

## Non-referential elements in the history of Low German

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Diachronic research into the syntax and clause structure of Low German has increased in the past few years but still, little is known about the inventory of non-referential elements, their syntactic representation and the discourse-related factors favoring their use and distribution in the respective varieties. In his grammar of Low German dialects of the late 19th century and the century turn, Grimme (1910) accounts for three elements acting as non-referential items, namely the personal pronoun *et* 'it', the single demonstrative *dat* 'that', and adverbial elements like *do* 'then' and *dor* 'there'. He observes that there is a division of labor between these elements, in that the adverbial elements prototypically occurring in existential constructions with a clause-internal indefinite subject (1a-b), while the pronominal elements more commonly act as non-referential arguments in the accusative, i.e., as semantically empty objects, see (2a-b). The variation between *it* and *that* results from differences in the formal paradigm of personal pronouns, as *it* is missing in some of the varieties and therefore replaced by *that* (Grimme 1910: 73). The aim of the present paper is to trace back the history of these classes of elements in the respective historical varieties of Low German by using the evidence included in the reference corpus ReN, and to investigate their distribution in terms of dialects, clause type, grammatical function and syntactic position. A special focus is placed on weather and psych verbs in which expletives in Germanic prototypically occur, but also on existential constructions, presentational sentences and impersonal passives, i.e. on contexts in which non-referential elements are ungrammatical in clause-internal position in modern German as a representative of asymmetric OV/V2-languages, in contrast to other classes of expletives. It is also of interest if the variation between *it* and *that* already applies for the MLG varieties and has an impact on the positional realization of these two elements in the respective syntactic clause types.

- (1) a. *da<sup>o</sup> was es ma<sup>o</sup>l ne fra<sup>u</sup>*  
there was once upon a woman  
'once, there was a woman' (Grimme 1910: 142)
- b. *dō<sup>r</sup> is-n smit w<sup>i</sup>est*  
there is-a blacksmith been  
'There was a blacksmith there' (Grimme 1910: 142)
- (2) a. *hq<sup>i</sup> kritt-et met-tr annest*  
he gets-it with-the.dat fear  
'he gets frightened' (region of Assinghausen/Sauerland; Grimme 1910: 130)
- b. *sa<sup>i</sup> hā<sup>n</sup> dat am lūts<sup>u</sup>n*  
they have it loud.superl  
'they make the biggest noise' (region of Stavenhagen/Mecklenburg; Grimme 1910: 130)

## References

Grimme, Hubert (1910), *Plattdeutsche Mundarten*. Reprint. Berlin et al.: de Gruyter.

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ReN, Referenzkorpus Mittelniederdeutsch/Niederrheinisch (1200 – 1650), <https://www.slm.uni-hamburg.de/ren/korpus.html>