Een beetje} appels heeft ze gegeten.
 what / a bit apples has she eaten
 ‘She has eaten some apples.’

7. We put the noun phrase in sentence-initial position to avoid interpreting the modifier as an adverbial modifier to the verb, i.e. as a case of context 1.

8. The CHN corpus contains only 19 examples in which *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ is immediately followed by a noun. Seven of these are structurally ambiguous with an analysis as a degree adjunct (see note 7), four modify a noun that is morphologically complex and whose left-hand side is an adjective (e.g. *ietwat bekendheid* ‘somewhat familiarity’). Six of them are of the type discussed in footnote 9. Since the interpretation of *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ here is not ‘a small amount’ and the noun following it is countable, we suspect that it is a different type of construction. The remaining two examples seem to be genuine; we list them in (36).

- (36) a. Ietwat buikgevoel en dienstbetoon kunnen hem helpen
 somewhat gut.feeling and public.service can him help
 inschatten wat er leeft onder de mensen. (CHN)
 assess what there lives under the people
 ‘Some gut feeling and public service can help him assess what the
 public sentiment is.’
- b. De veelkleurige parasol boven zijn wagen zorgt voor
 the multi.colored umbrella above his car cares for
 ietwat schaduw. (CHN)
 somewhat shade
 ‘The multi-colored umbrella above his car provides some shade.’
- (37) a. Ewa melk eitn gedroenken. (Wambeek Dutch)
 EWA melk heeft.hij gedronken
 ‘Some milk he has drunk.’
- b. Ewad appels eise geetn. (Wambeek Dutch)
 EWA appels heeft.ze gegeten
 ‘Some apples she has eaten.’

Singular count nouns are not allowed in this construction; this is shown in the following examples:

- (38) *{Wat / Een beetje} hond heeft hij gezien.
 what / a bit dog has he seen
- (39) *Ewad ont eitn gezien. (Wambeek Dutch)
 EWA dog has.he seen

The modifiers in this subsection indicate a quantity, rather than a degree. This makes them different from the first two contexts. There is another context that is formally very similar to this one, but which we will not discuss as a separate category. Only the modifier *een beetje* ‘a little’ appears in it. It is illustrated in the following example (Haeseryn et al. 1997):

- (40) Een beetje journalist kan dat zo te weten komen.
 a bit journalist can that so to know come
 ‘Any journalist worth their salt can find that out easily.’

This context is disallowed for *ewa* and *wat* ‘what’, and marginal for *ietwat* ‘somewhat’:⁹

- (41) *Ewa journalist kan da zoe te wete kommen. (Wambeek)
EWA journalist can that so to know come

- (42) {*Wat / *?ietwat} journalist kan dat zo te weten komen.
what / somewhat journalist can that so to know come
INTENDED: ‘Any journalist worth their salt can find that out easily.’

What differs from the previous examples in this section is on the one hand the fact that this construction is possible with count nouns, and on the other its semantics: in (40) *een beetje* ‘a little’ does not indicate a quantity, but a degree, as we will argue in section 3.

2.1.5 Context 5: nominal modification preceding the article

The fifth and final context we look at here concerns the use as a DP-modifier that occurs to the left of the article. These are not predicative DPs (which we discussed in section 2.1.2), but DPs that have an argumental function. This context distinguishes *ewa* and *een beetje* ‘a bit’ from the other modifiers:¹⁰

- (43) Een beetje een rare man opende de deur.
a bit a strange man opened the door
‘A somewhat strange man opened the door.’

- (44) Ewa ne skouë pee deed de dee eupen. (Wambeek Dutch)
EWA a strange guy did the door open
‘A somewhat strange guy opened the door.’

9. The CHN corpus contains a limited number of examples in which *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ is also used in this sense, e.g.:

- (i) Ietwat sportpsycholoog zal haar vooral die derde, cruciale
somewhat sports.psychologist will her especially that third crucial
poging doen herinneren. (CHN)
attempt make remember
‘Any sports psychologist worth their salt will make her remember that third, crucial attempt.’

