

A *wh* discourse particle: Dutch *hoezo*

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Abstract. This paper provides an analysis of a special kind of *why*-questions in Dutch, formed with the *wh*-word *hoezo* (lit. ‘how so’). We propose that *hoezo* signals the speaker’s resistance to updating the discourse model, by asking the interlocutor to provide a reason for their preceding discourse move. *Hoezo* shares properties with both discourse particles (its not-at-issue content expresses the speaker’s attitude towards the current state of the discourse), and question words (it asks the interlocutor to provide a reason). Unlike *waarom* (the regular word for ‘why’), *hoezo* is not subject to *wh*-movement and does not bind a variable.

Keywords. *why*-questions; *wh*-questions; content questions; discourse particles; *because*-clauses; reasons; Dutch

1. Introduction. *Why*-questions are typically used to ask the interlocutor for a reason, explanation, or cause (for instance, *Why was the train delayed?*).¹ But reasons, causes, and explanations come in many different varieties, so it’s maybe not surprising that languages often have more than one expression for ‘why’.² This paper focuses on the Dutch *wh*-word *hoezo* (lit. ‘how so’). Although *hoezo* is usually translated in English as ‘why’, it differs in important ways from the most common Dutch word for ‘why’, *waarom* (lit. ‘where for’). As a rough first characterization, we can say that the main function of *hoezo* is a pragmatic one. It can often be paraphrased as something like ‘What do you mean?’. This is illustrated by the attested example in (1) taken from the *Corpus Hedendaags Nederlands* [Corpus of Contemporary Dutch] (2021):

- (1) We beginnen onze optredens het liefst met Waterloo. Dan zie je de zaal exploderen. Iedereen danst en zingt mee. In de kleedkamer warmen we ons op met Arrival. Dat is instrumentaal, ja, maar we zingen mee met de doedelzakken. Hoezo, een afschuwelijk nummer? Het is prachtig. Alles van Abba is prachtig.
 “We like to start our performance with Waterloo. Then you see the room explode. Everybody is dancing and singing. In the dressing room we warm up with Arrival. That’s an instrumental track, yes, but we sing along with the bagpipes. What do you mean, a terrible song? It is beautiful. Everything by Abba is beautiful.”

As far as we have been able to determine, *hoezo* has not previously been discussed in any detail in the literature.³ The goal of this paper is to provide the first detailed description and the-

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¹ There are many linguistic and philosophical studies of *why*-questions, including Collins (1991); Schwarz & Simonenko (2018); Cheng (2021); Corver (2021); Cox (2021); Egler (2021); and Sandoval & Morzycki (2023), among many others.

² See for instance Zwicky & Zwicky (1973), for an early investigation of English *why*, *how come*, and *what for*.

³ Apart from the occasional brief side remark about *hoezo* (e.g., Corver 2023), the only publication specifically dealing with *hoezo* that we have been able to find is a short note in an online advice column called *Taalloket* (lit.

oretical analysis of *hoezo*, contrasting its syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties with those of *waarom*.

The core idea underlying the analysis developed in this paper is that the (not-at-issue) contribution of *hoezo* is at the level of the discourse rather than at that of the truth-conditional sentence semantics. *Hoezo* challenges the interlocutor to provide a reason for their discourse move (“Why did you say that?”). Even though *hoezo* is a *wh*-word just like *why* and *waarom*, at the same time it shares some of the properties of discourse particles. We thus propose the recognition of a novel lexical category, namely that of what we call a *wh* discourse particle. Because *hoezo*’s main function is a pragmatic one, its syntax and semantics are “impoverished” compared to that of *waarom/why*. In contrast to *waarom/why*, *hoezo* is not a variable-binding operator. In the syntax this is reflected in the fact that *hoezo* does not undergo *wh*-movement but is base-generated in the left-periphery of the clause, more specifically in Spec-CP. This is in line with the common assumption in the literature that functional projections above the IP level are the locus of pragmatic and illocutionary operators, and hence the natural home for discourse particles (Grosz 2020; Wiltschko 2021). These syntactic and semantic differences between *hoezo* and *waarom/why* will be demonstrated through a battery of empirical tests.

