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Conditional Constructions: The Special Case of Modern Dutch *mits*

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As a contribution to research into conditional constructions, this article presents a novel analysis of the Modern Dutch construction defined by the conditional conjunction *mits* 'provided that', a less frequent subordinating conjunction that differs in meaning from the main conditional conjunctions *als* and *indien* (both 'if'). Using examples from a corpus of 300 text passages containing the construction, we discuss its syntactic and semantic characteristics. It is found that clauses introduced by *mits* are only appended as a condition to matrix expressions that imply the existence of some specific DESIRABILITY. We discuss the general viability of the notion of desirability for grammatical analysis. In the interpretation of each instance of a *mits*-construction, the precise identity of the desirability concerned has to be determined, as well as its locus. This process makes knowledge available about a specific balance of interests of the communicators and other concerned parties. The Dutch *mits*-construction is thus found to lead the interpreter to understand details of configurations of diverging interests.[*]

1. Introduction.

Modern Dutch has a special conditional conjunction *mits* 'provided that', which has no cognate forms with conditional meaning in either German or English. Whereas conditional constructions in general have been the object of extensive modern research,[1] the literature on *mits* is scarce. This article aims to fill parts of the gap and analyse the use of modern constructions with *mits*. To give a first impression, we start with two examples.

[*] I am grateful for the perspicuous remarks and suggestions of two anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article.

[1] Some recent studies are Declerck & Reed 2001 and Dancygier & Sweetser 2005.

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(1) Alles mag in een schilderij, dun of dik, warrig of strak, **mits** het maar verrast (*Beelding* 3 nr. 8, 14, 1989).

'Anything goes on a canvas, the paint may be applied thinly or in thick layers, muddled or in taut forms, **on condition that** the result is startling.'

(2) Een rustig, licht januarigerecht: een omelet met ui en tomaat. Zeer lekker, **mits** goed gedaan (from the cooking section in *De Volkskrant*, January 4, 2007).

'A calm, light January dish: omelette with onions and tomato. Very tasty, **provided that** [it is] well prepared.'

Quotation 1 is from an interview with the Dutch painter and poet Lucebert. He claims that for a painter, no restrictions hold as to painting style, but he appends a *mits*-clause to the effect that under all circumstances, the result has to be startling to the observer. Otherwise, his general claim would not hold true after all. In quotation 2, the homely dish of omelette with onions and tomato is qualified as 'very tasty'. However, the phrase with *mits* introduces the special condition that the cooking process is handled adequately. If that condition is not met, the high degree of tastiness will not be guaranteed. As a first approximation, we can state that the part with *mits* names a strict condition on the fulfilment of the state of affairs expressed by the other part of the construction.[2] We note the necessity of taking into account not only the *mits*-phrase itself but also the part to which it is appended, as is the case for conditional constructions generally.

From the Dutch grammatical literature, it would seem that modern *mits* is not much different in principle from the much more frequent

[2] Roughly equivalent Dutch expressions are *als … tenminste, als … maar, op voorwaarde dat*. The English translations of *mits* are *provided/providing/supposing/on condition/on the understanding (that), so long as, only if* (Quirk et al. 1985:1089, 1093, 1103). As German equivalents may be cited (Durrell 1996:400–401): *unter der Bedingung/Voraussetzung dass, vorausgesetzt dass* with subordinate clause as well as *wenn nur, vorausgesetzt* with main clause; *wofern* and *sofern* are sometimes also mentioned.

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conditional conjunctions *als* and *indien*. Most grammars call *mits* somewhat antiquated and formal in style, at best noticing the strict nature of the condition expressed (the condition is a "necessary" one) and the relative ease of using *mits* with incomplete clauses.[3] However, preliminary investigations of the occurrence of *mits* in current language use (on the basis of print media, Google searches and the Corpus of Spoken Dutch *CGN*) provide thousands of examples, which indicate that *mits* in Modern Dutch is less of a rarity than it is thought to be; so far, a pilot corpus of 300 quotations has been assembled. Even more interesting is the fact that the overall meaning configuration imposed by constructions with *mits* turns out to be quite specific. Before we enter into the detailed discussion of the syntactic and semantic characteristics, we give a brief historical overview.

