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The history of Dutch *haar* as a plural object pronoun and the provenance of Skepi *or*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/flin-2025-0078>

Received April 29, 2025; accepted September 25, 2025; published online October 22, 2025

Abstract: New evidence from the extinct Dutch-lexified creole Skepi has brought to light the pronoun *or* as its third person plural form. This article proposes that *or* is a cognate of standard Dutch *haar* ‘her’, which in Early Modern Dutch also functioned as a plural pronoun meaning ‘them, their’ (present-day standard Dutch *hun~hen*). As such, the article provides a window into a largely forgotten chapter of Dutch pronominal history: the polysemous role of *haar* as both a singular feminine and all-gender plural pronoun. We revisit that chapter, focusing on the use of *haar* as a plural object pronoun (‘them’). The article reconstructs the diachronic development of *haar* in that role and traces its synchronic distribution in modern non-standard varieties of Dutch, Frisian, and Low German. Finally, we examine the dialectal provenance of Skepi *or*, with Zeelandic emerging as the primary suspect.

Keywords: third person plural object pronouns; Skepi Dutch Creole; Zeelandic; Early Modern Dutch; Frisian; Low German

1 Introduction

Skepi Dutch Creole (henceforth Skepi) is a now-extinct Dutch-lexified creole that once thrived along the Essequibo River in what is now the Republic of Guyana. It is one of three Dutch-lexicon creoles formerly spoken in the Caribbean, the other two being Berbice Dutch (spoken in close vicinity of Skepi in the Berbice colony) and Carriols (formerly known as Negerhollands and later also as Virgin Islands Dutch Creole). All three creoles went extinct in the course of the 20th century as they were replaced by local varieties of (creolized) English.

Skepi is by far the least well-documented of the three. Until recently, the only available data on the language consisted of around 200 words and a dozen short sentences, elicited in the 1970s and 80s by Robertson (1976, 1989) from a handful of people whose (grand) parents had spoken Skepi natively. But new Skepi data from the

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Table 1: Personal pronouns in Skepi Creole Dutch.

| | Skepi | Meaning | Dutch (dialectal) etymon |
|----------|------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1sg | <i>ek</i> [ɛk] | I, me, my | <i>ek</i> |
| 2sg | <i>ju</i> [ju] | you, your | <i>ju</i> |
| 3sg | <i>em</i> [ɛm] | he, him she, her it | <i>hem</i> |
| 3sg.POSS | <i>ese</i> [ɛsə] | his, her, its | <i>hem</i> + <i>ze</i> ^a |
| 1sg | <i>ons</i> [ɔns] | we, us, our | <i>ons</i> |
| 2pl | <i>jender</i> [jɛndɛr] | you, your | <i>jij</i> + <i>ander</i> (?) |
| 3pl | <i>or</i> [o:r] | they, them, their | (h)eur (?) |

^aPossessive constructions consisting of a (pro)noun + possessive, such as *hem z'n* (lit. ‘him his’) ‘his’, are common in both historical and present-day Dutch.

1790s and 1830s have recently emerged (Jacobs and Parkvall 2020, 2024), which reveal several salient lexico-semantic features from earlier stages of Dutch and, in some cases, point to specific dialectal input. In this article, we investigate one such feature: the use of a cognate of the standard modern Dutch singular feminine pronoun *haar* ‘her’ as a third person *plural* (henceforth 3pl) pronoun.

Table 1 shows the full paradigm of personal pronouns in Skepi. As is typical of creole languages, all these pronouns were gender- and case-neutral. An exception is the third person singular pronoun (henceforth 3sg), for which a dedicated possessive existed. The first five pronouns in the paradigm were documented by Robertson (1976, 1989). The idiosyncratic 3pl pronoun *or*, however, only came to light recently with the afore-mentioned discovery of new Skepi data.