Here we should mention from the outset that we do not exclude the possibility that *waarom* and *why* may have a pragmatic use that is similar (or identical) to that of *hoezo*, in addition to their ‘regular’ use as sentence-level variable-binding operators. In many, if not all, of the example with *hoezo* in this paper, it could felicitously be replaced by *waarom*. However, crucially, *hoezo* cannot function as a variable-binding operator and does not undergo *wh*-movement, as we will show in Section 5. Thus, whereas *waarom/why* may be ambiguous between being a sentence-level variable-binding *wh*-operator or a pragmatic *wh* discourse particle, *hoezo* only has the latter interpretation. In fact, Ginzburg (2012) argues for such an ambiguity of English *why*, in his analysis of what he calls its ‘metacommunicative’ use (p. 308-316). Our analysis of *hoezo* is similar in spirit to his, but we will not make a detailed comparison in this paper.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we distinguish three types of utterances with *hoezo* based on formal criteria. Section 3 discusses its pragmatic uses, and Section 4 presents the core of our theoretical analysis. The consequences for the syntactic behaviour of *hoezo* are discussed in Section 5. The systematic differences with *waarom* observed there lend strong empirical support to our analysis. In Section 6 we further motivate our proposal to classify *hoezo* as a *wh* discourse particle, based on general characteristics of discourse particles commonly discussed in the literature. In Section 7 we summarize our analysis, and suggest some promising avenues for further research.

2. Syntactic configurations for *hoezo*. Using purely syntactic criteria, we can distinguish three types of *hoezo*-utterances, namely (a) *hoezo* occurring by itself (isolated *hoezo*), (b) *hoezo* plus a single word or phrase (*hoezo* + *X*),⁴ and (c) *hoezo* as the initial question word in an interrogative

‘Language window’) of the popular monthly language magazine *Onze Taal* (n.d). Although this blog post is couched in prescriptive terms, it accords with our own native-speaker intuitions, pointing out that *hoezo* is less neutral than *waarom* (‘why’) and that it expresses ‘surprise’ or even ‘indignation’. We will see that this claim is supported by our analysis, although we regard this aspect of *hoezo* as a more superficial pragmatic side-effect of its core meaning. There is no mention of *hoezo* in *ANS* (2021), the most comprehensive and up-to-date descriptive grammar of Dutch.

⁴ The analogous construction with *why* is known in the literature as ‘*why*-Stripping’. Corver (2021) is a detailed discussion of the syntax of this construction in Dutch with *waarom* (but not *hoezo*). We’ll have to leave a comparison between ‘*waarom*-Stripping’ and ‘*hoezo*-Stripping’ for another occasion.

clause (CP) immediately followed by the inflected verb in the second position (*hoezo* + V2). In response to the assertion in (2), any of these constructions can be used, as illustrated in (3).

- (2) Speaker A: *Ons plan is totaal mislukt*
our plan is totally failed
 ‘Our plan has totally failed.’

(3) Speaker B:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| <p>a. <i>Hoezo?</i>
 HOEZO
 ‘What do you mean?’</p> | <p>isolated <i>hoezo</i></p> |
| <p>b. <i>Hoezo, totaal mislukt?</i>
 HOEZO totally failed
 ‘What do you mean, totally failed?’</p> | <p><i>hoezo</i> + X</p> |
| <p>c. <i>Hoezo is ons plan totaal mislukt?</i>
 HOEZO is our plan totally failed
 ‘What do you mean, our plan has totally failed?’</p> | <p><i>hoezo</i> + V2</p> |

In the *hoezo* + X construction, X can be a word or constituent of any syntactic category, as shown in (4):

- (4) a. *Hoezo mislukt?*
 b. *Hoezo totaal mislukt?*
 c. *Hoezo totaal?*
 d. *Hoezo plan?*
 e. *Hoezo ons plan?*

In the *hoezo* + V2 construction, *hoezo* is syntactically integrated in the sentence in a way that is superficially parallel to other *wh*-words like *wie* (‘who’), *wat* (‘what’), and *waarom* (‘why’), which have undergone *wh*-movement to the initial sentence position. Due to the well-known Verb Second (V2) constraint of Dutch syntax, the inflected finite verb then has to appear immediately following the *wh*-word. The standard analysis is that Dutch is underlyingly SOV, and that in finite main clauses the inflected verb moves to the C(omplementizer) position. The constituent preceding it (such as *hoezo* in (3c)) is in the Specifier of CP (Spec-CP).

