

A marked construction to mark a marked phenomenon: How to shift topics in Dutch, or, the Barabbas construction

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1 Introduction

The mainland Germanic languages are usually described as SOV languages. The verbal material, including the finite verb, is located in final position in subordinate clauses.

- (1) a. *dat ik dit graag zou willen kunnen zeggen*
that I this please would want can say
'that I would like to be able to say this'
- b. *daß Angelika diesen Kommentar dem Gästebuch*
that Angelika this-ACC comment the-DAT guest book
hinzugefügt hat
added has
'that Angelika has added this comment to the guest book'
- c. *dat ik je morgen opbel*
that I you tomorrow up-call
'that I'll call you tomorrow'

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Thanks to a mechanism of Verb Second, or V2, the finite verb is in second position of the main clause. Exactly one constituent occupies the first position. Or, in the words of Herman Paul:

- (2) Welches Satzglied den Verben vorangestellt wird, ist gleichgiltig, aber mehrere voranzustellen ist in der Prosa nicht erlaubt.

(Paul, *Deutsche Grammatik*, p. 78, quoted in
Thim-Mabrey, 1985, p. 18)

The effect is demonstrated in the examples in (3): in (3a) there is an adverb between the inflected verb and the rest of the verbal material, and in (3b) both the subject and the indirect object. Finally, (3c) shows an example of a particle verb (the citation form is *opbellen*, written as one word). In this case again, only the inflected part is in second position, whereas the non-verbal part of the verb is much more towards the end of the sentence.

- (3) a. *Ik zou graag willen kunnen zeggen dat ik geen sigaretten rook*
I would please want can say that I no cigarettes
smoke
'I wish I could say that I don't smoke cigarettes'
- b. *Und diesen Kommentar hat Angelika dem Gästebuch hinzugefügt*
and this-ACC comment has Angelika the-DAT guest book
added
'And this comment has been added to the guest book by Angelika'
- c. *Morgen bel ik je op*
Tomorrow call I you up
'Tomorrow I'll call you'

There is a tradition to describe the first position of Dutch and German main clauses as topic position (which may or may not be syntactically characterized as Spec,CP, as in van Craenenbroeck & van Koppen, 2002, an issue that does not concern me here). I will take this tradition as a starting point as well. In the unmarked case, the constituent in first position is

the subject, as in (3a), but as examples (3b) and (3c) show, there are other possibilities too: e.g., a direct object as in (3b), and an adverbial modifier as in (3c) (cf. e.g. van der Wouden, Schuurman, Schoupe, & Hoekstra, 2003, for some quantitative data).¹

Which discourse referent it is that may be expressed as an initial topic, be it a subject or something else, is highly dependent upon context and/or information structure. For reasons that may become clear later in the paper, I will demonstrate this with fragments from Bible translations. Let us first take a look at the opening lines of the book of John. For Dutch, I use the 1750 version of the “Statenvertaling”, the official 1637 protestant translation, and for comparison I give the parallel lines from the English King James Version.

- (4) a. *In den beginne was het Woord, en het Woord was bij God, en het Woord was God.*²
b. *Dit was in den beginne bij God.*
- (5) a. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.³
b. The same was in the beginning with God.

The opening clause (*In the beginning was the Word*) is used to introduce a new discourse referent (*the Word*), which is done by means of a temporal expression (*in the beginning*) that anchors the discourse and its referents. In the second clause (*and the Word was with God*), the recently introduced referent *God* is the topic. In the second verse, the topic is so familiar/salient, that it is referred to with an anaphoric expression (*The same*) rather than with a full noun phrase.

Now let us compare this fragment with another fragment, viz., from the book of Genesis. The first line is completely parallel: a new discourse referent (*God* doing some action) is introduced and anchored by means of the temporal expression (*in the beginning*). The third verse *And God*

¹“The prototypical position for a topic is the subject position”, as in Edith Kaan’s blurb via <http://irs.ub.rug.nl/ppn/157262472>, is completely wrong of course – mixing categories and functions.

²Dutch verses from Statenvertaling 1750, courtesy <http://www.redegg.org/bible.php>.

³English verses from King James Version, courtesy <http://www.redegg.org/bible.php>.

said, Let there be light: and there was light is also parallel to the second part of the first lines of John: the newly introduced referent is used as a topic.

- (6) a. *In den beginne schiep God den hemel en de aarde.*
- b. *De aarde nu was woest en ledig, en duisternis was op den afgrond; en de Geest Gods zweefde op de wateren.*
- c. *En God zeide: Daar zij licht! en daar werd licht.*
- (7) a. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
- b. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
- c. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

Now I ask your special attention for the second verse of this fragment. Here we see, as I will argue, two constituents before the finite verb *was*, to wit, the topic *de aarde* “the earth” on the one hand, and a tiny element *nu* on the other. Of the latter, I will argue that it is a topic marker, marking a special kind of topics.

Note that we find the same type of phenomenon in German, as can be seen in the example in (8a) and (8b) (the relevant lexical items are given in **boldface**):

- (8) *John 18, 40*
- a. *Zij riefen wederom: Niet hem, maar Barabbas! Barabbas **nu** was een rover.⁴*
- b. *Da schriegen sie wieder allesamt und sprachen: Nicht diesen, sondern Barabbas! Barabbas **aber** war ein Mörder.⁵*
- c. Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. **Now** Barabbas was a robber.⁶

(For comparison, I have given the English counterpart of (8b) and (8a) in (8c). Although English is not a V2 language, and the particle *now* is found

⁴Leiden translation, www.redegg.org.

⁵Luther Bibel 1545.

⁶KJV.

in first rather than in second position,⁷ it is comparable with German *aber* and Dutch *nu* to a considerable extent.)

