

**Dutch Tenses and the Analysis of a Literary Text:  
The Case of Marga Minco's *De val***

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**1. Introduction.** In this paper we will present some aspects of the analysis of Marga Minco's fine novella *De val* (*The Fall*), which came out in 1983 after many years of silence on the part of this widely admired author of well-constructed and balanced prose. Our first aim is to enrich the understanding of this novella — no doubt already quite detailed — of those interested in Minco's work. Secondly, we wish to show that literary interpretation may take advantage of elements of linguistic analysis — the latter being our true profession.<sup>1</sup>

Let us start with a short overview of the novella. The all-important event of *De val* is the accident of an old lady, who falls into a manhole which has been left open and unattended, without safety gates being placed around it. The manhole is filled with boiling water and the old lady, named Frieda, suffers a horrible death. The accident is the more tragic because some forty years earlier, in the determining event of her life, Frieda was the only one of her Jewish family to escape deportation and death at the hands of the Nazis. Just as blind fate took the life of her loved ones then while sparing herself, it has now finally claimed her as a victim. The circumstances of the events then and now comprise quite a few similarities, a parallelism which is carefully exploited by Minco, as one might expect.

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Now for our contribution to the interpretation of *De val*, let us take as a starting point a piece of information which is mentioned in several essays on the novella (cf. Middeldorp 1981-84). Evidently, Marga Minco got the idea for her book from a newspaper report: such an accident really did occur. It is also mentioned that the lady in question was the mother of Minco's sister-in-law. These are of course interesting facts; however, no mention is made of any connection between them and the novella as one reads it. But surely this would be an interesting possibility: perhaps one need not have the external, documentary information about Minco's particular inspiration to be able to still perceive some such layer of objectivity in the text itself.

We think we are able to do just that: to present a piece of linguistic analysis of *De val* from which we may conclude that this work is indeed best interpreted as a novelization of an event whose objective outlines have some separate role within the text. This part of our analysis turns on the use of past and present tense verb forms. However, it leads to a correction of the idea that the relevant kind of objective information would be precisely a newspaper report. We will show (sections 2-3) that a more interesting instance of 'intertextuality' exists between *De val* and another type of objective, non-fictional text.

Of course the precise wording of the text forms the basis of many other aspects of the story as it is understood by a reader. Our second piece of linguistic analysis will show (sections 4-5) that the use of verbal tense in *De val* (this time the perfect tense forms) is also involved in a very important distinction between the old lady's attitude to the traumatic events of the Second World War and that of other characters in the story. Linguistic details of the description of Frieda's thoughts will be seen to reveal the nature of her undiminished obsession with remembering the old days and the minutiae of what happened.

**2. Past tense.** To begin the first part of our analysis, let us state our view of the general import of the use of past tense finite verbs in Dutch. We analyze the opposition between Dutch present tense verbs and past tense verbs as an opposition between 'unmarked' forms and specifically 'marked' forms, roughly in the sense of Jakobson (cf. Jakobson 1971). That is to say that, in comparison to the present tense

forms, the past tense forms have an added formal part (the endings *-te* or *-de* or a stem change) which is in each case also interpreted as an extra aspect of meaning.

We will characterize the meaning contribution of the past tense by saying that a reader or hearer, when presented with a past tense form, is to understand that any IMMEDIATE EVIDENCE for the truth of what is being said is lacking (cf. for a somewhat similar analysis, Bakker 1974). For instance, the past tense in a simple utterance like "Ze waren niet thuis" ('They were not at home') implies that for the one interpreting the utterance there will not be any immediate experience of the well-known waiting at the door and getting no answer. But, although the interpreter will not find data to confirm or to disconfirm the state of affairs mentioned by simply looking around himself, he should still be willing to entertain various aspects of this state of affairs. Sometimes he will justify such open-mindedness by the realization that truly past events cannot actually be experienced; in other cases he is aware that some thoughts may be approached most relevantly within the framework of the knowledge contained in another mind (maybe his own mind at some other moment). "Dit ging te ver!" ('This was the limit!') — a reported thought of another person. A past tense verb alerts to just such a situation of 'lack of immediate evidence.' Note that this holds whether or not a marking of the perfect (cf. sections 4-5) is present as well; we claim that clauses with 'past perfect' and those with 'simple past' involve exactly the same caution with respect to the evidence.

