

**Case marking (accounts) in collapse:
Evidence from Early Modern Dutch egodocuments
(1572-1573)**

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Abstract. In this study, I examine the intermediate stages of case marking systems essential for testing hypotheses about the loss of case and its syntactic effects in Dutch. Past accounts typically compare earlier Middle Dutch (1200-1350), when a transparent case system was still in use, with Modern Dutch, which has lost morphological case. Scholars have made claims about the order in which the cases disappeared in Middle Dutch and generally view the end of the 15th century as the point by which the case system had broken down. With a several hundred year gap between the Middle and Modern Dutch periods and no detailed studies chronicling the deflexion process, however, these claims remain largely untested. Using a corpus of 42,000 words comprised mainly of unpublished archival manuscripts—eyewitness accounts chronicling the terror and destruction at the start of the Eighty Years War—I consider the questions of when, how quickly and where the case system collapsed, while situating the discussion in the context of the intense dialect contact situations that prevailed over the period of many centuries in Middle and Early Modern Dutch urban centres.

Keywords. case, deflexion, dialect contact, Middle Dutch, Early Modern Dutch

1. Introduction¹

Much has been written about the effects of deflexion in the history of Dutch. With respect to the loss of case, studies compare earlier Middle Dutch (roughly 1200-1350), when it is generally accepted that a transparent case system was still in use, with Modern Dutch, which has lost morphological case. Scholars have made claims about the order in which the cases disappeared in Middle Dutch (cf. De Wit 1997; Weerman & De Wit 1998, 1999) as well as the syntactic effects that the loss of morphological case had in Dutch. It has been hypothesized, for example, that only languages which have morphological case allow scrambling across arguments or the extraposition of DP arguments (cf. Neeleman and Weerman 2009). One reason that discussions of case marking focus on the two distinct periods of Middle Dutch and Modern Dutch is that it is widely believed that the case marking system had collapsed by the Early Modern period (the 16th and 17th centuries), and that the case marking observable in the texts at this time cannot be taken as evidence that case categories still existed. Such forms are treated instead as evidence of “language nurturing”, which had lingered on in use due to the partially successful attempts by Renaissance grammarians to resurrect a respectable case marking system for the language.

The earliest Middle Dutch texts already attest to considerable syncretism in the case forms; nevertheless we still lack the fine details of the intermediate stages between the fairly robust case marking of the early Middle Dutch period and practically no case marking in the modern language. We are left, then, with a gap of several hundred years in our understanding of the loss of morphological case and this raises several interesting questions. How can we know, for example, what the order of case loss is in Dutch if we have no detailed studies chronicling this process? Can we assume that case loss took place at the same time and at the same pace in the different dialects areas? If loss of morphological case has syntactic effects, and if the generalizations about scrambling and VO leakages are correct, how degenerate can a case marking system be and still allow for syntactic features that languages with much more robust case systems possess?

¹ I would like to express my thanks here to two anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper. Their comments and suggestions were extremely helpful to me in the revising process.

In this study, I examine the intermediate stages of case marking systems in Dutch by analyzing case marking in the egodocuments of three individuals from the northern province of Holland in the late 16th century—that is, the period by which time the traditional linguistic histories and handbooks of Dutch say that the case marking system had broken down. Since previous work on case loss in Middle Dutch draws upon data from the southern urban centres of Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp, it remains to be determined whether the findings of these studies are applicable to regions much further away such as those in the north. I focus in particular on the question of whether the breakdown of the case marking system took place at the same time and at the same pace in different parts of the Low Countries since establishing whether we can talk in terms of “case marking in Middle Dutch” (ie, treating texts, dialects and periods of Middle Dutch as representing a single grammar), or any other period in the history of Dutch, is essential to charting the breakdown or intermediate stages of the case marking system in the language. By contributing data on the state of case marking systems from individuals living in the Early Modern Period, prior to the publication of the first grammar of Dutch, we can also begin to shed some light on the question of to what degree Early Modern grammarians and language mavens were engaging in the artificial embellishment of the Dutch language by proposing the case systems they did—a question that can only be resolved by reference to what individuals *not* engaged in language refinement activities were actually doing.

In what follows, I first offer a brief overview of the claims that have been made about the loss of case in Dutch as well as make explicit the empirical basis for these claims (section 2). Against this background, in section 3 I present the findings of my analysis of case marking by three individuals who kept eyewitness accounts of turbulent events in the cities of Amsterdam and Haarlem in the early years of the Eighty Years War. In section 4 I compare the case marking systems from the eyewitness accounts to the case marking paradigms proposed by Renaissance grammarians to show that with respect to case marking, instead of creating artificial systems that bore no relation to the forms individuals were using, the early grammarians were engaged in more of a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, activity. In section 5, I return to the question of whether the breakdown of the case system occurred at the same time and pace in different parts of the Low Countries. In addition to the linguistic data discussed in sections

2 and 3, I introduce data from demographic, social and economic historians which underscores the point that where we take our evidence for case loss in Dutch can have a substantial impact on our understanding of the intermediate stages of case loss in the language. Section 6 offers a summary of the study.

2. The loss of morphological case in the history of Dutch

Before surveying the claims that have been made about the loss of case in Dutch and the empirical basis for these claims, it is important to offer a brief account of the early Middle Dutch case marking system. Table 1 provides an overview of the determiner system for Middle Dutch commonly found in grammatical sketches. The system distinguishes four cases (nominative, accusative, genitive and dative) as well as three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter) and makes a distinction between singular and plural. A further distinction is made between full forms and reduced forms (in brackets) of the definite articles with the full forms being the same as the demonstrative pronouns. A quick glance at the table shows that already by the Middle Dutch period, the case marking system has undergone considerable syncretism in the forms.

		Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Singular	N	die (de)	die (de)	dat ('t)
	A	dien (den)	die (de)	dat ('t)
	G	dies (des/'s)	dier (der)	dies (des)
	D	dien (den)	dier (der)	dien (den)
Plural	N		die (de)	
	A		die (de)	
	G		dier (der)	
	D		dien (den)	

Table 1. Determiners in early Middle Dutch (Burridge 1993:241).

As mentioned above, when the case system is discussed in the linguistic histories and handbooks of Dutch, the observation generally made is that (early) Middle Dutch still maintained a case system while Modern Dutch has lost morphological case. Furthermore, when case marking is noted in texts from the periods between Middle Dutch and Modern Dutch, particularly if the use of case marking can be shown to be inconsistent, it is often discussed using terms such as “archaic” or

“artificial”. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review in detail the statements made about case marking in the history of Dutch, a few references to the claims that have been made are important for establishing a context for this study, particularly as they pertain to the timing of the loss of case marking.

Starting with what could be described as the most radical claim regarding case loss, Hermkens (1985:537-538) asserts that by the early Middle Dutch period, the case system had already disappeared from the Middle Dutch dialects and that what we find in the texts from this period is part of a “written standard” employed by the learned few which bore no relation to how people actually spoke. This is a significant revising backwards in time of previous statements he had made that “in the 17th century, not a single Dutch dialect had a case system” (Hermkens 1973:46; 1981:70). In the context of “the decline of the case system during the Middle Dutch period” Van der Wal (1993) writes: “By the end of the fifteenth century Dutch case endings had almost completely eroded.” Far less radical, but also less specific in terms of time references, are the more recent statements by Van der Wal & Van Bree (2008) that at the end of the middle ages, the case system had seriously deteriorated and in the 16th century, there were only vestiges of a case system left. Finally, in terms of the order of the loss of cases in Dutch, De Wit (1997:49) states “[i]n the 15th century, the inflectional genitive was completely replaced by the vanPP” adding that the use of the prenominal genitive in later stages of Middle Dutch “gradually fade[s] and seem[s] unattested”. Weerman & De Wit (1998:18) assert further: “With respect to the ‘true’ (postnominal) genitive, we will argue that the change was completed in the 14th century, when the dative and the accusative were still present.”

A summary of these claims (excluding that of Hermkens (1985)) is presented in Table 2. It shows that when we chart out the statements made about the collapse of the case system in Dutch, we are left with century (or more) of “silence” concerning this topic. The 16th century is a period that does not feature in discussions of case marking in Dutch, except when they address the efforts of the Renaissance grammarians towards the end of this century and continuing on into the 17th century often in the context of addressing the (inconsistent) use of case marking in texts from this period.

Middle Dutch		1500s	Early Modern Dutch		Modern Dutch
1300s	1400s		1600s	1700s	1800s
<p>Middle Dutch has a morphological case system</p> <p>End 14th c. = loss of the genitive → </p> <p>End of 15th c. = collapse of case-marking system → </p>			<p> ← Early Modern Dutch case system = artificial/part of written standard</p> <p> ← None of the Early Modern Dutch dialects have a case system</p>		<p>Modern Dutch has no morphological case system</p>

Table 2. Overview of claims regarding the loss of morphological case in Dutch.

If we turn our attention to the empirical basis for the claims noted above we find that there is one important feature they have in common: either data has been used, or insights have been gained, from dialects that lie in the southern provinces of the Low Countries, in what is now Belgium. De Wit (1997) and Weerman & De Wit (1998, 1999) analyze texts from the southern cities of Bruges and Ghent spanning the 13th-15th centuries; Van der Wal (1993) and Van der Wal & Van Bree (2008) cite a reference to the lack of distinction between the nominative and accusative masculine singular noted in a Dutch translation of a Latin manual (*Exercitium Puerorum*), which was published in Antwerp in 1485; Hermkens (1973, 1981, 1985) relies on the writings of the prominent 17th-century author and political figure, Constantijn Huygens, whose parents were from the southern

Netherlands. Huygens uses the dialect of Antwerp in one of the farces he wrote (*Trijntje Cornelis*) set in that city and Hermkens uses these sorts of writings, as well as others from the 17th century, to inform his views about case loss in Dutch.

This very brief overview of claims made about the loss of case marking in the history of Dutch and the empirical basis for these assertions is crucial to the main goal of this study, which is to establish whether the breakdown of the case marking system took place at the same time and at the same pace in all the Dutch dialects and whether we can find evidence attesting to the order of case loss. In the absence of large-scale, systematic studies examining the loss of case in Dutch, a logical time and place to start looking for answers would be late in the 16th century in the northern part of the Low Countries. In adopting such an approach, the sample selected would be far removed from the work that has previously been done in terms of time and space. According to the statements summarized in Table 2, a sampling of texts from the late 16th century written prior to the first printed grammar of Dutch would yield little if anything that could be called a case marking system. For the purposes of this study, however, such a result would still be useful in terms of documenting the absence of case marking in a region far removed from the southern varieties which have, until now, been used in research into and discussions of this topic. To test how generalizable the statements found in Table 2 are, we turn our attention to the analysis of data from the province of Holland in the early 1570s.

