

**AN INTERNATIONAL MASTER OF
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Let's, in English and in Dutch¹

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1. Introduction

The *let's* construction in (1) is a peculiar construction.

- (1) Let's sing a song.

As a hortative it instantiates a peculiar kind of mood (sentence type or illocution type), related to the imperative and the optative. But it also relates to modality. *Let*, after all, is also a verb of permission – as well as of causation – and permission instantiates deontic modality. A quarter century ago, Seppänen (1977) dealt with the question of whether the hortative *let* might be considered a modal auxiliary in English, even if only a peripheral one. In his 1977 paper Seppänen also looks at some marginal or substandard uses, such as (2).

- (2) So let we have another hymn.

On that occasion Seppänen refers to Dutch, a language in which the counterpart to (2) is fully grammatical (3), as is the version with an accusative first person pronoun (4):

- | | | | | | | | |
|-----|----------------------------|-----|-----|--------|--------|---------|---------|
| (3) | Laten | | wij | een | andere | hymne | zingen. |
| | let.IND.PRS.1PL | | we | an | other | hymn | sing |
| | 'Let's sing another hymn.' | | | | | | |
| (4) | Laat | ons | een | andere | hymne | zingen. | |
| | let.IMP | us | an | other | hymn | sing | |
| | 'Let's sing another hymn.' | | | | | | |

Note that (3) and (4) differ with respect to the morphology of the *let* verb as well. Whereas (4) is an imperative, (3) is an indicative first person plural. In this paper we will follow Seppänen and have a closer look at the English *let's* construction and the Dutch construction in (3). We restrict ourselves to positive constructions.

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2. English *Let's*

The *let's* construction in (1) is related to the construction *let us*, with a full pronoun *us* rather than a cliticized 's.

- (5) Let us sing a song.

Unlike (1), however, (5) has two interpretations. In one reading, i.e. the reading not shared with (1), the first person pronoun has so-called 'exclusive' reference: *us* does not include the hearer(s). The hearer(s) is/are requested to grant permission for an action by the speaker and a third party. In the second reading, shared by (1) and (5), the reference of the first person pronoun is 'inclusive': *us* refers to the speaker but also to the hearer(s). Literally, there is a request to the hearer(s) to allow that both speaker and hearer(s) undertake the action. This amounts to a hortative reading: the speaker encourages the undertaking of an action by speaker and hearer(s) together.

The full pronoun template is available for all the pronouns, even, under certain circumstances, the second persons, appearing in a reflexive form:

- (6) Let me sing a song.
 him
 them

- (7) Let yourself/yourselves go.

The construction with the clitic, however, is much more restricted. But apart from the first person plural 's, at least the third person plural is sometimes seen in writing:

- (8) Never let 'em go.

More interestingly, the form *let's* itself has been attested in combination with full pronouns.² These examples have been claimed to be more typical of colloquial American English (*OED let* 14.a; Quirk et al. 1985:148). In (9), (10) and (11), the reference of the pronoun structure following *let's* is still the inclusive first person plural, but the full pronoun strategies differ a little. In each case, however, the full pronoun constructions could originally have served as a kind of appositional strengthening of the first person plural inclusive 's, as claimed by Hopper & Traugott (1993:11), concerning (9) and (10).

- (9) Let's you and I take 'em on for a set. (1929, Faulkner, *Sartoris* III.186; *OED let* 14.a)

² In what follows, examples are taken from the *OED*, research literature, and the web. Some electronic research corpora (British National Corpus, Helsinki Corpus of English Texts and ARCHER-2) have also been consulted, but the results were negative, in part because some of the uses are recent, typically American, and colloquial or substandard. See also De Clerck (2003). Obviously, the argumentative value of web examples is not the same as that of examples from linguistic corpora, not least because it is usually impossible to judge the linguistic competence of the web writers. The more marginal the example, the higher the chance that it does not reflect any linguistic process or system but a random idiosyncrasy or error.

- (10) Let's you and me duck out of there. (1950, J.D. MacDonald, *Brass Cupcake* VI.55; *OED, let* 14a)
- (11) Let's us not allow Anomie to set in.³

Examples (12) and (13), both discussed by Hopper & Traugott (1993:11), are also associated with US colloquial English, but we now see second person reference:

- (12) Lets [sic] you and him fight. (Midwestern American speaker)
- (13) Lets [sic] you go first, then if we have any money left I'll go. (Midwestern American speaker)

In (12) and (13) the clitic 's is no longer interpretable with first person plural inclusive reference. But there is a formal similarity to (9)–(11): (9) and (10) as well as (12) and (13) start with *let's you*, and three of them with *let's you and...* And there is yet another similarity: examples (9)–(12) all have plural pronouns. (13) can be plural as well, but according to Paul Hopper and Elizabeth Traugott (personal communication) one may suppose *you* to allow singular reference, too.

