

**Partitive Constructions and Partitive Elements  
Within and Across Language Borders in Europe**

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# The Partitive Pronoun ER in Two National Varieties of Standard Dutch

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**Abstract** The Dutch partitive pronoun ER in general occurs in combination with an elliptical noun phrase in object position. According to the Dutch Reference Grammar, partitive ER in general occurs with a quantifier in this case. The Dutch Reference Grammar observes that there is natiolectal variation with respect to the use of partitive ER, focusing on the national varieties of Dutch used in the Netherlands and in Belgium. In this essay, the acceptance of the use or omission of ER in different types of NPs by native speakers of the Netherlandic and the Belgian variety of Dutch is compared. It is shown that differences between the varieties go beyond those described by the Dutch Reference Grammar.

**Keywords** Partitive pronoun. ER. Netherlandic Dutch. Belgian Dutch. Standard language.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 National Varieties of Standard Dutch. – 2.1 A Pluricentric Vision. – 2.2 The Partitive Pronoun ER in the Dutch Reference Grammar. – 3 Previous Research on the Use of Partitive ER in Various Contexts. – 3.1 Berends (2019). – 3.2 Sleeman and Ihsane (2017; 2020). – 3.3 Cornips and Sleeman (2024). – 4 Methodology. – 4.1 Test Materials. – 4.2 Participants and Procedure. – 4.3 Analysis. – 5 Results. – 6 Discussion. – 7 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

Partitive pronouns refer to an antecedent that has previously been mentioned in the discourse. Typically, they occur in combination with an elliptical complex noun phrase modified by a cardinal numeral or weak quantifier in an indefinite NP in object position (Berends 2019). This is illustrated by the Italian example (1):

- (1) *NE ho tre.* (Italian)  
 PART.CL have.PRS.1SG three  
 ‘I have three (of them).’

Giusti and Sleeman (2021) observe that in (1) *ne* can also appear without the quantifier, resuming a determinerless indefinite expression, often called a ‘bare noun’. This is illustrated in (2):<sup>1</sup>

- (2) *Gatti? Sì, NE ho.* (Italian)  
 cats yes PART.CL have.PRS.1SG  
 ‘Cats? Yes, I have cats.’

Other Romance languages that make use of a partitive pronoun are French and Catalan. A Germanic language that has a partitive pronoun is Dutch. Whereas in Romance the partitive pronoun is a clitic, in Dutch it is a weak pronoun, the pronoun ER. Although in the Dutch tradition, ER is often called a quantitative pronoun (Blom 1977; Benis 1986), it will be called a partitive pronoun in this essay, as it is called for the Romance languages. Giusti and Sleeman (2021) observe that in Netherlandic standard Dutch, the weak pronoun ER requires the presence of the quantifier, as illustrated in (3):

- (3) *Katten? Ik heb ER \*(drie).* (Netherlandic Dutch)  
 cats I have PART.WK three  
 ‘Cats? I have three.’

De Schutter (1992) and Sleeman (1998) state that in standard Belgian Dutch, however, the use of a quantifier is not required, as illustrated by (4):

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I am grateful to Anne Tamm and her student Kathleen Dobbelaere for distributing the test. Many thanks go to the participants for filling in the test. I also thank the reviewers for their valuable remarks on an earlier version of this text.

**1** In the English translation the antecedent *cats* is repeated. English does not have a partitive pronoun. In (2), it is not possible to use an empty noun, as in the English translation in (1), in which the elliptical noun phrase contains a quantifier. To avoid the repetition of the noun, a definite pronoun could be used: “Yes, I have them”.

Context: [flowers]

- (4) *Hij brengt ER dikwijls mee voor haar.* (Belgian Dutch)  
 he brings PART.WK often with for her  
 'He often brings her flowers.'

Corver and van Koppen (2018) observe that (in Netherlandic standard Dutch) the partitive pronoun ER

typically occurs in clausal environments featuring a(n indefinite) direct object noun phrase whose nominal head is empty, possibly as the result of movement of the partitive pronoun, and which is introduced by a cardinal or indefinite quantifier

as in (3). However, Sleeman (2023) shows that in a Grammaticality Judgment Task, in more than 80% of the cases the 15 Netherlandic and 15 Belgian Dutch participants accepted the use of the partitive pronoun in coordinated Dutch sentences such as (5), in which the elliptical noun phrase has been analysed as a quantified adverbial noun phrase in the literature (Barbiers 2017 for Dutch; Belletti, Rizzi 1981 for Italian), modifying an intransitive verb like 'remain', 'sleep' or 'swim', as in (5):

- (5) [*Gisteren heb ik één kilometer gezwommen*] *en*  
 yesterday have I one kilometre swum and  
*vandaag heb ik ER twee gezwommen.*  
 today have I PART.WK two swum  
 'Yesterday I have swum one kilometre and today I have swum two.'

Sleeman (2023, fn. 6) also reports the judgments of the same Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch participants on the use of the partitive pronoun ER in Dutch sentences with the intransitive verbs 'weigh' and 'cost' and an elliptical measure noun phrase:

- (6) *Katrien weegt 57 kilo en Anneke weegt ER 59.*  
 Katrien weighs 57 kilograms and Anneke weighs PART.WK 59  
 'Katrien weighs 57 kilograms and Anneke weighs 59 kilograms.'
- (7) *De reis door Italië heeft 2,000 euro gekost en*  
 the trip through Italy has 2,000 euros cost and  
*de reis door Griekenland heeft ER 1,000 gekost.*  
 the trip through Greece has PART.WK 1,000 cost  
 'The trip through Italy cost 2000 euros and the trip through Greece 1,000.'

With these two verbs the judgments of the Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch participants diverge importantly. Sentence (6) with the verb ‘weigh’ was accepted by 47% of the Netherlandic Dutch participants and by 93% of the Belgian Dutch participants. Sentence (7) with the verb ‘cost’ was accepted by 27% of the Netherlandic Dutch participants and by 80% of the Belgian Dutch participants.

Besides sentences with intransitive verbs such as (5), (6) and (7), the Grammaticality Judgment Task that was submitted to the 15 native speakers of Netherlandic Dutch and the 15 native speakers of Belgian Dutch contained several other contexts in which the partitive pronoun occurred or was left out. In this essay the complete set of contexts with and without ER that were submitted to the Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch participants will be presented. The goal of the essay is to investigate for which contexts the judgments of the Netherlandic Dutch and the Belgian Dutch participants correspond and for which contexts their judgments diverge and to what extent. In this way, this essay aims at contributing to the description of syntactic differences between national varieties of standard Dutch.

