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Wat mutt, dat mutt*

‘Independent’ modals in West Germanic vernaculars

Wim Caers & Sune Gregersen

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Abstract

The squib investigates the dialectal distribution of the Dutch construction type HET *kan/mag/moet*, lit. ‘IT can/may/must’, where a modal verb occurs ‘independently’ with an eventive subject and no infinitival complement. The construction is shown to be widely attested not only in traditional dialects of Dutch, but also in Frisian, Low German, and Afrikaans. We suggest that the construction, which does not occur in standard German or English, is an areal feature shared by the West Germanic vernaculars of northwestern Germany and the Low Countries, including the South African ‘side branch’ Afrikaans.

Keywords: modal verbs, modality, Dutch dialects, Low German, Frisian

1 Introduction

This squib deals with ‘independent’ uses of the modal verbs in continental West Germanic. As has been observed in the linguistic literature, the Dutch modal verbs *kunnen* ‘can’, *mogen* ‘may’, and *moeten* ‘must’ can be used without a complement in a way which is not possible in English and German

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(cf. Mortelmans et al. 2009: 26).¹ In the construction in question, the modal verb is used independently without an infinitive, prepositional phrase, or other complement, and the subject argument refers to an event rather than a participant. Three examples from the *Corpus Hedendaags Nederlands* (CHN) are provided in (1)-(3), one with each of the modals *kunnen* (1), *mogen* (2), and *moeten* (3).²

- (1) *Tsjernobyl moet dus dicht. Maar kan dat wel?*
 Chernobyl must thus closed but can that actually
 ‘So Chernobyl has to be closed. But is that even possible?’ (CHN, periodical, 1994)

- (2) *De schilder zal zich ieder-e keer als hij een ladder neer-zet*
 DEF.C painter shall REFL every-C time when 3SG.M INDF ladder down-put

moet-en afvrag-en of dat mag.
 must-INF ask-INF if that may

‘Every time the painter puts down a ladder, he will have to ask himself if that is permitted.’ (CHN, newspaper, 2004)

- (3) *In één kwartaal kunnen we 500.000 stuk-s lever-en als dat moet.*
 in one quarter can.PL 1PL 500,000 unit-PL supply-INF if that must
 ‘In just three months we can supply 500,000 [PC cards] if that is necessary/required.’ (CHN, newspaper, 2005)

1 The negative-polarity modal *hoeven* ‘need’ can also be used independently (as in *Dat hoeft niet* ‘That’s not necessary’), but the history of this verb is somewhat more complex because it developed relatively recently from the transitive verb *behoeven* (see Nuyts et al. 2018). In addition, the auxiliary verb *zullen* ‘shall’ occurs independently in the – more or less fixed – expression *het/dat zal wel* ‘I suppose so’ (Haeseryn et al. 1997: 1006). We have restricted ourselves to *kunnen*, *mogen*, and *moeten* in this squib, but we agree with one of the anonymous reviewers that it would be interesting to include the other modal verbs in a later investigation.

2 The following abbreviations are used in the interlinear glosses: ACC = accusative; ADJZ = adjectivizer; APPL = applicative; ATTR = attributive; C = common gender; COMP = complementizer; DAT = dative; DEF = definite; DEM = demonstrative; DIM = diminutive; INDF = indefinite; INF = infinitive; M = masculine; N = neuter; NEG = negation; NMLZ = nominalizer; PL = plural; POSS = possessive; PST = past; PTCP = participle; REFL = reflexive; REL = relative; SG = singular.

In part because of examples like (1)-(3), the Dutch modals have been argued to be more autonomous than their English and German cognates, and they have attracted the attention of a number of scholars working on modality and grammaticalisation (Mortelmans et al. 2009; Nuyts 2011, 2013; Honselaar & Olbertz 2016; Olbertz & Honselaar 2017). However, to the best of our knowledge, the ‘independent’ use in (1)-(3) has only been studied in (standard) Dutch, although it is in fact attested in a number of West Germanic varieties, both in and outside of the Low Countries. An example from Westmünsterland Low German is seen in (4):

- (4) *Dat magg nich!*
 that may NEG
 ‘That is not allowed!’ (Pirainen & Elling 1992, s.v. *möggen*)

With this squib we wish to point out the existence of this pattern in a number of lesser-studied West Germanic varieties and make a first attempt at documenting its distribution. We will argue that the ‘independent’ use of the modal verbs is in fact an areal pattern, found not only in several dialects of Dutch, but also in Frisian and in the Low German dialects of western Germany. Furthermore, it occurs in Afrikaans, and may thus have been present in (at least some of) the Dutch varieties which formed the input to this language.

