

# Do I taste change?

## An analysis of the development of the Dutch gustatory verbs: *proeven* and *smaken* (to taste)

L.G. (Lila) Oprins

RMA Linguistics, Utrecht University, Utrecht

Course 'Syntax and Cognition: Grammar-Internal and Grammar-External Interfaces'

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### ABSTRACT

For the past few years a change in the use of Dutch gustatory verbs has been observed. Dutch is unique amongst other Germanic languages for having two verbs to denote taste, namely *smaken* (descriptive) and *proeven* (active, cognitive). Both verbs are used in specific contexts and indicate different ways of describing taste. It has been observed that *proeven* is now being used where one would expect *smaken*. Thus, 'Why and how is *proeven* taking over the use of *smaken*?' Some accounts credit this due to semantic encroachment and paradigm levelling (following Poortvliet, 2017); that *proeven* did not initially mean 'to taste' and developed into a gustatory verb later, taking over the meaning of *smaken*, leaving the latter to be reduced to only a descriptive verb. I argue this is only part of the explanation, that semantics is creating a ground for change but that syntax is the driver. Indeed, I propose that due to the syntactic nature of the verbs the change is enforced; *proeven* is transitive and assigns an agent, whereas *smaken* is unaccusative without an agent. This difference leads speakers with difficulties assigning agency and therefore *proeven* is chosen.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the changes that has been observed over the past few years is that the distinct differences between the Dutch gustatory verbs have been fading away; this was observed by Poortvliet (2017).

Dutch has two gustatory verbs, namely *proeven* and *smaken*. Both mean 'to taste'. However, *smaken* has an extra element of being 'to taste like/of something', whereas *proeven* is the verb used to describe what you taste when food/beverage is in your mouth or the action of tasting something. This distinction is very important and a unique feature of Dutch, as other Germanic languages, such as Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish, only have one verb (Poortvliet, 2017). Furthermore, each verb has a specific way of functioning in a sentence. *Smaken* is a verb that is descriptive and thus, describes the taste of something; *proeven* on the other hand, is a cognitive, active perceptive verb that is used for the experience of taste, the action (Poortvliet, 2017). See example (1) and (2).

- (1) De taart smaakt goed  
The cake taste.3SG good  
'The cake tastes good.'
- (2) Ik proef de taart  
1SG taste.1SG the cake  
'I taste the cake.'

The essential change that is happening here, is where one would expect the use of *smaken* in (1), now *proeven* is used in (3) and (4).

- (3) ?De Taart proeft lekker  
The cake taste.3SG delicious  
'The cakes tastes good.'
- (4) ?Het proeft naar salami  
3SG. Taste.3SG like salami  
'It tastes like salami.'

This is an extension of the verb *proeven*, where *smaken* is used in standard language. This also means that the semantic space *smaken* fills gets smaller and *proeven* expands to become the descriptive verb. Of note, this paper is not in favour of the prescriptivist argument, where speakers should always abide by the standard language rules; rather, language should be looked at in terms of use. If a certain group of speakers have different rules or use language in a 'non-standard way' that is also important to consider. However, the fact that this group exists is interesting for linguists because it begs the question why this is. Why do the rules change and what are the underlying principles driving it?

The change described in (3) and (4) will be the focus of this paper, resulting in the following research question: 'Why and how is *proeven* taking over the use of *smaken*?' This paper will outline what the main drivers are of this change, in both the semantic and syntactic domain; to see how this change happens and what facilitates it. There is a gap in the literature regarding this topic, with only one academic article covering it, namely that of Poortvliet (2017), where she concludes it is a semantic change. Therefore, this paper will provide more insight into the change.

I propose that it is not only semantics driving this change like Poortvliet (2017) argues, but that syntax also plays a big role. I hypothesise that due to the need of agency assignment, the unaccusative verb *smaken* (with no agent) is losing significance and is therefore more difficult to use. Speakers want to assign agency to the item they just tasted, and are unable to do this with *smaken*, therefore they use *proeven* instead. This is how the change is truly driven. The claim made here is that syntax and semantics work together in facilitating this change to happen. This is enabled by the diachronic semantic changes that have been happening since Early Middle Dutch (Poortvliet, 2017) and facilitated by the syntactic nature of the verbs.