10. Once again, we put the noun phrase at the beginning of the sentence to exclude the adverbial reading.

- (45) *{Wat / ietwat} een rare man opende de deur.
 what / somewhat a strange man opened the door

As with the predicatively used DPs, it is important that the DP can be given a gradable interpretation. This may be because it contains a gradable adjective (as in the examples above), or a gradable noun:

- (46) Een beetje een idioot opende de deur.
 a bit an idiot opened the door
 ‘A bit of an idiot opened the door.’

- (47) Ewa ne stoemerik deed de dee eupen. (Wambeek Dutch)
 ewa an idiot did the door open
 ‘A bit of an idiot opened the door.’

This construction is restricted to indefinite DPs, even if that DP can be interpreted as a gradable property (compare the examples in (30)):

- (48) *Een beetje de dorpsidioot opende de deur.
 a bit the village.idiot opened the door

2.1.6 Summary

The data from the five preceding subsections are summarised in Table 1:

Table 1: Summary of diminisher properties

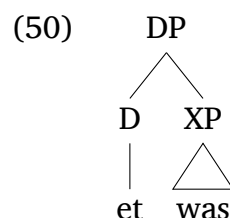
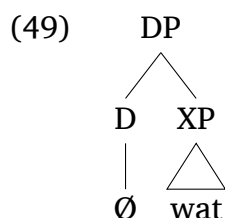
	degree adjunct		DO	DP-internal	
	verbal predicates	nonverbal predicates		before the noun	before the article
<i>wat</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	*
<i>ietwat</i>	✓	✓	*	✓	*
<i>ewa</i>	✓	✓	*	✓	✓
<i>een beetje</i>	✓	✓	*	✓	✓

The five contexts we discussed fall into three larger classes: the first is that of a degree adjunct, i.e. a modifier of predicates, both verbal and nonverbal. The second is as a direct object, and the third is DP-internal, either preceding the noun or preceding the article. Three different patterns can be distinguished in the table, separated by the horizontal lines. *Wat* ‘what’ can appear as a degree adjunct, a direct object, and as quantity denominator in a noun phrase, but it cannot appear to the left of

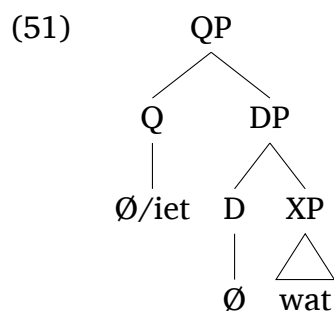
the article. The form *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ has the same distribution, except that it cannot act as a direct object. The latter also applies to *ewa* and *een beetje* ‘a little’, but those two forms can be placed to the left of an article. In the next section, we outline a syntactic analysis for this distribution.

2.2 The analysis

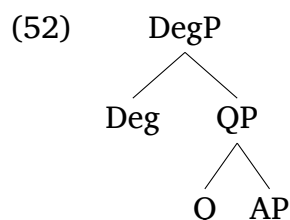
The starting point for our syntactic analysis is the tripartite division outlined in the previous section. In a nutshell, we propose that the different distributional behaviour of these diminishers follows from a difference in categorial status. Let us start with the least controversial facts from Table 1: the use of diminishers as a direct object. We assume that the fact that *wat* ‘what’ can be used in this way shows that this form is syntactically a DP (or can be a DP, cf. below). More specifically, we propose to analyse *wat* ‘what’ as in (49), where the *wat* part of the form represents the functional structure below the DP level. In Jaspers, Craenenbroeck & Wyngaerd (2016) we argue that German *etwas* ‘something’ has a distribution and structure similar to the Dutch indefinite pronoun *wat*, with the *et-* morpheme a spellout of D (see also Barbiers, Koenenman & Lekakou 2010, Hachem 2015). The structures in (49) (Dutch) and (50) (German) clarify this analysis:



While the fact that these forms are DPs explains why they can act as direct objects, it does not shed light on their use as degree or quantity markers. What we assume is that in that case we are dealing with a functional head Q that is combined with the DPs from (49) and (50). That functional head is usually covert/implicit, but can be spelled in Dutch as *iet* in the form *ietwat* ‘somewhat’:



We derive the functional head Q from the so-called ‘split degree system’ (Bresnan 1973; Corver 1997b;a). The central feature of that proposal is that there are two types of degree-denoting words in the functional superstructure of the adjective: some are of type Deg(ree), others of type Q(uantifier):



Examples of DegP are *zo* ‘so’, *hoe* ‘how’, *te* ‘too’, and *even* ‘as’; examples of QP are *meer* ‘more’, *minder* ‘less’, *genoeg* ‘enough’, and the comparative morpheme *-er*. What we are proposing here is that the functional heads Q and Deg may also be present in the internal structure of some of the degree expressions we discussed above. Unlike in Corver’s structure, however, there is no AP in the diminishers, but a DP. This reflects the nominal character of the internal structure of the diminishers, which is most evident in *een beetje* ‘a little’ (lit. a bite.DIM), but also in the other members of this category (witness their use as a direct object).

The structure in (51) explains why the form *wat* ‘what’ can be both a direct object and a degree/amount marker (i.e. why they are multifunctional in the terminology of Hachem 2015). This is a case of structural ambiguity, where a word can be either a DP or a QP. Furthermore, the analysis also explains why the form *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ does not exhibit the same structural ambiguity: the morpheme *iet* spells out a Q-head combined with a DP, so that *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ can only express degree or quantity.

The forms *ewa* and *een beetje* ‘a little’ share with *ietwat* ‘somewhat’ the property that they cannot act as direct objects (and thus in the terms of our analysis: they are not DPs), but on the other hand they differ also because they can appear to the left of an article. Interesting in light of

our data is the fact that Corver (1997b: 305n21) discusses the question of whether an element can precede an article as one of the possible criteria to distinguish Deg from Q: DegP elements can, but QP elements cannot. In this respect, consider the following facts from English.

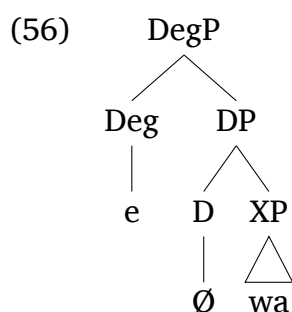
- (53) a. *a too long dress
b. too long a dress

- (54) a. a longer dress
b. *longer a dress

A modifier like *too long* (DegP) can only appear to the left of the indefinite article, while the comparative adjective *longer* (QP) always appears to the right of *a*. Dutch evidence pointing in the same direction is that some of Corver's Deg elements, such as *zo* 'so' and *hoe* 'how', can also be left of the article:

- (55) a. Zo een (rare) vrouw heb ik gezien.
so a strange woman have I seen
'I have seen such a strange woman.'
b. Hoe een man heb je gezien?
how a man have you seen
'What kind of a man have you seen?'

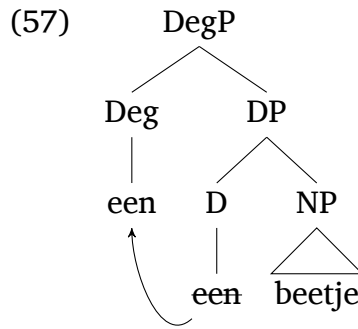
The generalisation is that DegPs can be to the left of the article, but QPs cannot. If we then apply this generalisation to the appearance of *ewa* and *een beetje* 'a little' to the left of the article, we arrive at the following analysis for *ewa*:



This time it is not a Q-head, but a Deg-head that is combined with the DP of the question word. That DegP, like the QP in (51), is able to express a degree or a quantity, but has the additional possibility of

appearing in the left periphery of the noun phrase, resulting in a word order where *ewa* appears to the left of the article.¹¹

Since *een beetje* ‘a bit’ has the same distribution as *ewa*, we assume that this is also a DegP. We tentatively propose that the article *a* is base-generated in D and then undergoes displacement to the Deg head:



In summary, in this section we have provided a syntactic analysis for the distributional patterns we outlined in the previous section. The starting point was the hypothesis that the three different patterns in Table 1 correspond to a difference in categorial status. Use as a direct object indicates DP status, while the degree and quantity interpretations are compatible with both DegP and QP. Appearance to the left of an article is reserved for DegPs.

3 The semantics of diminishers

In this section, we focus on the semantics of diminishers on the basis of the form *een beetje* ‘a little’. This diminisher represents the entire class in terms of its semantics (although not in terms of distribution; see above). We focus on its use as a degree indicator with adjectives, leaving its use as an indicator of quantity in a DP for future research. We start by describing the main semantic properties of *een beetje* ‘a little’, and then develop an analysis.

The main semantic property of degree-denoting diminishers has already been discussed in section 2.1: they want to combine with a gradable predicate. In other words, these modifiers are scalar. In addition, however, they are also what Nouwen (2013) calls *scale sensitive*, i.e. they only occur with adjectives that describe the bottom of the scale. This last property is apparent from the fact that *een beetje* ‘a little’ preferentially modifies adjectives that are negative (Broekhuis 2013; Nouwen 2013):

11. We leave unresolved here the question whether this is a case of moving the DegP to a position to the left of the article, or of base generation.

- (58) Zij is een beetje {onaardig / ?*aardig}.
 she is a bit unkind / kind
 ‘She’s a bit unkind/kind.’

In what follows we argue that the semantics of diminishers like *a bit* can be analyzed as follows:

- (59) Diminishers denote a point on a scale a short distance upwards from a fixed point α .

Before we can discuss this analysis in more detail—specifically the possible interpretations of α —we need to briefly elaborate Kennedy & McNally (2005)’s analysis of scale structure. Inherent to the concept of a scale is that they are built on an ordering relation. More formally, a scale is a triplet consisting of a set of degrees D , an ordering relation ($<$ or $>$) on D , and size dimension DIM (e.g. tallness, thickness, length, price, weight, etc.) (Kennedy 2007). Kennedy & McNally distinguish four types of scales: open scales, scales with a lower bound, scales with an upper bound, and closed scales that have both an upper and a lower bound.

The scale associated with the adjective *aardig* ‘kind’ as in (60) is an open one, with neither an upper nor a lower bound. The positive adjective *aardig* ‘kind’ orders the degrees on that scale in an upward fashion, while its polar counterpart, *onaardig* ‘unkind’ is a scale reverser (Ladusaw 1980), in that it reverses that ordering relation (Heim 2006; Büring 2007). What we can now conclude on the basis of the examples in (58) is that the point α referenced in (59) has to be situated in the bottom, ‘negative’ part of the scale. For open scales, α is a contextually determined standard. We can illustrate this on the basis of the example in (60):

- (60) Kim is aardig.
 Kim is kind
 ‘Kim is kind.’

According to scalar semantics, the sentence in (60) means that Kim’s scale of kindness exceeds a contextually determined standard of kindness (Bartsch & Venneman 1972). Kennedy (2007) argues that in the case of open scale adjectives it is not a matter of simply exceeding the standard to some random degree, but more specifically of ‘standing out’ with respect to that standard. For the example in (60) this means that Kim’s degree of kindness needs to be significantly or noticeably greater than the contextual standard. Now let us consider (61):

- (61) a. Kim is onaardig.
 Kim is unkind
 ‘Kim is unkind.’
 b. Kim is een beetje onaardig.
 Kim is a bit unkind
 ‘Kim is somewhat unkind.’