The squib is structured as follows: In section 2 we give a very brief survey of the existing literature on the construction and explain our choice of terminology. In section 3 we provide an overview of the grammars, dictionaries, and other sources which have been scrutinised, and discuss a few problems with the reliability and coverage of this material. Section 4 presents our findings, beginning with the dialects of Dutch, and then moving on to Frisian, Low German, and Afrikaans. Section 5 concludes.

2 Earlier research and terminology

As far as we know, the first study devoted specifically to non-auxiliary uses of the Dutch modal verbs is de Rooij (1975), but the pattern illustrated in (1)-(3) above is only mentioned in passing. Haeseryn et al. (1997: 1006) also only briefly mention the pattern and give a few examples. In recent years, however, the Dutch modal verbs have been the subject of a number of investigations, and there has been some discussion in the literature about how and when the ‘independent’ use of *kunnen*, *mogen*, and *moeten* developed. Nuyts (2011, 2013) suggests that it developed out of earlier auxiliary uses

of the modals, while Honselaar & Olbertz (2016) and Olbertz & Honselaar (2017) suggest that, at least with *moeten*, it developed out of the use with a directional phrase, as in (5):

- (5) *Johannes moest in de Gevangenissen*
 J. must.PST in DEF.C prison
 'Johannes had to go to prison' (DBNL, Van Swaanenburg, 1728)

The use with a directional phrase in (5) is well attested across the Germanic language family, including German and the Scandinavian languages (cf. Mortelmans et al. 2009), and also occurred in earlier English (Warner 1993: 98-99). It is important to stress, however, that the 'independent' use in (1)-(3) above is in fact quite different from the pattern in (5). In the latter construction, the directional phrase expresses a destination or goal, and the first argument (subject) refers to a participant, usually a human being or at least an animate entity.³ In the 'independent' uses in (1)-(3), on the other hand, there is no reference to a goal, and the subject refers not to a participant in an event, but to the event itself (a 'second-order entity' in the terminology of Lyons 1977): closing Chernobyl, putting down a ladder, supplying 500,000 PC cards, etc. Very often, this 'eventive subject' (as termed by Olbertz & Honselaar 2017: 274) is pronominal, referring anaphorically to an event mentioned in the context, but the event may also be expressed by, for instance, a complement clause or a nominalised verb phrase, such as *Het berijden van deze weg* in (6):

- (6) *Het be-rijd-en van deze weg kan slechts met een fourwheeldrive.*
 DEF.N APPL-drive-NMLZ of this.C road can only with INDF four.wheel.drive
 'Driving on this road is only possible with a four-wheel drive.' (CHN, newspaper, 2010)

There does not appear to be an established terminology for this construction, which is generally simply referred to as an 'independent' or 'autonomous' use of the modal verb. In this squib, we will refer to the construction as HET *kan/mag/moet*, where HET is a placeholder for any eventive subject, thus also including cases like (6).

3 Note, however, that inanimate subjects are perfectly possible as well, both in Dutch and other languages: *Alles moet weg* 'Everything has to go' (CHN, newspaper, 2004); *Müll muss raus aus der Ostsee* 'Rubbish has to be removed from the Baltic Sea' (German; Kommunalwirtschaft 2016); *Det gør mig forbandet ondt, men sandheden må frem* 'I am terribly sorry, but the truth has to come out' (Danish; KorpusDK).

The earliest example of HET *moet* in the WNT (also cited by Olbertz & Honselaar 2017: 286) dates to 1808, cf. (7), but it is not given any special attention in the dictionary – it is merely stated that no infinitive is expressed.