2. A Short History of Dutch *mits*.

The history of *mits* helps to appreciate some features of its modern use.[4] The historical dictionaries of Dutch (*EWN*, *VMNW*, *MNW* and *WNT*) reveal that conditional *mits* is related to the modern Dutch noun *midden* 'middle' and the element *mid-* in several compound words such as *midscheeps* 'midships' (referring to a local 'middle' part), and *midzomer* 'midsummer' and *middernacht* 'midnight' (bearing on temporal 'middle' parts). Participating in the use of an all-Germanic stem, at least from the thirteenth century onwards Dutch dialects knew an adjective *mit*, *mid* and an adverb *mids*, *mits* with a local or temporal meaning 'in the middle (of)'. The Middle Dutch adverbial form *mids* was already used as a preposition with instrumental or causal meanings as well. It is instructive to grasp the logic of a local and temporal preposition having a causal meaning from an example about a king Quintiaen:

(3) Want du best soe in sinen loue / **Mits** der scoenheit van dinen liue / Dat hi di hebben wille te wive (East Flanders, dated 1290, cited from *VMNW*, 3130)

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[3] Compare Den Hertog 1973, vol. 2:107, 110; Rijpma-Schuringa 1969:182, 218; *ANS* 1997:10.3.8.

[4] A condensed summary can be found in Van Es 1953:83 and Van Es & Van Caspel 1975:140. See also Daalder 2007.

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'he admires you so much / **because of** the beauty of your body, / that he wants to have you as a wife'

Starting from a presupposed situation in which king Quintiaen was not yet aware of the beautiful woman, the fact of the beauty of her body and the king's setting eyes on it is the fact 'in the middle', which leads to a subsequent situation in which he admires the woman so much that he wants to have her as a wife. It is not surprising that the fact 'in the middle', with its causal role, may also be expressed by a full clause, which is then introduced by *mits dat* 'because' (*dat* 'that' being the most neutral subordinating conjunction), as in quotation 4.

(4) dese Rente was ofghelost ende vercocht **mids dat**mer niet vele der of en conste ghecrijghen (Bruges, 15th century, cited from *VMNW*, 3130).

'this investment voucher had been sold **because** we could not get much yield from it.'

The "etymologizing" explanation of this quotation reads as follows. Starting from a normal state of affairs of positive prospects for the investment, there was the "middle" situation in which the investment turned out not to yield sufficient profit; this, then, was the reason for selling the voucher. A state of affairs that is temporally "in the middle" between two other states of affairs may thus be endowed with a causal role quite easily.[5]

A relatively small formal change occurred from the 16th century onwards, when the subordinator *dat* was dropped sometimes and *mits* itself was left with the role of a subordinating conjunction with causal meaning ('because, as a result of the fact that'). A bigger step was taken when, from the eighteenth century onwards, the conjunction *mits* occasionally was employed to introduce non-factual states of affairs that expressed a means **to be used** to achieve some result—in other words as

[5] In Traugott's (1985:292) survey of the historical sources of conditional markers, Dutch *mits* can thus be ranged under the fifth category, which encompasses several kinds of temporal expressions. No temporal indications of "middle" periods are cited here, however, which makes Dutch conditional *mits* into something of an exception.

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a **condition** on making the named result become a reality (*WNT*, vol. 9, 891). What remained the same in the new usage was the temporally "middle" position of the state of affairs expressed in the *mits*-clause. We need not say that causes and conditions are conceptually linked in a special way over and above the fact that causal and conditional clauses both express a state of affairs that is temporally ordered "in the middle" between two other states of affairs.

In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the conditional use of the conjunction *mits* gradually became the norm in the Dutch standard language. The *mits*-construction thus had become a truly different one. In quotation 2, for instance, it is certainly not stated as a fact that an omelette is "well prepared" per se. Rather, the *mits*-phrase names an adequate preparation as a condition which has to be fulfilled for the dish to be "very tasty." The prepositional use of *mits,* which continued to be used in Flemish Dutch, likewise developed the conditional meaning (see quotations 9–10 in the next section). This brings us back to the details of the modern construction.