In the rest of the paper, I will first argue why this type of constructions may be interesting from a linguistic point of view. I will discuss a number of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of the sentences involved, and I will demonstrate why they are problematic for many linguistic theories. In the next section, I will sketch an analysis. Rather than proposing to forget about the V2 generalization altogether, I will suggest that the construction better be approached from a different perspective, viz., that of Construction Grammar, which offers an elegant framework to capture generalizations about language constructs that possess a certain degree of idiosyncrasy, and allows for representation of both syntactic and semantic properties. Finally, I will do some suggestions as regards the history and provenance of the construction.

2 V2

The V2 generalization is strongly embedded in the Dutch grammar tradition (just like it is in Germany).⁸ V2 is even the basis for a popular test for constituency: according to the large reference grammar ANS (Haeseryn, Romijn, Geerts, de Rooij, & van den Toorn, 1997), what may come before the finite verb in the main clause is (at most) one constituent. Note, incidentally, that the converse is not true: not all constituents may occur in first position. In Dutch, sentence negation *niet* is a well-known case in point:

⁷If *of course* is a particle (Lewis, 2002), it is one that may occur in second position as well, e.g. in sentences like *Canst thou bind the sweet influence of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?? Now that of course is great poetry, and one of the issues that we are discussing here is whether science is killing the soul in the sense of poetry.* (Richard Dawkins & Steven Pinker, *EDGE* 53, April 8, 1999).

⁸See e.g. the traditional textbook by Rijpma and Schuringa (numerous reprints since 1917), the structuralist Paardekooper (Paardekooper, n.d.), or the generative textbook by Hans Bennis (Bennis, 2000).

- (9) a. *Ik wil niet naar bed*
 I want not to bed
 'I don't want to go to bed'
 b. *Naar bed wil ik niet*
 c. **Niet wil ik naar bed*

Still, there are some apparent or real counterexamples to Verb Second, which should be reasoned away first. Two types of cases may be distinguished: clauses with the finite verb in first position (V1), and clauses with (apparently) more than one constituent in first position (V3). These will be dealt with in the next sections.

2.1 V1

In imperative clauses and yes/no questions, the finite verb occurs in first, rather than in second position; the same holds for (complementizer-less) conditionals (Beekhuizen, 2008), (complementizer-less) counterfactuals, and narrative inversions:

- (10) a. *Bel me morgen op*
 Call me tomorrow up
 'Call me tomorrow'
 b. *Wil je me helpen?*
 Want you me help
 'Can you help me'
 c. *Kom je op tijd dan kun je mee eten* (Zwart, 2005)
 Come you on time then can you with eat
 'Be on time and you can join us for diner'
 d. *Was jij op tijd gekomen dan was er niets*
 Was you on time come-PART than was there nothing
gebeurd (id.)
 happen-PART
 'If you had been on time, nothing would have happened'
 e. *Kom ik daar binnen, zegt die vent...* (id.)
 Come I there inside says that guy
 'So I come in, and this guy says ...'

Main clauses typically convey assertions. Questions, imperatives, conditionals etc. have a semantics that is quite different from such assertions, so perhaps it is not too surprising that we don't find verb second in these cases. And if we don't want an explanation in terms of semantics, we can always reduce these cases to ordinary V2 sentences by postulating an invisible operator that occupies the first position, a line of thought I will not pursue here.⁹

A comparable [hocus pocus] analysis has been proposed for the optional rule of topic drop (Zwart, 2005), a typical phenomenon of spoken language:¹⁰

- (11) a. *Ken ik niet*
Know I not
'Don't know him/her it'

⁹For a proposal along these lines, see Zwart (2005) who refers to Katz and Postal (1964), Baker (1970) and Huang (1984) for predecessors of this idea. Zwart (2005) writes: "A solid piece of argumentation in defense of empty operators in these constructions revolves around the fact that each V1 construction allows just a single interpretation, i.e. a topic drop construction cannot at the same time be interpreted as a yes/no-question or a conditional, etc. (Cardinaletti 1990). This suggests that each construction involves a designated empty element. It has been noted, however, that the empty operator itself has to be 'sanctioned by preceding discourse or by pragmatics' (Cardinaletti 1990:78). This raises the question whether the operator cannot be dispensed with if the construction as a whole is viewed as a dependent of some factor of discourse organization or pragmatics. [...] We propose that, rather than stating that an empty operator is present which requires sanctioning by preceding discourse, the expression as a whole is a direct dependent of the relevant discourse factor.

Summarizing, V1 constructions in V2-languages are all characterized by a perceived dependency of the construction as a whole to some factor of discourse organization or pragmatics. We submit that under these circumstances, the expression as a whole is viewed as a dependent, with concomitant positional marking by left edge spell-out of the verb."

¹⁰Google "topic drop" and one finds, among other things, reference to Berman (1998) in which it is claimed (footnote 19) that "In German a subject or object in the prefield may in general be omitted" (Huang 1984), which is wrong, as it stands, as it only holds for pronouns, whose reference moreover must be clear in the discourse. Moreover, Schulz (2004) finds "an asymmetry between subjects and objects, in that all kinds of subject topics may be omitted, whereas only third person objects can." See also te Biesebeek (2003-2004).

- b. *Is goed*
is good
'That is OK'

As there is no special semantics here, an explanation in terms of an abstract operator occupying the first sentence position is less attractive.¹¹ On the other hand, a phonological rule deleting stuff before the inflected verb is problematic as well: note that it should have access to word class information (as it would be applicable to pronouns only) to syntactic structure (only applicable to first position, and if the first position pronoun is not a subject, it should be third person), etc. – a very strange phonological rule indeed!

2.2 V3

The first apparent case of a V2 violation was already present in (3b), where both *und* and the direct object *diesen Kommentar* occur before the inflected verb *hat*. These cases can be dispensed with if we, uncontroversially, assume that conjuncts co-ordinate clauses without being part of either of them.