By contrast, the so-called present tense verbs simply do not indicate anything of the sort. They are in fact used for situations in which there is a direct experience of truth or falsity, as well as for those without; compare "dit artikel is in het Engels" ('this article is in English') with "de meeste artikelen zijn in het Engels" ('most articles are in English'). The only thing one can say about present tense forms is that they are not SPECIFICALLY associated with a message of caution concerning the evidence. In Jakobson's terminology, they are 'unmarked.'

Now *De val* displays the normal usage of past tense verbs. Past tense forms indeed often evoke situations and events that are narrated;

for the reader, they are thus not supported by any direct evidence. An example: "Frieda Borgstein werd om halfacht gewekt" ('Frieda Borgstein was awakened at half past seven') — this on the fatal day. Alternatively, such forms indicate states of affairs as they are entertained in thought by the novella's characters. The evidence for them is thus really doubly indirect: the narrator does not just relate certain events but he actually narrates the thoughts of several characters about those events. *De val* in fact weaves together apparently disparate events from a day in the life of a number of characters. First of all of the main character Frieda; she wakes up and thinks about preparing for her birthday that is to take place the next day — "Morgen nam ze een douche. Morgen kleedde ze zich netjes aan" ('Tomorrow she would take a shower. Tomorrow she would dress up'). We come to know about the ill-humored servicemen; they begin their day with the strongest possible grudge. Also about Carla, the woman from the café, who observes the two men in the early morning and later remembers her irritation about their attitude — "Ze moesten niet op de vroege morgen de boel al komen verzieken" ('They'd better not start spoiling the mood at this hour'). And we become acquainted with the staff of the old people's home where Frieda lives, all thinking of the tasks at hand and — at the last moment — unable to accompany the fragile lady on her excursion on an icy cold day to do the shopping for her birthday.

**3. After-the-fact fragments in "De val."** The structure of *De val* is complicated by the presence of a number of non-dialogue passages dominated not by past tense verbs but by present tense verbs. Reviewing these passages in turn, we will find they have a specific relevance.

The very first sentence of the novella reads as follows (translated, with italics added): '*It is certain* that the two servicemen of the public works department stopped off at the Salamander café first thing that Thursday morning, rather than taking the usual straight road from the central boilerhouse to the location of their job.' The next paragraph has in similar fashion: '*It may be* that they thought it was still too cold or too dark for the job they had to do.' And immediately: '*It is also possible* that it was simply due to the reaction of Baltus, who sat behind

the wheel and stepped on the brake instinctively when he saw the neon lights above the counter flash on just as they drove by the café.' One notes the repetitive assessment of certainty and possibilities, prefixed in a stern and — for the reader — ominous fashion before the descriptions of the doings of the servicemen on the day of the accident. The descriptions themselves, in the subordinate clauses, are in the simple past. In the Dutch original: "*Het staat vast dat de twee monteurs [...] eerst aanlegden bij De Salamander*"; "*Het kan zijn dat ze het nog te koud of te donker vonden [...]*"; "*het is ook mogelijk dat het kwam door [...]*." Surely, these are unusual combinations of plain narrative and objective, after-the-fact statements.

After the first paragraphs of the novella, the objective style with present tense verbs remains in the background for a while. It turns up again on p. 33 in a rather detailed description of the underground hot water heating system and its service entrances in the street, situated near the old people's home where Frieda lives. 'The buildings of the social services department and of the municipal gas and electricity board *are located* side by side in the Uiterwaardenstraat, separated by a broad footpath [...]. Somewhat farther on the same side of the street there *is* the office of the housing department, built against the old low-rise houses. Those three buildings *are connected* to the municipal hot water heating system and they *are each provided* with a stopcock located down a manhole in the street.'