Parallel to what happens in (60), Kim’s degree of unkindness in (61a) needs to be significantly greater than a contextually determined degree of unkindness. The example in (61b) on the other hand indicates that the distance to the standard is small. More specifically, we want to argue that the distance to the standard is smaller in (61b) than in (61a). Put differently, there is an entailment relation between the two examples: if (61a) is true, then so is (61b), but the reverse doesn’t necessarily hold. The example in (61b) denotes a smaller degree of unkindness than (61a).

As indicated before, the point α has to be situated on the negative part of the scale, as shown in (62):¹²

- (62) #Kim is een beetje aardig.
 Kim is a bit nice

The polarity restriction imposed on the adjective by the diminishers is reversed in non-veridical contexts like imperatives, questions, conditionals, etc. In these contexts positive adjectives are systematically better than their negative counterparts:

- (63) Wees eens een beetje {aardig / #onaardig}.
 be once a bit kind / unkind
 ‘Please be kind!’
 (64) Was Kim een beetje {aardig / #onaardig}?
 was Kim a bit kind / unkind
 ‘Was Kim kind?’
 (65) Als Kim een beetje {aardig / #onaardig} doet, komt het
 if Kim a bit kind / unkind does comes it
 goed.
 good
 ‘If Kim is kind, everything will be ok.’

12. We’re using the #-diacritic to indicate that this example is not excluded in every possible context; see below for further discussion.

In these contexts, α has to be situated on the positive end of the scale, but other than that the semantics of these sentences is identical to that of the case we discussed earlier, i.e. *een beetje aardig* ‘a bit kind’ indicates a lower degree than the unmodified adjective.

Under certain circumstances a diminisher like *een beetje* ‘a bit’ can also co-occur with positive adjectives in a veridical context, e.g. when we add an adverb like *maar* ‘only’, *al* ‘already’, or *wel* ‘AFF’ (affirmative), and stress the noun *beetje* ‘bit’:

(66) Kim is maar een BEETJE aardig.

Kim is only a bit kind
‘Kim is only SOMEWHAT nice,’

(67) Je bent al een BEETJE groot.

you are already a bit tall
‘You are already SOMEWHAT tall.’

(68) Je bloemen zijn wel een BEETJE mooi.

your flowers are AFF a bit pretty
‘Your flowers are SOMEWHAT pretty.’

These sentences have the same semantics as their negative counterpart, i.e. a scale reversal: they denote a smaller degree on the relevant size dimension than the unmodified adjective.

Now let’s turn to diminishers in combination with closed and semi-closed scales. We start with scales that only have a lower bound, as exemplified by adjective pairs such as *wet–dry*, *bent–straight*, *dirty–clean*, etc. In each of these pairs it is the second adjective that denotes the lower bound. The first adjective refers to the entire scale to the exclusion of the lower bound. In these kinds of pairs only the positive adjectives—i.e. the first member of the pair—can be modified by *een beetje* ‘a bit’:

(69) a. Het linnen is een beetje {vuil / #schoon}.

the linen is a bit dirty / clean
‘The linen is somewhat dirty/#clean.’

b. Het doek is een beetje {nat / #droog}.

the cloth is a bit wet / dry
‘The cloth is a bit wet/#dry.’

c. Je loodlijn is een beetje {krom / #recht}.

your perpendicular is a bit crooked / straight
‘Your perpendicular is a bit crooked/#straight.’

We account for this contrast by assuming that α in this case is the lower bound of the scale: given that *een beetje* ‘a bit’ denotes a point on the scale that is a short distance removed from that lower bound, it can only modify an adjective that refers to the part of the scale that excludes the lower bound.