- (7) *Hij (zou) zeker... trotsch word-en; en dat moet niet*
 3SG.M shall.PST certainly haughty become-INF and that must NEG
 ‘He would certainly get haughty; and that mustn’t happen’ (WNT, s.v. *moeten*
 II; Loosjes, 1808)

Similarly, *kunnen* is also described as occurring without an infinitive; the dictionary leaves it open whether this is a case of ellipsis or *kunnen* is used independently.⁴ It has to be stressed, however, that ‘no infinitive’ is not a sufficient criterion for defining the construction, as there are a number of other uses of the Dutch modal verbs – such as (5) above – without an infinitive, as already pointed out by De Rooij (1975). The feature distinguishing HET *kan/mag/moet* from other uses with no overt infinitive is that the subject argument refers to an event rather than a participant. We focus only on the former type here.

3 Material and methods

Having introduced the construction under investigation, we will now present our material. Our point of departure was the observation that the Dutch construction has parallels in contemporary (Westerlauwers) Frisian and is also recorded in the traditional dialect of Dortmund (Schleef 1967). We thus decided to investigate whether it is also attested in other Low German dialects and in the traditional dialects of Flanders and The Netherlands. There are a number of obstacles to such an endeavour. First and foremost, the languages and varieties under investigation are – or were – primarily spoken vernaculars, standard Dutch or (High) German being the traditional written languages. Although Frisian, Low German, and to a lesser extent dialects of Dutch have been and are used as written languages, the available resources for doing grammatical research are much more modest than for standard Dutch, German, and, obviously, English.

4 ‘Ook zonder infinitief, hetzij dat hij weggelaten is, of dat *kunnen* als zelfstandig ww. is op te vatten’ (WNT, s.v. *kunnen* 4.a.β.). For *mogen*, the use without an infinitive is not mentioned separately (WNT, s.v. *mogen* 6.b.).

Because of the lack of comprehensive and comparable corpora for the investigated languages and dialects, a large-scale quantitative study is inconceivable. We have had to restrict ourselves to consulting whichever resources were available, such as smaller corpora, dictionaries, and grammatical descriptions. This task, however, has been made much easier in recent years because of the increased availability of digitised resources online. A substantial number of dialect grammars and dictionaries from the last two centuries are freely available through online collections such as the *Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren* (DBNL), the Internet Archive, and the website of the Meertens Instituut. Table 1 lists the online collections and corpora we have used. The abbreviations in the table will be used in the rest of the squib and in the bibliography ('Primary sources'), where we have indicated between square brackets which digital collection a given resource was found in. If no collection is mentioned in the bibliography, a printed source was consulted.

Table 1 Online collections used

Collection	Abbr.	Web address
Digitale Bibliotheek van de Nederlandse Letteren	DBNL	<dbnl.org>
Elektronische Woordenbank van de Nederlandse Dialecten	eWND	<meertens.knaw.nl/ewnd/>
Internet Archive	IA	<archive.org>
Korpus Sprutsen Frysk	KSF	<www1.fa.knaw.nl/ksf.html>
Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum	MDZ	<digitale-sammlungen.de>
Nederlandse Volksverhalenbank	NVb	<verhalenbank.nl>
Yntegrearre Taaldatabank Frysk	YTF	<tdb.fryske-akademy.eu>

The majority of the works consulted date from the second half of the nineteenth century or the first half of the twentieth century. We give the dates of recording or publication for all examples in the following.

For the Dutch dialects of Flanders and The Netherlands, we primarily consulted sources in the DBNL and in the online collections of the Meertens Instituut, chiefly the *Elektronische Woordenbank van de Nederlandse Dialecten*. For Frisian, we searched the text corpus *Yntegrearre Taaldatabank Frysk* and the spoken-language *Korpus Sprutsen Frysk*, both compiled and published by the Fryske Akademy. In lieu of a corpus of older spoken Frisian, we searched the Frisian portion of the *Nederlandse Volksverhalenbank*, which contains a large number of traditional folk tales and anecdotes recorded in the mid-twentieth century. The Low German material was consulted primarily through the Internet Archive and the Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum. A substantial number of works on

Low German were only available in print; in locating these various sources, we have made use especially of the bibliography published by the Verein für niederdeutsche Sprachforschung (VndS 2018) and the online bibliography compiled by Bordasch (2018). For Afrikaans we have had to limit ourselves to a number of relatively recent printed grammars and dictionaries.