In addition, there are *hoezo*-questions where the verb appears to be in the third position in the sentence, as in (5). It might be tempting to regard these as a fourth type of construction (‘*hoezo* + V3’); however, we take it that these are actually instances of the *hoezo* + X construction, where X happens to be a full declarative main clause (CP) with V2 word order.

- (5) *Hoezo, ons plan is totaal mislukt?*
 HOEZO *our plan is totally failed*
 ‘What do you mean, our plan has totally failed?’

5. Syntactic consequences: *hoezo* vs. *waarom*. When we consider occurrences of *hoezo* that are integrated syntactically in a full *wh*-clause (i.e., the *hoezo* + V2 construction) it appears at first glance to be syntactically analogous to other *wh*-words such as *waarom*. However, a closer look reveals that its syntactic properties differ substantially. Direct comparison between *hoezo* and *waarom* shows a number of syntactic differences that can be attributed to the pragmatic function of *hoezo*. We claim that *hoezo* is different from *waarom* in that *hoezo* is not subject to *wh*-movement and is base-generated in the left periphery (Spec-CP) of an interrogative main clause.⁸ The deeper reason for this syntactic difference is that, semantically, *hoezo* is a pragmatic, discourse-oriented operator, and as such does not bind a variable in the semantic representation of the sentence, unlike its apparent near-synonym *waarom*.

Putting aside some of the semantic and pragmatic intricacies of *why*-questions, we can characterize the regular *wh*-word *waarom/why* as a semantic operator that binds a variable ranging over reasons (see, e.g., Shlonsky & Soare 2011; Cox 2021):

(13) What is the reason *x* such that ... because of *x* ... ?

In (13), the *wh*-morpheme binds the variable *x*, which syntactically corresponds to the trace left by *wh*-movement. *Hoezo*, however, is a pragmatic operator that acts at the discourse level and in that sense has more in common with discourse particles and illocutionary operators. Semantically, *hoezo* does not bind a variable and syntactically it does not participate in *wh*-movement but is base-generated in its surface position (Spec-CP).

Our claim that *hoezo* is unable to create a binding configuration predicts that *hoezo* will be illicit in several types of *wh*-questions that require movement and variable-binding, in which other *wh*-words are able to appear, including *waarom*. We give a number of examples that show that this prediction is confirmed, which provides strong empirical support for our analysis.

First of all, in contrast to other *wh*-words, because *hoezo* does not undergo *wh*-movement, it always has to be interpreted locally and cannot participate in long-distance relations (unbounded dependencies). As a result, in interrogative sentences that contain an embedded clause, *hoezo* can only receive a root-clause construal,⁹ in contrast to *waarom*, which can also be interpreted as having originated in the embedded clause, and may therefore result in a structural ambiguity:

- (14) a. *Waarom* zei de politie dat de verdachte gearresteerd is?
 Why said the police that the suspect arrested is
 Root construal: ‘What is the reason that the police said the suspect was arrested?’
 Embedded construal: ‘What did the police say the reason is that the suspect was arrested?’
- b. *Hoezo* zei de politie dat de verdachte gearresteerd is?
 HOEZO said the police that the suspect arrested is
 Root construal: ‘What is the reason that the police said the suspect was arrested?’
 * Embedded construal: ‘What did the police say the reason is that the suspect was arrested?’

⁸ Collins (1991) makes the same argument for English *how come*, based on data very similar to ours for *hoezo*.

⁹ The same observation was made for English *how come* by Zwicky & Zwicky (1973) and Collins (1991).

