

## On describing polysemous discourse markers. What does translation add to the picture?\*

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### 1. Introduction

Imagine the following piece of conversation taking place between a mother and her youngest daughter:

- *Alors Maman, tu viens?*
- *Je dois encore travailler un peu ...*
- *Mais alors tu ne verras pas le début du film.  
Tu fais quoi encore ?*
- *J'écris un article. Une de mes collègues va avoir 60 ans, alors on lui offre un livre.*
- *Et ça va être bien ?*
- ...

This piece of pseudo-conversation contains a number of different uses of the French discourse marker *alors* ('then/so/well'). Translating the three occurrences of *alors* into Dutch, for instance, would probably result in three different translations namely *zeg*, *dan*, *dus*, respectively.

I would like to put forward here that *alors* is a polysemous discourse marker in Modern French, and that the use of translation data can be used as an additional means to disentangle the different related meanings of this marker. The paper is further structured as follows. Section 2 tackles the issue of describing the polysemy of discourse markers, section 3 briefly reviews the use of translation data as a heuristics to describe the semantics of discourse markers. Sections 4 to 6 describe the semantics of *alors* and present a study of its use in translations from French to Dutch and from Dutch to French. The article ends with a number of concluding remarks.

### 2. The polysemy of Discourse markers

Discourse markers are polysemous linguistic items. Straightforward as this assertion might seem, it is not. Actually, when talking about discourse markers (henceforth DMs), nothing seems straightforward. First, there is the issue of deciding what constitutes the class of DMs. Despite the explosion of empirical and theoretical research on DMs in the last 20 years, a univocal answer to that question is still lacking (see, e.g., the seminal work by Schiffrin 1987, Jucker & Ziv 1998, Lenk 1998, Hansen 1998, Andersen & Fretheim 2000, Fischer 2000 and 2006, Aijmer 2002, Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2006). Exactly 10 years ago, Schourup (1999: 228) noted that “[d]espite the quantity of research in this area (...) no consensus has emerged regarding fundamental issues of terminology and classification.” Agreement is indeed poor but on the observation that DMs build a formally and functionally highly complex category. There are nevertheless a number of syntactic and semantic properties of DMs the research community agrees on. According to Schourup (1999), there is agreement on at least (!) three properties: (i) connectivity, (ii)

optionality, and (iii) non-truth-conditionality. In other words, DMs signal a relationship between discourse units, i.e. utterances, longer spans of text, or even between the text and the extra-linguistic context. The optionality of DMs refers to the fact that they are almost always syntactically optional, i.e. they can be removed without altering the grammaticality of the host sentence. This does not mean that DMs have no function whatsoever in the utterance they occur in. Most authors agree that they “reinforce” the interpretation intended by the speaker (authors cited by Schourup in this sense include Brown & Yule 1986, Schiffrin 1987, Brinton 1996, Schwenter, 1996). The non-truth-conditionality of DMs, finally, accounts for the fact that they do not contribute to the propositional content of the utterances in which they occur. This distinguishes them from so-called ‘content’ words. Other characteristics of DMs leading to less agreement in the research community include: weak clause association, initiality, orality, and multi-categoriality (Schourup 1999: 232-234).

If we accept the idea that minimal agreement on the properties of DMs suffices to consider them as a linguistic category worth studying and classifying, we can briefly turn to a second “hot topic” with regard to the description of DMs, namely the problem of polyfunctionality, or “how a single phonological/orthographic form can have so many different possible readings” (Fischer 2006: 12). Within the wide spectrum of possible ways of dealing with the polyfunctionality of DMs, two extremes can be distinguished. On the one hand, there are the so-called monosemy approaches assuming a single meaning that may be instantiated in context, on the other hand, there are the so-called homonymy approaches that spell out the different interpretations assuming them not related. In between these two poles, there are a variety of approaches among which the so-called polysemy approach stands out (be it in the broad or in the narrow sense). Here it is assumed that “there are different distinct readings and that these different senses are related” (Fischer 2006: 13). It is this latter position that I will follow in this paper with respect to the description of *alors*.