The technical description continues about the groundwater, which reaches a high level in wintertime, fills up the manholes, and gets heated to a temperature near the boiling point by the hotwater pipes. Because of certain dangers inherent in this situation, 'the entrances *must* [present tense in the original] be pumped out at regular intervals [...],' a statement which allows for an immediate return to the past tense narrative: '[...] and it *was* this chore which *had been assigned* to the servicemen for that morning.' An evocation follows, with past tense verbs, of some personal thoughts that were on their minds while they were busy with the job. It was no more than a routine task for them, and we read the explanation for that again in the present tense: 'Once the submersible pump *hangs* in the manhole, it *does* the job; the seething water *is* drained off to the sewerage all by itself. Nothing *can* go wrong as long as you *keep* an eye on things' (p. 34f).

The last sentence is in colloquial Dutch: "[z]olang je de boel in de gaten houdt." This gives the impression of an oral testimony, a statement made afterwards by the servicemen in the context of an investigation into the circumstances of the fatal accident. One may surely expect an official investigation to be carried out in the case of a death caused by what looks like gross, even culpable negligence on the part of the servicemen. A report resulting from such an investigation usually contains testimony not only from those directly responsible, but also from everybody else who was near the spot of the accident or who met with the protagonists at some time during the day. The structure of *De val* is indeed reminiscent of this: the narrative is divided up into shorter episodes, with precise time indications.<sup>2</sup> And such a judicial report may well state its conclusions with careful but definitive present tense phrases like those which introduced the novella: 'It is certain that [...]; it may be [...]; it is also possible [...].' Finally, if anything is typical of official reports, it is detailed, objective present tense description — as the one we just read — of the location where some event took place. Such a description is, in fact, not typically found in such newspaper reports as are said to have inspired Minco to write her novella.

The report fragments turn up again — and with strong effect — at the very moment that we expect to 'see,' through the eyes of one of the bystanders, Frieda's fatal step. On p. 69 we are witness to Frieda's own thoughts while she leaves the home to do her shopping. She is surprised by the strange clouds of steam and becomes aware of a van, almost blocking the footpath but not quite. With normal past tenses: 'She thought she had plenty of room to pass the car. There was a space of about two feet left.' At this point nine lines of comment follow, report-like sentences with present tense verbs alternating with past tense narrative sentences and clauses: '*Maybe she has misjudged the space. Maybe it was her eyes, which she had not been able to dab dry. There is the possibility that she tripped over the hose lying beside the manhole, or over the manhole cover. A combination of*

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<sup>2</sup>Concerning Gerrie, a geriatric helper in the home, it is noted (p. 76): 'Later she had said that it had been like in a movie [...].' Carla from the café 'later remembered that [...]' (p. 11). The women have apparently been asked to relate their impressions of the fatal day of the events in the home and of the mood of the servicemen, respectively.

*those factors cannot be excluded. The full facts of the case will never be known. In any case she has taken no more than two or three steps before she felt the ground vanishing under her feet'* (p. 70). It is clear: nobody actually saw Frieda falling into the manhole, and although for the reader the calamity has been imminent all along, his knowledge in the end is no more than is contained in these reconstructing statements.

In short, the tragic story narrated in *De val* is interwoven with a number of objective assessments concerning the accident, which are like echoes from a judicial report. Asking ourselves about the significance of this construction, we may note two complementary, and mutually reinforcing, effects. From a literary perspective, the servicemen are, by opening up the hot water hell, the agents of fate, reincarnations of the death-bringing Germans. However, the present tense forms at decisive points of the text indicate that the parallelism should not be allowed to obscure the fact of the servicemen's plain personal responsibility, their being guilty of gross negligence. Now ironically, this in turn leads back to the well-known fact that it was precisely out of a rigid sense of duty that many German officers reportedly performed the crimes of the Nazi regime. Deadly as it was, their devotion to duty was beyond reproach, and criminal proceedings could not be instituted in many cases... Fate seemingly traces its course undisturbed by the ethics of human actions.