Secondly, a regular *wh*-interrogative such as *waarom* can appear *in situ* in multiple *wh*-questions and echo questions. Under common assumptions, both constructions are interpreted by means of *wh*-movement operating at the level of LF.¹⁰ If *hoezo* is base-generated in surface position and is not a variable-binding operator, we predict that it cannot appear *in situ* in multiple *wh*-questions or echo questions, and that is exactly what we find:^{11,12}

- (15) a. Wie heeft waarom op de VVD gestemd?
 who has why on the VVD voted
 ‘Who voted for the VVD why?’
 b. *Wie heeft hoezo op de VVD gestemd?
 who has HOEZO on the VVD voted
 Intended: ‘Who voted for the VVD why?’
- (16) a. Zij heeft WAAROM op de VVD gestemd?
 She has why on the VVD voted?
 ‘She voted for the VVD WHY?’
 b. *Zij heeft HOEZO op de VVD gestemd?
 She has HOEZO on the VVD voted?
 Intended: ‘She voted for the VVD WHY?’

Thirdly, since *hoezo* is a pragmatic discourse-level operator, it is only expected to appear at the root-clause level.¹³ This predicts that it cannot head an embedded CP. Again, this is borne out:

- (17) a. Ik vraag me af waarom het regent? b. *Ik vraag me af hoezo het regent?
 I ask me of why it rains I ask me of HOEZO it rains
 ‘I wonder why it’s raining?’ Intended: ‘I wonder why it’s raining?’

Since *hoezo* cannot head an embedded CP, it follows that sluicing with *hoezo* is also impossible.

¹⁰ Alternatively, in theories that assume a semantic analogue of LF movement, the interpretation of *in situ* or multiple interrogatives will result in a variable-binding configuration, which will likewise be ruled out for *hoezo*.

¹¹ There may be another (or additional) reason why *hoezo* cannot appear in an echo question. Interestingly, Csipak (2023) observes that *hoezo* cannot even be used in an echo question where the *wh*-word appears in Spec-CP, as shown in (i). She relates this observation to the exceptional stress on the first morpheme of compound *wh*-words in echo questions, and the fact that, unlike all other Dutch *wh*-words, *hoezo* lacks a demonstrative counterpart.

- (i) a. Speaker A:
 Hotze bought a yacht because *mumble*.
 b. Speaker B:
 WAARom / *HOEzo heeft Hotze een jacht gekocht?
 WHY / HOEZO has Hotze a yacht bought
 Intended: ‘Why did Hotze buy a yacht?’

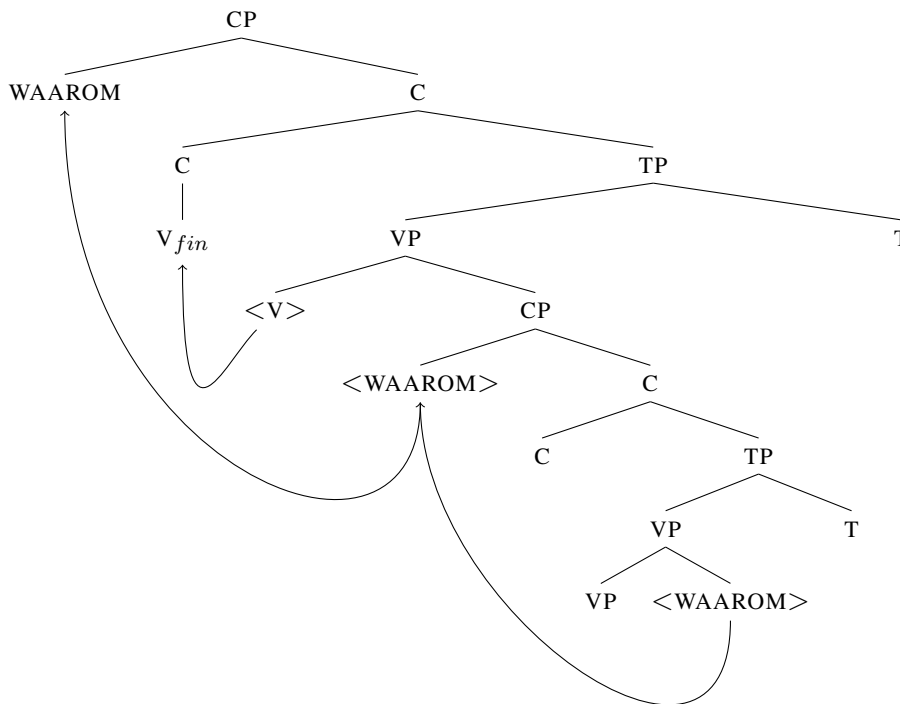
¹² The VVD is a right-wing party in the Netherlands.