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 gives insight into the semantic change of both verbs, following analysis of the change provided by Poortvliet (2017). The third section further details what has been shown in example (3) and provides some insight as to where *proeven* is taking over. The fourth section provides my own syntactic analysis of why this change is taking place. The last section is the conclusion where I will posit that in the future, Dutch will also become a language like the other Germanic languages, with only one gustatory verb, namely *proeven*, where *smaken* will have been lost or only been kept as standard phrases like *smakelijk eten* 'enjoy your meal', i.e. 'bon appétit'.

## 2. The change from *proeven-smaken* to *proeven-over-smaken*

The change described above has been observed by some, as mentioned above by Poortvliet (2017), but also in an online magazine by van Oostendorp (2012) and Koetsenruijter (2017) in *De Volkskrant* (a Dutch newspaper). He describes that the change happens 'mostly in the north' and concludes that the verbs are used interchangeably and *proeven* is taking over, because in Old Dutch the verb *proeven* was included in the definition of *smaken*. This is an interesting remark, where the diachronic change of the meaning is highlighted (Koetsenruijter, 2017). However, the change being a Northern phenomenon, is probably not the case and yet to be investigated,<sup>1</sup> nonetheless the diachronic change is a solid explanation, one that Poortvliet (2017) also puts forward and that will be used in this article. It is important to explain this diachronic semantic change.

### 2.1 *Proeven*

According to Van Dale (n.d.), the official Dutch dictionary, *proeven* comes from 'to prove', 'to try', 'to make clear', 'to test', and ultimately routes from the old French word *prover* (which has its origin from Latin *probāre*), which mean the same (Poortvliet, 2017). The Dutch verb *proberen* (to try) also comes directly from that Latin verb (Philippa et al. 2003–2009). Another intriguing aspect of *proeven* is that the original meaning of 'to test', 'to try' and 'to research', 'to prove' etc. has been lost. This is still visible in the German *prüfen* or in English to *prove*. Both uses require a different verb in Dutch, *bewijzen* (to prove), *beproeven* (to test), *proberen* (to try) (Philippa et al. 2003–2009).

The point is that initially, the verb *proeven* did not mean taste, or have the gustatory meaning that it has now, until the Middle Dutch period. *Smaken* already existed as a form of gustatory meaning and then a second verb became available with the same meaning of *smaken*, which will be discussed in the next subsection. In middle Dutch, *proeven* meant 'to test food and drink', 'to approve the taste' (Philippa et al., 2003–2009). As Poortvliet (2017) states, it is essential that *proeven* had not yet taken the meaning of *smaken* during that period, otherwise *proeven* would have covered *smaken*, and the latter would not have existed anymore. With *proeven*

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<sup>1</sup> This is what I personally assume, because I have heard people from all over the Netherlands say this. However, no evidence from corpora has been collected.

meaning ‘to test’ back then, it meant that *smaken* was an essential part of the vocabulary as the tasting verb. This explains how *smaken* survived in the Dutch lexicon.

Later, *proeven* meant a whole host of things mentioned above, ‘to prove’, ‘to test’, ‘to try’, etc. and eventually, all these meanings were lost (Poortvliet, 2017), and as stated before, it now means ‘to taste’, ‘to research the sense of taste and observe taste’ (Van Dale, n.d.). This leads us to the meaning of *smaken*, because it seems that even though *smaken* was essential to denote the tasting of food in Middle Dutch, *proeven* now covers part of the meaning of *smaken*. What is, thus, the development there?

## 2.2 *Smaken*

*Smaken* was present in the Dutch language before *proeven*, and means to taste, but also perceiving taste, however it also goes much broader than this, namely to experience. (Philippa et al., 2003–2009). The Van Dale (n.d.) states that *smaken* means to enjoy or be pleasant/please (*bevallen* in Dutch) and most importantly it meant *proeven*. Furthermore, *smaken* means that it tastes like or of something. Even though Van Dale states that *proeven* in the meaning of *smaken* is dated, the sense of tasting is still very much there. This is used in a descriptive manner for *smaken* as opposed to the cognitive/active perception way like *proeven* now is (Poortvliet, 2017). The diachronic change described is that of *smaken* denoting cognitive and active perception as well as descriptive, while over time *smaken* is only left with the descriptive power. This means *smaken* has lost semantic load over time, and *proeven* has grown as a gustatory verb, taking it from *smaken*.