Semi-closed scales that only have an upper bound can be illustrated by adjective pairs like *certain–uncertain*, *safe–unsafe*, *pure–impure*, *accurate–inaccurate*, etc. In these pairs, the first adjective denotes the upper bound, while the second one refers to the entire scale to the exclusion of the upper bound. In these cases, *een beetje* ‘a bit’ can only modify the negative element of the pair:

- (70) a. De uitkomst is een beetje {#zeker / onzeker}.
 the outcome is a bit certain / uncertain
 ‘The outcome is a bit #certain/uncertain.’
 b. Het experiment is een beetje {#veilig / onveilig}.
 the experiment is a bit safe / unsafe
 ‘The experiment is a bit #safe/unsafe.’
 c. Zijn mengsel is een beetje {#zuiver / onzuiver}.
 his mixture is a bit pure / impure
 ‘His mixture is a bit #pure/impure.’

Here α refers to the upper bound of the scale, and the well-formed versions of (70) denote a degree that is a short distance removed from that upper bound. Although it might seem like this distance from the upper bound proceeds in a downward direction, this is only illusory: a negative adjective like *onzeker* ‘uncertain’ causes scale reversal, and the degree of uncertainty in (70a) is greater than the upper bound of the scale—which, informally speaking, corresponds to 100% uncertainty.

Closed scales are associated with adjective pairs such as *full–empty*. In these cases, the first adjective indicates the upper bound, and the second one the lower bound. Modification by *een beetje* ‘a bit’ is excluded for both members of the pair:¹³

- (71) De fles is een beetje {#vol / #leeg}.
 the bottle is a bit full / empty

As indicated in fn12, the reason why we have marked examples that are not well-formed with the #-diacritic rather than starring them is that in certain contexts/interpretations these examples become acceptable. For example, it is not hard to find examples where *een beetje* ‘a bit’ can

13. Except in certain discourse contexts, which we turn to immediately below.

modify both the positive and the negative member of an adjective pair that is associated with an open scale. Compare and contrast the example in (72) with the ones in (61b) and (62):

- (72) Dat is een beetje {groot / klein}.
 that is a bit big / small
 ‘That’s a bit too big/a bit (too) small.’

Note, however, that *groot* ‘big’ has acquired a negative reading here: the expression *een beetje groot* ‘a bit big’ is interpreted as ‘too big’, not as ‘somewhat big’. This means that α doesn’t refer to the contextual standard of actual size, but rather that of desired size or size aspired to. We find the same standard when the degree adverb *te* ‘too’ is used, as illustrated by the fact that we can add this adverb to the example in (72) without much difference in meaning: *Dat is een beetje (te) groot* ‘That is a bit (too) big.’

We can see the same effect with adjectives that denote the lower bound of a semi-closed scale. Compare the examples in (69) with the ones in (73):

- (73) a. Die kamer is een beetje schoon.
 that room is a bit clean
 ‘That room is a bit too clean.’
 b. Het brood is een beetje droog.
 the bread is a bit dry
 ‘The bread is a bit too dry.’
 c. Je lijnen zijn een beetje recht.
 your lines are a bit straight
 ‘Your lines are a bit too straight.’

In these contexts we are turning a semi-closed scale into an open one: the idea is that rooms can have various degrees of cleanness, bread various degrees of dryness, and lines various degrees of straightness. In addition there’s the interpretation of α as that which is desirable or to be aspired to. In an example like (73a), we are looking for a room that is not too clean, e.g. when scouting a location for a movie. The use of the diminisher then indicates that the referent denoted by the subject-DP is a short distance removed—in an upward direction—from the standard or norm that is considered desirable. The same is true for semi-closed scales that only have an upper bound, and for closed scales; the examples in (74) also have the reading ‘more A than is desirable’:

- (74) a. Zijn mengsel is een beetje zuiver.
 his mixture is a bit pure
 ‘His mixture is a bit too pure.’
 b. Het glas is een beetje {vol / leeg}.
 the glass is a bit full / empty
 ‘The glass is a bit too full/empty.’