The examples in (12) show that focus particles can occur in first position together with the constituent they are associated with (12a), while both the focus particle (12b) and the focus constituent (12c) can occupy this first position all by themselves as well (König, 1991; Hoeksema & Zwarts, 1991), which suggests that they are (or can be) independent constituents by themselves. The example in (13) makes clear that the first position can be filled by a constituent plus an apposition, whereas (14) is used by Barbiers (1995) to argue that, next to topicalization that fronts any constituent (14c), we must assume there to exist a scrambling rule in Dutch that optionally fronts a sentence adverb (*gisteren* 'yesterday', as in (14b)) to join the initial constituent (14a).

¹¹Zwart (2005) is correct in pointing out that "some factor of discourse organization or pragmatics" has to be taken into account – just like other factors such as the difference in behavior between pronouns and full noun phrases, cf. also Schulz (2004).

- (12) a. *Zelfs Lutgart was er*
even Lutgart was there
'even Lutgart was there'
b. *Zelfs was Lutgart er*
c. *Lutgart was er zelfs*
- (13) *Lutgart, mijn zus, komt me volgende week opzoeken*
Lutgart my sister comes me next week visit
'Lutgart, my sister, comes to visit me next week'
- (14) a. *De krant gisteren meldde het voorval niet*
The paper yesterday reported the incident not
'Yesterday's paper didn't report the incident'
b. *De krant meldde gisteren het voorval niet*
c. *Gisteren meldde de krant het voorval niet*

The cases in (12)-(14), however, are perhaps only apparent counterexamples to V2, as the "chunks" filling the first position in these sentences can be shown to be constituents after all, at least according to some criteria. Note that these chunks can be used as answers to simple Wh-questions.^{12,13,14}

¹²Multiple constituent answers are only possible as answers to multiple wh questions, as in (*Who ate what?*) *Kim pizza and Sandy tagliatelle*.

¹³A completely different set of potential counterexamples to the V2 generalization is formed by so-called intercalations: *Maar toch, Jan, begrijp ik het niet goed* 'But still, John, understand I it not wel 'But John, I still don't understand it', *Paul McCartney (basgitaar) was lid van de Beatles*, 'Paul McCartney (base guitar) was a member of The Beatles'. However, as intercalations are *by definition* interrupting constructions in a structure in which they are not integrated (Schelfhout, 2006), these sentences are to be considered harmless for the V2 generalization as well.

¹⁴Another type of V3, true or apparent, is exemplified by: *Leek de wedstrijd eerst wel leuk, na de pauze was het niks*. The first position of the main clause is filled by the (complementizer-free) concessive clause, the second position by the temporal expression. The inflected verb is in third. The construction is very old in Dutch, witness the following example from the *Leidse Willeram* (ca. 1100) as quoted in van der Horst (2008, p. 332): *ande so wie uilo so hiro si, sie sint iethoch unum in confessione nominis mei*.

- (15) a. *Was iedereen er? Zelfs Lutgart.*
Was everyone there? Even Lutgart.
'Was everyone present? Even Lutgart.'
- b. *Wie komt je volgende week opzoeken? Lutgart, mijn zus.*
Who comes you next week visit? Lutgart, my sister.
'Who is coming to visit you? Lutgart, my sister'
- c. *Wie vermeldde het voorval? De krant gisteren.*
Who reported the incident? The paper yesterday
'Who reported the incident? The paper yesterday.'

3 The Barabbas construction

Let us now return to the type of sentences exemplified in (8), repeated for convenience below as (16).

- (16) a. *Da schriegen sie wieder allesamt und sprachen: Nicht diesen, sondern Barabbas! Barabbas **aber** war ein Mörder.*
- b. *Zij riepen wederom: Niet hem, maar Barabbas! Barabbas **nu** was een rover.*
- c. Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. **Now** Barabbas was a robber.

As the construction involved, to my knowledge at least, doesn't seem to have an accepted name yet, I will call it the Barabbas construction.¹⁵ In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that the Barabbas construction is a real counterexample to the V2 generalization.

As a first piece of evidence I note that, in sharp contrast with the cases discussed above (15), the combination of constituent and adverbial cannot be used as an answer to a Wh-question:

¹⁵Pasch, Brauße, Breindle, and Waßner (2003) describe the position of words like *aber* in the Barabbas construction as "Nacherstposition".

- (17) a. *Wer war ein Mörder? *Barabbas aber.*
b. *Wie was een rover? *Barabbas nu.*

Sentences such as (8) and the problems they pose for the V2 generalization have not gone unnoticed in the literature. Engel (1994) tries to explain them away by classifying adverbials such as *aber* as “Quasi-Attribute”. This seems to be intended to mean that *aber* syntactically belongs to the noun phrase (or whatever other constituent) in first position, while semantically modifying the whole clause or some part of it.¹⁶ Dürscheid (1989) argues against this position:¹⁷

- (18) Stehen sie zusammen mit einer anderen Konsituente im VF, bilden sie mit dieser keine syntaktische Einheit, da sie den ganzen Satz modifizieren, nicht die betreffende Konstituente [...]. In diesem Sinne kan hier tatsächlich von einer mehrfachen VF-Besetzung gesprochen werden. (Dürscheid, 1989, p. 26)

Zwart (2005) too tries to reduce the constructions in (8) to those exemplified in (12)-(14). He correctly observes that in the construction, words like *aber* function more at the pragmatic than the propositional level (more on this below). He further claims that the adverbials in the construction are unstressed, and that they prosodically group with the first constituent. He furthermore has to assume the mechanism(s) moving things to the first position to be “sensitive to prosodic grouping”, in other words, that it doesn’t move constituents, but rather things of another nature.

Let me note first that it is not correct to claim that the adverbials in the construction are unstressed and that they prosodically group with the first constituent. I am not a phonetician, but spellings with the particle between commas, as in (19), suggest that the two constituents do not always form a prosodic group, and that the particle in second position

¹⁶Engel (1988, p. 879) defines Quasi-Attribut as “Partikel, die im Vorfeld des Satzes – entgegen dem allgemeinen Attributsbegriff – auch als Satellit infiniter Verben erscheinen kann”.