3. Case marking systems in late 16th century northern Dutch egodocuments

For the purpose of this study, I analyzed the case marking systems of three individuals from the province of Holland taken from their own eyewitness accounts of the daily horrors they experienced in the early years of the Eighty Years War (1572-1573). Two of the individuals from the city of Haarlem—Cornelis Bartholomeeszn (CB) and Nicolaes van Rooswijk (NvR)—give brief

clues in their journals that they are from this town.² The third individual is a prior from the city of Gouda, Brother Wouter (BW), who was forced in 1572 to flee from Gouda to Amsterdam to escape religious persecution.³ The journals these individuals kept differ considerably in terms of their length and style, yet all of them make regular use of local Holland dialect features. A diplomatic transcription of Brother Wouter's 800-plus page handwritten journal was published by Van Eeghen in 1959 and for the purpose of this study, approximately 10,000 words (which equates to 25 pages) were analyzed. The two Haarlem journals chronicling the gruesome siege of that town in 1572-1573 are unpublished handwritten accounts. For the analysis presented below, I have used my own transcriptions of the original manuscripts totaling approximately 32,000 words (CB: 18,000 words, NvR: 14,000 words).

The findings presented in this section are based on the analysis of case forms for determiners presented in Table 1.⁴ The reason for this is first and foremost to look for evidence of case category retention where it will be most visible. Possessive pronouns in Middle Dutch and Early Modern Dutch, for example, did not always inflect, which is unsurprising given that they originated from the genitive forms of the personal pronouns. But we also find inflected possessive adjective forms in use in a variety of texts alongside the invariant possessive

² Cornelis Bartholomeesz actually tells "the reader" that having been "out of the land" for a period of several years, he happened to have returned to Haarlem just prior to the siege of the city. Moreover, he had purposely remained in the city because he had three brothers still living there and he wanted to be with them, their children and with the other members of the town during that horrific event. He maintained his account, admitting that he had "no sense of style" and "no idea how to write a proper history", for a more accomplished writer to use to record these events for the history of the Netherlands. As for Nicolaes van Rooswijk, the only bit of information noted in his journal about himself is a comment to having witnessed an event he was reporting on "at his father's table".

³ We know considerably more about Brother Wouter Jacobsz. He was born and raised in Gouda and at the age of 28 or 29, had assumed the role of the Prior of Steen. This monastery was located just outside Gouda, but had been relocated inside the town in 1549, the year before Wouter was made prior. See Van Eeghen (1959) for further details of his life.

⁴ One form, which appears in the texts but not in Table 1, is the neuter nominative and accusative singular *het*. As shown in Table 1, the unstressed form of *dat* was 't, which is the same form as the unstressed neuter 3rd person singular pronoun *het*. Eventually *het* became the full form of the neuter singular definite determiner, replacing *dat*. *Dat* is still the neuter singular demonstrative pronoun (cf. Van Loey 1970:145-146).

pronouns and this, for obvious reasons, would serve to obscure rather than clarify the extent to which case categories still existed in the late 16th century.

To set manageable boundaries for this study, I limited the analysis of case marking to four categories. They are the forms of the determiners in subject, direct object, and indirect object positions where the main cases used to mark arguments in these positions are the nominative, accusative and the dative respectively. To get a sense of whether the genitive case was still in use, I also analyzed determiners in possessive constructions. Table 3 provides a summary of the number of tokens found in each of the texts according to the four categories for analysis.

	Subject position	Direct Object position	Indirect Object position	Possessives	Total
BW	99	73	28	61	261
NvR	282	137	26	158	603
CB	213	71	8	83	375
Total	594	281	62	302	1239

Table 3. Number of tokens analyzed per category and per individual.

One final point needs to be raised concerning the grammatical gender system. This is crucial to any study of case loss, however due to constraints of space and, more importantly, to the under-researched nature of the topic (cf. Audring 2009:34), it can only be dealt with here in passing. The grammatical gender system in Dutch was already in a state of flux in the early Middle Dutch period. A common way to present the determiner system of Middle Dutch is to give a three-way gender system that distinguishes singular masculine from singular feminine from singular neuter nouns as in Table 1. In reality, however, many nouns had more than one gender. The historically feminine noun *stadt* “city”, for example, is listed in the Middle Dutch dictionary (CDRMLS 1998) as a noun that is feminine, masculine and sometimes also neuter. It is important to mention this

here because there is a tendency by some to view the shifting genders of nouns as evidence that the case system had completely collapsed in Dutch. Van Loey (1970:119), for example, cites the use of both *des* or *der* as genitive singular forms for a singular feminine noun to claim that these genitive forms were no longer part of the living language in Holland from the 15th century. There is, however, another way to view the use of these two genders for one noun, and that is to say that in a situation where a three-way gender system is becoming a two-way gender system (with masculine and feminine collapsing to form a common gender), certain nouns will appear at times to be unspecified for gender. This does not *necessarily* mean, however, that these nouns are not marked for case. Using *des* (genitive masculine singular) in a possessive construction involving a (historically) feminine noun shows the noun *is* being marked for case; what it does not show is that the noun belongs solely to the category “feminine”.

In the remainder of this section, I present my findings for the analysis of case marking in determiners in subject position (3.1), direct object position (3.2), indirect object position (3.3) and in possessive constructions (3.4). Section 3.5 provides a summary of the findings.

3.1 Case marking of determiners in subject position

It comes as no surprise to find that instances of determiners in subject position were far and away the most numerous in the corpus of texts analyzed for this study. Of the four categories distinguished in the analysis, the first two of nominative singular *die* and nominative plural *die* comprised the majority of tokens and there is little more of interest to comment on here. That leaves one more “non-nominative” category of forms that were found in subject position, which identifies the use of the “oblique” *den* in both the singular and the plural. Of the four categories distinguished in Table 4, only those involving oblique *den*, set off by grey shading, are of interest to a study of the breakdown of the case marking system. In terms of accounting for these forms in subject position, it should be noted that it is not uncommon to find the use of what some refer to as “accusative subjects”—that is, a phenomenon involving masculine singular nouns that is observed with increasing frequency in texts from the late Middle Dutch period up to the 18th century (cf. Van der Horst 2008:357, 580-581, 803, 1083). Although the instances of singular *den* in subject position account for the vast

majority of tokens below, there were still a few instances of plural *den* found in subject position, suggesting that a more appropriate label for these *den* forms would be “oblique subjects”.