### 3. Discourse markers in translation

In this article, I would like to follow a recent trend in (lexical) semantics according to which translation data can be used to gain insight into the precise meaning of the linguistic items under study (see Noël 2003, for an overview). Assuming that translation corpora contain texts that are intended to express the same meanings and have identical or at least very similar discourse functions in the relevant languages, we have stated elsewhere (Evers-Vermeul, Degand, Fagard & Mortier, *subm.*) that “[s]uccessively using the source and target language as a starting-point, we can establish paradigms of correspondences: the translations can be arranged as a paradigm where each target item corresponds to a different meaning of the source item”. Dyvik (1998, 2004) was one of the first to argue in favor of the use of translation corpora to establish the precise semantics of words (cf. also Doherty 1998, Gellerstam 1996). Since then, the method has been applied by several authors, also in the area of DMs. Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenberg is one of them. In a co-authored chapter on *Pragmatic markers in translation* (that inspired the title of this section), she states that “[t]ranslations of pragmatic markers can (...) serve as a heuristic for discovering contextual dimensions or for making more fine-grained divisions in these dimensions, because the translations force one to account for the contextual factors that lead to particular choices.” (Aijmer, Foolen, Simon-Vandenberg 2006: 111). This cross-linguistic method can then lead to establishing semantic-pragmatic fields and through studying these “we may arrive at insights into the question of multifunctionality and how it relates to semantic and pragmatic polysemy” (p.

113). As such, the advantages of a translator-based approach to semantics and pragmatics are clear: “by taking the translator’s profile as a starting point, one is likely to acquire some information on the original propositional content of the message and on the potentially accompanying pragmatic implicatures” (Mortier 2007: 144). Revealing the multifunctionality (in the sense of Haspelmath 2003) of DMs is indeed the key issue when using translation as a heuristics. In the same line, Bazzanella *et al* (2007:11) state that “different functions, which correspond to different shades of meaning, can be ‘activated’ simultaneously by a particular DM in a given language, and the choice of an equivalent in the target language is unlikely to preserve all the different shades of meaning and all the different functions it conveys in the source context.” Thus by choosing one equivalent over another the translator will highlight one particular meaning over another which will help making explicit the different meaning components involved in the use of a particular DM.

#### 4. The case of *alors*

French *alors* has been the topic of quite some research recently (Franckel 1989, Gerecht 1987, Hybertie 1996, Jayez 1988, Le Draoulec & Bras 2007, Hansen 1997). These authors give a good account of the uses of *alors* in Present Day French (PDF), which can be brought back to four primary meanings: temporal, causal, conditional, and discourse structuring (or metadiscursive). In Degand & Fagard (in press), we describe the diachronic evolution of *alors* from Old to Modern French. We show that its temporal meaning came first and persists until today (although in spoken French the temporal use is close to disappearing), with the causal and conditional meanings adding up to the temporal one from pre-classical French on. It is not before the Modern French period that metadiscursive uses can be found (in direct speech data and in oral language) (Degand & Fagard 2009). Examples (1-4) illustrate the different uses of *alors* in Modern French (from the Frantext database, 1941-2000). Example (1) shows a temporal use, (2) gives a causal use, (3) a conditional one, and (4) illustrates a metadiscursive use.

- (1) Puis il y eut une bousculade assez brutale dans le lointain. - Un sanglier, murmura Gaspard. Jérôme tremblait de tous ses membres, Ludovic lui tira les cheveux. **Alors** on entendit un pas d'homme dans la boue de l'allée. DHÔTEL André/Le Pays où l'on n'arrive jamais/1955.  
And then there was a rush at some distance. – A wild boar, murmured Gaspard. Jérôme trembled all over his body, Ludovic tore his hair. **Alors** ('At that moment') we heard the step of man in the mud of the alley (...).
- (2) Tu aimes ça ? Julien haussa les épaules. - Je les mange, dit-il, mais j'en suis pas fou. - Eh ben, mon vieux, le patron adore ça. Et puis surtout, c'est vite fait, **alors** faudra que tu apprennes à les aimer. CLAVEL Bernard/La Maison des autres/1962  
You like it? Julien shrugged his shoulders. - I eat it, he said, but I'm not fond of it. – Well buddy, the boss loves it. And most of all, it's ready quickly, **alors** (so) you'll have to learn to like it.
- (3) Je m'approchai de la fenêtre et jetai un regard distrait sur la cour à gauche, c'était bien la fenêtre de la pièce où Mlle Brichs cherchait de la monnaie. Mais **alors**, pourquoi n'avait-elle pas allumé ? Cette pièce était certainement plus petite que

la chambre. Comment compter des billets dans l'obscurité ?... BASTIDE François-Régis/Les Adieux/1956.