3. The Construction.

3.1. Patterning.

Following the custom of the study of conditionals, we use the variable letters p and q in the quotations to identify the different roles of the two parts of *mits*-constructions. The condition (the PROTASIS, in traditional logical terminology) will be represented as p, while the expression to which the condition is appended (the APODOSIS) is represented as q. In the corpus, we find three patterns, as indicated in 5 (below): *mits* p may be in final position, which is by far the most frequent pattern (formula 5a), or it may interrupt q, of which then a part follows the *mits*-phrase (formula 5b), or it may precede q (formula 5c). Quotation 6 is an example of pattern 5a, which we also encountered in examples 1–2. Quotation 7 exemplifies pattern 5b; quotation 8 does the same for pattern 5c.

(5) a. q, mits p
b. q first part, mits p, q second part
c. mits p, q

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(6) Kopiëren mag **[q]**, **mits** voor eigen gebruik **[mits p]** (nl.wikipedia.org)

'Copying is allowed **[q]**, **provided** [it is] for personal use **[provided p]**'

(7) Alle uitgaven van de stichting Drukwerk in de Marge zijn hier **[q** first part**]** – **mits** nog leverbaar **[mits p]** – verkrijgbaar **[q** second part**]**. Het adres van de winkel: […] (www.drukwerkindemarge.com)

'All publications of the Society for Marginal Print Work **[q** first part**]** – **provided** [they are] still in print **[provided p]** – are available here **[q** second part**]**. Address of the shop: …'

(8) **Mits** niet anders vermeld **[mits p]** valt de inhoud van deze pagina onder een Creative Commons Licentie **[q]** (www.denkpatroon.nl)

'**Provided that** [there is] no statement to the contrary **[provided that p]**, the contents of this page are subject to a Creative Commons License **[q]**'

Examples 6–8 also show a further important characteristic of *mits*-constructions: frequently, p is not a full clause but just a phrasal constituent, in particular some participial, adjectival or adverbial modifier that aligns with a constituent of q. In 6, *voor eigen gebruik* 'for personal use' is an adverbial modifier to the 'copying' of part q. The condition p which has to be fulfilled in order for copying to be allowed as it is stated in q, consists of the copying being done specifically for personal use. Similarly, in 7 the adjectival phrase *nog leverbaar* 'still in print' aligns as a secondary predication with *alle uitgaven van de Stichting […]* 'all publications of the Society […]' in part q. A fulfilment of that predication, that is, that the requested publications are still in print, forms a condition on the reality of their immediate availability in the shop. In quotation 8, *niet anders vermeld* 'not stated differently' is slightly different in the fact that is does not align grammatically with a constituent of q. It is a fixed phrase which stipulates that q will be verified unless it is the subject of an explicit exception.

Separate mention has to be made of a further constructional possibility, which is restricted to Flemish Dutch. As mentioned at the end of the last section, Flemish Dutch has retained the older use of *mits* as a

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preposition, that is with the part p defined by a noun. That noun normally is a nominalization, as in 9 and 10.

(9) Men kan er dus FreePhone 24 van maken **[q] mits** 5 euro opleg **[mits p]** (blauridder.net)

'It is possible to change the contract into FreePhone 24 **[q] on condition of** a surcharge of 5 euros **[on condition of p]**'

(10) **Mits** goed gedrag **[mits p]** kan een moordenaar vroeger vrijkomen **[q]** (serreberre.spaces.live.com)

'**On condition of** good behaviour **[on condition of p]**, a murderer may be released early **[q]**'

The meaning of this construction is not different from the construction with a full or reduced clause as p, thus making the distance to Netherlandic Dutch rather small. *Mits goed gedrag* 'on condition of good behaviour' in 10 with the nominalized form *gedrag* sets the same strict restriction on an early release becoming real as would be expressed by the corresponding clause *mits hij zich goed heeft gedragen* 'on condition that he has been behaving well'.

3.2. Semantics.

We now turn to the semantics of the construction. From the examples discussed, it has become clear that the part p names a condition which has to be satisfied for the fulfilment of whatever it is that q states. The condition is a necessary one—it is not a sufficient condition or a necessary-and-sufficient one. The recipe author of quotation 2 will agree immediately that an adequate cooking process is not in fact the only condition for the omelette to emerge 'very tasty'. He has just picked out a necessary condition in relation to which he cares to instruct his readers. Similarly for quotation 6: apart from the condition that the copying is done for personal use, there are a host of other conditions to be met in order for it to be in fact allowed (as it is made clear on the relevant web page). The part p of a *mits*-construction constitutes no more than a necessary condition. It comes therefore as no surprise that quotations with multiple *mits*-clauses are indeed occasionally found. In quotation 11, reproducing a copyrighted work is said to be allowed, provided that