De Troij, Grondelaers and Speelman (2023) observe that empirical research on the relationship between Netherlandic Dutch and Belgian Dutch has primarily targeted variation in pronunciation and the lexicon, but that relatively little is known (but see Haeseryn 1996; 2013) about how the national varieties compare at the level of grammar and morphosyntax, natiolectal variation with respect to syntax being thought to be absent or not being recognised because of ideological reasons. With the help of large bilingual parallel corpora and machine translation software, De Troij, Grondelaers and Speelman (2023) discovered that natiolectal variation in the grammar of Dutch is far more present than has often been assumed, especially in less edited text types such as discussion lists. They found natiolectal variation in 18 out of 20 alternative morphosyntactic types, comprising variable adnominal inflection, analytic versus synthetic constructions and variation in auxiliiation. The current essay aims at contributing to this line of research, focusing on the contexts in which the partitive pronoun ER can be used in the two national varieties and using grammaticality judgments instead of production data.

The essay is structured as follows. In Section 2, the concept ‘national varieties of standard Dutch’ is introduced and is illustrated by means of a short description of the use of the partitive pronoun ER in national varieties of standard Dutch. In Section 3, literature reporting the results of research on several contexts of use of the partitive pronoun ER in, essentially, standard Netherlandic Dutch, is presented. Section 4 contains the methodology for the present study. The results of this study are presented in Section 5 and discussed in Section 6. The essay ends with some conclusions in Section 7.

## 2 National Varieties of Standard Dutch

### 2.1 A Pluricentric Vision

Since several decades, one of the most important grammars in which modern standard Dutch is described is the Dutch Reference Grammar.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch Reference Grammar is a descriptive grammar (Coleman et al. 2021a).<sup>3</sup> The first edition of the Dutch Reference Grammar was published as a printed book (Geerts et al. 1984). The second, revised, edition was published in 1997 in a printed form (Haeseryn et al. 1997) and in 2002 this second edition appeared online (Haeseryn, Coppen, de Vriend 2002). The third, partly revised, online edition was published in 2021 (Coleman et al. 2021b).

In the course of the years, the vision of the authors of the Dutch Reference Grammar on what is the Dutch standard language has changed (Coleman et al. 2021a). In the second edition of the Dutch Reference Grammar (Haeseryn et al. 1997), the Dutch standard language only comprises language phenomena that are used in the entire Dutch language area. This means that in this vision phenomena that are only used in the Dutch language of a specific area, such as Belgian Dutch, do not belong to the Dutch standard language. In fact, the “norm” in the second edition of the Dutch Reference Grammar is Netherlandic Dutch, whereas phenomena that only occur in Belgian Dutch have received the label “regional” (Haeseryn 2016). In the last decades, this vision has been replaced by a more symmetrical vision on what is the Dutch standard language (Coleman et al. 2021a). In the third edition of the Dutch Reference Grammar (Coleman et al. 2021b), a vision is formulated that is based, among others, on the report *Visie op taalvariatie en taalvariatiebeleid* (Vision on language variation and language variation policy), a text of the Advisory Committee on Language Variation commissioned by the General Secretariat of the Language Union (Vandekerckhove et al. 2019). In the vision of this report, the Dutch standard language is largely identical in the whole Dutch-speaking language area, but each part of the Dutch language area has language phenomena that are typical for the language of the specific region. These regional phenomena may also belong to the Dutch standard language. With respect to national varieties, this revised vision of the Dutch standard language is a pluricentric vision on language

<sup>2</sup> The Dutch name of the grammar is *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst*, abbreviated as ANS.

<sup>3</sup> For questions about the Dutch language it is also possible to consult *Taaladvies.net*, which is a language advice website of the Dutch Language Union (Nederlandse Taalunie) and which has a prescriptive role (Dhondt et al. 2020).

(Dhondt et al. 2020), in which there are several regional norms for the standard language. This pluricentric vision on language is also adopted by *Taaladvies.net*, which has a language desk for both Netherlandic Dutch and Belgian Dutch, and has also been adopted for languages like English or German (Haeseryn 2016).

The national varieties that are essentially described in the third edition of the Dutch Reference Grammar are Netherlandic, Belgian and Surinamese Dutch. Regional varieties that are used within these three language areas are sporadically described in the Dutch Reference Grammar (Colleman et al. 2021a). The Dutch Language Union (*Taalunie*), founded in 1980 by the governments of the Netherlands and Belgium, is a regulatory institution that governs issues regarding the Dutch language. Suriname has been an associate member of the *Taalunie* since 2004 (Ghyselen 2022).<sup>4</sup> Since much less is known about Surinamese standard Dutch than about Netherlandic Dutch and Belgian Dutch, in the Dutch Reference Grammar there is only a limited description of grammatical phenomena that typically occur in Surinamese standard Dutch. In the next subsection the Dutch Reference Grammar's description of the use of the partitive pronoun ER in national varieties of standard Dutch will be presented.

## 2.2 The Partitive Pronoun ER in the Dutch Reference Grammar

The third edition of the Dutch Reference Grammar was published online in 2021, although several sections or chapters had not been revised yet. This also holds for the sections on the partitive pronoun ER, whose revision will not start before 2024. The version of the section on the partitive pronoun ER present in the third edition of the Reference Grammar is still the same as in the second edition. This means that the pluricentric vision has not yet been incorporated into this part of the Reference Grammar.

The subsection on the partitive pronoun can be found under the section "Adverb". Three regional distinctions are made. First, cases are presented that are used in the whole Dutch-speaking area and thus the standard language, such as the use of ER with a quantifier, as in (3). A second case that is presented, is the use of non-referential ER versus the use of a definite pronoun such as ZE 'them':

<sup>4</sup> Although there is also an official collaboration between the Dutch Language Union and the Caribbean part of the Dutch Kingdom, for many speakers there Dutch is not the mother tongue (Vandekerckhove et al. 2019). This could explain why Caribbean Dutch is not included in the Dutch Reference Grammar.

- (8) “*Heb je ballen bij je?*” “*Ja, ik heb ER bij me.*”  
 have you balls with you yes I have PART.WK with me  
 “Did you take balls with you?” “Yes, I took balls with me.”
- (9) “*Heb je ballen bij je?*” “*Ja, ik heb ZE bij me.*”  
 have you balls with you yes I have them with me  
 “Did you take balls with you?” “Yes, I took balls with me.”