I came up to the window and looked vaguely at the courtyard to the left, that was for sure the window of the room where miss Brichs was looking for money. But **alors** (then), why didn't she put the lights on? That room was certainly smaller than the bedroom. How could one count banknotes in the dark? ...

- (4) Juvenin avait disparu, d'autres malades sorties de la salle observaient la scène en riant, faisant cercle. Quand mon ami revint, il demanda simplement à la femme : "**Alors**, comment vous sentez-vous aujourd'hui, madame Leroux ? ", et aussitôt ce fut fini entre elle et moi. PONTALIS Jean-Bertrand/L'amour des commencements /1986

Juvenin had disappeared, other ill women had come out of the room and observed the scene, laughing. When my friend came back, he simply asked the woman: "**Alors** (Well), how do you feel today, Mrs Leroux", and at that moment everything was over between her and me

Degand & Fagard (in press) develop the explicit criteria used to distinguish the different meanings of *alors* in their corpus data. In a nutshell, temporal *alors* can be glossed by *à ce moment-là* 'at that time' or *ensuite* '(and) then'; causal *alors* takes paraphrases such as *par conséquent* 'as a consequence', *du coup* 'therefore', *donc* 'so', *si bien que* 'so that'; conditional *alors* can be glossed by *dans ces conditions*, *dans ce cas* 'in that case'; and metadiscursive *alors* can be glossed by other topic shifters, such as *bon* 'well', or transition markers, such as *et puis* 'and then'.

Our diachronic studies (Degand & Fagard in press, 2009) clearly show that the causal and conditional uses arise out of the temporal use of *alors*. Work in progress relates the recent evolution of *alors* in the metadiscursive domain to Traugott's (1982: 256) hypothesis that "[i]f there occurs a meaning-shift which, in the process of grammaticalization, entails shifts from one functional-semantic component to another, then such a shift is more likely to be from propositional through textual to expressive than in reverse direction."

With respect to the semantic distribution of *alors* in Present-Day French (novels written between 1990-2000), Degand & Fagard (in press) observe 35% of temporal uses, 22% of causal uses, 17% of conditional uses, and 26% of metadiscursive uses. As mentioned before, I consider these different meanings of *alors* to be related to one another, and thus advocate a polysemy approach for the description of this lexical item. A specific point I would like to investigate here is to what extent translation can help disentangle the different readings of *alors*. In other words, if different readings of *alors* would systematically receive different translations, then the latter could be used as indications of different meanings. Although it is unlikely that this will be the case, the question remains to what extent translation can be a helpful tool in the endeavor of distinguishing related meanings in a given language.

## 5. Meaning of *alors* in translation

Our data consist of a corpus of originally Dutch texts and their translations into French, and of originally French texts and their translations into Dutch.<sup>1</sup> The size of the corpus is approximately 550,000 words. Two main types of text are represented: fiction (literature) and non-fiction (newspaper texts). I restricted my analysis to the fiction data<sup>2</sup> and extracted a random selection of 50 occurrences of *alors* both in the translated data

(originally French *alors* translated into Dutch) and in the back-translations (different originally Dutch items translated into *alors*). I will refer to translated *alors* as ‘source-*alors*’, and to back-translated *alors* as ‘target-*alors*’. Table 1 presents the resulting list of markers that were used as translations of source-*alors*, as well as their respective frequencies.

Dutch translation	Translations of <i>alors</i> (N = 50)
(en/maar) dan (toch/dus)	28 (56%)
dus	10 (20%)
en nu, nou	3 (6%)
toen, in die tijd, dusverre	5 (10%)
No translation	4 (8%)

**Table 1. Frequencies of Dutch translations of *alors***

A preliminary grouping of the translations of source-*alors* reveals one item standing out covering 56% of the cases, namely *dan* ‘then’, possibly in co-occurrence with the connectives *en* ‘and’ or *maar* ‘but’, and modalizers such as *toch* ‘though’. The second most frequent translation is *dus* ‘so’ (20%), followed by a number of temporal adverbials (‘at that time’), modalizers (‘well’), and zero-translations, all adding up to 10% or less.