Having laid out the semantic changes both verbs have undergone, it is clear that *proeven* has a more clear-cut definition of tasting in the sense that a person really experiences the taste. Another apparent dilemma is that in order to be able to say something about the taste (*smaken*) you need to have put a food or drink item in one’s mouth (*proeven*) first. To make it concrete: to know something tastes like chocolate, you need to have put it in your mouth and experienced the taste of the chocolate (*proeven*), to then be able to say that it tasted like chocolate (*smaken*). This is what Koetsenruijter (2017) also pointed out; it is hard to distinguish between the two verbs, that clearly do have different meanings, depending on what one wants to say. This can lead to confusion, where the individual has already tasted it (*proeven*) and so when somebody asks for the taste, it can be confusing to get to the verb *smaken*, because it is hard to distinguish between the taster and the chocolate that it tasted like. This will be explored more in section three.

## 2.3. Paradigm levelling

Poortvliet (2017) argues that the choice of *proeven*, where the standard language assumes *smaken*, is due to semantic encroachment which results in lexical paradigm levelling.

She argues that we now live in a time where the two varieties coexist, but eventually *proeven* will be the only gustatory verb left, like in the other Germanic languages. This is an example of paradigm levelling, where the variety within a paradigm is lost and only one verb is left in a said paradigm. The explanation as to why a verb that first meant 'to try', 'to experience' and 'to test', became the sole verb for 'to taste' is due to 'metaphorisation' (Poortvliet, 2017). This is when a verb extends its meaning due to the metaphoric meaning it could take. In this case, 'testing something' extended its meaning (metaphorically) to 'testing something with the mouth'. This is where *proeven* went from a very versatile verb to one left with the narrow meaning, 'stealing' it from *smaken*. For a more extensive discussion see Poortvliet (2017).

Thus, on the semantic side of the argument, it is because of this meaning change between both verbs, where *proeven* now means what *smaken* used to mean, that speakers of Dutch now use *proeven* where *smaken* is expected. In the next section, this change of use will be explored.

### 3. What is licenced and what is not?

To establish the innerworkings of this change it is important to explore what exactly is and is not subject to it and what the speakers do exactly.

Below are some examples that have been taken from spontaneous spoken speech found on YouTube and from written language in the newspaper, to give a more balanced view of the change. Again, I want to stress that I am not trying to make any normative arguments regarding this change, I am merely trying to uncover why this change is happening in the first place.

As mentioned above, it is always *proeven* taking the place of *smaken*, and never the opposite; you will not find (5):

- (5) \*Ik smaak knoflook in de pasta  
 1SG taste.1SG garlic in the pasta  
 'I taste garlic in the pasta.'

Examples (6) through (9) illustrate perfectly what this change between *proeven* and *smaken* is about. They are all similar in the sense that one verb is replaced by the other, however they are in different positions and not all in the same constructions.

- (6) Het proeft niet eens naar puur  
 3SG taste.3SG not even like pure  
 'It does not even taste like dark chocolate.'

- (7) ... al proeft de makreel niet helemaal kraakvers  
 ... even if taste.3SG the mackerel not completely crisp fresh  
 ‘... even if the mackerel does not taste completely fresh.’
- (8) Ik vind hem niet chemisch proeven  
 1SG find.1SG 3SG.obj not chemical taste.INF  
 ‘I don’t find it tastes chemically.’
- (9) Ik was heel benieuwd hoe die ging proeven  
 I to-be.1SG.PAST very curious how that go.3SG.past taste.INF  
 ‘I was very curious as to how it would taste.’

As you can see in these examples, *proeven* instead of *smaken* is allowed in many different constructions, with the infinitive, in a subordinate clause, with personal pronouns. Moreover, it is important that it is not just in the ‘to taste like’ (*smaken naar*) construction that *proeven* is used, but also in other sentences such as (9). They illustrate that *proeven* can take over all the forms where *smaken* would be expected and it is not bound to one specific expression. This means that the spread of *proeven* is deeper than just one element of *smaken*, in the sense that all aspects of *smaken* are subject to *proeven*.