Both versions are considered to be belonging to the standard language, but there is a regional difference in use: ER is used in Belgium and to a lesser extent in the southern provinces of the Netherlands (called the *x*-speakers in the Dutch Reference Grammar), although in the rest of the Netherlands, where ZE is used (called the *y*-speakers), *y*-speakers may know that ER could be used as well and may consider its use to belong to the standard language in this context.<sup>5</sup>

In the non-referential use, the pronoun does not refer to the whole antecedent, but in fact only to the noun. It indicates a subset of a category. In the referential use of the pronoun, only ZE can be used in the whole Dutch-speaking area. ZE refers to the whole set of apples that was introduced in the first part of the sentence:

- (10) *Ik heb vanmorgen appels geplukt en*  
 I have this morning apples plucked and  
*ik heb ZE aan de burens gegeven.*  
 I have them to the neighbours given  
 ‘This morning I have plucked apples and I have given them to the neighbours.’

A third case that is presented, is one which in the second and not yet revised version of the text on the partitive pronoun in the third edition is considered to not belong to the standard language. In the Belgian area, it is possible to use ER in combination with an indefinite noun phrase containing an adjective, see also De Schutter (1992):

<sup>5</sup> The Dutch Reference Grammar does not explicitly make a similar remark about the use or knowledge of the use of ZE in non-referential contexts by *x*-speakers. One of the reviewers observes, however, that the Dutch Reference Grammar does not claim the use of the definite pronoun in these contexts to be absent or ungrammatical in the Belgian area. According to De Schutter (1992, fn. 2), in the Belgian area ZE can only be used in combination with an elliptical NP containing a PP, as in (i). In this context ER can also be used:

- (i) *De rode truitjes zijn verkocht, maar we hebben ER/ZE nog wel in 'tblauw.*  
 the red sweaters are sold, but we have PART.WK/them still yes in the blue  
 ‘The red sweaters have been sold, but we still have them in blue.’

- (11) “*Wat voor rozen hebt u?*” “*Ik heb ER witte en rode.*”  
 what for roses have you I have PART.WK white and red  
 “What kind of roses do you have?” “I have white and red ones.”
- (12) “*Zijn er nog andere rozen?*”  
 are there still other roses  
 “*Nee, er zijn ER geen andere.*”  
 no there are PART.WK no other  
 “Are there also other flowers?” “No, there are no other ones.”

Furthermore, in the Belgian area it is possible to use ER replacing a mass noun, without a quantifier, see also De Schutter (1992):

- (13) “*Wilt u nog koffie?*” “*Nee, ik heb ER nog.*”  
 want you still coffee no I have PART.WK still  
 “Would you like to have more coffee?” “No, I still have coffee.”

If, in the pluricentric vision of the third edition of the Dutch Reference Grammar, regional phenomena may also belong to the Dutch standard language, it could be the case that this third case, ER with an adjective and ER replacing a mass noun, would be considered to belong to the Belgian variety of the standard language. The definition that is given of “standard language” in the Dutch Reference Grammar is:

the language that is generally used in public communication, that is in all major sectors of public life: government and administration, jurisdiction, education, media, etc.

That this third case would belong to the standard language could be supported by the fact that Sleeman (1998) found sentences like (13) in an exercise book belonging to a Belgian grammar book, which is the sector “education” of public communication, and which belongs to the standard language.

In this essay, the statements in the Dutch Reference Grammar with respect to partitive ER are checked. Furthermore, it is investigated if there are more contexts in which the use of partitive ER in the Netherlandic and the Belgian varieties of standard Dutch differ. It is also checked to what extent contexts with ER are accepted by native speakers. Before presenting the research, some other investigations on the use of ER in contexts that are relevant for this essay are presented.



### 3 Previous Research on the Use of Partitive ER in Various Contexts

In the Introduction, results from the study by Sleeman (2023) on the acceptance of the use of ER with intransitive verbs and an elliptical quantified adverbial NP or elliptical measure NPs by native speakers of Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch were presented. In this section other results of previous research on the use of ER in various contexts are presented. Most research concerns Netherlandic standard Dutch. One research concerns Heerlen standard Dutch, which is a regional variety used in a city in the south-east of the Netherlands.

#### 3.1 Berends (2019)

**Table 1** Two conditions of a Grammaticality Judgment Task on ER (adapted from Berends 2019)

Condition		Sentences								
Numeral	Introduction	<i>Vorige</i>	<i>week</i>	<i>hebben</i>	<i>jullie</i>	<i>drie</i>	<i>films</i>	<i>bekeken.</i>		
		last	week	have	you	three	films	seen		
	Target gram.	<i>Deze</i>	<i>week</i>	<i>hebben</i>	<i>wij</i>	<i>ER</i>	<i>vier</i>	<i>bekeken.</i>		
	Target ungram.	<i>*Deze</i>	<i>week</i>	<i>hebben</i>	<i>wij</i>		<i>vier</i>	<i>bekeken.</i>		
		this	week	have	we		four	seen		
'Last week you have seen three films. This week we have seen four.'										
Adjective	Introduction	<i>Vorig</i>	<i>jaar</i>	<i>heb</i>	<i>ik</i>	<i>vijf</i>	<i>grote</i>	<i>cadeaus</i>	<i>gekregen.</i>	
		last	year	have	I	five	big	presents	received	
	Target gram.	<i>Dit</i>	<i>jaar</i>	<i>heb</i>	<i>jij</i>		<i>vijf</i>	<i>kleine</i>	<i>gekregen.</i>	
	Target ungram.	<i>*Dit</i>	<i>jaar</i>	<i>heb</i>	<i>jij</i>	<i>ER</i>	<i>vijf</i>	<i>kleine</i>	<i>gekregen.</i>	
		this	year	have	you	ER	five	small	received	
'Last year I have received five big presents. This year you have received five small ones.'										

In a syntactic study, Berends (2019) submitted a Grammaticality Judgment Task to a group of 25 adult native speakers of Netherlandic Dutch. The participants were recruited in and around Amsterdam, which is a city in the western part of the Netherlands. The test consisted of pre-recorded sentence pairs: an introductory sentence and the test sentence. Visual stimuli were not provided. Two of the conditions were ER + numeral and ER + numeral and adjective. For each sentence with ER, there was a corresponding sentence without ER. Based on the literature (Sleeman 1996; Kranendonk 2010), Berends predicted that sentences containing ER + numeral and sentences containing a numeral and an adjective without ER would be judged grammatical, and the corresponding sentences without and with ER, respectively, ungrammatical [tab. 1]. For each condition there were 10

sentences, 5 with ER and 5 without. The participants were asked to judge the sentences on their grammaticality according to Dutch prescriptive grammars. They were sitting in front of a computer screen and were asked to press a red button when they judged a sentence incorrect and a green button when they judged a sentence correct.