**4. Perfect tenses: looking back.** Let us now present an analysis of some important aspects of the use of perfect tenses in *De val*. Again, we will first provide a general characterization of these tense forms in general terms, and then demonstrate how their use can be seen as contributing to a fundamental theme of the novella.

Formally, the perfect tenses in Dutch are construed with a form of one of the auxiliaries *hebben* 'to have' and *zijn* 'to be' and, in general, the past participle of the main verb. In certain contexts involving the presence of yet another auxiliary, all non-finite verbs are infinitives and no past participle occurs in the perfect tense.

Semantically, we regard the perfect in all its forms as a marking for 'looking back': it consists of an operation on the content of the verb stem to the effect that — from an interpreter's position — this

process, situation, or event is looked back upon. The focus of attention, as tense theorists call it, may be some situation resulting from what the verb stem indicates, or it may be that the point is to provide an overview or summary of a certain situation. 'Looking back' can be taken as the general, encompassing catchword (cf. Koefoed 1984).

In our view, the meaning provided by 'perfect' is completely independent from 'past.' From the point of view of grammar, there are no constraints on their combination. The two markings give rise to four possible combinations: (1) not marked 'past' and not marked 'perfect': the 'simple present;' (2) marked 'past' and not marked 'perfect': the 'simple past;' (3) not marked 'past' and marked 'perfect': the 'present perfect;' (4) marked 'past' and also marked 'perfect': the 'past perfect.'

Note that in our analysis, there is no grammatical opposition between 'past' and 'perfect,' nor can there be. The present perfect simply provides a marking for 'looking back,' while the past perfect provides the very same marking and the marking for 'lack of immediate evidence' as well. We will see that in *De val* the present and past perfect tenses indeed fulfil the same role.

**5. History in "De val": living in it vs. looking back upon it.** As we have observed in section 3, nobody is witness to Frieda's actual falling into the manhole. In the nine lines that comment on her fatal step, two clauses are in the present perfect (the first and final main clause of the paragraph). So without abandoning the viewpoint of an objective reporter, we are effectively looking back on the event.

This occurrence of perfect tense forms marks a turning point in the novella, in a way we will now explicate. Let us start by considering the final chapter. Its beginning and end picture Ben Abels, an old acquaintance of Frieda's, at the funeral. But the major part of the chapter relates Abels's recollection of the conversation he had with Hein Kessels the day before; Kessels is the man who in 1942 was supposed to help Frieda and her family escape to Switzerland. It is this conversation that reveals something about what really went wrong then (though much will still remain unclear).



In the speech of both men as reported, the present perfect is used frequently when they speak of the incident of 1942. Just a few examples, from a large number of instances (we translate literally): "Door anderen zijn wel hogere bedragen gevraagd" ('Others have been asking even higher amounts,' p. 86), "Bent u er later niet achtergekomen?" ('Have you not found out later?' p. 89), "Ze hebben me eindeloos verhoord" ('They have interrogated me endlessly,' p. 90), "Die heeft zij niet gehad" ('SHE has not had them [i.e. periods of forgetting],' p. 91). Details of the incident are also reported in non-perfect tenses (generally simple past), but Abels and Kessels use the perfect so consistently that it is quite clear what their relationship to these past events is: they are looking back on them, not able to forget but not living in them anymore either.

The position of Abels and Kessels towards the past contrasts sharply with Frieda's; her frequent and detailed recollections are largely narrated with simple past tense verbs. Frieda's position is explicitly indicated by the author at the end of the 8th chapter: 'Until the end of her days, two images would keep entering her mind, and sometimes they would overlap, as they did now: she was standing on the threshold of a room full of people and could not go in — she was standing on the threshold of her empty house and could not go out' (p. 54). But even as early as on pp. 17-19, when Frieda has just woken up, the overlap of images occurs in the text itself, as much as four times. We give one example, from the passage about Frieda making her breakfast in her room in the old people's home: 'Busy with the transparent, sticky slices of cheese, she became aware of the smell of fresh bread and fried eggs — the sun was shining through the kitchen window and cast spots of light on the table set for breakfast' (p. 19). And there are more instances of flashbacks at other places in the text, sometimes indicated by a single past perfect form. The images do not always overlap completely, but often they do (cf. the quotation from p. 54 above).