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only a small part is reproduced **and** provided that the condition of paying a reasonable fee is met:

(11) **Mits** [niet meer dan] een klein gedeelte van een beschermd werk gereproduceerd wordt **[mits p_1]**, mag dat **[q] mits** een billijke vergoeding wordt betaald **[mits p_2]**. Dit is de basis voor het kopieerrecht (Wikipedia:Citaatrecht/zin_en_onzin)

'**Provided that** only a small part of a copyrighted work is reproduced **[provided that p_1]**, it is allowed **[q] provided that** a fair compensation is paid **[provided that p_2]**. This is the basis of the right of reproduction'

The *mits*-construction displays a further generalization, which relates to the part q. In all cases, q seems to name something desirable, something evaluated as positive. Of course tastes and opinions on just about everything differ wildly, and we may see this clearly in connection with some of our examples. Not everyone will be happy under all circumstances with the principle that a murderer may be released early, as it is formulated in quotation 10, and this includes in fact the author of the blog. Still, the quotation comprises the acknowledgment that this is a desirable state of affairs according to some, an evaluation that may be a favourite with convicted murderers first of all but is seen to extend to officials of the judicial system and further into society. However, for that desirability to become reality, there is still the condition of good behaviour to be fulfilled in any case. Similarly, in quotation 8 it is stated as q that the contents of the relevant web pages are subject to a so-called Creative Commons License, a recent invention based on the solidarity of creative minds. The applicability of that relatively lenient regime is to be interpreted as a desirable state of affairs, compared to the tight constraints and burdens of commercial copyright. Some more commercially inclined minds might not necessarily agree with that judgment. The author (in this case, an institutional author) only implies the desirability of that fact for **some**, including, presumably, the founders of the organization. And of course, there is a necessary condition p to be met for the Creative Commons License to be applicable to each of the organization's web pages: the absence of an explicit statement to the contrary.

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We can now give a preliminary characterization of the semantic regularities involved in constructions with *mits*, as in 12.

(12) Semantic import of *mits*-constructions **q, mits p** (first version):
q expresses some specific desirability, for the fulfilment of which **p** names a strict ('necessary') condition

The question then arises: is this semantic import really due to *mits*? How about examples with *als* or *indien*, two standard conditional conjunctions, both comparable to 'if'? The minimal sentence pair of examples 13 and 14 gives a clear answer.

(13) De wereld zal in vlammen opgaan, **mits** the wereldleiders zo doorgaan

'The world will go up in flames **[q]**, **provided that** the world leaders continue in this way [of stoking the fires of war] **[provided that p]**'

(14) De wereld zal in vlammen opgaan **als/ indien** de wereldleiders zo doorgaan

'The world will go up in flames **[q] if** the world leaders continue in this way [of stoking the fires of war] **[if p]**'

The sentence with *mits* 'provided' (example 13) seems to be a quote from a devilish mind or at least a very cynical one, who presents the destruction of the world as a good thing. In order for this (perverse) desirability to become true, the world leaders have to stick to their present policies (of stoking the fires of war). For the same sentence with *als* or *indien* instead of *mits*, however, the interpretation need not take this specific direction. Sentence 14 might possibly, like 13, be attributed to a sinister person, but it could just as well stem from a pacifist without any hopes left. This means that constructions with *mits* are coupled to a special semantics involving the notion of a desirability, as in 12, whereas those with *als* or *indien* are not.

The idea that the part q of a *mits*-construction expresses something desirable is corroborated by the fact that negation is infrequent in that

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part.[6] It is, of course, possible to interpret the absence of an undesirable state of affairs as a desirability, in which case a negation is neutralised. That is precisely the configuration in quotation 15.

(15) Dus de Friezen hadden op zichzelf niet eens zoveel bezwaar tegen een landsheer **[q] mits** dat maar op hun eigen voorwaarden was **[mits p]** (Corpus of Spoken Dutch, *CGN*)

'So the Frisians did not really have strong objections to a ruler in principle **[q]**, **provided** their own conditions would be met **[provided p]**'

Whatever the pros and cons of feudalism, the medieval Frisians are portrayed here as not having such undesirable feelings as strong objections to a feudal ruler, which amounted to a desirable outcome, if only in principle: because they did demand the fulfilment of their conditions for that desirable outcome to become reality.