While an extensive discussion of oblique subjects would take us too far afield, a few brief observations can be made about those encountered in the texts used for this study. Of the 28 oblique *den* forms found in subject position, 21 appear in sentences low in transitivity—that is, sentences involving stative predicates (5), intransitives (8), reflexives (2) and passives (5) (cf. Burridge 1993:152-160). That leaves seven *den* forms, all of which occur as the subject of transitive verbs. For a further three of these forms, the non-etymological *-n* could be a hiatus filler inserted between a final schwa and a word-initial vowel. Howell & Olson (2011) have documented this, for example, in other informal writings from this period. We are then left with five instances of oblique *den* in subject position, and these could simply be due to a confusion of forms.

	Nominative singular <i>die</i>	Nominative plural <i>die</i>	singular <i>den</i>	plural <i>den</i>	Total
BW	47	52	0	0	99
NvR	78	179	21	4	282
CB	60	150	2	1	213
Total	185	381	23	5	594

Table 4. Case marking of determiners in subject position.

3.2 Case marking of determiners in direct object position

About half as many tokens were collected in the analysis of determiners in direct object position when compared to those in subject position, and again this comes as little surprise. Here, too, we have the division between the expected accusative forms, which are used to mark direct objects, and forms that are not expected.

With respect to the latter, there were a few instances of plural *den* found which were similar to those recorded for plural determiners in subject position in section 3.1. Furthermore, one token each from BW and NvR could be accounted for in terms of a hiatus *-n*, leaving just two “unexpected” forms that cannot be accounted for in this way. Again, the “non-accusative” forms are shaded in grey in Table 5 representing those which are not expected based on the (idealized) case marking system presented in Table 1.

	Accusative singular			Accusative plural	plural <i>den</i>	Total
	<i>den</i>	<i>die</i>	<i>het</i>	<i>die</i>		
BW	22	14	15	20	2	73
NvR	58	25	26	26	2	137
CB	8	30	12	21	0	71
Total	88	69	53	67	4	281

Table 5. Case marking of determiners in direct object position.

3.3 Case marking of determiners in indirect object position

Searching for large numbers of tokens in indirect object position is a difficult quest at the best of times. Prepositional phrases are a frequent substitute for bare objects in this position, which is underscored by the fact that my corpus of 42,000 words contained only 62 tokens of determiners in indirect object position. There are two points to note about the data presented in Table 6. The first is that no tokens of the dative feminine singular *der* in the position of an indirect object were found in the corpus. The reason for this gap in the data is likely due primarily to the topics discussed in the journals. For the two journals chronicling the siege of Haarlem, for example, most of the indirect objects in the singular were masculine nouns such as *den coninck* “the king”, *den hertogh* “the duke”, *den prinche* “the prince”, *den secretar* “the secretary”, etc. The second point to note is that there was

clear evidence attesting to the use of the unmarked or nominative *die* in this position, although these unmarked forms still comprised less than a third of total number of tokens in indirect object position.

	Dative singular			Dative plural		Total
	<i>den</i>	<i>der</i>	<i>die</i>	<i>den</i>	<i>die</i>	
BW	8	0	4	14	2	28
NvR	10	0	0	11	5	26
CB	1	0	2	2	3	8
Total	19	0	6	27	10	62

Table 6. Case marking of determiners in indirect object position.

3.4 Case marking of determiners in possessive constructions

The final context to be examined in this study—that of possessive constructions⁵—is complicated by the fact that already in the early Middle Dutch period, the morphological genitive could be substituted with a prepositional phrase involving the dative preposition *van* “of”. In fact, Weerman & De Wit (1998, 1999) have shown that for the southern cities of Ghent and Bruges, the use of one option over the other is unremarkable for the 13th century. In the 14th and 15th centuries in Bruges, however, their data shows that the use of the “*van*-construction” increases dramatically as shown in Table 7. This leads them to conclude that the switch from use of the morphological genitive to that of the periphrastic *van*- construction was completed in the 14th century, at a time when the dative and the accusative cases were still present.

⁵ The label “possessives” is used here as a cover term for constructions that would have used the genitive in early Middle Dutch. Thus, in addition to recording the relation of possession between two nouns, the data includes instances of other semantic relationships, such as partitives.

	morphological genitive	periphrastic <i>van-</i> construction
Thirteenth century (Ghent)	47%	53%
Thirteenth century (Bruges)	46%	54%
Fourteenth century (Bruges)	16%	84%
Fifteenth century (Bruges)	4%	96%

Table 7. Possessive constructions: Ghent, 13th century and Bruges, 13th-15th century. (Weerman & De Wit 1999:1158, ex. 6 and ex. 7).

Given the findings of Weerman & De Wit for the southern city of Bruges in the Middle Dutch period, the analysis of possessive constructions carried out for this study using data from individuals from two northern towns (Haarlem and Gouda) is all the more intriguing.

Firstly, it must be noted that a simple division between the morphological genitive and the *van-* constructions that Weerman & De Wit employed was not possible for the analysis of the 16th-century egodocuments; it is clear that at this time in the northern Dutch varieties of our “informants”, a prenominal genitive could appear following the dative preposition *van* (1a) or to express part/whole relationships (2a) or that the genitive plural *der* could follow *van* when we would expect to find the dative plural *den* (3a). Examples (1b), (2b), and (3b) provide the corresponding dative options—that is, the case marking one would expect to find in ‘*van-* constructions’ and presumably the only options that Weerman & De Wit encountered in their analysis of Middle Dutch texts from the southern cities of Ghent and Bruges.