Mirroring several other creole languages worldwide, the Skepi 3pl *or* also functioned as a nominal plural marker (1), a property usually attributed to contact with West African languages.¹ That function, however, is of no relevance to this article. Here, we are concerned exclusively with its original use as a 3pl pronoun (2, 3). In this role, *or*, like all other Skepi personal pronouns, was entirely case neutral: it served as subject, object and possessive alike.

- (1) *Qua* *Goodt* ***oar***
angry/evil God 3pl/PLU
‘Angry Gods’ (Youd 1833-1842, in: author and author)

1 This phenomenon is not rare cross-linguistically (Parkvall 2000:106) and, besides Skepi, is attested in around two dozen Atlantic creoles (Maurer 2013).

- (2) *Oar say, dat fail yanafoo set*
 3pl say that many evil spirit be
 ‘They say that there are many evil spirits haunting the place’ (Youd 1833-1842, in: Jacobs and Parkvall 2020: 367)
- (3) *Ikke weese dinkie joe sa weese Kos or*
 1sg PAST think 2sg FUT PAST kiss 3pl
 ‘I thought you would have kissed them’ (Rodschied 1792, in: Jacobs and Parkvall 2024: 399)

We initially considered *or* to be a grammaticalized reflex of Dutch *ander* ‘other’. Variants of *ander* phonetically similar to *or* exist dialectally, such as *aar* in Hollandic and *oar* in some Zeelandic and Frisian dialects. Moreover, in several French-, Spanish and Portuguese-lexicon creoles, forms meaning ‘other(s)’ are suffixed to simplex pronouns to form compound 1pl, 2pl and 3pl pronouns (cf. Spanish *nosotros* and *vosotros*). A similar morphological process is thought to have given rise to the Skepi (and Carriols) 2pl *jender* (< *jij* + *ander*). On closer inspection, however, the *ander*-hypothesis for Skepi *or* does not convince. First, why would the creators of Skepi have selected /andər/ to construe the 2pl (*jender*) but a different phonetic variant, /or/, for the 3pl? Second, why was *or* not attached to a simplex pronominal root, as is typically the case in plural pronouns involving the word for ‘other’ (e.g., Spanish *nos* + *otros* → *nosotros*, or, indeed, Skepi *jij* + *ander* → *jender*)?

These objections prompted us to consider a different, more plausible and more economical hypothesis proposed in this article, namely that *or* is in fact a cognate of the standard modern Dutch feminine 3sg object and possessive pronoun *haar* ‘her’. As such, Skepi *or* reveals a fascinating and little-known chapter in the history of Dutch, which is investigated in this article: the additional use of *haar* as a 3pl object pronoun for all genders. More precisely, Section 2 traces the history of this pronominal polysemy from (Late) Middle to Early Modern Dutch. It will be shown that the feature was at its peak in the 17th century, a period coinciding with the Dutch settlement of the Essequibo River and the formation of Skepi. Section 3 outlines the extent to which the feature has been retained in the present-day Dutch language area,² as well as in Frisian and Low German.

Investigating the dialectal provenance of Skepi *or* presents two challenges: first, the origins of Dutch settlers in the Essequibo colony are poorly documented; second, dialectological research on the Skepi vocabulary has yet to be undertaken (but see Jacobs forthcoming). Nevertheless, a plausible working hypothesis is to link the Skepi pronoun to Zeelandic, given that the Essequibo colony was administered by the West

2 The Dutch language area, as used here, refers to the continuum of Dutch dialects spoken in the Netherlands and Belgium, including varieties with ‘regional language’ status (Limburgish and Low Saxon), but excluding Frisian.

India Company's Chamber of Zeeland.³ Section 4 examines the evidence for and against a Zeelandic origin.