¹⁷Comparable arguments against the position of Engel and others that there is only one constituent before the finite verb in the Barabbas construction can be found in Thim-Mabrey (1985, p. 52 vv.) and Pasch et al. (2003).

may constitute an intonational domain all by itself, including stress.

- (19) *Rusland, immers, heeft nu eenhoofdige leiding*
Russia, as you know, has now single-headed leadership
'Russia, as you know, has single-headed leadership now'¹⁸

Moreover, it is an extremely strange property for a syntactic rule to move non-constituents: if there are word order phenomena that are not governed by syntax, then what is the function of syntax in the first place?

Apparently unhappy with his own solution, Zwart offers another suggestion somewhat later in the same paper, to wit, that the adverbial, or speech act material in general, is "extracyclic", which seems to boil down to being invisible, and therefore unproblematic for syntax.¹⁹ This solution may work, but it is a form of begging the question, and again not very enlightening.

In the remainder of this paper, I will try to come up with a more principled analysis of the Barabbas construction. I will show that it is a construction (or constructional idiom) in the sense of Construction Grammar with a certain form, a certain meaning, and specialized pragmatics and usage properties.

3.1 Style and register

A first observation that should be made is that the Barrabas construction is quite rare in modern Dutch, and restricted to formal, written variants of the language (as well as in spoken renderings of written language, de Vries, 2001).²⁰ One does find the construction in Bible translations and academic prose, but it does not occur in the recently completed Spoken Dutch Corpus (at least I did not find it in the over 30,000 main clauses

¹⁸www.clingendael.nl/publications/?id=5446.

¹⁹"[W]e can say that extracyclicity is applied to certain fronted adverbials if a speech act reading must be enforced. This suggests that speech act material is in principle extracyclic in Germanic, yielding V3, but that unambiguous speech act material may be included in a cycle, generalizing the V2 pattern." (Zwart, 2005).

²⁰"Zulke zinnen zijn wel wat boekachtig, maar toch niet onmogelijk stijf." (van Haerigen, 1947); "in hoofdzaak beperkt tot wat plechtig, geschreven Nederlands" (Koelmans, 1975).

comprising the syntactically annotated part of it, van der Wouden et al., 2003). I assume that the construction is acquired at quite high an age, and only from written input; many speakers never ever use it actively. The usage in a book of fairy tales (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 1996) (a translation from nineteenth Century German) therefore seems to be too far-fetched for the target group:

- (20) *Zij waren zo verheugd, dat zij haar niet wakker maakten,*
They were so happy that they her not awake made,
maar haar in het bedje lieten doorslapen. De zevende dwerg
but her in the bed let through-sleep. The seventh dwarf
echter sliep bij zijn makkers, bij ieder van hen één uur
however slept with his mates, with each of them one hour
en toen was de nacht om.
and then was the night over.
'They were so happy that they didn't wake her up, but left her
sleeping in the bed. The seventh dwarf however slept with his
mates, one hour with each of them and then the night was over.'

According to my informants, the German variant of the construction is likewise felt to be stately and formal these days: one shouldn't expect to find it in the spoken vernacular, but rather in formal writings.²¹ The examples in (21), taken from a scientific bibliography of Martin Luther, are other cases in point (Herrmann, 2003, pp. 202, 375):

- (21) a. *Eben diesem Usus **aber** wurde Martinus gefährlich.*
even this use however became Martinus dangerous
'Even this habit however became dangerous for Martin.'
b. *Die römische Gewalt **hingegen** zeigte sich noch immer*
The roman power however showed itself still always
kaum von Wittenberg infiziert.
hardly by Wittenberg infected
'The Roman authorities however still showed hardly a sign of
Wittenberg infection.'

²¹The *Oxford Duden German Dictionary* (Scholze-Stubenrecht & Sykes, 1990) qualifies second position *aber* as an obsolete conjunction ("veralt.: Anknüpfung").

3.2 Properties of the adverbial elements

Let us now take a closer look at the adverbial elements occurring in the Barabbas construction. Dutch *echter*, ‘however’, always links two sentences or utterances.²² The examples in (22) show its syntactic possibilities: like any ordinary sentence adverb, it can occur in the middle field (22a); like a discourse particle, it can come before the first constituent of the sentence (22b); if it is a sentence adverb in (22a), it is a constituent in its own right, and then it shouldn’t be too surprising that it can occupy the first sentence position all by itself (22c) (although this sounds rather old fashioned and bookish to modern ears);²³ and finally, we find it in the Barabbas construction (22d) (which is also bookish, as mentioned before, but less so than (22c) with *echter* in first position):

- (22) a. *Vader wil naar huis. Dat is echter geen goed idee*
 Father wants to house. That is however no good idea
 ‘Father wants to go home. That however is not a good idea’
 b. *Vader wil naar huis. Echter dat is geen goed idee*
 c. *Vader wil naar huis. Echter is dat geen goed idee*
 d. *Vader wil naar huis. Dat echter is geen goed idee*

Without claiming to be exhaustive, the ANS grammar (Haeseryn et al., 1997, p. 1297) lists *althans* ‘at least’, *daarentegen* ‘on the contrary’, *dus* ‘so, therefore’, *echter* ‘however’, *evenwel* ‘however’, *immers* ‘for’, *nu* ‘now’, *toch* ‘yet’ (the English translations are only approximations) as elements occurring in this construction. They also state that these adverbials link the sentence in which they occur with the preceding context, for instance

²²Note that *echter* is already rather formal/bookish itself: in the face to face dialogue subpart of the Spoken Dutch corpus, the word occurs 2 times (N ~ 1.7 MW), but in the debate part (with many prepared speeches) 33 times (N ~ .21 MW) and in the read aloud part no less than 158 times (N ~ .55 MW) (i.e. spontaneous speech 1 pM, debate 157 pM, read aloud 282 pM). There is also a homophone *echter* that is the comparative form of *echt* ‘real’.