¹³ Corver (2023) remarks that *hoezo* “typically occurs in root (i.e. non-embedded) clauses.”

- (18) a. Hij is boos maar ik weet niet waarom.
 he is angry but I know not why
 ‘He’s angry but I don’t know why.’
- b. *Hij is boos maar ik weet niet *hoezo*.
 he is angry but I know not HOEZO
 Intended: ‘He’s angry but I don’t know why.’

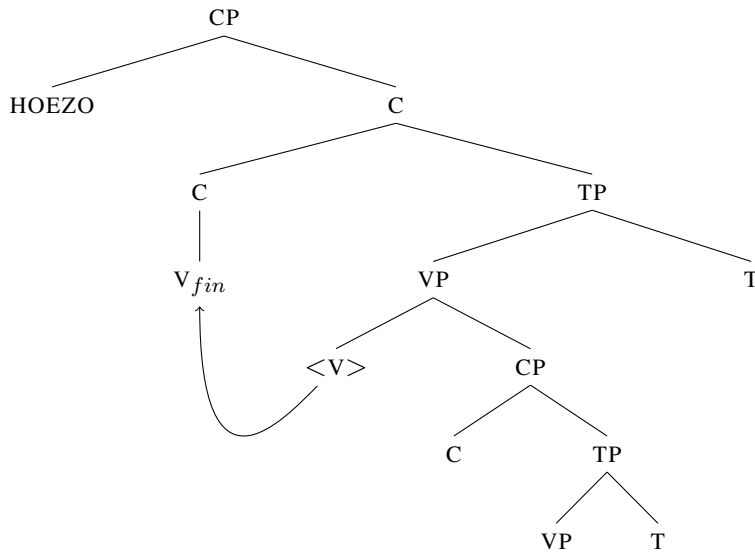
To sum up, while *hoezo* acts as a (pragmatic) question word, we have seen that in its syntactic distribution and semantic interpretation, it differs markedly from regular *wh*-words such as *waarom*. Specifically, the data in this section show that *hoezo* is restricted to a position at the left edge of the root clause. Since this is the only position in which *hoezo* appears, we conclude that *hoezo* is base-generated in Spec-CP (or another projection within the left-periphery, cf. Rizzi 1997; Wiltschko 2021), which is a natural location for discourse operators. We illustrate this syntactic difference with the schematic trees in (19)-(20):¹⁴

(19) *Waarom*



¹⁴ While Dutch is an OV language, in which complement clauses are right-dislocated (Koster 1994; Ott & de Vries 2016), our structures show a simplified version in which the embedded clause appears as a complement to the left of the verb.

(20) *Hoezo*



6. *Hoezo* as a discourse particle. Taking stock of the syntactic patterning and pragmatic behaviour of *hoezo*, we have seen that *hoezo* is certainly not like regular *wh*-words in Dutch. By questioning a preceding discourse move by the interlocutor, and by signalling resistance to updating the Common Ground or other components of the discourse model, *hoezo* contributes to Common Ground Management in the sense of Krifka (2008). More specifically, we argue that *hoezo* acts like a discourse particle.

There is a huge and highly diverse literature on discourse particles, and there is no consensus by any means about their definition, or about a set of empirical criteria for identifying them (Thoma 2016). There are many different subtypes of discourse particles, and there is no generally agreed-upon classification scheme. And, of course, across different languages, discourse particles do not necessarily all behave the same way. Nevertheless, there are a number of common characteristics that are shared by most, if not all, lexical items that are usually classified as discourse particles. How does *hoezo* compare to standard discourse particles on such diagnostics?

On the one hand, several typical characteristics of regular (non-*wh*) discourse particles that are also shared by *hoezo* are listed in Table 1. These include the property of both *hoezo* and non-*wh* discourse particles that they do not contribute to truth conditions and do not express at-issue content (Kratzer 1999; Gutzmann 2015). They also situate a proposition *p* in the CG (Grosz 2020: see ex. (17)) and dispute the CG content, marking *p* as controversial/contradictory (Grosz 2010).