In a similar way we can interpret a customary saying such as *ik heb er geen moeite mee, mits …* 'I have no problem with it in principle, on condition that …', as can be seen from quotation 16.

(16) Op zich zou ik er geen moeite mee hebben als iemand mijn Inet verbinding gebruikt **[q]**. **Mits** ik er geen last van heb / krijg en er geen mogelijkheid is om [in] mijn data te sniffen **[mits p]** (internet chatting sequence on www.security.nl)

'I have no problem in principle if somebody uses my Wi-Fi internet connection **[q]**. **On condition that** it doesn't give me trouble and people won't be able to nose in my data **[on condition that p]**'

When somebody uses my Wi-Fi internet connection, I do not have such an undesirable thing as a problem, the chat participant states, which thus comes down to a desirable situation. In principle, that is, because for the desirability to become true the chat participant stipulates the strict

[6] In the condition part p, negation may be used freely. See quotations 8, 15, 16, and 20.

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condition that sharing the connection will not cause him or her any trouble.

A pure "no" of denial, however, seems impossible as contents of the part q. The corpus shows no instances of examples like 17.

(17) ??nee **[q]**, mits … **[mits p]**
'??no **[q]**, provided … **[provided p]**'

A consequence of the fact that a *mits*-phrase cannot modify a pure denial, can be seen in the make-up of well-known slogans with a *mits*-phrase and a *tenzij*-phrase ('unless') in elliptical form with the contents of the respective conditions left out, combined as in 18.

(18) Liever "ja **[q]**, mits" dan "nee, tenzij"!
'"yes **[q]**, provided" rather than "no, unless"!'

With regard all kinds of social issues, Dutch and Flemish speakers have over the last decades learnt to discuss the choice between the answers *ja, mits* and *nee, tenzij*; that is, the choice between 'in principle yes, but under strict conditions' and 'in principle no, unless certain exceptional conditions hold'. For instance, of two alternatives in the domain of energy policy, one could be the continued production of nuclear energy under strict conditions ('ja, mits'), while the other would be to stop investing in nuclear power plants unless other energy sources would cease to be available altogether ('nee, tenzij'). *Tenzij* 'unless' on its own can be combined freely with *ja* or with *nee*, but in a combined slogan, *tenzij* always goes with *nee*, while *mits* is coupled to *ja*, as in 18. The reason must be that coupling *mits* to *nee* would be semantically incoherent.

In order to provide for cases like 18, in which q is just *ja* 'yes' and does not explicitly 'name' a desirability, we have to revise the preliminary formulation of the semantic import of *mits*-constructions, which we gave above (12). The generalization as to q is that it implies the existence of some desirability. This formulation will also be necessary for other, more complex cases in which the desirability has to be found interpretively (see section 5). We thus arrive at the revised characterization in 19.

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(19) Semantic import of *mits*-constructions **q, mits p** (revised version): **q** implies the existence of some specific desirability, for the fulfilment of which **p** names a strict ("necessary") condition

4. Desirability as a Descriptive Concept.

It might be objected that desirability would seem an implausible concept to be coded in the grammar of a language. However, desiderative and optative verbal morphology as well as optative clause constructions show that the coding of that kind of modification of actions and states of affairs is not uncommon in the languages of the world (Knobloch 1986:555–556). In direct relation to these phenomena, grammars of many languages devote separate discussion to verbs expressing concepts of desire, hope and the like.[7] Conditional constructions themselves have also been related to the concept of desirability and its opposite. For instance, Akatsuka (1997) describes Japanese and Korean counterfactual conditionals in everyday adult discourse to children. In these constructions either two desirable states of affairs or two *un*desirable ones are connected to each other, resulting in expressions functioning as instructions, promises and permissions or threats and warnings, respectively. Akatsuka (1999) and Akatsuka & Strauss (2000) extend the idea to conditionals more generally and conclude that the meaning of conditional constructions in natural language is not the same as material implication (that is, the logicians' computation from two independent truth values). This is because of the irreducible causal or epistemological connection that exists between the desirability or undesirability of the events expressed by p and q: their values are interdependent. Our description of the Modern Dutch *mits*-construction as encompassing an existing desirability q whose fulfilment is conditional on p, would appear to partake of the same semantic space as the analyses by Akatsuka & Strauss.