²³Clause-initial *echter* is amply available on the internet, e.g. *Niemand kan garanderen dat je met gebruik van een HP je tentamen haalt, echter kan iedereen je voorspellen dat je zonder studeren je tentamen in ieder geval niet haalt!* (elektron.et.tudelft.nl/~costar/hp48ana2.htm).

to create a contrast. Supposedly, the adverbials found most in the position between a constituent and the inflected verb are the ones that cannot occupy the first position all by themselves.²⁴

As regards the last suggestion, note that it is not very restrictive. Moreover, it is only a tendency, and not without exceptions. We already saw above that *echter* is not completely felicitous in first position, but consider Dutch *nu* and its more colloquial variant *nou*.²⁵ This element occurs in the Barabbas construction, but (in this function of linking sentences) it can occupy the first position as well:

- (23) a. *Ik wil een perpetuum mobile construeren. Nu weet ik*
I want a perpetuum mobile construct. Now know I
dat dat geen triviaal probleem is.
that that no trivial problem is
'I want to construct a perpetuum mobile. Now I know that
that is not a trivial problem.'
- b. *Ik wil een perpetuum mobile construeren. Dat nu is*
I want a perpetuum mobile construct. That now is
geen triviaal probleem, dat weet ik.
no trivial problem, that know I
'I want to construct a perpetuum mobile. Now that is not a
trivial problem, I know.'

The number of particles occurring in the German version of the Barabbas construction seems to be somewhat larger than in Dutch: Pasch et al. (2003, pp. 498–99) give an overview. They also discuss the suggestion from the literature that the Barabbas construction is favored by adverbial elements with some kind of adversative semantics (Pasch et al., 2003, pp. 498–99). They show, however, that there are adverbial elements with adversative semantics that do not occur in the construction (e.g. *außer-*

²⁴This latter observation seems to square with Zwart's suggestion that the elements in this construction do not, and perhaps cannot, form an independent prosodic unit – which is incorrect.

²⁵Van As (1987, 1992) claims that the only difference between the two variants is their style level. Some of the properties to be described below can be used to argue against that claim.

dem, dabei, daher, deshalb, deswegen and *trotzdem*), on the one hand, and other adverbials without such a semantics that do occur in the construction (e.g. *nämlich, schließlich* and *übrigens*). They therefore conclude that until now, there is no independent characterization of the elements that occupy the relevant position.

3.3 Pragmatic properties

Let us now pay some attention to the text properties of the construction. An important thing to observe is the fact that the construction can never be the first clause of a text fragment. That is to say, without the appropriate context, the sentences with the construction are infelicitous:

- (24) a. #*Barabbas aber* war ein Mörder.
b. #*Barabbas nu* was een rover.
c. #**Now** Barabbas was a robber.

This is not too surprising, as these adverbials link the sentence in which they occur with the preceding context (Haeseryn et al., 1997, p. 1297; Pasch et al., 2003, pp. 498–99).

Apart from linking the sentence to the preceding context, however, the construction does more. But what? In the entry on *nu*, the WNT, the monumental historical dictionary of the Dutch language, distinguishes a usage “to stress a word in the sentence” (“Om een woord uit den zin meer nadruk te geven”), giving examples such as the following:²⁶

- (25) a. *In den beginne schiep Godt den hemel, ende de aerde,*
In the beginning created God the heaven and the earth.
De aerde nu was woest ende ledigh
the earth now was barren and empty
‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And
the earth was without form, and void’

²⁶The first example is from Gen. 1,1, the second DE BRUYN, *Reizen* 2, 42 a, that is *Reizen van C. de Bruyn, over Moskovie door Persie en Indie*. Amst., 1714.

- b. *Het woord van Czaer nu betekent in de Slavonische*
the word of czar now means in the Slavonic
sprake eigentlyk Koning
language actually king
'Now the word Czar actually means king in the Slavonic lan-
guage'

One might be inclined to interpret this description of “stressing a word” as “giving it focus”. That would imply that *nu* is a focus particle after all, comparable to English words like *even*, *too*, *only*, or to *zelfs* as exemplified in (12).

However, I already discussed an argument against the position that *aber*, *nu* and comparable elements are focus particles:²⁷ unlike combinations of constituents and undisputable focus particles, the “chunks” found before the inflected verb in the Barabbas construction cannot stand alone, i.e., they cannot be used as answers to questions. Moreover, both the ANS and Pasch et al. (2003) explicitly note that the first constituent before Barabbas construction, although carrying stress, does not (usually) bears the main intonational peak of the sentence, but rather a secondary stress.

Finally, there is the semantics of the construction (König, 1991). In the alternative semantics theory of Rooth (1985), a sentence with a focussed constituent, such as:

(26) MARY drinks beer

is analyzed in terms of selecting a particular alternative from a set of alternatives that are associated with the sentence.²⁸ In the case of (26), the alternatives are propositions of the form ‘x drinks beer’, among which

²⁷Vandeweghe (1992, p. 14) appears to see *echter* and words like that as focus particles; as far as I can see, his analysis comes close to the one by Engel.

²⁸In a number of publications, Manfred Krifka (e.g. Krifka, 2006) has argued that the Alternative Semantics theory is not powerful enough to cover all focus data, and that a stronger theory, such as Structured Meanings, is called for. “While the simplicity and parsimony of AS makes this the null hypothesis, there are certain phenomena that indicate that the additional features of SM are required.” Discussion is beyond of the scope of this paper.

the proposition that it is Mary, and not someone else, is 'highlighted'. In (27),

(27) Mary drinks BEER

the same proposition is highlighted, but within a different set of alternatives, viz. propositions of the form 'Mary drinks x'. Focus particles "live on" this semantics, so to speak, selecting (or de-selecting) particular elements from the set of alternatives:²⁹

- (28) a. Only MARY drinks beer
b. MARY drinks beer too
c. Even MARY drinks beer

That is to say, in all sentences in (28) the alternatives are still propositions of the form 'x drinks beer', among which the proposition that it is Mary, and not someone else, is highlighted. The difference, however, is that the focus particle has something to say about the alternatives: in the case of (28a), it is claimed that the set of alternatives is empty, in the case of (28b), on the other hand, it is claimed that the set of alternatives is not empty, whereas (28c) likewise claims that the set of alternatives is not empty, but moreover that Mary is among the most unlikely to having drunk beer.