- (1) *a. int* *velt ... van des* *prinszen* *vollick* (CB, p. 9)
 in.the field... of the.GEN.M.SG prince people
- b. int* *velt ... van den* *vollick*
 in.the field... of the.DAT.N.SG people

van den prinsen
of the.DAT.M.SG prince

‘in the field of the prince’s people’

(2) a. *een deel van des prinsen Ruter* (CB, p. 12)
a part of the.GEN.M.SG prince knights

b. *een deel van den Ruter van den*
a part of the.DAT.M.PL knights of the.DAT.M.SG

prinsen
prinsen
prince

‘a part (group) of the prince’s knights’

(3) a. *van der vyanden* (CB, p. 36)
of the.GEN.PL enemies

b. *van den vyanden*
of the.DAT.PL enemies

‘of the enemies’

Secondly, the prenominal genitive expressions, which De Wit (1997:49) states “gradually fade out and seem unattested” in later stages of Middle Dutch, are well-attested in the corpus of texts analyzed for this study well over a century later. They account, in fact, for just over half of the tokens. Thirdly, the post-nominal genitive appears to be relatively healthy, being used in nearly a third of the possessive constructions containing a morphological genitive as shown in Table 8.

	pre-nominal Genitive	post-nominal Genitive	<i>van</i> + pre-nominal Genitive (<i>des</i>)	<i>van</i> + pre-nominal Genitive (<i>der</i>)	Total
BW	24	12	4	1	41
NvR	42	10	9	1	62
CB	10	19	5	11	45
Total	76	41	18	13	148

Table 8. The use of the morphological genitive by individuals from Haarlem and Gouda.

Turning to the use of *van-* in periphrastic possessive constructions (other than those discussed above in the context of the morphological genitive), in the 16th-century northern Dutch egodocuments analyzed for this study, the most interesting finding pertains to the number of tokens following *van* (53) that appear neither in the genitive nor in the dative case. Given that the number of tokens in indirect object position was so small, these results give us another glimpse into the use of the dative case with a preposition that historically governed this case, and here we see numerous examples of the feminine singular *der* in use. As with the other tables above, the data that can be used to shed light on the breakdown of the case marking system is shaded in grey in Tables 9a and 9b.

The data involving possessives requires one further comment, which has to do with the distorting effects of counting the ambiguous genitive/dative feminine singular *der* forms as datives only as shown in Table 9a. Treating feminine singular *der* as dative only, when in fact it is also the genitive form, gives the impression that the loss of the genitive case is greater, in fact, than it may have been. For example, treating the feminine singular *der* as dative only—particularly since its occurrence in the corpus is so high for NvR—results in the ratio of morphological genitive use to that of the dative possessive *van-* construction of 49% to 51%. Removing the unambiguous genitive/dative feminine singular forms from the overall calculations, as in Table 9b, results in a ratio of 60% use of the morphological genitive to 40% use of the periphrastic possessive dative *van-*

constructions. It is for this reason that the “snapshot of health” summary in Table 10 is calculated based on the numbers of tokens given in Table 8 and Table 9b.

	<i>van + den</i>	<i>van + der</i>	<i>van + die</i>	<i>van + het</i>	Total
BW	11	0	8	1	20
NvR	21	50	19	6	96
CB	15	4	14	5	38
Total	47	54	41	12	154

Table 9a. The use of the periphrastic *van*- constructions by individuals from Haarlem and Gouda.

	<i>van + den</i>	<i>van + die</i>	<i>van + het</i>	Total
BW	11	8	1	20
NvR	21	19	6	46
CB	15	14	5	34
Total	47	41	12	100

Table 9b. The use of the periphrastic *van*- constructions by individuals from Haarlem and Gouda excluding ambiguous feminine dative/genitive singular *der* tokens.

3.5 Summary of case marking in the definite determiner systems in late 16th century Holland

In summarizing the findings presented in sections 3.1-3.4, we can present the overall results in terms of the “health” of the case marking system as is done in Table 10, or in terms of its “decay” as in Table 11. Immediately apparent from a glance at the snapshots presented in these tables is the fact that case marking in the determiner systems of three individuals from small northern Dutch towns in the late 16th century appears to be still relatively intact. Crucially, there is no evidence to show that any one of the cases has fallen out of use.

Subject position (Nominative case)	Direct Object position (Accusative case)	Indirect Object position (Dative case)	Possessive constructions (Genitive case)
95.3%	98.6%	74.2%	60%
(566/594)	(277/281)	(46/62)	(148/248)

Table 10. Snapshot of “health”: percentages of expected case forms (with #s of tokens in brackets below).

	Subject position	Direct Object position	Indirect Object position	Possessive constructions (“periphrastic -van” substitute for morphological genitive)	
	singular <i>den</i> plural <i>den</i>	plural <i>den</i>	non-Dative <i>die</i>	<i>van + die</i>	<i>van + het</i>
BW	---	0.7%	9.6%	8%	1%
NvR	4.2%	0.7%	8.1%	19%	6%
CB	0.5%	---	8.1%	14%	5%
Total % of “decay”:	4.7%	1.4%	25.8%	41%	12%

Table 11. Snapshot of “decay”: percentages of unexpected case forms⁶.