In themselves these frequency results are not very interesting. They merely tell us that *alors* has more than one translation equivalent, which should be the rule rather than the exception. More interesting results can be obtained when relating these translations to the different meanings of source-*alors*. Here 42% is used with a temporal meaning, 26% with a causal meaning, 28% with a conditional meaning, and only 4 % is metadiscursive in use. This latter figure is in sharp contrast with the 28% of metadiscursive uses found by Degand & Fagard (in press). This is certainly due to the very low number of direct speech utterances in the present data (18% against 36% in the data used by Degand & Fagard, in press). In writing, metadiscursive uses are found exclusively in direct speech utterances (Degand & Fagard 2009).

We established the meaning of source-*alors* independently from its translation. A detailed analysis of the translations of source-*alors* as a function of the meaning expressed in the original utterances gives rise to a fairly sparse matrix table as illustrated in Table 2.

	Temporal	Causal	Conditional	Meta	Total
<i>Dan</i>	12	1	5		18
<i>Dán</i>				1	1
<i>dan toch</i>			1		1
<i>dan dus</i>			1		1
<i>en (...) dan</i>	2				2
<i>wat dan?</i>		1			1
<i>maar dan</i>			4		4
<i>dus</i>		9	1		10
<i>dusverre</i>	1				1
<i>Toen</i>	3				3
<i>in die tijd</i>	1				1
<i>en nu</i>		1			1
<i>Nou</i>				1	1
<i>Zo</i>			1		1
Nihil	2	1	1		4
Total	21	13	14	2	50

**Table 2. Meaning of source-*alors* as a function of its translation**

A number of observations can be made from the data depicted in Table 2. First of all, there seems to be a division of labour between temporal and conditional uses on the one hand, and causal uses on the other hand. Very clearly, *dan* is not used as a translation of causal source-*alors* which is nearly exclusively translated by *dus* (5). Temporal uses are preferably translated by *dan*(-constructions) (6) or by temporal adverbials such as *toen*, *in die tijd*, *dusverre* ‘at that time, until then’ (7). Conditional uses are also translated by *dan*-constructions, especially *maar dan* ‘but then’ which is exclusively conditional (8).

- (5) Dès les premiers jours, nous savons qu'un avenir commun n'est pas envisageable, **alors** nous ne parlerons jamais de l'avenir, nous tiendrons des propos comme journalistiques, et a contrario, et d'égale teneur. (Duras)  
Meteen de eerste dagen al weten we dat een gemeenschappelijke toekomst niet tot de mogelijkheden behoort, **dus** zullen we nooit over de toekomst praten, we vertellen als het ware journalistieke verhaaltjes, en a contrario, en van gelijke strekking.
- (6) Ils s'affrontaient pour un rien, pour cent francs gaspillés, pour une paire de bas, pour une vaisselle pas faite. **Alors**, pendant de longues heures, pendant des journées entières, ils ne se parlaient plus. Ils mangeaient l'un en face de l'autre, rapidement, chacun pour soi, sans se regarder. (Perec)  
Ze kregen het om niets met elkaar aan de stok, om honderd verspilde francs, om een paar kousen of om de afwas die iemand niet had gedaan. **Dan** spraken zij uren lang, hele dagen lang niet met elkaar. Ze aten tegenover elkaar gezeten, snel, ieder voor zich, zonder elkaar aan te kijken.
- (7) 25 janvier. Je suis brisée. Il m'a téléphoné pour me dire qu'il passait la nuit chez Noëllie, qu'il ne pouvait pas la quitter dans l'état où elle était. J'ai protesté, il a raccroché, j'ai appelé à mon tour, j'ai laissé sonner longtemps, et **alors** ils ont décroché. (Beauvoir)  
25 januari. Ik voel me gebroken. Hij belde op om te zeggen dat hij de hele nacht wegbleef, dat hij Noëllie niet alleen kon laten in de toestand waarin ze verkeerde. Ik protesteerde, hij hing op, ik belde terug, ik heb de telefoon heel lang laten overgaan en **toen** hebben ze de hoorn van de haak gelegd.
- (8) Tu as eu le tort de croire que les histoires d'amour duraient. Moi j'ai compris; dès que je commence à m'attacher à un type, j'en prends un autre. **Alors** tu n'aimeras jamais! (Beauvoir)  
Je hebt de fout gemaakt dat je dacht dat liefde eeuwig duurde. Ik ben er al lang achter: zodra ik aan een man gehecht begin te raken, neem ik een ander. **Maar dan** zul je nooit van iemand houden!

On a heuristic level, a first preliminary conclusion can be drawn. Dutch translations of *alors* can be useful to distinguish temporal and conditional uses on the one hand, from causal and metadiscursive uses on the other.