For each of the two conditions, Berends presents the results of the sentences with and without ER together. Table 2 gives an overview of the means per condition.

**Table 2** Means per condition for L1 Netherlandic Dutch speakers (adapted from Berends 2019)

	L1 Netherlandic Dutch
ER [+/*-present] with numeral	9.04/10
ER [*+/-present] with numeral and adjective	5.56/10

For the condition with a numeral, the result is as predicted, but for the condition ‘numeral + adjective’ it is not. Since an accepted cut-off point for acceptance is a score above 80% (e.g., Muftah, Eng 2011; Muftah, Rafik-Galea 2013; Spinner, Jung 2017), Berends set the cut-off point for rejection at a score below 20%, and the chance level between 40% and 60%. Based on the literature, Berends expected the means for the condition ‘numeral + adjective’ to be below 2.0. Although the mean score for the condition ‘numeral + adjective’ (5.56/10) is much lower than the mean score for the condition ‘numeral’ (9.04/10), it is not below 2.0, but it is at chance level. Berends suggests that it might be the case that Netherlandic standard Dutch is becoming more tolerant in allowing ER in combination with a numeral + adjective, a combination that is also allowed in some Dutch dialects (Kranendonk 2010).

Berends also conducted a semantic research on the acceptance by the same 25 native speakers of Netherlandic Dutch of sentences containing ER in combination with a non-presuppositional or a presuppositional quantifier. There were two types of non-presuppositional quantifiers: [-definite], as the quantifier *een heleboel* ‘a lot, many’, introduced by an indefinite article, and [-strong], as the quantifier *enkele* ‘some’. There were also two types of presuppositional quantifiers: [+definite], as the quantifier *de helft* ‘half’, introduced in Dutch by a definite article, and [+strong], illustrated by the quantifier *sommige* ‘some of them, certain’.

According to De Jong (1983) and De Hoop (1992), partitive ER encodes the referential characteristic [-presupposition]. The authors claim that ER can only appear in sentences in which the quantifier is also non-presuppositional. Berends (2019) therefore predicts that native speakers of Dutch will judge sentences containing ER in combination with the non-presuppositional quantifiers *een heleboel*

and *enkele* grammatical and sentences containing ER in combination with the presuppositional quantifiers *de helft* and *sommige* ungrammatical:<sup>6</sup>

[-presuppositional]

(14) [-definite]

*Zij bakt ER een heleboel.*  
She bakes PART.WK a lot  
'She bakes many.'

(15) [-strong]

*Zij bakt ER enkele.*  
She bakes PART.WK some  
'She bakes some.'

[+presuppositional]

(16) [+definite]

\**Zij bakt ER de helft.*  
She bakes PART.WK the half  
'She bakes half of them.'

(17) [+strong]

\**Zij bakt ER sommige.*  
She bakes PART.WK certain  
'She bakes some of them.'

In this test only sentences with ER were tested, and not versions without ER. The test was again a computer-based Grammaticality Judgment Task. The sentences were again pre-recorded audio-sentences containing a preamble sentence and a test sentence. For each type of the four quantifiers there were 5 sentences, presented in a random order. Participants were asked to indicate on a scale ranging from 1 to 5 whether they thought that native speakers of Dutch would never say such a sentence (indicated by '1') or whether they thought that native speakers of Dutch would produce such a sentence (indicated by '5'). For the analysis, the results of the two non-presuppositional quantifiers + ER were taken together and the results of the two presuppositional quantifiers + ER were taken together.

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<sup>6</sup> The Dutch Reference Grammar explicitly makes a remark about the impossibility of the combination of *sommige* with ER (5.9.3.2.vi, 6), attributing the predicate "excluded" to the combination.

The acceptance rate, on a 5-point scale, of the sentences with ER and a non-presuppositional quantifier was 91%, as predicted. The acceptance rate of the sentences with ER and a presuppositional quantifier was 60%, which was not predicted on the basis of the literature. However, a statistical analysis showed that there was a significant difference between the acceptance rates of the [-presuppositional] and [+presuppositional] quantifiers in combination with ER [tab. 3].

**Table 3** Acceptance rates in the non-presuppositional and presuppositional conditions (adapted from Berends 2019)

Grammatical [-presupposition]	Ungrammatical [+presupposition]	p
3.62 (SD 0.52)	2.39 (SD 1.20)	0.0002 ***

### 3.2 Sleeman and Ihsane (2017; 2020)

Sleeman and Ihsane (2017; 2020) present the results of 23 Dutch students, all native speakers of Dutch and all being students of French at the University of Amsterdam. They filled in two Grammaticality Judgment Tasks, one for French and one for Dutch, with the options “Correct” and “Incorrect”. Only the results of the Dutch version are presented here. The test contained:

- i. 6 sentences with a non-presuppositional quantifier: 3 with ER and 3 without ER, as in (3);
- ii. 6 sentences with non-referential plural noun phrases: 3 with ER, as in (8), and 3 with ZE, as in (9);
- iii. 6 sentences with referential plural NPs: 3 with ZE, as in (10), and 3 with ER;
- iv. 6 sentences with a mass noun: 3 with ER, as in (13), and 3 with the singular definite pronoun HET ‘it’;
- v. 6 negated sentences with a mass noun: 3 with ER and 3 with the singular definite pronoun HET, as in (18-19):

[Situation: Anne: “Do you never drink wine?”]

(18) *Lucie:* “*Nee, ik drink ER nooit.*”  
 Lucie no I drink PART.WK never  
 Lucie: “No, I never drink it.”

[Situation: Anne: “Do you never drink wine?”]

(19) *Lucie:* “*Nee, ik drink HET nooit.*”  
 Lucie no I drink it never  
 Lucie: “No, I never drink it.”

- vi. 6 negated sentences with a plural bare noun: 3 with ER and 3 with the plural definite pronoun ZE, as in (20-21):

[Situation: Claire: “When you were in Brittany, didn’t you eat oysters?”]

(20) Paul: “Nee, ik heb ER niet gegeten.”

Paul no I have PART.WK not eaten

Paul: “No, I did not eat oysters.”

[Situation: Claire: “When you were in Brittany, didn’t you eat oysters?”]

(21) Paul: “Nee, ik heb ZE niet gegeten.”