Before we present our findings in section 4, a few caveats have to be mentioned. Firstly, it should be kept in mind that the available dictionaries and grammars vary considerably in their scope and coverage. Some, such as the *Niedersächsisches Wörterbuch* or the dictionaries of the Groningen dialect by Molema (1887) and ter Laan (1929), give copious examples of various patterns and expressions, whereas others, such as most nineteenth-century grammar sketches, restrict themselves to the phonology (*Lautlehre*) and inflectional morphology (*Formenlehre*) of the dialect in question. Many of the earliest dialect dictionaries and word collections ('idioticons') are also quite limited in scope and contain mainly individual words that the author considered characteristic of the dialect in question or interesting for ethnographic or folkloristic reasons. The value of such sources for the study of grammatical variation, unfortunately, tends to be negligible.

Secondly, the sources generally provide little or no metadata which is now considered standard among descriptive linguists, such as information about data collection and elicitation, informants, and patterns of variation within the linguistic community. Many of the nineteenth-century sources – as well as some more recent dialect dictionaries – were not written by professional linguists or philologists, but by enthusiasts who were often themselves native speakers of the dialect in question and relied on their own intuition and knowledge of it. If any information is given about the distribution or frequency of a pattern, it is generally too impressionistic to be of much use ('this expression is often heard', etc.). Accordingly, we are not in a position to make any claims about the usage frequency or pragmatics of the construction in the individual dialects. Our goal is simply to investigate whether the pattern is attested in the available sources for the various dialect areas.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that the sources do not generally provide any negative evidence, and the truism about the absence of evidence should thus be kept in mind – if a pattern is not mentioned in a given source, this does not necessarily mean that it did or does not exist in the dialect in question. The author may have overlooked or ignored it, or it may not have occurred in the material used. In addition, despite our best efforts we may of course ourselves have overlooked the attestation of a form in our material. With these caveats in mind, we will now move on to the

attestations of HET *kan/mag/moet* in the various languages and dialects that we have investigated.

4 Findings

We begin our survey with the dialects of Dutch before moving on to Frisian, Low German, and finally Afrikaans. For each example we indicate the location and the broader dialect area. Note that, as a matter of convenience, we also treat Low Saxon and Limburgish in subsection 4.1, although these Dutch dialects are in some respects linguistically closer to the Low German and Central Franconian dialects across the border.

4.1 Dutch dialects

We have found HET *kan/mag/moet* recorded in dialect grammars and dictionaries from most of the Dutch-speaking area.⁵ *Kunnen* and *mogen* are both attested with the meaning ‘is possible’ and ‘is permitted’, respectively. (8)-(10) give examples with *kunnen*, in (9) with the older 3SG past-tense form *kos* (< Middle Dutch *const(e)*, cf. MNW, s.v. *connen*, 1.), in (10) as part of a periphrastic perfect with the participial form *ekennen* (cf. Boekenoogen 1897, s.v. *kunnen*).

- (8) Groningen (Low Saxon)

Hou kin 't!

how can 3SG.N

‘How is it possible!’ (Ter Laan 1929, s.v. *kinŋ*)

- (9) Land van Ravenstein (Brabantian)

't kos mar nèt

3SG.N can.PST only just

‘It was just barely possible.’ (Zegers 1999, s.v. *kos*)

5 Namely the broader dialect areas Low Saxon (*Nedersaksisch*), Hollandic (*Hollands*), Brabantian (*Brabants*), and Limburgish (*Limburgs*). We have not found any examples in sources from the Zeelandic (*Zeeuws*) or Flemish (*Vlaams*) dialects. However, the material we have been able to access from these areas is quite limited, consisting mainly of a small number of dictionaries. We leave it open for future work whether the construction may be found in other materials from Zeeland and Oost- and West-Vlaanderen.

- (10) Zaandam (Hollandic)
O, dat had toch niet 'ekennen
 oh that had after.all NEG can.PTCP
 'Oh, that wasn't possible after all' (Boekenoogen 1897, s.v. *kunnen*)

Two examples with *mogen* 'is permitted' are given in (11)-(12):

- (11) Barneveld (Low Saxon)
da moes nie mag-en [damösnīmagən]
 that must.PST NEG may-INF
 'That shouldn't be allowed' (Van Schothorst 1904, s.v. *magən*)
- (12) Hoeksche Waard (Hollandic)
't Heb nooit gemagge; 't is al êêuw-e verbôôje
 3SG.N has never may.PTCP 3SG.N is already century-PL ban.PTCP
 'It's never been allowed; it's been banned for centuries' (HW 2006, s.v. *magge*)

In addition, in (13) we see an example of *mogen* with the older meaning 'be possible' rather than 'be permitted'. This was the most frequent meaning of *mogen* in (written) Dutch until well into the early modern period (cf. Nuyts & Byloo 2015).