A notion of desirability has also come up in the description of certain constructions with adjectives. Elaborating on Leech & Svartvik (1975:102), Leech (1983:147) states that some Modern English degree adverbs, such as *fairly* and *entirely*, are restricted to modifying what he calls "evaluatively positive" adjectives, adjectives that are specifically used to commend something. For example, *it's fairly warm today*

[7] For Dutch, see *ANS* 1997:18.5.4.16–18.

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expresses that the temperature is moderately pleasant; it is not used in relation to a warmth that goes some way to being oppressive. Cruse (1986:251) similarly discusses the relevance of "evaluative polarity" in the determination of the linguistic polarity of opposite terms. For Modern Dutch, Klein and Hoeksema (1994) and Klein (1998) conclude that the degree adverb *bijster* 'very' is virtually restricted to combinations with "evaluatively positive" adjectives, whereas the intensifier *bar* 'very' is only combined with "evaluatively negative" adjectives.[8]

Interestingly, Klein and Hoeksema found that in earlier stages of Dutch, *bijster* used to be more free in its distribution. Its modern status of an intensifier that modifies only evaluatively positive adjectives is said to reflect a process of lexical specialization. This is similar to what seems to have occurred in the case of the Dutch preposition/conjunction *mits*. In the Middle Dutch period, a *mits*-phrase could add a means, reason, motive, or cause to expressions of various interpretation, not just to expressions in which the existence of some desirability was implied (see Daalder 2007). In the seventeenth century, however, the usage of *mits*-phrases to indicate a strict condition on the fulfilment of some desirable state of affairs developed. In nineteenth and twentieth century standard Dutch, *mits*-constructions have come to be specialized to express such a configuration exclusively.

5. Desirability—For Whom?

If the existence of some desirability is a fixed aspect of the semantics of *mits*-constructions, determining the identity of the "desiring" party has to be an essential part of the interpretation of any utterance containing a *mits*-construction. It seems, however, doubtful that the interpretation process will always have an unambiguous outcome. We may review a couple of more complex cases.

[8] To complicate things, *bijster* and the evaluatively positive adjective together then function as a negative polarity expression, i.e. they demand a context with a special, logically negative character: *zij is niet bijster onder de indruk* 'she is not very impressed'. With degree adverbs such as *bar* that rather take evaluatively negative adjectives, the situation is a mirror image. Together with an evaluatively negative adjective, *bar* forms a combination that expressly does not fit in a logically negative context: *hij is bar teleurgesteld* 'he is very disappointed'; **hij is niet bar teleurgesteld* 'he is not very disappointed'.

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The statement in 20, a regulation from the Dutch tax authorities, affirms a certain exemption from taxation, implying that this is a desirability.

(20) Voor het financieel beheer van bewonersgelden wordt vrijstelling verkregen **[q]**, **mits** er geen winst mee wordt behaald **[mits p]** (www.belastingdienst.nl)

'The management of residents' private resources is exempted from taxation **]q]**, **provided that** no profits are gained **[provided that p]**'

The desirability of the tax exemption from the point of the view of the tax paying care institutions is the most easily accessible assumption for any reader of 20, but of course the residents can themselves also be seen as beneficiaries of the regulation and thus as a further probable locus of the desirability. Furthermore, the legislator, in whose name the tax authorities speak, has judged the tax exemption to be justified and therefore can assumed to find it desirable. Thus, there does not seem to be one single answer to the question as to the 'interested parties' for whom the desirability exists.

In literary texts, desires may be attributed to fictional characters. This is the case in quotation 21, taken from a text by the melancholic Dutch humorist writer Simon Carmiggelt. The *mits*-construction here, following *en* 'and', is the second coordinate part of a subordinate clause that explains the contents of the archive clerk's "nebulous" theory in words that could be his own.