The primary focus of this article is on cognates of *haar* meaning 'them' rather than 'their'. Forms of *haar* meaning 'their' are still so common in the Dutch language area that discussing their distribution would vastly surpass the scope of a normal article. It would not provide many interesting new insights either, given that the former role of *haar* as a 3pl possessive in Middle and Early Modern Dutch is already frequently mentioned in modern-day scholarship. Its historical role as a plural *object* pronoun, by contrast, is often ignored. Tellingly, of the six etymological dictionaries cited in the online *Etymologiebank* (Van der Sijs 2010) in the entry for *haar*, four mention its 3pl *possessive* role, but none reference its 3pl *object* function. This pattern is echoed in present-day books and articles dealing with the history of Dutch pronouns more generally: *haar* meaning 'their' is routinely highlighted as a relic, while *haar* meaning 'them' is rarely acknowledged.

2 Plural *haar* in Middle and Early Modern Dutch

In modern standard Dutch, *haar* functions exclusively as a singular feminine pronoun – not a plural one – mirroring English *her*. However, during the Middle and Early Modern Dutch periods, *haar* commonly assumed a range of plural pronominal functions. Below we briefly describe its historical trajectory.

2.1 Middle Dutch *haar* 'her, their'

In the Middle Dutch period (1100–1500), the mainstream pronominal functions of *haar* included the 3sg feminine genitive, dative, accusative and possessive (4), as is still the case today. In addition, unlike in contemporary Dutch, *haar* also served as the 3pl genitive and possessive pronoun for all genders (5).⁴ In other words, as a genitive and possessive form, *haar* was ambiguous between singular (feminine) and plural (all genders) (c.f. Hogenhout-Mulder 1983:31; Van der Sijs 2010; Van Loey 1948:35).

³ The original name of the Dutch colony in Essequibo was *Nova Zeelandia*. It soon came to encompass settlements in Pomeroon and Demerara. In the early 19th century, the colony passed into British hands, heralding the decline of Skepi as English and English Creole spread throughout the region.

⁴ As a genitive/possessive, *haar* (~*haer*) often appeared in inflected forms such as *hare*, *harer*, *harder*, *haars* and even *haarders*.

- (4) ***Haer** man hadse ghelaten met kinde* ‘She had left **her** husband with child’ (*Floris ende Blancefloer*, dated 1230–1290)
- (5) *Met dieren stenen ende met gemmen Scierden die goutsmede **haer** werke* ‘With valuable stones and gems the goldsmiths decorated **their** work’ (*Floris ende Blancefloer*, example and translation from Van Kerckvoorde 1993:19, 37)

This state of affairs was consistent with other West Germanic languages at the time, including varieties of Middle English, where allomorphs such as *hir(e)* and *her(e)* were likewise polysemous, serving both as a feminine 3sg pronoun (6) and as an all-gender 3pl genitive/possessive pronoun (7) (Bennett 1995; Howe 2013:138).

- (6) *Ful smale ypulled were **hire** browes two* ‘**Her** two eyebrows were plucked very thin’ (Canterbury Tales, line 3245)
- (7) *Men sholde wedden after **hire** staat* ‘Men should wed according to **their** status in life’ (Canterbury Tales, line 3229)

Table 2 presents the ‘mainstream’ Middle Dutch pronominal paradigm; for comparison, Table 3 lists the modern standard Dutch pronouns, with *haar* cognates in bold.

In Middle English, plural *th*-pronouns (*they*, *them* and *their*) eventually replaced *hie*, *him* and *hir(e)*, relegating *hir(e)* to a feminine singular only. In Middle Dutch, on the other hand, *haar* retained its plural genitive and possessive functions across all genders.