On a more theoretical level, this close (formal) relationship between temporal and conditional uses in the Dutch translations is interesting with regard to general grammaticalization paths from temporal to conditional and/or causal relations. A number of authors have defended the idea that the semantic evolution of discourse markers is from temporal to causal (Heine & Kuteva 2002: 328, Traugott & König 1991:

194). Hansen (1997: 181) notes that it “is not clear from the literature whether the extension from temporal to conditional uses of *alors* preceded, followed, or was perhaps simultaneous with the extension to resultative structures.” Vogl (2007), on the other hand, claims that the grammaticalization chain [temporal > causal] is actually more complex. According to her, there is an alternative chain of the type [temporal > conditional > causal]. At first sight, these different options seem equally plausible. The (sparse) translation data presented here seem to suggest that the grammaticalization from temporal to causal and from temporal to conditional could well be running in parallel, giving rise to different linguistic constructions in different languages. Work in progress furthermore indicates that the extension from temporal to causal and from temporal to conditional took place in different contexts. The former would be based on *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning (after this, hence because of this) (see also Hybertie 1996), while the latter would find its origin in prospective contexts, in line with Vogl’s proposal (Degand & Fagard 2009).

## 6. Meaning of *alors* in back-translation

What does the use of *alors* in back-translations tell us about its semantics? What is important here is to establish what kinds of meanings expressed in the originally Dutch texts are expressed with target-*alors*. If these linguistic expressions are equivalent to the ones listed in Table 1, this will tell us something about the regularities of semantic correspondences between *alors* and a number of Dutch counterparts (such as *dan* to express temporal and conditional relations, and *dus* to express causal relations). Table 3 lists the correspondences between target-*alors* and its Dutch source items.

Dutch original	Back-translations to <i>alors</i> (N = 50)
(en) dan (even/gewoon)	23 (46%)
dus	2 (4%)
en, nou, wel	6 (12%)
toen, op dat moment	12 (24%)
Zero	7 (14%)

**Table 3. Frequencies of target-*alors* in French back-translations**

A comparison of Tables 1 and 3 shows that, broadly speaking, the same kinds of formal pairings exist between *alors* and a number of Dutch forms both in translation and in back-translation. The proportions are however different. *Dan*-constructions still stand out (46% in back-translation against 56% in translation), but they are followed by other temporal adverbials (especially *toen* ‘at that time’) (24% in back-translation, 10% in translation), zero-forms build up 14% of the back-translations, while a diversity of “modalizers” comes with 12%. *Dus* is used only in 4% of the cases (20% in translation). The contrast in these distributions is depicted in Figure 1.

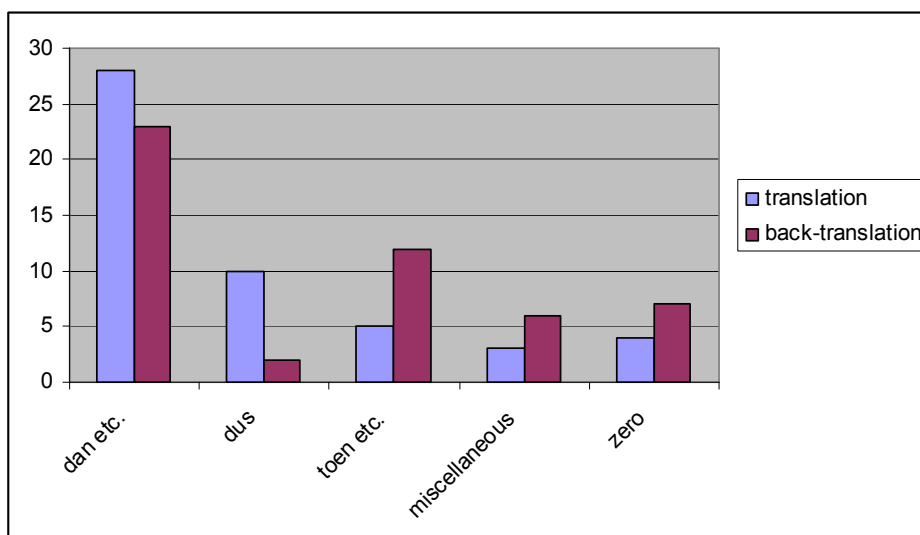


Figure 1. Formal counterparts of *alors* in translation and back-translation

This contrast should be related to the meanings expressed by *alors*. To keep things comparable, I again coded the meanings of the target-*alors* segments, independently from the Dutch source. Table 4 provides an overview of the meanings expressed by target-*alors*.