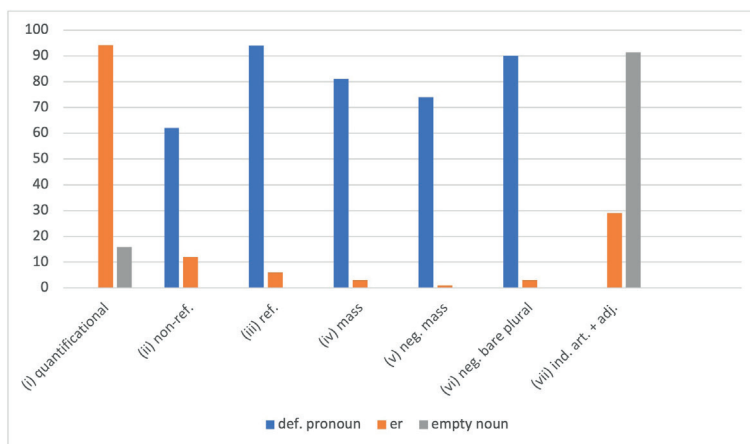
Paul no I have them not eaten

Paul: “No, I did not eat them.”

- vii. 6 sentences with an indefinite noun phrase containing an adjective, 3 with ER and 3 without ER, as in (11-12).

The reason for testing sentences such as (18-21) was that in sentences with a negation an indefinite can only be non-referential. In sentences such as (8-9) and (10) the (non-)referentiality depends on the context, and thus on how the participant interprets the sentence.

The results are presented in Figure 1. Per condition there were two options and therefore there are two bars per condition.



**Figure 1** Acceptance of definite pronoun, “er” and empty noun by native speakers of Dutch (Sleeman and Ihsane 2017; 2020)

The results in Figure 1 show that the Dutch participants in Sleeman and Ihsane’s research overwhelmingly accepted the use of the definite pronoun, not only in referential contexts (iii), but also in

non-referential contexts such as (ii), (v) and (vi). Since the participants were students from the University of Amsterdam, most or all probably were from the western part of the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> According to the Dutch Reference Grammar, these speakers use the definite pronoun in non-referential contexts. Since, according to the Dutch Reference Grammar and De Schutter (1992), only speakers from Belgium use ER referring to mass nouns, the high percentage of acceptance of a definite pronoun in this context (iv) in Figure 1 is expected as well. The high acceptance of ER with a quantifier (i) is expected also. In more than 90% of the cases the omission of ER with an indefinite determiner and an adjective was accepted, as expected on the basis of the Dutch Reference Grammar, which states that it is possible to use ER in combination with an indefinite noun phrase containing an adjective in the Belgian area, see Section 2.2. This suggests that in the standard language of the Dutch area the combination of ER and an elliptical indefinite noun phrase containing an adjective is not possible. However, in almost 30% of the cases the use of ER with an indefinite determiner and an adjective was accepted. This percentage is lower than the 5.56/10 score in Berends' (2019) Grammaticality Judgment Task, see Section 3.1, but still higher than the cut-off point for rejection at a score below 20% set by Berends (2019). Although according to De Schutter (1992) the combination of ER with a numeral + adjective is completely unusual in Netherlandic Dutch, Kranendonk (2010) shows that it is allowed in some Dutch dialects. Kranendonk (2010) divides them into northern Dutch and southern Dutch for reasons of geographical distribution.

### 3.3 Cornips and Sleeman (2024)

Cornips and Sleeman (2024) investigated the use of the partitive pronoun in the quantificational construction and in the Age/Weight construction in Heerlen standard Dutch. The corpus was collected by Cornips (1994). The data consists of sociolinguistic interviews between 67 speakers of Heerlen Dutch, who interviewed each other. In the quantificational construction, ER was used 138 times (conform the use in Netherlandic standard Dutch) and omitted 28 times. The omission of ER is illustrated in (22). In the Age/Weight construction, ER was omitted 67 times (conform the use in Netherlandic standard Dutch) and used 14 times. This is illustrated in (23-25).

<sup>7</sup> As stated at the beginning of Section 3.2, the participants were students of French of the University of Amsterdam. There are different departments of French spread over the country. Students of French generally choose a local university.

(22) *er is Ø nog eentje die in de boom gehangen heeft* [Henk]  
 there is another one.DIM who in the tree hung has  
 ‘there is another one who has hung in the tree’

(23) *ik was Ø vierenzeventig toen ik begon* [Mr. Balk]  
 ‘I was forty-four when I started.’

(24) *ik was ER 15* [Leo]  
 I was PART.WK 15  
 ‘I was 15 [years].’

(25) *ik was ER 95 toen ik eruit kwam* [Dik]  
 I was PART.WK 95 when I out came  
 ‘I was 95 [kilos] when I got out.’

Most of the previous research concerns the acceptance of ER in various contexts by native speakers of Netherlandic Dutch and shows some regional variation within the Netherlands. The goal of the research for this essay is to compare the judgments of native speakers of Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch. In the next section the methodology is presented.

## 4 Methodology

The goal of the essay is to investigate for which contexts with or without the partitive pronoun ER the judgments of the Netherlandic Dutch and the Belgian Dutch participants correspond and for which contexts their judgments diverge and to what extent.

### 4.1 Test Materials

A Grammaticality Judgment Task was created consisting of 75 sentences which had to be evaluated with respect to their acceptability. They were presented in a randomised order. Because of the length of the test, only the options “Correct” and “Incorrect” were available as possible answers. The test contained the following categories, presented in 66 sentences:

- i. 6 quantificational sentences (3 sentences with ER and 3 without ER)
- ii. 6 non-referential NPs (3 sentences with ER and 3 with a definite personal pronoun)
- iii. 6 referential NPs (3 sentences with ER and 3 with a definite personal pronoun)

- 
- iv. 6 mass nouns (3 sentences with ER and 3 with a definite personal pronoun)
  - v. 6 negated mass nouns (3 sentences with ER and 3 with a definite personal pronoun)
  - vi. 6 negated bare plural nouns (3 sentences with ER and 3 with a definite personal pronoun)
  - vii. 6 sentences containing an indefinite article + adjective (3 sentences with ER and 3 without ER)
  - viii. 6 sentences containing the presuppositional quantifier *de helft* ‘(the) half’ (3 sentences with ER and 3 without ER)
  - ix. 6 sentences containing an indefinite quantity noun: *een kilo* ‘a kilogram’, *drie liter* ‘three litres’ and *twee glazen* ‘two glasses’ (3 sentences with ER and 3 without ER)
  - x. 6 sentences containing a measure noun referring to ‘age’, ‘weight’ or ‘cost’ (3 sentences with ER and 3 without ER)
  - xi. 6 sentences containing an intransitive verb (*blijven* ‘to remain’, *slapen* ‘to sleep’ and *zwemmen* ‘to swim’) and a quantified adverbial NP (3 sentences with ER and 3 without ER)

There were also 9 fillers.