Note now that alternatives do not play a role in the Barabbas construction. This is particularly clear in the Genesis case (25a), repeated here for convenience as (29):

- (29) *In den beginne schiep Godt den hemel, ende de aerde, De*
In the beginning created God the heaven and the earth. the
aerde nu was woest ende ledigh
earth now was barren and empty
'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the
earth was without form, and void'

Although it is possible that there are other things apart from the earth that are barren and empty, that is not what is being claimed here.

²⁹Cf. also Krifka (2000).

4 The function of the construction

Having established (once again) that the Barabbas construction is not a focus construction, the question of course is, what it is. I would like to propose here that the Barabbas construction is a topic construction. To be more precise: the construction can be used to explicitly mark unexpected discourse topics. Consider again the example in (25a). After the first sentence, there are two salient topics: the temporal *in den beginne* ‘in the beginning’ and the subject God. These topics could be referred to by standard pronominal elements:³⁰

- (30) a. *In den beginne_i schiep God_i den hemel, ende de aerde.*
In the beginning created God the heaven and the earth.
Toen_i gebeurde er iets anders...
Then happened there something else
‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Then something else happened ...’
- b. *In den beginne schiep God_i de hemel en de aarde.*
In the beginning created God the heaven and the earth.
En hij_i zag dat het goed was
and he saw that it good was
‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And he saw it was good’

The other noun phrase in the first sentence, *de hemel en de aarde*, ‘the heaven and the earth’ may perhaps be available for pronominal reference, the members of the coordinated structure are definitely not:³¹

³⁰Cf. Dekker (1993).

³¹The intricacies of discourse anaphora are too complicated to dwell into here, see e.g. Beaver (2004).

- (31) *In den beginne schiep Godt den hemel_i, ende de aerde_j.*
In the beginning created God the heaven and the earth.
Hij_{mathiti}/j was woest en ledig.
He was barren and empty
'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. It was without form, and void.'

The Barabbas construction's main function, I claim, is to explicitly mark shift from a salient to a non-salient discourse topic, i.e., to explicitly *override* preferences in the availability of discourse referents.

Dutch and German (as well as other European languages) use considerable amounts of particles for a wide range of functions (Weydt, 1979; Foolen, 1993; van der Wouden, 2002), but as far as I know, systematically marking topic-hood is not one of the standard functions of Germanic particles (contrary to, e.g., the Japanese particle *wa*).³² The standard means to mark a topic in Dutch and German is word order (Onrust, Verhagen, & Doeve, 1993): by default, the first constituent of the main clause is the topic:

- (32) a. *Morgen ben ik de bruid*
tomorrow am I the bride
'tomorrow I'll be the bride'
b. *Ik ben de bruid morgen*
c. *De bruid ben ik morgen*

Due to different possibilities of disambiguation by means of explicit case marking, German allows topicalized direct objects where Dutch doesn't (33b) is fine in the reading where the truck driver is the subject); one standard way to topicalize Dutch direct objects is the passive voice (Burger & de Jong, 1997, p. 158):

³²<http://japanese.about.com/library/weekly/aa051301a.htm>

- (33) a. *Einen betrunkenen Sattelzugfahrer hat die Polizei in
A-ACC drunk-ACC truck driver has the police in
Düren aus dem Verkehr gezogen*
Düren from the traffic pulled
'The police has taken a drunk truck driver from the road in
Düren'
- b. **Een dronken vrachtwagenchauffeur heeft de politie in
A drunk truck driver has the police in
Düren van de weg gehaald*
Düren from the traffic pulled
- c. *Een dronken vrachtwagenchauffeur is in Düren door de
A drunk truck driver is in Düren by the
politie van de weg gehaald*
police from the road taken
'A drunk truck driver has been taken from the road by the
police in Düren'

In spoken language, intonation can be used to override topicalization defaults and to switch discourse topics. And another way is starting the sentence with a conjunction.

- (34) a. *Da schriegen sie wieder allesamt und sprachen: Nicht diesen, sondern Barabbas! **Aber** Barabbas war ein Mörder.*
- b. *Zij riepen wederom: Niet hem, maar Barabbas! **Maar** Barabbas was een rover.*
- c. Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. **But** Barabbas was a robber.

Many prescriptive grammarians have forbidden to start sentences with a conjunction. And while the written language has no intonation, the explicit marking of switched discourse topics could use another mechanism. I claim that the function of the Barabbas construction is exactly this.

4.1 Summing up

Summing up, I conclude that the Barabbas construction has at least the following properties:

- marked syntaxis – V3
- lexically grounded – limited number of particles, hard to characterize independently
- stylistically marked – only in formal written language
- acquired late, and probably not by all
- pragmatically motivated – to explicitly mark non-default discourse topics

All in all, the construction is very marked in a number of respects. Moreover, the construction is non-compositional, in the sense that at least some of its properties do not follow directly from the properties of the constituting parts and the way they are combined. Consider the particle *nu*. When used as an adverb, it means ‘now’, i.e., it has a clear temporal meaning. When used as an adverbial conjunct, as in (23a), it loses its temporal meaning, and links sentences in the discourse. In the Barabbas construction, that is only one part of what *nu* does: next to that, it marks the shifted discourse topic. Next, consider the first constituent in the Barabbas construction. That it is the topic of the sentence, but that it is not a default topic, but rather a shifted one, is a property of the construction.