- (13) West Friesland (Hollandic)
Zuks mag graag
 such may easily
 'Such a thing may easily happen' ('zoiets kan gemakkelijk gebeuren'; Pannekeet 1984, s.v. *magge*)

Uses of HET *moet* are primarily recorded in the idiomatic expression *wat moet, dat moet* or the variant *als het moet, dan moet het*. This expression is attested not only in the Dutch dialects, but also in Frisian and Low German (cf. below). (14) is from the north, (15) from the very south of The Netherlands.⁶

6 Further examples of HET *kan/mag/moet* can be found in sources from Maastricht and Thorn in Limburg (Endepols 1955, s.v. *kunnen*; Tonnaer & Sniekers 2012, s.v. *mótte*), Drente (Molema 1889, s.v. *mag*), Nuenen in Zuid-Brabant (De Laat 2011, s.v. *magge*), and Arendonk in the province of Antwerp (Claessen & Van Deuren 2016: 22, 26).

- (14) Groningen (Low Saxon)

wat mout dat mout [or:] *as 't mout den mout 't*
 what must that must if 3SG.N must then must 3SG.N
 'what has to be, has to be' (Molema 1887, s.v. *mouten*)

- (15) Kempen (Brabantian)

A's 't moet dan moet et
 if 3SG.N must then must 3SG.N
 'If it has to be, then it has to be.' (De Bont 1958, s.v. *mutə(n)*)

4.2 Frisian

As in Dutch, the HET *kan/mag/moet* construction is used in contemporary Frisian, and numerous examples with the cognate modal verbs *kinne*, *meie*, and *moatte* can be found in the speech corpus KSF, cf. (16)-(18):⁷

- (16) *ik woe even wat wetter hel-je, kin dat?*

1SG want.PST just some water get-INF can that
 'I'd just like to go and get some water, is that possible?' (KSF, speech)

- (17) *skriuw-e ûnder pseudonym mei*

write-INF under pseudonym may
 'writing under a pseudonym is permitted' (KSF, meeting)

- (18) *fan Fryslân sizze wy ja, it moat wol*

from F. say.PL 1PL yes 3SG.N must actually
 'from Fryslân we say, yes, it is necessary [i.e. including Frisian in the curriculum]' (KSF, discussion)

Because of the high level of Dutch influence on contemporary Frisian, one might suspect this to be a recent calque of the Dutch construction. However, we think the available evidence, though limited, suggests otherwise. The construction is attested from various locations in Fryslân from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, so if it entered the language through contact with Dutch, this happened one and a half centuries ago at the very least.

7 The corpus consists of about 65 hours of recorded and transcribed spoken language. We have added punctuation, but otherwise the examples are reproduced as they appear in the corpus.

In the YTF corpus, we found a single example with *meie*, from one of the versions of the parable of the Prodigal Son in Winkler's *Dialecticon*:⁸

- (19) Schiermonnikoog Frisian (dated January 1871)
In hi kriiġe so'n huenger dot hi wuuë wol graag
 and 3SG.M get.PST such hunger COMP 3SG.M want.PST actually gladly
siin lif fol it-e mooi de swiine, mar dot mocht net.
 3SG.M.POSS belly full eat-INF with DEF.C pig but that may.PST NEG
 'And he got so hungry that he would have liked to stuff himself with the pig,
 but that wasn't allowed.' (YTF; Winkler 1874: 458)

It is worth noting that Winkler does not mention *dot mocht net* in his commentary to the text, suggesting that he did not consider this use out of the ordinary.⁹ The dictionary of Schiermonnikoog Frisian, mainly based on mid-twentieth century sources, mentions the construction for all three modal verbs, for example *It is in hynjersmiddel, maar it mot* 'It's a rough remedy, but it has to be' (Visser & Dyk 2002, s.v. *motte*; see also s.vv. *kinne*, *meie*). From other varieties of Frisian, we have found numerous attestations in the *Nederlandse Volksverhalenbank*. The two examples in (20), one with *meie* and one with *kinne*, are from the same anecdote, recorded in 1971 in eastern Fryslân. (21), from another recording, gives an example with *moatte*.