There is no denying that semantics plays a role in this usage-based change and that it might also drive it, as you can see in the examples above, the changing semantics of the verbs does contribute to the preference of *proeven*. Nevertheless, there is another side of the argument that needs to be explored as well, namely the syntactic side of the gustatory verbs, to enforce the argument for change and why this change is happening. I postulate that the syntax of both verbs carries the change forward and is the true reason for it. The semantics create a good ground for the syntactic change to flourish. This will be discussed below.

#### 4. The syntactic change

One thing that I have not mentioned yet but is essential for the analysis is the type of verbs *smaken* and *proeven* are.

*Proeven* is an intransitive/transitive verb. Transitivity of verbs is a way to describe the relations a verb carries. Does a verb need an object, how many elements can it adhere to, or can it be on its own, like intransitive verbs that do not take objects? In the case of *proeven*, it can be both, like shown in example (10), (11) and (12) below. I will consider *proeven* to be mainly transitive.

- (10) Ik proef  
 1SG taste.1SG  
 ‘I taste.’
- (11) Ik ben aan het proeven  
 1SG be.1SG to 3.SG taste.INF  
 ‘I am tasting.’

- (12) Ik proef de saffraan  
 1SG taste.1SG the saffron  
 'I taste the saffron.'

*Proeven* gets at least a subject, an object, and potentially another indirect object is inserted. *Proeven* thus wants two arguments and assigns different theta-roles (Koeneman & Zeijlstra, 2017). For this reason, *proeven* can assign two theta roles, namely the agent and a theme, where the object that is being tasted is the theme. This seems straightforward to use and does not pose any problems for Dutch speakers.

The verb *smaken*, however, is not transitive and has a different construction. *Smaken* is an unaccusative (ergative) verb (Broekhuis, Corver & Vos, 2020), meaning it is an intransitive verb without a semantic agent. This means that the subject has no responsibility of the action of the verb, it overcomes it (Koeneman & Zeijlstra, 2017). For example, with *smaken*, a sandwich or cake that tastes like X did not initiate the tasting like X, it happens to be tasting in a certain way and this is up for interpretation of the taster (i.e. the human eating the cake or sandwich), the non-existent agent in the sentence.

*Smaken* lacks an external agent (and the object does not get accusative case). Koeneman and Zeijlstra (2017) state that unaccusatives optionally assign agency, however in the case of *smaken* and *proeven*, if the speakers want to assign an agent, *proeven* is required; and therefore, *smaken* does not assign an agent in any case. It is also because *smaken* normally takes unanimated subject, which are not agents (Broekhuis et.al., 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Let us consider examples (1) and (2) again, shown here again in (13) and (14):

- (13) De taart smaakt goed  
 The cake taste.3SG good  
 'The cake tastes good.'

- (14) Ik proef de taart  
 1SG taste.1SG the cake  
 'I taste the cake.'

The subject is tasting the cake, so *proeven* is used, and the cake tastes good, so *smaken* is used. Thus, the essential difference, other than semantics, is verb typed. I argue that this is what is driving the underlying change between the two verbs. The fact that they are merged differently and behave differently syntactically drives people to choose the agency over non-agency, because since the agent is tasting (*proeven*) the food or drink item, but it is in fact item tasting like (*smaken*)

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2 *Smaken* normally takes an inanimate subject; however, it can also take animate objects (humans), but only in very context specific sexual situations would 'jij smaakt lekker' (you taste good) be accepted.

that is described, is a difficult transition and of loss of ‘agency’. Speakers want to assign *smaken* with the agent, which is not possible, and therefore *proeven* is easier to use.

Here is an example: Somebody just tasted a hazelnut chocolate cookie and they want to express that this cookie did in fact really taste like hazelnut. They just tasted it with their mouth (*proeven*), so there is a clear agent, but when they want to express what the cookie tasted like, the sense of agency is still there. They want to assign that agency to the cookie, because it did really taste like what they expected and it was in their mouth. Therefore, the unaccusative verb *smaken* will not satisfy this need for agency, which leads to *proeven* taking over. Even if the sentence does not require an agent, there is need, from the speaker, to still have it there.