On the other hand, Table 2 outlines a few common characteristics of (non-*wh*) discourse particles for which it is more questionable whether they also apply to *hoezo*. Perhaps most striking is the fact that non-*wh* discourse particles cannot be used independently – i.e., they must be positioned within a clause or phrase (Grosz 2020). However, *hoezo* can obviously be free-standing, since it often occurs in isolation, as we saw in (3a). While this is the case, it should also be mentioned that some *bona fide* discourse particles have homophones (modulo stress) that can be used as free-standing utterances, such as German *ja* and *doch*. These are often treated as belonging to a different category than that of discourse particles (for instance, response particles), but this raises the question of whether this homophony is indeed completely accidental and a whether a

more unified analysis might be possible. In any case, not allowing a free-standing use may not be such a clear cut criterion as is sometimes thought.

Secondly, discourse particles are often observed to be sensitive to the sentence type they occur in (e.g., declarative vs. interrogative), yet they themselves are unable to introduce a question. (Zimmermann 2004). When *hoezo* occurs in a clause (in Spec-CP) that clause of course has to be an interrogative and cannot be declarative or imperative. Whether this should be described as sensitivity to sentence type is debatable, since it may be better to say that the presence of *hoezo* is what *makes* the sentence an interrogative. But this is a rather fine distinction to make. At the very least, the presence of *hoezo* is tightly connected to the interrogative sentence type.

Thirdly, it has been argued that while discourse particles can mark a proposition *p* as controversial or uncontroversial, they do not *directly* challenge *p* (Grosz 2020). But although *hoezo* may be said to challenge *p*, arguably this challenge is only an indirect one. What *hoezo* does is to challenge the *interlocutor* to provide a reason for why they asserted (or presupposed or implicated) *p*.

Finally, discourse particles have been characterized as *deficient adverbs*, i.e., as weak or clitic-like sentence adverbs (Grosz 2020). *Hoezo* does not seem to fall in such a category, given its independent use that was discussed above and is illustrated in (3a). However, as we just noted, several common discourse particles have homophonous, but stressed, counterparts, and it's not clear where to draw the line, or whether this should be regarded as a definitional property of all discourse particles.

Non-<i>wh</i> discourse particle	<i>Hoezo</i>	Non-<i>wh</i> discourse particle	<i>Hoezo</i>
No truth-conditional contribution	✓	Cannot be independent	?
Not at-issue	✓	Cannot introduce a question	?
Situates <i>p</i> in the Common Ground	✓	Cannot directly challenge <i>p</i>	?
Manages CG-content dispute	✓	Deficient adverb	?
Marks <i>p</i> as controversial	✓		
Does not bind a variable	✓		

Table 1. Some similarities between *hoezo* and discourse particles

Table 2. Some differences between *hoezo* and discourse particles

Note that the criteria listed in Table 1 center on *hoezo*'s pragmatic function, which we take to be at the heart of what makes something a discourse particle, whereas the criteria in Table 2, for which the evidence is more equivocal, mainly involve distribution and form. Given that several core pragmatic and semantic characteristics of (non-*wh*) discourse particles are shared by *hoezo*, we think that it is entirely plausible to categorize *hoezo* as a (*wh*) discourse particle, especially given the large variety among the recognized discourse particles in different languages and the lack of consensus in the literature about definitions. But clearly this is an issue that merits further investigation and debate. Our analysis of *hoezo* extends the typology of discourse particles with a new subcategory, that of *wh* discourse particles. In the final section of the paper we give some suggestions for other lexical items that are potential members of this new subcategory. We hope that our proposal will contribute to the wider debate about the definition and empirical diagnostics for discourse particles.