5 A constructional analysis

In general, Dutch and German main clauses with two constituents before the inflected verb are completely ungrammatical. On the other hand, standard cases of the Barabbas construction do not meet any objection in terms of acceptability: most often, they go unnoticed as potential counterexamples to the V2 generalization.

What should one do? Give up the V2 generalization and allow for a highly constrained (details to be worked out) version of grammar in which V2 and V3 are possibilities that follow from independent principles

of grammar? Peter Culicover suggests one shouldn't take that step too hastily:

- (35) the ability of native speakers to make sharp grammaticality judgements about rare constructions does not mean that there must be a universal principle that accounts for these judgements. The alternative, keeping in mind the conservative attentive learner, is that rare constructions are in fact learned on the basis of experience, and that the cases that are experienced most frequently constitute the core representation of the construction in the mind of the learner. (Culicover, 1999, p. 179)

This squares with recently developing ideas about “probabilistic models of grammar which assume that grammar is quantitative, and learned from exposure to other speakers” (Bresnan & Hay, 2006), cf. also Daelemans (1998), Bod (2006), Hay and Bresnan (2006). Anyways, in recent years, linguists have collected evidence for the position that everyday language abounds with “prefabricated”, “ready to use” larger items with their own semantics and their own usage possibilities (Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor, 1988; Jackendoff, 1997; Wray, 2002).

Recently, the rise of a family of grammar formalisms can be observed that try to do justice to this observation, and that go beyond the classical position that the lexicon is more than a boring list of boring words. Theories such as Construction Grammar (Goldberg, 1995) or variants such as Radical Construction Grammar (Croft, 2001) and Sign-based Construction Grammar (Sag, Wasow, & Bender, 2003, Ch. 16) offer elegant ways to account for the subtleties of phrasal idioms, constructions. (I don't want to claim that the theories mentioned are notational variants but space and time do not allow for elaborating on the details.)

To get an idea of the type of representation, look at (36), the transitive construction according to Goldberg (1995, p. 117, Figure 4.4)

(36) TRANSITIVE CONSTRUCTION (Goldberg, 1995, 117, Figure 4.4)

Sem	proto-agent	proto-patient
	↓	↓
Syn	SUBJ	OBJ

One should interpret this as follows: the transitive construction, just like any other construction, is a construct with a form and a meaning, which is depicted here by the separate Syn and Sem levels. In this particular construction, the thematic role of (prototypical) agent is associated with the grammatical function subject, whereas the (prototypical) patient is connected with the grammatical function object.

As this type of representation abstracts away from word order, it is not specific enough to use it to implement the Barabbas construction. I will therefore shift to Verhagen’s representation of the Dutch variant of the *way* construction (Verhagen, 2003). The English *way* construction has been quite popular in linguistic research (see e.g. Goldberg, 1995, Ch. 9 and the references given there), as it shows an interesting mix of regularity and idiomaticity. Verhagen focusses on the Dutch counterpart of the English *way* construction, which is both very parallel and different in an interesting way. (37a) gives a real life example of the English *way* construction, (37b) is an example of the Dutch counterpart (real life, again), and (37c) is Verhagen’s representation of the construction.

- (37) a. the River Nile weaves her way through the narrow strip of fertile land wedged between the Libyan and Nubian deserts
- b. *De Amazonerivier baant zich een weg door het regenwoud*
 The Amazon river ‘banen’ self a way through the rain forest
 ‘The Amazon river makes her way through the rain forest’
- c. $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{Sem: creator create-move, for-self created-way, path} \\ \quad | \quad | \quad | \quad | \quad | \\ \text{Syn: SUBJ}_i \quad [V \quad [\text{REFL}_i \quad [\text{DO}] \quad \text{OBL}]] \end{array} \right]$

According to the theory, this construction is hierarchically subordinate to the very general, very abstract SVO construction, or, in light of what was stated before, the V2 construction of Dutch and German (I collapse semantics and pragmatics in one level Sem, which might be too simplistic):

$$(38) \quad \left[\begin{array}{cccc} \text{Sem:} & \text{TOP} & \text{V}' & \text{PRED} \\ & | & | & | \\ \text{Syn:} & \text{XP} & \text{V} & \text{XP, (XP, \dots)} \end{array} \right]$$

Of course, some mechanism is called for to systematically derive subordinate and VSO orders, etc.:

- (39) a. *Het is een feit dat de Amazonerivier zich een weg door het regenwoud baant*
 It is a fact that the Amazon river self a way through the rain forest 'banen'
 'It is a fact that the Amazon river makes her way through the rain forest'
- b. *Baant de Amazonerivier zich een weg door het regenwoud?*
 'banen' the Amazon river self a way through the rain forest
 'Does the Amazon river make her way through the rain forest?'

But nothing will be said about that here (cf. Sag et al., 2003, Ch. 10; Poss, 2010, Ch. 4).

In line with the foregoing, I now propose (40) as a first approximation of the Barabbas construction:

$$(40) \quad \left[\begin{array}{cccccc} \text{Sem:} & \text{marked-TOP} & (\text{link}) & \text{V}' & \text{PRED} \\ & | & | & | & | \\ \text{Syn:} & \text{XP} & \text{Part} & \text{V} & \text{XP, (XP, \dots)} \end{array} \right]$$

Note that this grammar leaves ample space for the formulation of V2 violations. The constraints formulated in the construction (such as the presence of a particle and a specified semantics/pragmatics) elegantly

preclude over-application of the rule – default word order is still SVO (or XVO) thanks to the much more general form of the construction in (38).

Of course, the representation in (40) is only an approximation. Somewhere it has to be stated that the construction is highly marked, and restricted to certain style levels and genres; the notion shift-TOP has to be fleshed out (Beaver, 2004; Kroon, 1995). Moreover, the particles that may occur in the construction have to be listed explicitly – which of course has the advantage that the differences between Dutch and German, or between speakers within a language, are expected and can easily be accounted for.