We conclude that use and non-use of perfect tense forms in the novella serve to differentiate two contrasting positions with respect to the same past events: one, Frieda's, in which the past is still being lived in; the other, Abels's and Kessels's, in which the past is looked back upon. Furthermore, we note that perfect forms do not only occur

in the reported speech of Abels and Kessels; at some points in the final chapter, the thoughts of Abels, as he recollects the conversation with Kessels, are reported by the author by means of perfect tenses as well. Some examples: "Hoe heb ik hem herkend, dacht hij" ('How have I recognized him, he thought,' p. 87), "Toen [...] had hij gezien dat hij mankte" ('Then he [Abels] had seen that he [Kessels] limped,' p. 92). In this way, not only the contents of the conversation display a perspective of looking back, but also the way in which it is narrated. The truth about the 1942 incident is thus conveyed in hindsight on two levels: Abels en Kessels are looking back at the absurd events of 1942, and the reader is looking back at them talking about it.

In fact, the latter perspective prevails in all four chapters following Frieda's falling into the manhole; it is in this respect that we stated earlier that the use of perfect tense forms on p. 70 marks a turning point. In chapter 13, many sentences in the past perfect look back upon events coinciding with or just preceding Frieda's fall, or upon that event itself. In the first paragraph, they help specify the contents of the suggested objective report ("deze keer had niemand het oversteken van Frieda gezien," 'this time nobody had seen Frieda crossing,' p. 72); in the remainder of the chapter, it is the thoughts and behavior of other characters that are looked back upon. This pattern continues in chapter 14: each character has her or his story told, so to speak. Chapters 13 and 14 are 'dramatized' testimonies: the details of each story are embedded in texts portions which as a whole look back on the fatal event, witness the repetition of past perfect forms.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 15 shows the same mechanism. The only difference is that the perspective here is not eyewitness testimony but Abels's personal recollection (on the day of the funeral) of his experience of Frieda's fall. He is the only person in whom Frieda had taken a personal interest in the period after the war (cf. p. 47), and he is also nearest to the position of the author (these aspects are of course related). This perspective is one of looking back too, albeit more personally involved.

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<sup>3</sup>In some places, this aspect of 'dramatized' testimony becomes very clear; cf. note 2.

Generalizing over these observations, we may say that after Frieda's death, there remains only looking back: both on her life and death, and on the life and death of her husband and children. In a sense, she had continued their lives also (cf. p. 20: 'As long as she lived, [...] she kept them present; with that idea she justified her existence'). Frieda could not take the position of looking back on the past events of her life, but Kessels, Abels, the author, and we, the readers, can. The linguistic conclusion is that we have to give a similar interpretation to the perfect tense forms both in the narrated text and in the dialogues in the final chapters. Consequently, the meaning of 'perfect' must indeed be taken to be exhaustively characterized by our description; there is no 'systemic' relation (opposition or otherwise) between the perfect and the past tense forms.<sup>4</sup>

Concluding our analysis of *De val* as a work of literary art, we note the following. In the passages where Frieda's point of view is chosen, the details of life then and now are described in an unusually unitary form, showing Frieda's somewhat hazy picture of reality changing. Other characters also wonder about the causes of the catastrophic events but in them there is an overriding sense of hindsight and things past. The richer for it is the reader, who is gradually presented with the detailed temporal knowledge of participants and witnesses and also with the moving possibility of a state of mind in which recollections are not really different from experiences.

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<sup>4</sup>The logic of this position is straightforward. The marking 'perfect' has the same interpretation when combined with 'past' as when combined with 'present', therefore the meaning of 'perfect' cannot be determined as being in some way opposed to 'past,' nor as being similar. Either position would make it difficult to explain combinations of 'perfect' and 'past' on the former view, opposite meanings would be used simultaneously, while the latter view would entail a claim of redundancy. In that sense, no systemic relation between 'perfect' and 'past' enters into the determination of either

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