- (20) Achtkarspelen (Wood Frisian)
 a. *Dat gong oer in frou, de man hie oan='t nei-doll-en*
 that go.PST about INDF woman DEF.C man have.PST at=DEF.N after-dig-NMLZ
west op it boer-en-e lân, dat mocht net
 be.PTCP on DEF.N farmer-ADJZ-DEF land that may.PST NEG
 'It [i.e. the anecdote] was about a woman, her husband had been stealing
 potatoes in the fields, that wasn't allowed'

8 We have not systematically investigated any East or North Frisian material, i.e. from the Frisian languages spoken in northern Germany. However, the two East Frisian texts in Winkler (1874) suggest that the pattern may have been in use here as well, as they both contain the phrase *det môt un det skel ôrs* (Saterland Frisian), *dait mut un dait sil ôrs* (Wangeroog Frisian) 'it must and it has to be different' (Winkler 1874: 159, 172), cf. Dutch *het moet anders*. This, as well as the modal systems of the Frisian languages in general, deserves to be investigated in more detail.

9 Note that while Johan Winkler (1840–1916) grew up in Leeuwarden and was thus not a native speaker of Frisian, he did learn to speak and write the language fluently (Meertens 1958).

b. *En nou seit mynhear ek noch, it kin net. Nou, at dat kin.*
 and now says sir also yet 3SG.N can NEG now COMP that can
 ‘And now Sir is saying, that’s not possible [i.e. resurrecting the dead]. Well,
 certainly that’s possible...’ (NVb, ABIJMA42, 1971)

(21) Nijega (Wood Frisian)

Tsjoenster-s en nachtmerje-s komm-e troch=’t kaeisgat of troch
 witch-PL and mare-PL come-PL through=DEF.N keyhole or through

it goatsgat. Dat moat wol, oars kin dat folk-je ommers
 DEF.N drain that must actually else can that people-DIM after.all

nergens troch yn=’e hûs komm-e
 nowhere through in=DEF house come-INF

‘Witches and mares enter through the keyhole or through the drain. And that has to be this way, you see, because those beings can’t get into the house in any other way’ (NVb, CJ000515, c.1965)¹⁰

With *moatte* we have also found examples similar to the Dutch expression *wat moet, dat moet* mentioned above:

(22) *Hwet moat, dat moat, sei de boer, en hy forkoft syn kou*
 what must that must say.PST DEF.C farmer and 3SG.M sell.PST 3SG.M.POSS cow

en kofte in prûk.
 and buy.PST INDF wig

‘What has to be, has to be, said the farmer, and he sold his cow and bought a wig.’ (WFT, s.v. *moatte*; *Frysl.*, 1916)

The WFT also records the idiomatic expression in (23), where both *kinne* and *moatte* have an eventive subject:

(23) *As ’t net kin sa ’t moat, den moat it sa ’t kin*
 if 3SG.N NEG can as 3SG.N must then must 3SG.N as 3SG.N can
 ‘If it can’t be the way it has to be, then it’ll have to be the way it can be’
 [= necessity is the mother of invention] (WFT, s.v. *kinne*; W. Dykstra, 1896)

¹⁰ Further examples from the NVb can be found in the stories with the ID codes CJ027023, CJ083303, CJ120704, YPFOE054, YPFOE207, YPFOE252, and YPFOE405.

4.3 Low German

Despite the more than 8,000 bibliographical entries in VndS (2018), we have found almost no literature devoted specifically to the Low German modal verbs. The only exception is Mortelmans (2007), which deals primarily with the inventory of modal verbs and their morphological characteristics compared with Dutch and High German. However, the available dictionaries and grammars make it abundantly clear that the HET *kan/mag/moet* construction is also recorded in traditional Low German dialects.¹¹ We have found attestations from eight different locations in northwestern Germany, the easternmost attestation being from Glückstadt on the Elbe (Bernhardt 1903: 20). For *könen* ‘can’, a Westphalian example is given in (24), a North Low Saxon one in (25).¹²

- (24) Westmünsterland (Westphalian)

Et kann ook, dat –
3SG.N can.PST also COMP

‘It was also possible that...’ or ‘It also occurred that...’ (Pirainen & Elling 1992, s.v. *können*)

