



Discourse marking and the subtle art of mind-reading: The case of Dutch *eigenlijk*

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ABSTRACT

This article gives a unified semantic analysis of the various uses of the Dutch discourse marker *eigenlijk*. *Eigenlijk* is analyzed as involving implicit assumptions of the speaker about the hearer's expectations: by using *eigenlijk*, the speaker marks the plausibility of what s/he assumes the hearer to infer on the basis of their shared beliefs. Hence, the speaker not only recognizes the discrepancy between the speaker's and the hearer's perspective, but in addition, the speaker puts him/herself in the hearer's shoes. The claims are empirically supported by the results of a web experiment as well as by data from natural language.

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1. Introduction

After Saddam Hussein had been sentenced to death in Iraq, the Dutch Prime Minister at the time, Jan-Peter Balkenende, commented the following in the television program *Buitenhof*, broadcasted on November 11, 2006:

(1) *De doodstraf is iets waarvan Nederland heeft gezegd: "Dat hoort eigenlijk niet".*

'The death penalty is something about which the Netherlands have decided: this is EIGENLIJK wrong.'

This statement yielded a great amount of criticism, the most lenient of which was that the Prime Minister was unclear about what he thought about the death penalty. More severe critics accused him of declaring himself in favor of the death penalty, at least in some cases. In the most favorable case for Balkenende – and judging from his utterances preceding and following the above statement, this is what he actually meant to say – he wanted to express agreement with the fact that Saddam is punished in the most severe way possible, corresponding to the atrocities he committed, without conceding the position that the death penalty is morally wrong.

These diverging, or even opposing interpretations of one and the same utterance are due to the use of *eigenlijk*. Had Balkenende not used *eigenlijk*, he would have made a firm statement against the death penalty. In this paper, we will give a semantic analysis of this elusive particle.

This article is organized as follows. In section 2, we will discuss previous accounts of *eigenlijk* and its German cognate *eigentlich*, and the differences between the two discourse markers. We present our monosemous analysis of *eigenlijk* in

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section 3. In section 4, we compare our account with previous theories about *eigentlich*; in section 5, we empirically test our claims by means of an experiment and two corpus surveys. In section 6, we come back to and give an account of example (1) above, and we end with conclusions in section 7.

2. Previous analyses

Eigenlijk ranks among the 50 most frequent tokens in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch (CGN, 2006). In spite of the fact that Dutch is one of the world's best-described languages and a rich tradition in describing and analyzing Dutch particles (cf. van der Wouden, 2002), there are surprisingly few analyses of *eigenlijk*. In this section we discuss definitions and analyses of *eigenlijk* and its German cognate *eigentlich*.

The authoritative Van Dale dictionary of the Dutch language (Geerts and den Boon, 1999) gives the following definition for *eigenlijk* [our translation]: “essentially (especially in contrast to what it appears to be)”.¹ That is: the proposition that is modified by *eigenlijk* is a true, essential, real, etc. description of a state of affairs, and can be contrasted with what appears to be case at first sight. Mortier and Degand (2009), studying not only the Dutch particle *eigenlijk*, but also its supposed French counterpart *en fait*² have a rather similar interpretation of *eigenlijk*. They consider *eigenlijk* to be a polysemous marker with rather “vague” semantics, which can best be described as an adversative marker, opposing *p* and *p'* where *p* is more true/real/correct than *p'*.³ At the same time, on the basis of the results from a collocation analysis, they argue that *eigenlijk* seems to need other discourse markers to express adversativity (e.g., *maar* ‘but’ to express *opposition*, *dus* ‘so’ to express *causality*). In contrast with Mortier and Degand (2009), we do think *eigenlijk* can be ascribed one (yet not an adversative) meaning. Before turning to our monosemous analysis of *eigenlijk*, we will first discuss two analyses of the German cognate *eigentlich*.

2.1. Schmitz and Schröder (2004) and Schmitz (2008)

A detailed line of thought is found in Schmitz and Schröder (2004), who analyze the German cognate *eigentlich*. The idea defended by Schmitz and Schröder (2004) is that there is a default rule *if p then normally not q*. By using *eigenlijk*, this rule is not cancelled, but although *p* is the case, $\neg q$ does not follow in this particular case. Consider the following example (from Schmitz, 2008:568):

- (2) A. *Kommst du mit essen?*
 ‘Are you coming with us to eat?’
- a. B. *Ich muss meinen Artikel noch fertig schreiben.*
 ‘I still have to finish my paper.’
- b. B. *Eigentlich muss ich meinen Artikel noch fertig schreiben.*
 ‘EIGENTLICH I still have to finish my paper.’

The different answers (2a) and (2b) correspond to a difference in hearer expectations: of a group of 42 test subjects, nearly all expected speaker B (presumably) not to go out for lunch after hearing answer (2a), whereas 2/3 of the subjects thought B would go along after hearing (2b), cf. Schmitz (2008:569). According to the analysis of Schmitz & Schröder, the fact that speaker B still has to finish a paper evokes the default conclusion that s/he presumably does not go along to eat. The use of *eigenlijk* would then cancel this default conclusion for this particular case, bringing about a conversational implicature that the speaker will go out for lunch. In our view, however, the utterance in (2b) does not give a decisive answer about whether or not speaker B joins A: both options are still open.

Schmitz (2008) presents a slightly different analysis of *eigentlich* in a paper aptly called “*Eigentlich*” *again*. The proposition in (2a) yields the default conclusion *presumably* $\neg q$. Through a process of modal strengthening (the hearer completes what s/he thinks is intended by the speaker in the underspecified answer to question A), this expectation is transformed from *presumably* $\neg q$ to $\neg q$. In this approach, *eigentlich* does not cancel the default conclusion, but rather blocks the modal strengthening. Thus, in (2b), this modal strengthening is no longer possible. Due to pragmatics (conversational implicature), the hearer concludes that the speaker will go out for lunch. One of the benefits of the new account is that it can account for examples where the default conclusion does seem to hold but cannot be strengthened.

We underline the idea of the speaker taking the hearer's expectations into account when using *eigentlich*. However, we do not agree with the way in which Schmitz and Schröder (2004) and Schmitz (2008) formalize this idea. According to the authors a speaker uses *eigentlich* to prevent a hearer from having, or strengthening, a particular expectation that would follow from using the utterance without *eigentlich* (Schmitz and Schröder, 2004; Schmitz, 2008). In this view, [*eigentlich p*] is used to alter the hearer's expectations that arise from *p* itself. Let us illustrate this with an example. Consider a situation in which someone points to a piece of fruit in a bowl that looks like a pear, uttering the following sentence:

¹ *Naar het wezen (m.n. tegenover wat het schijnt).*

² As their analysis clearly shows, *en fait* is in most contexts not a counterpart of *eigenlijk* at all.

³ Mortier and Degand (2009) call the opposed propositions *p* and *q*, but in order to avoid confusion with Schmitz and Schröder (2004), to be discussed below, different use of *p* and *q*, we have adapted it to *p* and *p'*.

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