As De Clerck (2003) has pointed out, *Let's you and him fight* is the title of a thirties Popeye cartoon, which may have helped spread the pattern through that particular sentence. The authors of <http://home.earthlink.net/~thimbletheatre/theatreicast.html> call *Let's you and him fight* a 'household phrase'. In any case, De Clerck (2003) found a lot of variation on *Let's you and him fight*, with verbs with meanings related to *fight*, as in (14) and (15), both web examples.

- (14) Let's you and him argue.
- (15) Let's you and him make peace.

There is also variation among the pronouns. Apart from *you and him* the web also documents *him and you*, and very rarely, a third person plural and even a first person singular:

- (16) Let's they and them fight.⁴
- (17) Let's me show you.⁵

Note that the second person pronouns do not take the reflexive form, which suggests that *let* is not a second person imperative with *you* as object. It further supports the view commonly expressed in the literature (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985:148) that these occurrences of *let's* are not verbs anymore, but particles. This conclusion is also supported by the appearance of the

³ <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Human-rights/2003/anomie.htm> (April 27, 2004).

⁴ <http://smithsonianchips.si.edu/schreiner/1982/h82215.htm> (April 27, 2004).

⁵ E.g.: <http://www.lyred.com/lyrics/Geto+Boys/Makin'+Trouble/One+Time+Freestyle> (April 27, 2004).

nominative pronouns *I* in (9) and *they* in (16), and by the fact that *let's* is sometimes written as *lets*.

Hopper & Traugott (1993:10–14) discuss *let's* as an illustration of grammaticalization. If (1) and (9)–(17) are representative of the whole range of *let's*, then we can say that English has a grammaticalized hortative construction, well established in the first person inclusive plural, and venturing itself into the terrain of the second person and perhaps even, but at best only marginally so, the third person plural and the first person singular.

3. Dutch *Laten wij*

Dutch *laten wij*, as in (3), is also a grammaticalized hortative. Its origin is the construction with *laat ons* exemplified by (4). Just like the English *let us* construction, (4) has two readings: a permissive-causative one with an exclusive first person plural, and a hortative one with an inclusive first person plural. Just like the English *let's* construction, (3) has the hortative reading, and it lacks the permissive-causative one.

Interestingly, Dutch also had a structurally intermediate construction, illustrated in (18) (see Duinhoven 1997:480–492).

- (18) Laat we wechlopen.
 let.IMP we run.away
 'Let us run away.'

The intermediacy concerns the form of the verb and of the pronoun.

- (19) (4) IMP ACC
 (18) IMP NOM
 (3) IND.PRES.1PL NOM

As Duinhoven (1997:490–492) argues, it is not quite clear whether (18) antedates (3). (18), however, was frequent in Middle Dutch, and (3) was not, and (3) becomes frequent only in the 18th century, and it has now fully ousted the intermediate (18). (4) is still in use, too.

Like in English, the permissive-causative pattern is available for all grammatical persons, inclusive the second persons.

- (20) Laat mij/je/hem/jullie/hen gaan.
 let me/yourself/him/yourselves/them go
 'Let me/yourself/him/yourselves/them go.'

Like English *let's*, the hortative pattern (illustrated in (3)), is found also with grammatical persons other than the first person plural inclusive. But whereas English non-first person plural inclusive *let's* is typical of second persons, the corresponding Dutch construction is

equally acceptable for the first singular, the third singular and plural, but not, in fact, for the second persons.⁶ Below are examples based on Haeseryn et al. (1997:1020):

- (21) Laat ik eens gaan werken.
 let.IND.PRES.1SG I once go work
 'Let me go work.'
- (22) Laat hij maar oppassen.
 let.IND.PRES.3SG he but take.care
 'Let him take care.'
- (23) Laten ze dat nooit meer doen.
 let.IND.PRES.3PL they that never more do
 'Let them never do that again.'