- (25) Emden (Ostfriesland, North Low Saxon)

t kann neet
3SG.N can NEG

‘it cannot be, is not possible’ (‘es kann nicht sein, ist nicht möglich’, Krüger 1843: 42)

For *mögen* ‘may, be permitted’, we have already cited an example from Pirainen & Elling (1992) in the introduction, cf. (4). However, *mögen* is also found in a number of sources with the older meaning ‘be possible’, namely when it occurs in the collocation *mag lichte/sachte*. In the Westphalian example in (26), *mag lichte/sachte* seems to function as a

11 For lack of a standard Low German orthography, we refer to the three modal verbs using the forms in Lindow et al. (1998): *könen*, *mögen*, and *möten*.

12 Uniquely among the works we consulted, the source of (25) also speculates about the origins of the construction: ‘Die sogenannten Hilfsverben haben im Ostfriesischen eine eigene Bedeutung, die sich aus der ältesten Zeit herschreiben muß, wo diese Verben noch nicht zu Abstracten geworden waren, sondern einen vollen prägnanten Sinn hatten.’ [In the language of Ostfrisland, the so-called auxiliary verbs have a special meaning, which must go back to the ancient time when these verbs had not yet become abstract, but had their own full sense] (Krüger 1843: 42).

complement-taking predicate; the *Niedersächsisches Wörterbuch* appears to analyse the collocation as an adverb, as suggested by the gloss ‘vielleicht’ in (27).

- (26) Osnabrück (Westphalian)
et mag lichte, et mag sachte dat [...]
 3SG.N may easily 3SG.N may readily COMP
 ‘it may easily be that...’ (Rosemann gen. Klöntrup 1982 [1824], s.v. *mügen*)
- (27) Helzendorf (Grafschaft Hoya, North Low Saxon)
mach lichde bzw. mach sagde „kann sein, vielleicht“.
 may easily or may readily can be.INF perhaps
 ‘may be, perhaps’ (NW 1965–, s.v. *mögen*; no date given)

Examples with *möten* ‘must’ are recorded as well, cf. (28)–(29). As (29) shows, the idiomatic expression *wat moet, dat moet* (cf. above for Dutch and Frisian) also has parallels in Low German:

- (28) Emden (Ostfriesland, North Low Saxon)
t moot
 3SG.N must
 ‘it has to be’ (Krüger 1843: 42)
- (29) Westmünsterland (Westphalian)
Et mutt man so! Wat mutt, dat mutt [...] Wat mott denn nu?
 3SG.N must just thus what must that must what must then now
 ‘It just has to be that way! What has to be, has to be [...] What’ll have to happen now?’ (Piiirainen & Elling 1992, s.v. *mütten*)

In fact, the expression *Wat mutt, dat mutt* appears to be commonly known in Germany, where it is stereotypically associated with a certain (alleged) Northern German equanimity or resignation. This is reflected in the description in (30), from a humorous radio vignette from NDR 1 Niedersachsen:

- (30) *Es gibt im Norden gewiss-e Sachzwänge, an denen*
 3SG.N give.3SG in.DEF.SG.DAT north certain-PL necessity.PL by REL.PL.DAT

man nicht vorbei-komm-t. Wenn ein derartig-er Sachzwang vor-lieg-t,
 one NEG around-come-3SG if INDF such-M.SG.NOM necessity before-lie-3SG

sag-t der Nord-deutsch-e: "Wat mutt, dat mutt."
 say-3SG DEF.M.SG.NOM north-German-DEF.SG what must that must

'In Northern Germany, there are certain practical necessities which one cannot avoid. If one such practical necessity presents itself, the Northern German will say, "Wat mutt, dat mutt".' (Klookschieter 2008)

A search on the German version of Google.com (26 Jan 2019) returns more than 15,000 hits on the search string 'wat mutt dat mutt', including a Low German-themed board game and references to the phrase in various regional and national media (see, for instance, Die Welt 2017).