The categories (i)-(vii) with the test sentences were taken from Sleeman and Ihsane (2017; 2020). On the basis of the Dutch Reference Grammar no difference in judgments was expected for category (i), but for the categories (ii) and (iv)-(vii) it was expected that native speakers of Belgian Dutch are more tolerant with respect to the use of ER than native speakers of Netherlandic Dutch. Category (viii) was added based on Berends (2019). Berends shows that in French the partitive pronoun is used with the presuppositional, definite quantifier *la moitié* ‘(the) half’. Berends shows that this also holds for indefinite determiner + adjective. Therefore, another category was added in which in French (and Italian) a partitive pronoun is used. This is category (ix). The categories (x) and (xi) were added because according to the literature the use of a partitive pronoun in combination with an intransitive verb is not allowed (Belletti, Rizzi 1981; Barbiers 2017), which raises the question whether there could be a difference between Netherlandic and Belgian standard Dutch, Belgian Dutch being generally more permissive with respect to the use of the partitive pronoun in various contexts than Netherlandic standard Dutch. The results for these two categories were already presented in Sleeman (2023), see the Introduction, but will also be presented in the Results section of this essay.



## 4.2 Participants and Procedure

The test was presented in SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com>) and spread via social media, with a snowball effect. The participants could fill in the test in an anonymous way. They also answered some personal questions, such as their mother tongue, their age and their country of birth and residence. They had to give their informed consent for the use of their anonymous data for scientific purposes before they could proceed to the test.

## 4.3 Analysis

Only tests that were completely filled in and that were filled in by native speakers of Dutch who were not early bilinguals were retained for analysis.<sup>8</sup> This resulted in the data of 15 monolingual speakers of Netherlandic standard Dutch (age range 21-50+) and 15 native speakers of Belgian Dutch (age range 18-50+).<sup>9</sup>

The results of one sentence of category (vi), negated bare plural nouns with ER, were not taken into consideration, because the test sentence contained a negative quantifier, *geen* 'no', and not a bare noun.

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**8** The participants were asked if they had been living for some time in the Netherlands or in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The goal of this question was to know if they had been living in another Dutch-speaking country than their own, but the answers showed that this may not have been clear. Only the data from participants who answered "Yes, I am from the Netherlands" or "Yes, I am from Belgium" were retained for analysis.

The participants were also asked if they were living or had been living in a region where a dialect or a regional language is spoken (and if this was the case, which one(s)), and which dialect(s) or regional language(s) they spoke or understood well, and to what degree. The results of the analysis of these data showed that there was regional variation, but since the number of participants per national variety left for analysis was rather low, no correlation with the results could be established.

**9** Participants who were older than 50 years did not have to specify their age any further. One of the goals of the study was to investigate whether there was a difference in acceptance between a younger age group of participants (who had not reached the age of 35 years) and an older age group of participants (35+), but due to the relatively low number of participants left for analysis, such a comparison could not be made.

## 5 Results

The results of the judgments of the 66 experimental sentences are presented in Figure 2 for the Netherlandic Dutch participants and in Figure 3 for the Belgian Dutch participants [figs 2-3].

The results of the categories (x) and (xi) were already presented in the Introduction to this essay, but are presented here as well. There were two options and therefore theoretically two bars per condition. In conditions (v) and (vi) there is only one bar in Figure 2, because there was 0% of acceptance of the use of ER in these conditions.

For most of the categories there is more than 80% of acceptance and/or less than 20% of acceptance of one of the two variants that were presented to the native speakers of Netherlandic Dutch. ER replacing a mass noun accompanied by a negation and ER replacing a bare plural noun accompanied by a negation were accepted in 0% of the cases.

In the judgments of the native speakers of Belgian Dutch, there is only one category for which one of the two variants is judged correct in more than 80% of the cases and for which the other variant is judged correct in less than 20% of the cases. This is the category “quantificational NP” (i). For the categories “indefinite quantity noun” (ix) and “quantified adverbial NP” (xi), the general pattern is the same as in the data of the Netherlandic Dutch data, although the percentages for the variant with ER differ somewhat for the category “indefinite quantity noun” (9% of acceptance in Netherlandic Dutch and 27% of acceptance in Belgian Dutch). For the category “referential”, the definite pronoun is accepted in more than 90% of the cases, as in the Netherlandic Dutch data, but ER is accepted in 31% of the cases, which is more than in the Netherlandic Dutch data (9%). Since ER was accepted in 71% of the cases in the category “non-referential” in the Belgian Dutch data, but only in 24% of the cases in the Netherlandic Dutch data, the interpretation of a referential NP as a non-referential NP (in both varieties) may thus account for the relatively high percentage of acceptance of ER with referential NPs in the Belgian Dutch data. The general pattern is also the same in the case of negated mass nouns (v) and negated bare plurals (vi), although the percentages of acceptance of the definite pronoun are lower than in the Netherlandic Dutch data. The general pattern is furthermore the same for the category “*de helft*” (viii), although ER was also accepted in 40% of the cases, but in the Netherlandic Dutch data only in 11% of the cases.

The general pattern of judgments with respect to the Netherlandic Dutch data differ in four cases: “non-referential NPs” (ii), “mass nouns” (iv), “indefinite article + adjective” (vii) and “measure nouns” (x). For non-referential NPs, mass nouns and indefinite article + adjective this is expected on the basis of what is observed in the Dutch