4. A Semantic Map

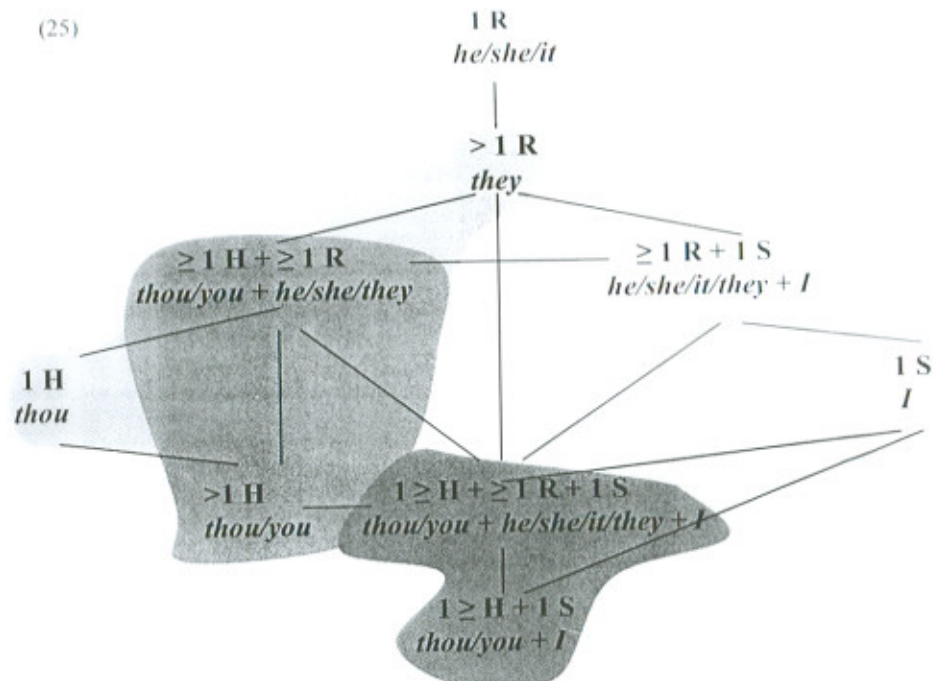
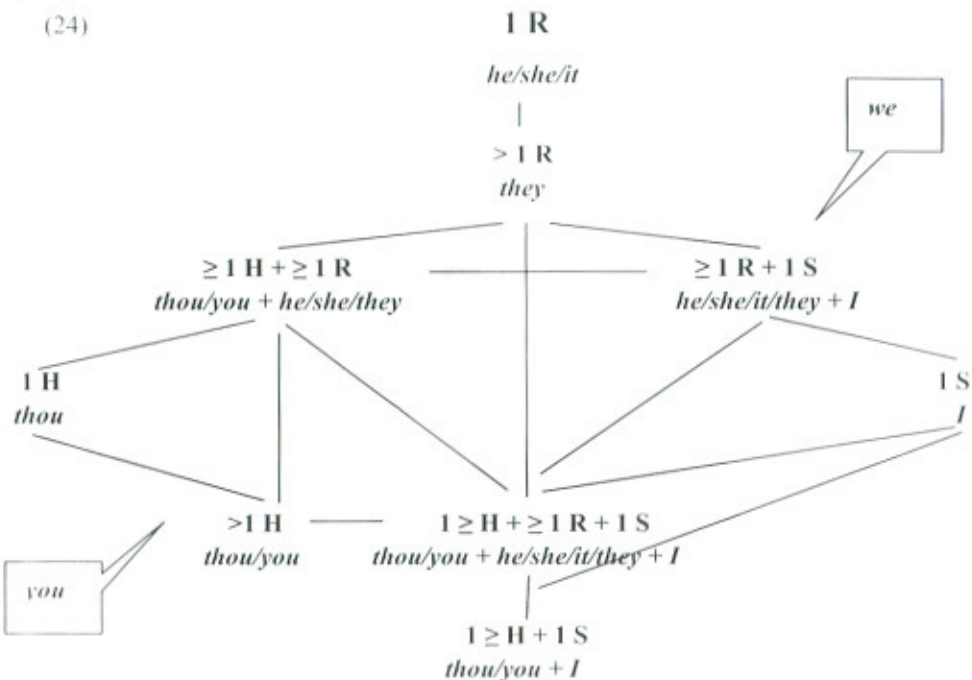
We have seen that both English and Dutch have grammaticalized hortative patterns. The source of the grammaticalization is the same, viz. an imperative of the permissive and causative verb meaning 'let', viz. English *let* and Dutch *laten*. The details of the grammaticalization are different, however. In English, the first person inclusive plural pronoun turned towards the imperative, it cliticized, it then seems to have allowed strengthening with *us*, *you and I* or *you and me*, a pattern which further allowed variations with *you and him*, bare *you*, and perhaps marginally also *they and them*, and *me*. In this process *let's* became a particle. In Dutch, the first person plural pronoun turned to the lexical verb. It was reanalyzed as the subject of that verb, and the imperative was reanalyzed as an indicative present, agreeing with the new subject.

The English strategy is now available for the inclusive first person plural, much less so for the second person plural, and at best marginally also for the second person singular, the third person plural and the first person singular. The Dutch construction is also typical of the inclusive first person plural, but it is equally acceptable for the first person singular, as well as for the third person singular and plural pronouns, and not at all for the second persons. It is this difference between English and Dutch that we focus on in the remainder of the article.