6 Support from the history of the construction?

In this section, I would like to put forward some speculations re the history of the Barabbas construction. Isn't it strange that a strong word order generalization such as V2 in German and Dutch has been violated for centuries, and still is violated in a stylistically marked subpart of the language? How can one explain this?

It has been suggested that many cases of language change have been caused, or at least influenced, by language contact. Or, to quote an influential language typologist:

- (41) In situations of language contact, word order is frequently affected.³³

Note that the examples of the Barabbas construction I started with are taken from translations. (42a) is the original Greek text,³⁴ (42b) is the Latin translation, from the Vulgate.

³³Bernd Heine, abstract for a talk at Leiden University, April 7, 2006.

³⁴Via <http://www.greekbible.com/index.php>.

- (42) a. ἔκραύγασαν οὖν πάλιν λέγοντες μὴ τοῦτον ἀλλὰ
 ekraugasan oun palin legontes me touton alla
 they-cried PART again saying not this-one but
 τὸν Βαραββᾶν ἦν δὲ ὁ Βαραββᾶς ληστής
 ton barabban (:) en de o barabbas lestes
 the Barabas : was PART the Barabbas robber
 ‘Then they cried again, and said, not this one, but Barabbas!
 But Barabbas was a robber.’
- b. clamaverunt rursus omnes dicentes (:) non hunc sed
 they-cried again all saying : not this-one but
 Barabban (.) erat autem Barabbas latro
 Barabbas . was however Barabbas murderer
 ‘Then they cried again, and said, not this one, but Barabbas!
 But Barabbas was a robber.’

Note moreover that both versions of the source text have a particle (*δὲ* and *autem*, respectively) in second position. The *Deutsches Wörterbuch* observes that German *aber* in second position is often used to translate the Greek particle *δὲ*:

- (43) Einen leiseren ausdrück empfängt *aber* im vordersatz, wenn es, wie sehr oft im N.T., das griech. *δὲ* verdeutscht: *Jesus aber kam wieder von dem Jordan* [...]; *der Teufel aber sprach zu ihm* [...], wo die nl. übersetzung hat: *ende Jesus keerde weder, ende de duivel seide tot hem*, mehr den fortgang der erzählung als einen gegensatz, den sie durch *maar* zu bezeichnen hätte, darlegend.
 (J. Grimm and W. Grimm (1854–1960) s.v. *aber*)

(J. Grimm, Grimm, Frings, & Neumann, 1965), on the other hand, connects this second position usage of *aber* to Latin *autem*. In any case, both particles favor second position:

- (44) *δὲ* is normally placed second in sentence or clause.
 (Denniston, 1975, p. 185)
- (45) [*autem*] is never found at the beginning of a clause, but after one ore more words
 (C. T. Lewis & Short, 1879, p. 211)

There is a number of Greek particles (such as $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$) with a preference for the second position; inherently unstressed, they seem to be attracted to this position, which is inherently unstressed as well (Wackernagel, 1892). Wackernagel (1892, p. 416) suggests that the same mechanism may explain the preference of *autem* for the second position; others have opposed to that type of explanation because *autem*, having two syllables, is extremely heavy for an enclitic.

Whatever the reason, *autem* is usually found in second position. According to Kroon (1995, pp. 274–5), *autem* is a discourse connective: “as a rule *autem*-units belong to the continuation of a preceding, corresponding unit. Hence it is inconceivable (and in fact not attested, as far as I know) that a text should start with an *autem*-unit.” (p. 275) Moreover, p. 227: “it appears that *autem* is not a presentational particle that marks rhetorical relations between communicative units such as acts and moves; the function of *autem* rather pertains to information units or thematic units, and hence to the thematic organization of a discourse”. And finally (Kroon, p. 257): “The frequent combination of *autem* with a fronted noun is no coincidence. Rather it is an important distributional property of *autem*, which can be taken as co-indicative of the discourse function of the particle. It has been observed [...] that in Latin shifts of discourse topic are typically associated with clause-initial position of the discourse topics concerned, provided that the topical elements are ‘given’ or at least ‘accessible’ information”.³⁵

What I would like to suggest – without proof! – is that the Barabbas construction might be a loan from Latin and/or Greek, via translations of (in particular) sacred texts. Trying to maximally honor the properties of the source text(s) (Nauta, 1937; de Bruin, 1993), they often respected the original source text ways in which the discourse was organized. The word order in the target languages was not as fixed as it is now (cf. e.g. the elucidating account of the decline of the medieval double negation system in van der Horst & van der Wal, 1979), leaving some possibilities

³⁵It has also been suggested to me (Hedda Klip, p.c.) that the Barabbas construction might be influenced by Hebrew syntax. Caroline Kroon (p.c.) does not believe in Hebrew influence on the place of words like *autem* in Latin: already in the second century BC *autem* had a preference for second position.

of V2 deviations that parallel syntactic structures quite common in Greek and Latin.

The influence of the vernacular Bible translations can hardly be overestimated (cf. e.g. de Gooyer, 1962, but see also van der Sijs, 2004). The Bible translations, including many instances of the Barabbas construction, was read, re-read and rehearsed, and it became part of many a native speaker's linguistic competence. And it has remained so until today. Many speakers only know the construction passively, others use it actively, some of them allowing themselves some variation in the choice of the particle. And they use it because it fulfils the same function the *autem* constructions fulfilled in Latin: to explicitly mark unexpected discourse topics. On the other hand, very few people use the construction in spontaneously spoken language, as that type of language has other means to reach that goal, means that moreover fit better into the general structural pattern of the language.

7 Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have discussed properties of an apparent violation of a generally accepted word order generalization about Dutch and German. I have argued that the Barabbas construction is a real exception to the generalization, and I have tried to explain why it exists. I have given a sketchy analysis in terms of Construction Grammar, and I have speculated on the history of the construction.

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