The results presented in section 3 would seem difficult to reconcile with the statements that have been made about the loss of case in Dutch surveyed in Section 2. However before considering the reasons for why this may be, and whether or not we can reconcile the seemingly disparate findings that have emerged from the analysis of texts from very different parts of the Dutch-speaking area as well as from different time periods, I will comment briefly on the

⁶ The percentages for this table were calculated as follows: For “Subject position”, 25 of the 594 tokens (= 4.2%) in subject position for NvR were not in the expected nominative case and for CB, 3 of the total 594 tokens (= .5%) in subject position were not in the expected nominative case. The raw numbers for “Direct Object position” are: 2 tokens out of 281 or 0.7% for both BW and NvR. For “Indirect Object position”, the raw numbers are: 6 out of 62 (= 9.6%) for BW, 5 out of 62 (= 8.1%) for both NvR and CB. Making sense of the data for the possessive constructions is not as simple a task. The snapshot of decay in Table 11 concerns the periphrastic *van*- constructions involving *van + die* or *van + het*—in other words, those instances where we would expect the dative case used given that *van*- governs the dative case. The uninflected forms account for 53% of the (unambiguously) dative forms involving *van*- constructions.

issue of the “artificiality” of case marking in texts from the Early Modern period. In doing so, I offer an alternative view of the task that the early Renaissance grammarians were engaged in with respect to the state of the case marking system in Dutch.

4. Renaissance grammarians: resurrecting an artificial case marking system or capturing and ordering variants in use?

The frequency with which references to the artificiality of case marking in texts from the Early Modern period are made raises intriguing questions about the power of a few to control the linguistic choices of the many—especially at a point in linguistic history when the emergence of a standard language ideology was still a good century or two away. There is a substantial body of literature devoted to chronicling the work of the Early Modern grammarians and language “experts” (cf. Van der Sijs 2004 for a recent overview of this work) and in the linguistic histories of Dutch, this topic features prominently from the Early Modern period onward (for recent examples, see Janssens & Marynissen 2005, Van der Wal & Van Bree 2008). In fact, there is a sharp division between how Middle Dutch is treated in these works compared to Early Modern Dutch; for the earlier period, dialectal differences are the main focus while for the later period, the emerging (written) standard language takes centre stage. The *actual* language use (as opposed to contemporary parodies of it) of non-grammarians, non-published authors, non-academics, non-politicians and others who were not considered to be linguistically astute or “socially prestigious” receive little if any attention from this period onward. Two immediate questions are: What were ordinary people actually doing in terms of language use in the Early Modern period? And how does their language use square with that which was, as the traditional linguistic histories suggest, promulgated by the so-called language experts?

In terms of case marking, section 3 offers an account of what ordinary people were actually doing. We can use this data to compare it with the paradigms that the early Dutch grammarians were said to be prescribing. First, however, it is important to get a sense of what the systems looked like. In Table 12, the earliest two case marking paradigms published in grammars of the 16th/17th century are

provided for comparison. Immediately apparent when comparing the two systems is that they are different in a way that reflects another change going on in the language at the time—that is, the collapse of the three-way gender system to a two-way system that has common gender/neuter distinction. Spiegel’s case system is an attempt to capture the collapse in the gender system, while Van Heule’s case system does not take this change into account. This, in turn, accounts for the only differences (see bolded forms) between their paradigms, since the other apparent differences can be more accurately described as an increase in options.

	Spiegel (1584) <i>De Twe-spraak</i>			Van Heule (1625, 1633) <i>Nederduytsche Grammatic ofte Spraec-konst</i>		
	masc.	fem.	neuter	masc.	fem.	neuter
Sg						
N	de	de	het	de	de	het
A	de(n)	de(n)	het	den	de	het
G	des	des	des	des	der	des
D	den	den	den	den	de(r)	het/den
Abl.	vande(n)	vande(n)	van het/ vant	vanden	vande(r)	van het/ van den
Pl						
N	de	de	de	de	de	de
A	de(n)	de(n)	de(n)	de	de	de
G	der	der	der	der	der	der
D	den	den	den	den	den	den
Abl.	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)

Table 12. Case marking systems ‘prescribed’ by early Dutch grammarians (Source: Hermkens 1973).

Turning now to the comparison of Spiegel’s case system with that used by individuals just a bit over a decade prior to the appearance of this first printed grammar of Dutch, there are 12 differences (see bolded forms) to be noted in Table 13, eight of which represent options rather than completely different forms. When comparing the case systems used in the late 16th-century egodocuments with Van Heule’s case marking system that appeared in the second printed grammar of Dutch over four decades after Spiegel’s *De Twe-spraak* (Table 14), there are only five differences to be noted, all of which represent options rather than different forms.

Spiegel (1584) <i>De Twe-spraack</i>				Egodocuments (1572-1573)		
	masc.	fem.	neuter	masc.	fem.	neuter
Sg						
N	de	de	het	de(n)	de	het
A	de(n)	de(n)	het	den	de	het
G	des	des	des	des	der	des
D	den	den	den	de(n)	de(r)	het/den
Abl.	vande(n)	vande(n)	van het/ vant	vanden	vande(r)	van het/ van den
Pl						
N	de	de	de	de(n)	de	de
A	de(n)	de(n)	de(n)	de(n)	de	de(n)
G	der	der	der	der	der	der
D	den	den	den	den	den	den
Abl.	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)

Table 13. Comparison of case marking forms: Spiegel vs egodocuments.

Van Heule (1625, 1633) <i>Nederduytsche Grammatic ofte Spraec-konst</i>				Egodocuments (1572-1573)		
	masc.	fem.	neuter	masc.	fem.	neuter
Sg						
N	de	de	het	de(n)	de	het
A	den	de	het	den	de	het
G	des	der	des	des	der	des
D	den	de(r)	het/den	de(n)	de(r)	het/den
Abl.	vanden	vande(r)	van het/ van den	vanden	vande(r)	van het/ van den
Pl						
N	de	de	de	de(n)	de	de
A	de	de	de	de(n)	de	de(n)
G	der	der	der	der	der	der
D	den	den	den	den	den	den
Abl.	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)	vande(n)

Table 14. Comparison of case marking forms: Van Heule vs egodocuments.