Indeed, when *proeven* is used instead of *smaken* it is often when they want to assign a taste (*smaak*) to a food item they just ate, for example:

A just took a bite of a red velvet chocolate cookie and wants to tell B how it tasted<sup>3</sup>

A, specifically talking about the chocolate cookie they just took a bite out of:

- (15) Hij proeft nog steeds best wel vers  
 3SG taste.3SG still kind of fresh  
 ‘He still kind of states fresh.’

The fact that A assigns animacy to the red velvet chocolate cookie is almost as if the chocolate tastes itself, and therefore needs to have agency. *Smaken* does not licence agency and thus *proeven* is chosen.

What the problem is here is the lack of transparency between who is doing the *proeven* or *smaken* (tasting). When we have tasted a cookie, it is easy to think that we have tasted it and thus need an agent (*proeven* is needed), whereas if we want to say something about how the cookie tasted (*smaken*) we get ‘confused’ because we have just tasted it with our mouth and therefore, we feel it is us that is tasting it. It is, in reality, the object we ate that tastes like it. This creates a sense of agency, because we are tasting it; regardless whether a sentence needs an agent. This is why I postulate that *proeven* is used instead of *smaken* when describing the taste of the object.

In this section it has become clear that the syntactic type of the verb and the way it is merged is essential in understanding the change in verb use. The urge to assign an agent to a noun that normally does not take that theta-tol, results in the use of *proeven* over *smaken*, the former having an external agent.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a direct example from a YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joqddk2VRpU>, timestamp: 09:28.



## 5. Conclusion

This paper sets out to explore why the Dutch gustatory verbs *smaken* and *proeven*, two verbs with distinct uses, meaning and positions, are converging: *proeven* is taking over the use of *smaken*.

I postulate that the similarities, yet distinctiveness, of the semantics of both verbs give ground for the encroachment of *proeven* over *smaken*. However it is also important to look deeper into the syntactic operations of both verbs. If we look at the semantics of both verbs, *proeven* did not initially mean ‘to taste’, but ‘to try’, ‘to investigate’ and ‘to test’. Over time, it became ‘to test with one’s mouth’ and eventually meant ‘to taste’, which is its main use today; denoting the cognitive and active perception of tasting. Thus, the meaning of *proeven* extended at first, and then lost nearly all of it, resulting in a narrow sense.

*Smaken* on the other hand was used for cognitive, active, and descriptive perception, at least until *proeven* started to become a gustatory verb. *Smaken* then lost all its semantic content except for the descriptive perception. It is now used to say something tastes like or of something. Poortvliet (2017) argues that this is paradigm levelling and thus gives ground for *proeven* to take over the use of *smaken*.

Semantics is a very important aspect of language and do drive lexical change, however I advance that it is essential to look at the syntactic behaviour of the verbs. The verbs are inherently different when it comes to theta-role assignment. *Proeven* is transitive and assigns an agent, whereas *smaken* is unaccusative and does not merge with an external agent. This is the underlying mechanism that drives the change in use of verbs.

Speakers of Dutch want to assign a taste to an object they just ate but are unable to make the subject the agent with the expected verb *smaken*, and therefore, they use *proeven*. This has been shown, specifically in example (15). The need to assign agency drives the change. I argue that this change is a combination of semantics and syntax. The fact that *proeven* has taken over some meaning of *smaken* gives ground for the verb-type (transitivity) to push the agent assignment and ultimately *proeven* to be chosen.

For future research it would also be insightful to investigate a more sociolinguistic explanation as to who is driving this change. Is it really, as Koetsenruijter (2017) has stated, the north that is prompting this change? Are all generations and genders undergoing this change? I also propose to do a grammaticality judgement test to see what the acceptance and preference is of the examples presented in the paper, as this could provide insight into the syntax-semantics interface.

In conclusion, it is important to consider different aspects of language to investigate what speakers are really doing, and maybe in a few centuries from now *smaken* will be lost completely and *proeven* will be the ultimate gustatory verb. ■

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