(21) Hij was belast met nederig archiefwerk en stond als gek te boek, omdat hij een mistige theorie had bedacht, volgens welke de gehele Bijbel één brok geheimschrift was en, **mits** goed ontcijferd **[mits p]**, een reeks atheïstische wandspreuken bevatte **[q]** (Carmiggelt, quoted from Van Es and Van Caspel 1975:140)

'He had a humble job as an archive clerk and was regarded as a fool because he had dreamt up a nebulous theory, according to which all of the Bible was one big piece of secret code and, **provided that** [it was] deciphered properly **[provided that p]**, comprised a series of atheist mottos **[q]**'

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In 21, the part q is the statement that the Bible comprises a series of atheist mottos. The character's *mits*-construction leads the reader to understand that this is more than just neutral knowledge. Rather, the unmasking of the Bible constitutes a desirability for him: after all, this knowledge, about which other people do not have the faintest idea, is his hidden pride. The character is well aware that the desirable event might not soon become reality, because there is his vague condition p to fulfil: the Bible has first to be deciphered 'properly'. To ask the question about the extent to which the author (when writing) and the readers (when reading) share the desire of the character would lead us into very deep waters. From a linguistic point of view, no general answer seems possible in such a case.

A further example of complex desirability ascription is provided by the following quotation from a newspaper contemplating the contents of a proposed new Rent Act, which will take no effect because of an expected change of government:

(22) De extra huurverhogingen die een kwart van de huurders de komende jaren zouden treffen, zijn zo goed als zeker van de baan. […] De huurwet zou op 1 januari ingaan. […] In 2010 zouden de huren van deze woningen met een hoge WOZ-waarde worden vrijgegeven. De verhuurder mocht dan vragen wat hij wil **[q]**, **mits** er voldoende huizen waren bijgebouwd **[mits p]**. (*De Volkskrant*, December 6, 2006)

'In all probability, the extra rent increases, which would have affected 25% of tenants in the coming years, are off. […] The Rent Act was meant to come into effect from January 1st. […] In the year 2010, the rent of apartments in the higher council tax bands would be deregulated. A landlord would then be able to ask whatever rent he likes **[q]**, **provided that** enough new apartments had been built **[provided that p]**.'

In 22, a desirability is implied which in a situation that is said to be almost certainly nonreal would have existed for (unspecified) landlords. They would have been able to ask the rent they would like, conditional upon a sufficient regional building activity. The impression for the reader is that the Rent Act in question had itself come to embody at least some

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of the desirability judgments of the landlords. An involvement of the journalist describing the complex of interests is not clear in this case.

The upshot of our brief investigation of the locus of the desire implied by a *mits*-construction is that there seem to be few general constraints. The speaker may himself or herself be the one for whom the desirability implied in q exists. But a speaker may as well give voice to interests and desires of an addressee or one or more third parties, or indeed any combination of speaker, addressee and third parties. It may be expected that different text and discourse genres will show different quantitative use of those possibilities. The parties with a clear interest in relation to q—the convicted murderers (in quotation 10), the archive clerk (quotation 21) or the landlords (quotation 22)—are also seen as feeling motivated to effect a fulfilment of condition p, or to assess whether p applies. Parties who are concerned less immediately with the advantages implied in q may have an interest in the enforcement of p from their own perspective and are then understood to agree to q as a concession. For instance, in quotation 10, society has an interest in a murderer's subsequent good behaviour and may therefore make the conditional offer of an early release. In all cases it is the speaker who, with his use of a *mits*-construction, chooses to give expression to a configuration of the kind summarized in generalization 19.

6. Conclusion.

Our analysis of the Modern Dutch conditional construction with the special conjunction *mits* 'provided that' (q, *mits* p) has resulted in a novel generalization as to its semantics. Central in this generalization is the notion of desirability: the member q implies the existence of some specific desirability. The fulfilment of this desirability is said to be conditional upon p. In the situated interpretation of each expression with the *mits*-construction, the locus of the desire has to be determined: speaker, addressee, third parties or a combination of one or more of those. The desiring parties in relation to q have a derived interest in the fulfilment of the condition p; other parties may have an interest in the enforcement of p from another perspective and are then understood to agree to q as a concession.

Far from being definable within the logical domain of truth functions, the Dutch conditional *mits*-construction is thus found to make knowledge available about the interests and desires of communicators

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and others, specifically about a balance of interests of several concerned parties. It is not to be expected that the standard conditional constructions *als* and *indien* can be characterized in a similar way. Still, it would seem worthwhile scrutinizing those constructions along the lines of the analysis of the *mits*-construction presented here.

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