To sum up the discussion to this point, when we compare the case marking systems which appeared in the first two printed grammars of Dutch (Table 12) with the case systems that emerged from the analysis of the late 16th-century

egodocuments from individuals from two small towns in the province of Holland (Tables 13-14), it is difficult to come away with the impression that the grammarians were promulgating completely artificial case systems that could not have been in use in the late 16th century. Much has been made of the fact that these early grammarians had created systems involving six cases (cf. Van der Wal & Van Bree 2008:191-192) and how this shows that these case systems were indeed artificial. What is important to recognize here is that they had introduced two *labels* (ablative and vocative) that had not traditionally been used in previous discussions of case systems for Dutch. These two new labels, crucially, did not introduce new forms into the language or new distinctions that were not already there in the language. Thus while it may appear to us to be unnecessary to have introduced a “vocative” category into a case paradigm which is just the bare form of the noun such as “man” or “woman”, it does not mean that the other case categories that were traditionally used to mark the major participants in a sentence or to mark the relations between nominals were therefore artificial.

Instead of focusing exclusive attention on this idea of artificiality of case marking from the 16th century onward, a more productive line of enquiry, if we seek to understand the relationship between the linguistic beliefs and attitudes of the early grammarians and their effects (if any) on contemporary language use, is to try to bring into focus how ordinary people were using the language at this time. We know that if we are to witness change in the language—and with respect to this study, that would be change in the case marking system or the breakdown of case marking system—there must be a period of variation that precedes such a change. It is difficult to conceive of a situation of linguistic change that does not involve older forms varying in use with newer forms. An interesting point to note in terms of Spiegel’s and Van Heule’s case paradigms is that they are clearly allowing for variation. These are not paradigms that represent the most conservative 13th century Middle Dutch case marking system possible, which allows for no change and no variation. For this reason, I would argue that the task that the early grammarians were engaged in was more akin to capturing and ordering the variants in use at the time rather than resurrecting case marking forms that are alleged to have—as much as a century or two earlier—fallen out of use.

One final point to make about the relationship between Early Modern grammarians' efforts at language prescription/proscription and the actual language use of ordinary people, concerns the question of how ordinary people received this work or how the grammarians themselves may have felt about their work. Interestingly, given the amount of attention that the work of the early grammarians has attracted in the traditional linguistic histories of Dutch to date, we know very little about the reception of their work by the wider population. That topic remains to be investigated.⁷ Hermkens (1973:19), however, provides us with a few intriguing details about the concerns of a few early grammarians themselves regarding the reception of their work by others. He explains that these early Dutch grammarians were actually apprehensive about the linguistic work they were undertaking. They were fearful of how their work might be misunderstood and criticized by others, and how they might be the subject of complaints or be slandered or maligned because of their work. In fact, several of the early grammarians sought the protection of more powerful men around them; Spiegel, for example, sought the protection of the mayors and the councilors of the city of Amsterdam. Crucially, though, these fears were not ones that those of us living in standard language cultures would be familiar with. Thus, instead of fearing, for example, that their work (ie, grammars) may be perceived as too lenient, allowing for too much variation, and therefore being too descriptive, it appears that they were fearful that their efforts might be construed as being *too directive*. As Hermkens (1973:19) notes, the activity of “arranging the language” (*taalordening*), at least in the beginning, generated a fair amount of resistance. Information such as this is a gentle reminder that it is important to consider not only what purportedly influential people say about themselves and others engaged in the same activities they are; it is equally important to examine, where possible, their actions as they are perceived by others and the response of others to their endeavours.

⁷ Some might argue that this is a topic that cannot be investigated because we cannot know how the broader population received the work of these early grammarians in the late 16th/17th century—that that sort of data is not recoverable from the sources at our disposal. If it is found that this indeed turns out to be the case, then it is all the more important to undertake studies which aim to compare how people *not* engaged in language matters are behaving linguistically, and to compare these results with how a minute, select, sub-section of the population (the grammarians) would like such people to be behaving.

5. Putting claims of case loss in Dutch in their socio-historical context

The final topic for consideration is one that has already been foreshadowed, and concerns the question of whether we can reconcile the results obtained in this study with earlier findings or observations made about case marking and case loss in Dutch. This study has shown that individuals from small towns in late 16th-century Holland still made use of a case marking system although evidence of breakdown is clearly visible. Previous work on case marking, or assumptions about case marking, suggest that the case system was lost in Dutch after the 15th century and that whatever case marking we can observe from the 16th century onward has more to do with the work of the early Dutch grammarians rather than any reflection of actual language use. While it may seem impossible to draw these differing accounts together in a way that shows that each is potentially on the right track, I believe it is possible if we place these findings in their socio-historical context. What we would be looking for is any historical information that might be conducive to rapid language change in different parts of the Low Countries at different points in time.

Such information about rapid change in the history of the Low Countries is, in fact, readily available in the work of demographic historians. In Table 15 we have population estimates for several southern and northern Dutch cities spanning three and a half centuries. The first difference to note is that the cities in the south were substantially larger than those in the north. What these figures do not do, however, is give us a sense of how dynamic this situation was. Ieper in the 13th century, for example, experienced the fastest growth of anywhere in northwestern Europe (Stabel 1997:33), and the province of Flanders (where the cities of Bruges and Ghent are located) had the densest population in medieval Europe. This density was estimated at 78 inhabitants per square kilometer with the greatest concentration around Bruges (Stabel 1997:26). The peak period for migration to the city of Bruges occurred in the decade of 1440-1449 after which point the city witnessed a steady decline in population (Stabel 1997:32). For the city of Antwerp in the province of Brabant to the north of Flanders, it is the 15th and 16th centuries that are the key periods for migration and population explosion. For cities further north in the province of Holland such as Amsterdam and Leiden, it

is not until the late 16th century (for Amsterdam) and the early 17th century (for Leiden) that these towns began to witness a doubling and tripling of their populations.