⁶ Note that we are only discussing hortative *laten*. There are still other derived uses of *laten*. An admirative use, for instance, does allow the second person. (a) is from Haeseryn et al. (1997:102). See Duinhoven (1993, 1997:484–499) for an attempt to sketch the connections between the uses.

(a) Laten jullie nou de eerste prijs gewonnen hebben!
 let.IND.PRES.2PL you.PL now the first prize won have
 'Hard to believe that you have won the first prize!'

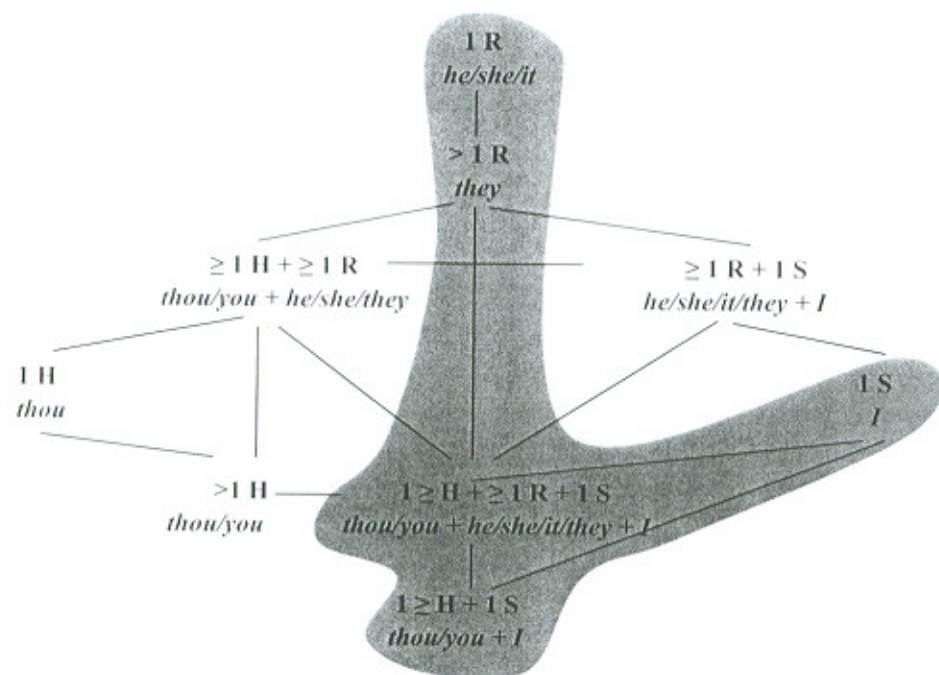
When a construction is associated with different uses, in this case, different grammatical persons, one presumes that these uses are semantically connected. It should be possible to construct a semantic space, on purely semantic grounds, and the prediction is then that any construction that ventures itself into this space is available only for semantically connected (contiguous) uses. This is the 'semantic map' technique (see Haspelmath 2003). In (24) we present a version of a semantic map that has proved to be of value in a typological study of imperatives and hortatives (van der Auwera et al. 2004). 'S' stands for 'speaker', 'H' for hearer; these are the speech participants. 'R' stands for a thing or individual talked about other than speaker or hearer, the 'Referent'. For simplicity's sake, the map does not always distinguish between singular and plural (or dual, etc.): this is what is meant by '≥ 1'. (25) presents this map with (quasi-)English paraphrases (with *thou* for the second person singular and *you* for the second person plural), as well as with a shading that indicates the use of the 'real' English pronouns, in case they differ from the paraphrases. The lines mark the semantic connections.



(26) is the map for the Dutch hortative construction:

We now come back to the English and Dutch hortative constructions under discussion. The shaded area on (25) shows the spread of the English construction. The relatively exceptional nature of the second plural is symbolized by a weaker shading. Weaker still is the second person singular, the third person plural, and the first person singular.

(26)



(25) and (26) show that the English and Dutch hortatives are typologically well-behaved systems. From a common center, the inclusive first person plural, the English system has developed towards including the second person, whereas the Dutch system has avoided it and encompasses the third persons and the first person singular. In both systems, however, the uses cover contiguous stretches of semantic space.

It is also worthwhile to return to the English examples with third person plural and first person singular, (16) and (17). These rare occurrences were found on the web, and we cannot rule out that they are merely the result of someone's poor knowledge of English. We have to remain careful, of course, but sentences (16) and (17) also make sense as resulting from an increased 'particelization' of *let's* and an ensuing paradigm growth.

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