	Temporal	Causal	Conditional	Meta	Total
<i>dan</i>	8	2	9	1	20
<i>dan even</i>			1		1
<i>dan gewoon</i>			1		1
<i>en dan</i>	1				1
<i>dus</i>		1		1	2
<i>toen</i>	9	1		1	11
<i>en op dat moment</i>	1				1
<i>en</i>	1			1	2
<i>nou</i>				2	2
<i>nou en</i>				1	1
<i>wel</i>				1	1
<i>nihil</i>	2	3	1	1	7
Total	22	7	12	9	50

Table 4. Meaning of target-*alors* as a function of its source

In translations from Dutch to French, *alors* is temporal in meaning in 44% of the cases (close to the 42% for source-*alors*), only 14% is causal (against 26% for source-*alors*), 24% is conditional (close to the 26% conditional *alors* in the French data), and 18% is metadiscursive in use (compared to only 4% in the original data). The differences in metadiscursive use are again easy to account for. They are straightforwardly correlated to the higher number of direct speech utterances in the back-translation data (52%). Direct speech is a linguistic means to mirror (spontaneous) conversation (Degand & Fagard 2009) and will thus contain more “oral-like” expressions among which metadiscursive markers play a prominent role. In French, *alors* has developed into a typical metadiscursive marker with no real equivalent in Dutch which resorts to a number of (modal) discourse particles such as *nou*, *wel*, *en*.

With respect to the Dutch-French formal pairings, the back-translation data confirm the temporal and conditional meaning of the *dan/alors* pair. The causal use of *alors* is not really accounted for in the back-translations: *dus/alors* does not appear as a strong translation pair leading to an underuse of *alors* in causal contexts. In contrast, the *toen/alors* pair is subject to a form of overuse confining *alors* to its “typical” temporal meaning.

## 7. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to pursue the endeavor advocated by a number of (contrastive) linguists, Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenberghe being one of them, to use translation data as a heuristics to uncover the meaning of Discourse Markers.

By and large, the translation data confirm the polysemous status of *alors* which can be used with temporal, causal, conditional, and metadiscursive meanings. A number of translation tendencies could be drawn from the data. First, there is the *dan/alors* pair used to express temporal and conditional meanings and which can be used as a heuristics to distinguish them from causal meanings. Since the distinction between temporal and causal meanings is not always easy to make, translation can be used as an additional device, next to other contextual factors (Degand & Fagard in press). A second observation is the poor use of causal *alors* in the back-translations which seems to indicate that the causal meaning of *alors* is not as well established as the monolingual studies suggest. Finally, the (back-)translation data confirm the (developing) use of *alors* as a metadiscursive marker with no real counterpart in Dutch.

On a theoretical level, I believe that the findings presented here offer a number of research perspectives in the area of grammaticalization theory. The close translation relationship between temporal and conditional uses of *alors* offers evidence for a grammaticalization path from temporal to conditional meanings that would be distinct from the temporal > causal chain. Further diachronic research is obviously needed to strengthen this hypothesis.

## Notes

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1. With sincere thanks to Liesbeth Mortier (UCLouvain) who collected and aligned the corpus.

2. The Dutch subcorpus counts 289,210 words and contains four novels:

1. Mulisch, Harry (1983) *De Aanslag*. Amsterdam: Bezige Bij. (translated by Philippe Noble);
2. Mulisch, Harry (1992) *De Ontdekking van de Hemel*. Den Haag: Ulysses. (translated by Isabelle Rosselin, 2002);
3. Claus, Hugo (1983) *Het Verdriet van België*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij (translated by Alain Van Crugten, 1986);
4. Dorrestein, Renate (2000) *Zonder genade*. Amsterdam / Antwerpen: Contact. (translated by Bertrand Abraham, 2003).

The French subcorpus counts 158,161 words and three novels:

1. Beauvoir, Simone (1968) *La Femme rompue*. Paris: Gallimard. (translated by J. Huijts, 1969);
2. Duras, Marguerite (1984) *L'Amant*. Paris: Editions Minuit. (translated by Marianne Kaas, 1985);
3. Perec, Georges (1975) *Les Choses*. Paris: J'ai lu. (translated by Edu Borger, 1990).

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