	Stabel (1997), Blockmans (2003)*			De Vries (1984)			
	beg 14th	mid 14th	late 15th	1500	1550	1600	1650
Ghent	64*	64	45	40	50	31	46
Bruges	46*	45	42	30	35	27	34
leper	30	40	severe decline	10	10	unknown	13
			Antwerp	40	90	47	70
			Amsterdam	14	30	65	175
			Leiden	14	12	25	67
			Haarlem	14	14	30	38
			Gouda	11	11	13	15

Table 15. The growth of southern and northern Dutch cities, 1300-1650 in thousands.

When we consider the fact that “urban living even in the best of times was a deadly proposition” (Murray 2005:97), for cities to grow at all they needed a substantial number of people moving into them (this is known as the “urban graveyard effect”). Furthermore, historical demographers have been able to determine that while smaller cities drew their new citizens from the immediate surrounding countryside, larger cities drew most of their immigrants from far away. If we combine the urban graveyard effect with these findings of historical demographers we may have an answer to the question of how a fairly substantial change, such as the breakdown of a case system, could have taken place at considerably different points in time and in geographically distant parts of the Low Countries. Given what is known about the potential of larger cities to attract immigrants from much further away than the smaller cities and towns, simply considering the question of dialect diversity, the smaller cities would tend to

reflect a more local, relatively linguistically homogenous population, while the larger cities would be, by comparison, linguistically much more heterogeneous. This has been demonstrated to be the case for the urban centres in medieval Flanders (cf. Thoen 1993) and such a scenario could favour the rapid and relatively early erosion of case distinctions and thus the collapse of the case marking system in that region.

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this section, if we consider the claims that have been made in the past about the breakdown of the case marking system in Dutch, and we consider where in the Low Countries the data for these claims has been taken, and for what time periods, we find that the evidence has been taken from *precisely those urban centres* which were witnessing rapid growth in their populations and therefore precisely those urban centres which would have been linguistically much more heterogeneous and where case loss might have been an outcome of such an intensive period of dialect contact.

6. Summary

In this study I considered the breakdown of the case marking system in Dutch by adopting an approach which focuses on the intermediate stages of this change. Given that the bulk of the work chronicling the collapse of case marking in Dutch still remains to be done, one question I sought to shed light on is whether we can assume that case loss took place at the same time and at the same pace in different parts of the Dutch-speaking area. My findings, based on an analysis of case marking of determiners from of a corpus of 42,000 words, and representing the language use of individuals from the late 16th century, showed that the state of case marking was still relatively healthy at a time when the case marking system in Dutch is believed to have long since collapsed.

To address what might appear at first glance to be irreconcilable differences between past claims made about case loss in Dutch and about when case marking became “artificial” in the language, and the findings of this study showing case marking still very much in use, I drew upon the research of demographic historians to underscore the importance of placing our linguistic analyses and

insights into their socio-historical context. While our understanding of the linguistic effects of rapid demographic, social and economic change is still in its infancy, I hope to have made a solid case for treating changes like case loss as one that we must assume occurred at different times, at different rates and in different places in the history of the language. As such, where we look for evidence of case loss in the history of Dutch—both in terms of chronology and geography as well as in terms of text types—*will* matter to the answers we seek about this substantial change that took place in the Dutch linguistic territory over the course of several centuries.

Given the prominent place accorded to it in the linguistic histories and handbooks of Dutch, there is one final point to make concerning the efforts of the early grammarians and how to make sense of their contributions. Although many of us are primarily interested in understanding people's actual language use in earlier points in time and why and how their linguistic repertoires may have changed, there is nevertheless a real need for a discussion of how to view the work of these purported language experts. In considering this topic, what strikes me is that there seems to be a blurring of distinctions between determining what was part of an artificial written language *at a given point in time* and what *became* artificial *over time*. With respect to case marking and case loss, *when*, and importantly *for whom*, did the descriptions of early Dutch grammarians become prescriptions and at what point did they also become artificial? The demographic data presented in Table 15 is important to consider in relation to this question. The grammarians and cultivators of the Dutch language that works like Hermkens (1973) or Van der Sijs (2004) survey began precisely at a place (the urban centres of Holland) and time (the late 16th/early 17th century) that coincided with demographic, social, economic and political changes on a scale previously unknown in the history of the Low Countries. It is crucial, therefore, to situate the findings of this study as they pertain to the case marking systems of three individuals from the northern Dutch towns of Haarlem and Gouda, in this historical context. The same sort of study carried out in Amsterdam in the early decades of the 17th century, and possibly even in the final decades of the 16th century, is likely to yield dramatically different results in terms of the degree to which case is still found to be marked. It is entirely conceivable that there were individuals in Amsterdam at this time whose writings show no evidence of a case

marking system, just as it is conceivable that there would have been individuals in 14th/15th century Bruges or 15th/16th century Antwerp whose writings no longer show evidence of a case marking system. There are, as discussed in this study, good reasons to assume that the breakdown of the case system in Dutch was not a change that took place “in the language” by a certain point in time. It goes without saying, however, that more research is needed if we are to understand the finer details how just how this major change unfolded.

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