We have not encountered the HET *kan/mag/moet* construction in any East Low German (Mecklenburgish, Pomeranian, Markish) sources. Notably, however, in an East Pomeranian source we found a variation of *wat mutt, dat mutt* almost identical to the Frisian expression cited above, but in this version, given in (31), the modal verb occurs with an overt infinitive, *wesen* 'be':

- (31) Hinterpommern (East Pomeranian)
Wat wes-en mutt, datt mutt wes-en! säd' jenn' gaud' Buur; verköfft sin
 what be-INF must that must be-INF said DEM good farmer sold 3SG.M.POSS

Oss-en, unn köfft sick='n Prüück
 ox-ACC and bought REFL=INDF wig

'"What has to be, has to be!" said the good farmer, and sold his ox and bought himself a wig.' (Haken 1994 [1806]: 179)

Whether this reflects an actual grammatical difference and the construction was indeed restricted to the western Low German dialects will have to be investigated further.

4.4 Afrikaans

Finally, we also find the construction in a West Germanic language spoken outside of Europe, namely Afrikaans. This language, which until the beginning of the twentieth century was regarded as a non-standard variety of Dutch, descends from the Dutch varieties spoken by settlers in South Africa from the seventeenth century onwards. In contemporary Afrikaans, the three modals all occur in the HET *kan/mag/moet* construction. (32)-(34) provide an example of each:

- (32) *Wat nie kan nie, kan nie.*
 what NEG can NEG can NEG
 ‘What isn’t possible, isn’t possible’ (HAT 2015, s.v. *kan*¹)
- (33) *Ons hoef ons nie te verbeel dat die laas-te woord ge-spreek is oor*
 IPL need IPL NEG to imagine COMP DEF last-ATTR word PTCP-speak is about

wat op ’n Sondag mag en wat nie mag nie
 what on INDF Sunday may and what NEG may NEG

‘We needn’t imagine that the last word has been said about what is and isn’t allowed on a Sunday’ (WAT 1996, s.v. ³*mag*; *Volksbl.*, 1963)

- (34) *Ons sal help as dit moet.*
 1PL shall help if 3SG.N must
 ‘We’ll help if it’s necessary.’ (WAT 1996, s.v. ¹*moet*, I.1.c)

The earliest example we have found from Afrikaans is from the second half of the nineteenth century, cf. (35):

- (35) *Di eerste boek-i wat “Di Genootskap van Reg-te Afrikaander-s” uitge*
 DEF first book-DIM REL DEF society of true-ATTR Afrikaner-PL publish

is Di Eerste Beginsel-s van di Afrikaans-e Taal. En dit kan ook ni
 is DEF first principle-PL of DEF A-ATTR language and 3SG.N can also NEG

anders ni, want di Genootskap is mos op<ge>rig “om te staan
 otherwise NEG because DEF society is indeed <PTCP>found in.order to stand

ver ons Taal, ons Nasi en ons Land.”
 for 1PL.POSS language 1PL.POSS nation and 1PL.POSS country

‘The first booklet published by “The Society of True Afrikaners” is *The basic principles of the Afrikaans language*. And it can’t be in any other way, because the Society was indeed founded “to stand for *our language*, our nation, and our country.” (Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners 1882 [1876])

The history of Afrikaans – in particular how it developed out of Dutch vernacular varieties – has been the subject of much debate and several scholarly works (cf. Carstens & Raidt 2017, in particular chapter 11, for a recent overview and bibliography). However, we are not aware that the HET *kan/mag/moet* construction and its origins have received any attention so far.

5 Concluding remarks

As mentioned in the introduction, our goal with this contribution has been to document the areal distribution of the HET *kan/mag/moet* construction in the languages and dialects of continental West Germanic. We hope to have shown that this particular construction with an eventive subject and no infinitive is not just a peculiarity of Dutch, but is in fact also found in Frisian, Afrikaans, and several dialects of Low German. Our interpretation of these facts is that HET *kan/mag/moet* is an areal feature of Dutch, Frisian, and Low German at least west of the Weser. In addition, since it occurs in contemporary Afrikaans, it was probably present in at least some of the varieties which formed the input of this language.

While there would be nothing surprising about the existence of this kind of syntactic isogloss, the areal distribution of HET *kan/mag/moet* appears to have been overlooked in the literature on West Germanic. To be sure, the pattern has clearly been noticed by lexicographers of Low German, but perhaps because of the relatively low visibility of this language, linguists outside of Low German studies do not appear to have been aware of it. It is worth stressing that we are not ruling out that it may be found outside of the area described above, as we have not (yet) systematically examined sources from High German dialects, eastern Low German, or the Frisian languages of Germany. We intend to investigate this question in future work.

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