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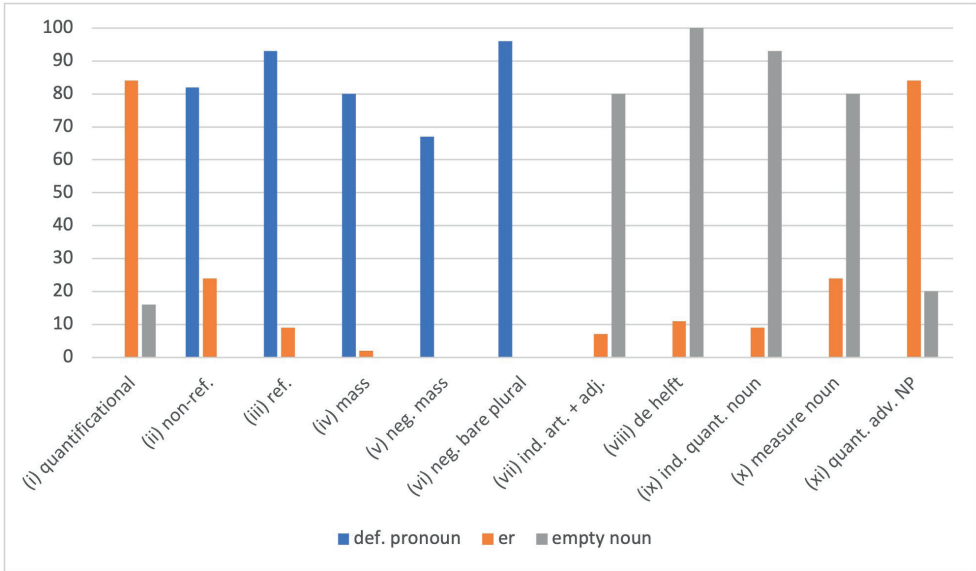


Figure 2 Acceptance of definite pronoun, “er” and empty noun by Netherlandic Dutch participants

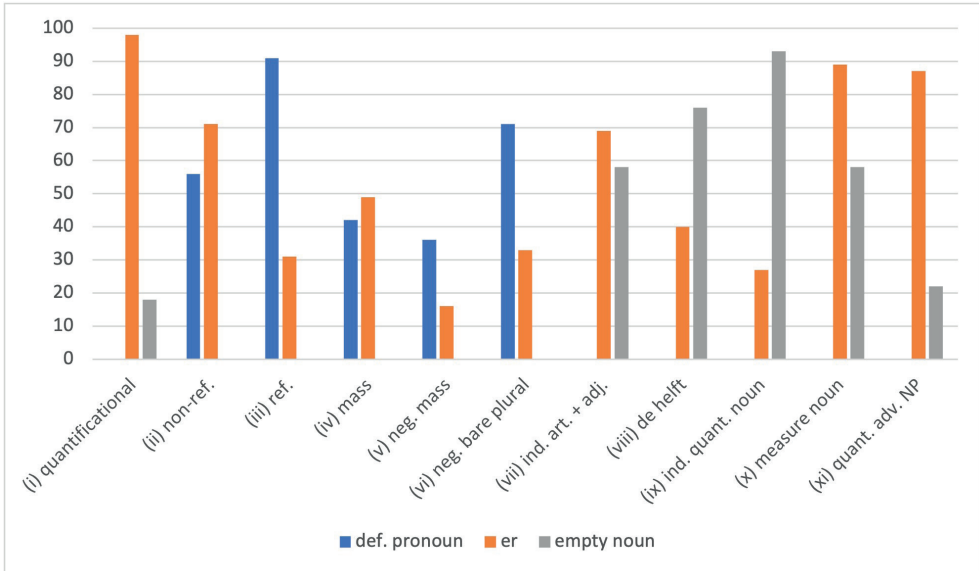


Figure 3 Acceptance of definite pronoun, “er” and empty noun by Belgian Dutch participants

Reference Grammar and De Schutter (1992). The category “measure nouns” is not presented in the Dutch Reference Grammar. For these four categories, the “other” variant is also accepted to a relatively high degree.

## 6 Discussion

In this essay it was investigated for which contexts with or without ER the judgments of the 15 Netherlandic Dutch and the 15 Belgian Dutch participants correspond and for which contexts their judgments diverge and to what extent.

The general patterns correspond for the five categories “quantificational NP”, “referential NP”, “*de helft*”, “indefinite quantity noun” and “quantified adverbial NP”. For the first two categories this corresponds to the observations in the Dutch Reference Grammar. For the category “*de helft*” the variant with ER was accepted more in the Belgian Dutch data (40%) than in the Netherlandic Dutch data (11%). The same holds for the category “indefinite quantity noun”, such as ‘a kilo’ or ‘three litres’, where ER was also accepted more in the Belgian Dutch data (27%) than in the Netherlandic Dutch data (9%). These two categories were added to the test, because in a language like French (and Italian) the partitive pronoun is used with these categories. Both in the Netherlandic Dutch data and in the Belgian Dutch data the variant without ER is preferred, but the variant with ER is accepted to a certain extent as well in the Belgian Dutch data.<sup>10</sup> ER is preferred with quantified adverbial NPs in the Belgian Dutch data as it is in the Netherlandic Dutch data. These results for both national varieties seem to contradict claims that have been made in the literature on the acceptability of the combination of the partitive pronoun and quantified adverbial NPs, see the Introduction.

For the four categories “non-referential NPs”, “mass nouns”, “indefinite article + adjective” and “measure nouns” referring to “age”, “weight” or “cost”, the general patterns in the Netherlandic vs. the Belgian Dutch data diverge. For the categories “non-referential NPs”, “mass nouns” and “indefinite article + adjective” this was predicted on the basis of what is observed in the Dutch Reference Grammar and in De Schutter (1992), although for the category “mass nouns” the variant with ER was accepted in only 49% by the Belgian Dutch speakers. The category “measure nouns” referring to age, weight and

<sup>10</sup> One of the reviewers wonders if there could be influence from French. It could be the case that the relatively higher acceptance of the partitive pronoun in Belgian Dutch in these cases is influenced by the vicinity of French-speaking areas. However, De Schutter (1992) argues against the possibility of French influence to account for the more extensive use of ER in Belgian Dutch, attributing it to a language-internal overextension.

cost is not presented in the Dutch Reference Grammar. The results of the Grammaticality Judgment Task show a clear difference between the acceptance of the use of ER with this category in the Netherlandic Dutch data (24%) and the Belgian Dutch data (89%). It was shown for these four categories that the variant that was preferred in the Netherlandic Dutch data was also accepted to a relatively high degree by the native speakers of Belgian Dutch.<sup>11</sup>

For the categories “negated mass nouns” and “negated bare plurals” it was predicted that ER would be accepted more by the Belgian Dutch participants than the definite pronoun. This was predicted on the basis of the fact that both types are non-referential. According to the Dutch Reference Grammar and De Schutter (1992), ER is used with non-referential elliptical NPs and with mass nouns in Belgian standard Dutch, but see fn. 5. However, the variant with the definite pronoun was preferred, as in the Netherlandic Dutch data. It is not clear if the difference between the two national varieties in the general patterns with respect to the categories “non-referential NPs” and “mass nouns” is due to the negation or if there could be another explanation. Both in the case of the category “mass nouns” and the category “negated mass nouns” the percentages of acceptance are relatively low, both for the variant with ER and for the variant with the definite pronoun.

