Informal valedictions in Dutch: tennis ze!

Our aim in this paper will be to present an FDG-account of the following frequently used Dutch construction (the “ZE-construction”):

(1) tennis ze!
    play_tennis-IMP them-OBJ
    ‘enjoy playing tennis!’

The meaning of the construction is something like ‘enjoy X’, where X stands for an activity expressed by means of a verb and is characterized by a number of specific formal and functional features. Formally, the construction consists, minimally, of an imperative verb, carrying sentence stress, and the invariable element ze. Although, unlike the element ze, the verbal form has its regular meaning, not every verb is allowed: the verb must, for instance, be (pseudo-)intransitive, while separable complex verbs, as well as copular verbs, are excluded. Modification is restricted too: whereas locative, temporal and comitative adjuncts are allowed, manner adverbials do not seem to be acceptable. Furthermore, the ZE-constructions cannot be negated. Finally, the construction exhibits considerable orthographic variation.

The construction is also characterized by a number of highly specific pragmatic and discourse features. Stylistically, the construction is largely restricted to informal conversation. Its function is to express a wish: the speaker expresses the wish that the addressee will derive pleasure from performing the action described. Further restrictions on its use are that they can be used only with respect to actions that have been mentioned in the preceding context, that the addressee must in principle be in control of the action, that the action must take some time, and that the construction functions as a closing formula, marking the end of a conversation.

So far, the ZE-construction has not been studied in any great detail: in most existing analyses (including Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008: 347) the element ze is simply analysed as a dummy object. In this paper we intend to demonstrate not only that such an analysis is not very plausible, but also that the theory of FDG actually allows for much more convincing analyses. The element ze could, for instance, be taken to function as a kind of mitigation operator at the layer of the Illocution. Alternatively, the ZE-construction could be analysed as an Optative construction (its formal properties being triggered by an abstract Illocution). Another possibility would be to analyse the ZE-construction as a construction in the sense of Construction Grammar, in which case the element ze might be analysed as an invariable element in a partially filled morphosyntactic template. In our paper we will consider the advantages and disadvantages of these various analyses, and will eventually suggest a solution that will account for all the discourse, pragmatic, semantic and orthographic properties and restrictions observed, also taking into consideration the role of contextual information.

References