

# Root past participles in Dutch: The role of truncation

Marcel den Dikken • Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics & Centre of Linguistics, University of Lisbon

**1 The playing field** Dutch uses past-participial constructs (marked with *(ge-+)-d/t/n*) as root utterances in a variety of different ways: (1) reduced, formulaic/proverbial conditionals and correlatives; (2) imperatives (see [Rooryck & Postma 2007](#)); (3) narration of past events; and (4) planning of the near future. This paper asks whether truncation is involved in any of these cases.

- (1) a. opgestaan, plaats vergaan als je opstaat, dan vergaat je plaats  
up.stand.PTC place gone.PTC ‘if you stand up, then your place/seat is gone’  
b. zo gewonnen, zo geronnen zo snel als je iets wint, zo snel verlies je het weer  
so win.PTC so flow.away.PTC ‘easy come, easy go; here today, gone tomorrow’
- (2) a. opgepast/opgelet! b. opgesodemieterd! c. afgesproken!  
up.watch/pay.att’n.PTC up.sodomise.PTC off.spoken.PTC  
‘watch out, pay attention!’ ‘sod/bugger off!’ ‘let’s! / it’s a deal!’
- (3) a. opgestaan, geld op tafel gelegd, (mijn) jas gepakt en weg  
up.stand.PTC money on table put.PTC my coat fetch.PTC and off  
‘I stood up, put money on the table, got my coat and left’  
b. (de) bus gepakt en daarna verder gelopen  
the bus take.PTC and afterwards further walk.PTC  
‘I/we/unspecified person took the bus and walked the rest of the way’
- (4) straks/<sup>??</sup>morgen eerst nog even een plas gedaan en een sigaretje gerookt en dan op pad  
shortly/tomorrow first still briefly pee.PTC and a cigarette smoke.PTC and then on path  
‘I’ll shortly go take a quick leak and smoke a cigarette and then I’ll be on my way’

**2 Conditionals and correlatives** The use of ‘bare’ past participles in conditionals and correlatives is highly restricted: (1a,b) are both proverbs; so are *jong geleerd*, *oud gedaan* ‘learn.PTC young, do.PTC old’ and *niet geschoten is altijd mis* ‘not shot.PTC is always miss(ed)’. This last-mentioned case is close to English *nothing ventured, nothing gained*, itself an example of a root-participial conditional correlative; and the English idiomatic renditions of (1b) feature root infinitives (*come, go*) or a root participle (*gone*). These constructions obey strict rules regarding their complexity. In the consequent of (1a), *plaats* ‘place’ must be a bare singular: it would not be possible to add a possessor to it (*\*je plaats* ‘your place’). It is also impossible to add temporal-aspectual or manner adverbials to either clause of (1a): (*\*eenmaal*) *opgestaan*, (*\*meteen/\*snel*) *plaats vergaan* ‘once you stand up, your place is gone right away/quickly’. In (1b), even though the interpretation intuitively suggests an adverb meaning ‘quickly’, it is impossible to add *snel* ‘quickly’ to the right of *zo* in either or both clauses: *zo (\*snel) gewonnen*, *zo (\*snel) geronnen*. This is parallel to *zo (\*geslepen) vader*, *zo (\*geslepen) zoon* ‘like (\*cunning) father, like (\*cunning) son’. These restrictions likely plead for an analysis in terms of two juxtaposed radically truncated structures.

**3 Imperatives** Though (2) may look like truncated clauses, there is good reason to believe that their syntax is not small. The grammaticality of object omission and object extraposition (see (5)) indicates (in light of the analysis of these two phenomena in Dutch imperatives in [den Dikken 1992, 2025](#)) that past-participial imperatives provide a home for null-operator movement to accommodate object omission and a landing-site for leftward movement of the past-participial VP to facilitate object extraposition. My perspective on participial imperatives is (6), featuring movement of the past-participial VP to the specifier of the Mod(al)P projected by the silent deontic obligation modal postulated for past-participial imperatives by [Rooryck & Postma \(2007\)](#). At a minimum, past-participial imperatives are as large as MoodP, not radically truncated structures.