The results differ from Berends (2019), discussed in Section 3.1, who tested native speakers of Netherlandic Dutch on their judgments on the combination of ER with an indefinite noun phrase containing an adjective and with presuppositional quantifiers such as *de helft*. For the first category the mean score in Berends (2019) was 5.56/10 (for adjectives with and without ER) and for presuppositional quantifiers (*de helft* and *sommige* ‘some’ + ER) the average acceptance rate was 2.39/5. In the Netherlandic Dutch data used for this essay, ER was accepted in 7% of the cases with an adjective and in 11% of the cases with *de helft*, which are much lower percentages than in Berends’ results. It could be the case that the discrepancy is due to the different methodologies that were used: in Berends (2019) the test

<sup>11</sup> Whereas for the category “non-referential plural nouns”, the plural definite pronoun ZE ‘them’ was accepted in 71% of the cases by the Belgian Dutch participants, with the category “mass nouns” the singular definite pronoun was accepted in only 42% of the cases. A possible explanation could be that there was a gender mismatch between the antecedent and the definite pronoun in two of the three test sentences: whereas the antecedent was a common noun, the pronoun was a neuter pronoun, which is a generally accepted use in, at least, spoken Netherlandic Dutch for reference to mass nouns (Audring 2009). However, one of the mismatch sentences was accepted in 60% of the cases, but the matching sentence was accepted only in 40% of the cases. Therefore, a gender mismatch does not seem to be a viable explanation. Another explanation could be that, according to De Schutter (1992) ZE is acceptable in combination with an elliptical NP containing a PP, see fn. 5. The results suggest then that the acceptance of ZE is extended to non-referential NPs without a PP as well. With mass nouns only ER would be possible, according to De Schutter.

sentences were presented in an aural form, whereas in this study the participants read the test sentences and in Berends (2019) a graded scale was used, whereas in this study a binary scale was used. In Sleeman and Ihsane's (2017; 2020) results, presented in Section 3.2, the acceptance by the Netherlandic Dutch participants of ER with elliptical indefinite nouns containing an adjective was higher, namely 29%. With respect to the results of the other categories reported in Sleeman and Ihsane (2017; 2020) [fig. 1], the tendencies observed in the results of the judgments are the same [fig. 2]. The category "measure nouns" was not tested by Sleeman and Ihsane. The use of ER in combination with the measure nouns "age" and "weight" in a corpus of Heerlen standard Dutch was studied by Cornips and Sleeman (2024). ER was used 14 times and omitted 67 times. In the Belgian Dutch data of this essay, the use of ER was accepted in 89% of the cases and its omission in 58% of the cases.

Because of the relatively small number of participants in this study, a statistical analysis has not been presented. Because of the relatively low number of participants, the results have to be taken with care, especially those of the Belgian Dutch participants. The Netherlandic Dutch data confirm to a large extent Sleeman and Ihsane's (2017; 2020) results. Since the statements of the Dutch Reference Grammar seem to be confirmed for Belgian standard Dutch, the results of the other contexts may also be valid. However, more research is needed, especially for the cases in which both variants were accepted to a low degree. Furthermore, this is a study on acceptance and not on production and regions where participants have been living could have influenced their acceptance of an option. More research is also needed in this respect.

In this essay, the acceptance of the use of the partitive pronoun ER by speakers of two national varieties of standard Dutch was investigated. Within the pluricentric vision of standard Dutch (see Section 2), there is, besides Netherlandic and Belgian standard Dutch, a third national variety of standard Dutch, namely Surinamese standard Dutch. Coleman et al. (2021a) observe that data about Surinamese Dutch are still largely absent in the third version of the Dutch Reference Grammar, because not much research has been done yet on this national variety. According to Vandekerckhove et al. (2019), one of the most widespread characteristics of Surinamese Dutch is the omission of the partitive pronoun ER in the quantificational construction, as in *Hoeveel kinderen heb je? Ik heb Ø vier*. 'How many children do you have? I have four.' If ER is absent in the quantificational construction in Surinamese standard Dutch, it could be expected that it is absent in other categories researched in this essay as well. However, it could be the case that in a Grammaticality Judgment Task ER would be accepted to a certain degree, under the influence of the asymmetric norm of Netherlandic standard Dutch. More research is also needed here.

## 7 Conclusion

The results of this essay confirm the statements made in the Dutch Reference Grammar with respect to differences between Netherlandic and Belgian standard Dutch. Whereas in Netherlandic Dutch the use of HET or ZE or the omission of ER is preferred with mass nouns, non-referential plural nouns and elliptical noun phrases containing an adjective, in Belgian Dutch the use of ER is preferred in these cases. It has been shown, however, in this essay, that the “other” variant is accepted as well in Belgian Dutch, but to a somewhat lower degree.

A new context that was tested, was the use of ER with elliptical measure nouns such as “age”, “weight” and “cost”. Whereas in the Netherlandic Dutch data the omission of ER was clearly preferred, in the Belgian Dutch data the use of ER was accepted in 89% of the cases, although the variant without ER was accepted as well, but to a lower degree.

Another new context that was added, was the use of ER with quantity nouns such as *een kilo* ‘a kilo’, *drie liter* ‘three litres’ or *twee glazen* ‘two glasses’. The data for both national varieties of standard Dutch showed a clear preference (93% in both cases) for the variant without ER.

A third new context was the use of ER with the presuppositional quantifier *de helft*. The Belgian Dutch participants accepted sentences with ER in 40% of the cases, which is relatively high, although the sentences without ER were preferred (76%), as in the Netherlandic Dutch data.

A fourth new context was the use of ER with quantified adverbial NPs. In both national varieties there was a clear preference for the variant with ER, contradicting claims that have been made in the literature.

Colleman et al. (2021a) observe that to be able to make well motivated statements about the status of current national varieties of standard Dutch, a valid method should be developed that can be replicated. This could be a uniform research in big and comparable corpora of national varieties of standard Dutch or a uniform questionnaire submitted to native speakers of national varieties. Colleman et al. (2021a) add that the results of such a large-scale empirical investigation could without any doubt lead to adaptations in the description of the status of national varieties in the Dutch Reference Grammar. Although the study presented in this essay was only a small-scale study, it is hoped that the results may lead to small adaptations in the third version of the section on partitive pronouns in the Dutch Reference Grammar or that the method may be used for follow-up research on a larger scale.

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