7. Conclusion and outlook. The main points of our analysis of *hoezo* are summarized in (21):

- (21) a. *Hoezo* signals resistance on the part of the speaker to updating the discourse model (including the CG, the QUD Stack, and the To-Do List).
- b. It does so by asking the interlocutor to provide a reason for their earlier discourse move; in that sense, *hoezo* is a (pragmatic) question word.
- c. *Hoezo* functions as a discourse particle, because as (part of) its not-at-issue meaning it expresses the speaker’s attitude towards the current state of the discourse model and whether and how it should be updated.
- d. Unlike canonical *wh*-words such as *waarom/why*, *hoezo* is not a variable-binding operator.
- e. Syntactically, *hoezo* is base-generated in Spec-CP, and does not undergo *wh*-movement.

There are several issues that would be worth exploring in future research. The first is identifying other members of the class of *wh* discourse particles, and comparing them to *hoezo*. Some plausible candidates include English *so what* and its Dutch equivalent *wat dan nog*. In contrast to *hoezo*, these seem to be asking not for a reason, but rather for the implications or consequences of the interlocutor’s discourse move. In a very interesting recent paper, Wiltschko (2023) points out a certain use of plain English *what* (which is shared by Dutch *what*), in response to what she calls a “summons”, in a way that seems very similar in spirit to our analysis of *hoezo* in this paper. Another interesting case study might be that of the English expression *what of it*. And what about *how so*, the literal translation of *hoezo*?

A second promising area for further research is the implications of our analysis for the typology of *why*-questions. We already mentioned that *waarom* and *why* may have pragmatic uses similar to *hoezo* (cf. Ginzburg 2012). The differences between *why* and *how come* could be explored further as well (cf. Zwicky & Zwicky 1973 and Collins 1991). Important questions could also be asked (and have been) about parallels between *why*-questions and *how*-questions (cf. Schwarz & Simonenko 2018 and Sandoval & Morzycki 2023). Can it be a coincidence that *hoezo* contains the morpheme *hoe* (‘how’)? (cf. Corver 2023).

A third issue for further research is the connection between *why* and the connective *because*. As is well-known, a *because*-clause can be used pragmatically to express the reason why the speaker is making the discourse move that they do, as in (22):¹⁵

- (22) When’s dinner, because I’m starving.

Interestingly, Dutch has a special connective for this discourse-oriented function of *because*, namely *want* (‘for, since’). *Want* contrasts with the usual Dutch counterpart of *because*, *omdat*, not only in that the latter lacks the pragmatic use illustrated in (22), but also syntactically: whereas *omdat* is a subordinating connective, with the verb in clause-final position, *want* is coordinating, with V2 word order (ANS 2021):

¹⁵ This example is due to Jessica Rett, who used it in a recent presentation at UBC (March 2024).

- (23) a. Hoe laat gaan we eten, want ik heb honger.
 How late go we eat, since I have hunger.
 ‘At what time are we going to eat, because I’m hungry.’
- b. #Hoe laat gaan we eten, omdat ik honger heb.
 How late go we eat, because I have hunger
 Intended: ‘At what time are we going to eat, because I’m hungry.’

We conjecture that *want* corresponds to *hoezo*, and *omdat* to *waarom*, in that the former two are both discourse-oriented, whereas the latter two operate at the level of the truth-conditional sentence semantics. This could potentially account for their syntactic properties as well, since *hoezo* and *want* both appear to be located high up in the syntactic spine, at or above the CP layer. But of course the details remain to be worked out.

To end this paper, we want to point out a final, intriguing fact about *hoezo*. It’s possible to use *hoezo* in response, not to a discourse move, but to a surprising (and unpleasant) non-linguistic event, typically with an undertone of anger or frustration:

- (24) Context: Speaker opens the blinds and looks out the window.
Hoezo regent het nu alweer?
 HOEZO rains it now again
 ‘Why the heck is it raining again?’; ‘I can’t believe its raining again!’

- (25) *Hoezo* heb je mijn postzegelverzameling weggegooid?
 HOEZO have you my stamp-collection away-thrown
 ‘Why did you throw out my stamp collection?’; ‘I can’t believe you threw out my stamp collection!’

It may be possible to extend our analysis to account for such cases, if we think of them as resistance on the part of the speaker to updating the CG not with a proposition that was linguistically expressed by an interlocutor, but with a new fact that the speaker just discovered or noticed. This resistance to updating the CG could account for the sense of incredulity associated with such examples. But we will leave it to a future occasion to try and work out that idea.

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