- (5) a. en nou neergelegd (die bal)! and now down.put.PTCP that ball ‘put down that ball right now!’  
 b. en nou weggegooid (die rotzooi)! and nou away.thrown that rubbish ‘throw away that rubbish right now!’
- (6)  $[_{\text{MoodP}} Op_{\text{Obj}} \dots [_{\text{ModP}} [_{\text{VP}} t_{\text{Obj}} \text{V}]] [_{\text{Mod}}_{[\text{deontic}:\square]} (\dots) [_{\text{VP}} \dots t_{\text{VP}}]]]]$

**4 No silent auxiliary in past-participial imperatives** The syntax in (6) as it stands does not clarify the past-participial form of the verb: deontic obligation modals do not as a rule take past-participial complements in Dutch. But there is one context in which deontic modals (not just *moeten* ‘must’ but also *mogen* ‘may’) do combine directly with a past participle: (7) (see also [Verrips 1996](#) on child-Dutch cases of this type with an infinitive). For (7), postulating a silent auxiliary of the passive is unnecessary: participles do not require a selector, and passive syntax can arise in the absence of an auxiliary (cf. *with*-absolutes: [*with the problem solved*] *we can relax*).

- (7) a. het huis moet schoongemaakt ‘the house must be cleaned’  
 b. het bord mag (niet) uitgeveegd ‘the blackboard may/mustn’t be erased’

**5 Narration of past events** Unlike English, Dutch allows the combination of a present-tense auxiliary of the perfect and a past participle to make episodic reference to events in the past: *gisteren ben ik om 7 uur opgestaan* ‘yesterday I got up at 7 a.m.’. In light of this it is imaginable that (3) involves partially externalized full clauses in which the participles are selected by unpronounced auxiliaries. The fact that the nominals in these utterances do not have to be bare is compatible with a full-fledged clausal syntax. For narrative reduction in diary contexts ([Haegeman 1990](#)) and text messages ([Weir 2008](#)), it has been established that subject drop is not a case of truncation: it is possible in non-root contexts and in the presence of clause-initial high adverbials (*tomorrow (I) will travel to Vienna*), though not in subject–auxiliary inversion constructions — arguably because SpecCP here faces competition, with both the silent subject (a null operator) and the *wh*/Q-operator vying for this spot. Dutch narrative root past participles of the type in (3) have an optionally overt nominative subject: cf. (3b) and *dus ik/hij meteen \*(de) bus gepakt en...* ‘so I/he took the bus at once and...’. A complication in evaluating the significance of this observation is that nominative is the default case in Dutch. But the fact that in the presence of a nominative subject, the object can no longer be articleless suggests that more structure is projected when the subject is overt than when it is dropped, with truncation possible only in the latter case.

**6 Futurate root past participles** Intuitively the most peculiar use of root past participles in Dutch is the one illustrated in (4). The future-oriented interpretation of (4) cannot be attributed to a (silent) modal (as in (2) and (7)) because there is no semantics of modality involved; futurate root participles also do not have the illocutionary force of a (self-addressed) command: the speaker of (4) is announcing their plans for the immediate future, non-coercively. Past participles with auxiliiation are never futurate (*ik heb even een plas gedaan* ‘I took/\*will take a quick leak’). Because futurate root participles convey the speaker’s own plans, an overt subject would be redundant, hence does not occur. (The root-participial idiom *mij niet gezien!* ‘me not seen, i.e., no way I’m going to do that!’ is interesting here: it does convey the speaker’s plans (*i.c.*, their refusal to do something), but the implicit subject of the expression is evidently not 1SG, which would cause a Condition B violation for *mij* ‘me’.) But other indications of a relatively large clause size are available. One is that nominal expressions must be articulated: *\*(een) plas/sigaretje* ‘a pee/cigarette’ in (4). Another is the grammaticality of PP-over-V (‘PP-extraposition’): *straks eerst nog even <met Jan> gebeld <met Jan>, en dan naar bed* ‘first I’ll quickly make a phone call to Jan and then I’ll turn in’. Regardless of one’s analysis of flexible PP-placement in Dutch, it requires syntactic structure on top of v/VP. So futurate root participles are not radically truncated.