

Micro-variation, contact and change: the absentive in Frisian and Dutch

In both Frisian and Dutch we find the absentive, a syntactic construction to express the absence of a subject. The absentive is formed (in these languages) by a finite form of *to be* and an infinitive (a bare infinitive in Dutch, a *te*-infinitive in Frisian).

In this talk, I will argue that the absentive can be analyzed as a case of go-deletion, following Abraham (2008). That is, the examples below actually include a silent form of perfective *go*:

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| (1) | Jan is te fiskjen gongen | Frisian |
| | <i>Jan is to fish.inf gone</i> | |
| | “Jan is off fishing” | |
| (2) | Jan is gaan vissen / Jan is vissen gegaan | Dutch |
| | <i>Jan is gone fish.inf / Jan is fish.inf gone</i> | |
| | “Jan is off fishing” | |

Besides being able to explain the meaning of the absentive, I will argue that this analysis is the key in another problem: it explains the differences that we find between the Dutch and Frisian absentive: 1) why Frisian included a *to*-infinitive, rather than a bare infinitive, 2) why the finite verb in the absentive can also be *gean* (“go”) or a modal verb in Frisian, and 3) why the Frisian absentive can have a passive interpretation.

Finally, I will present some data showing that the absentive in Frisian is changing under influence of Dutch, but that this does not mean that the Frisian system is lost.