In all of the cases we have discussed so far *een beetje* ‘a bit’ has a so-called bilateral reading (Horn 2001), whereby it denotes a point on a scale a short distance removed from α in an upward direction, while at the same time implying that higher degrees on that scale are not instantiated (i.e. ‘a bit, but not more than a bit’). There is another use of *een beetje* ‘a bit’, however, that is unilateral, i.e. whereby the denotation can be paraphrased as ‘a bit, maybe more’. This is the case in the following example (which we already briefly mentioned in section 2.1.4):

- (75) Een beetje journalist kan dat zo te weten komen.
 a bit journalist can that so to know come
 ‘Any journalist worth their salt can easily find this out.’

The meaning of *een beetje* ‘a bit’ here can be paraphrased as ‘someone who/something that exceeds the minimal requirements for inclusion in the denotation of the noun by at least a small amount’. In (75) the denotation of *een beetje journalist* ‘a bit journalist’ includes not just those individuals who clearly reach the minimum threshold for qualifying as a journalist, but also those who rank above those minimum requirements. The diminisher *een beetje* ‘a bit’ thus means something like ‘a small amount or more’. This is the unilateral reading, whereby any point on the scale above the point indicated by the diminisher is included as well. That same unilateral reading is also present in an example like (76):¹⁴

- (76) 71 en nog geen beetje sleet: Rob de Nijs op 11
 71 and still no bit wear.and.tear Rob de Nijs on 11
 oktober in de Lotto Arena.
 October in the Lotto Arena
 ‘71 and still healthy and well: Rob de Nijs performs on 11 October in the Lotto Arena.’

This newspaper headline doesn’t merely state that the singer Rob de Nijs doesn’t show minor ailments of old age, but also that he doesn’t show

14. <http://www.seniorennet.be/Magazine/artikel/65/>

71-en-nog-geen-beetje-sleet--rob-de-nijs-op-11-oktober-in-lotto-arena

any major such problems. Non-veridical sentences form another context where the unilateral reading shows up: the sentence in (77) clearly implies that if Kim is more than only somewhat nice, everything will be ok as well.

- (77) Als Kim een beetje aardig doet, komt het goed.
 if Kim a bit kind does comes it good
 ‘If Kim is kind, everything will be ok.’

A final note on the semantics of diminishers concerns the fact that they are positive polarity items (see Hoeksema 2002: 207 and Nouwen 2013 for this observation with respect to *een beetje* ‘a bit’). This means that they are ill-formed within the scope of negation:¹⁵

- (78) a. *Ze is niet een beetje raar.
 she is not a bit weird
 b. *IJ is nie ewa skou. (Wambeek Dutch)
 he is not EWA weird

4 Conclusion

The first half of this paper focused on the syntactic distribution of the Brabant Dutch diminisher *ewa*, as well as a number of its Standard Dutch counterparts. This comparison revealed that *ewa* and *een beetje* ‘a bit’ have largely the same distribution, and that more generally, we can distinguish between three syntactic type of diminishers, which we analyzed as DPs, DegPs, and QPs. The second half of the paper focused on the semantics of diminishers, taking *een beetje* ‘a bit’ as the main focal point. We have developed an analysis whereby diminishers denote a point on a scale that is a short distance upwards from a fixed point α . The precise nature of α can vary across contexts, and examining this has been the main focus of our discussion. We have argued that α can be a contextual standard on the negative portion of the scale (or the positive portion in non-veridical contexts), but it can also be a contextual standard that is desirable or aspired to, and in the case of closed and semi-closed scales, it can refer to the upper or lower bound of the scale. With this study we hope to have laid some of the groundwork for more in-depth future research into the class of diminishers.

15. Note that the example in (78) improves when the sentence continues with something like ‘...she is very weird.’ This is well-known from the literature on positive polarity items, i.e. that they can occur under metalinguistic negation (Horn 1985; 2001).

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