2.2 Early Modern Dutch *haar*: the rise of *haar* as a 3pl object pronoun

From the 15th century onward (possibly earlier), likely starting in the west of the Dutch language area (Van Loey 1958b:10/30 and elsewhere), *haar* began to take on

Table 2: Middle Dutch personal pronouns (adapted from Van Loey 1948:33–35 and Van Kerckvoorde 1993:79).

| | Nominative | Dative | Accusative | Genitive | Possessive | Reflexive |
|------------|------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1sg | <i>ic</i> | <i>mi</i> | <i>mi</i> | <i>mijns</i> | <i>mijn</i> | <i>mi</i> |
| 2sg | <i>du</i> | <i>di</i> | <i>di</i> | <i>dijns</i> | <i>dijn</i> | <i>di</i> |
| 3sg masc | <i>hi</i> | <i>hem</i> | <i>hem</i> | <i>sijns</i> | <i>sijn</i> | <i>hem</i> |
| 3sg fem | <i>si</i> | <i>haer</i> | <i>haer</i> | <i>haer</i> | <i>hare</i> | <i>hare ~ haer</i> |
| 3sg neuter | <i>het</i> | <i>hem</i> | <i>het</i> | – | <i>sijn</i> | <i>hem</i> |
| 1pl | <i>wi</i> | <i>ons</i> | <i>ons</i> | <i>onser</i> | <i>onse</i> | <i>ons</i> |
| 2pl | <i>ghi</i> | <i>u</i> | <i>u</i> | <i>uwer</i> | <i>uwe</i> | <i>u, ju</i> |
| 3pl | <i>si</i> | <i>hem, hen</i> | <i>hem, hen</i> | <i>haer</i> | <i>hare</i> | <i>hen, hem</i> |

Table 3: Modern-day standard Dutch personal pronouns.

| | Subject | Object | Possessive | Reflexive |
|------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| 1sg | <i>ik</i> | <i>mij</i> | <i>mijn</i> | <i>me</i> |
| 2sg | <i>jij</i> (polite: <i>u</i>) | <i>jou</i> (<i>u</i>) | <i>jouw</i> (<i>uw</i>) | <i>je</i> (<i>u</i>) |
| 3sg masc | <i>hij</i> | <i>hem</i> | <i>zijn</i> | <i>zich</i> |
| 3sg fem | <i>zij</i> | <i>haar</i> | <i>haar</i> | <i>zich</i> |
| 3sg neuter | <i>het</i> | <i>het</i> | <i>zijn</i> | <i>zich</i> |
| 1pl | <i>wij</i> | <i>ons</i> | <i>ons</i> / <i>onze</i> | <i>ons</i> |
| 2pl | <i>jullie</i> / <i>u</i> | <i>jullie</i> / <i>u</i> | <i>jullie</i> / <i>uw</i> | <i>je</i> / <i>u</i> |
| 3pl | <i>zij</i> | <i>hun</i> / <i>hen</i> ^a | <i>hun</i> | <i>zich</i> |

^aOfficially, *hun* is used for dative and possessive, *hen* for accusative. The *hun/hen* case distinction was proposed by grammarians as early as the 17th century but gained wider currency in standard Dutch only from the 19th century onwards (Van der Horst 2008:1096). Even today, however, numerous standard Dutch speakers use *hun* only.

additional roles as a plural dative, accusative and reflexive pronoun for all genders, alongside, or instead of, the traditional *hen* and *hem* (Brill 1849:239; Franck 1910:180; Howe 2013:206, 207; Tille 1925:193; Van Bree 2012:234, 238; Van Helten 1881:120, 1887:449; Van Halteren 1906:16, 39).⁵ This plural object use of *haar* became “generalized” (to quote Van Halteren 1906:22) in 16th-century Dutch and appears to have flourished well into the 17th century. Examples of *haar* (and phonetic variants) as an all-gender plural object pronoun are abundant in 17th-century Dutch literature, including the works of prominent authors such as Vondel (8), Huygens (9), P.C. Hooft (10) and Bredero (11, 12).

- (8) *Wie boos is van gemoed, wanneer't hem qualijck gaet, Wenscht andren dat **haar** magh ontmoeten tselve quaed* ‘(He) who is angry at heart, when things go badly for him, will wish upon others that the same misfortune may face **them**’ (Vondel, dated 1605–1620, in: Sterck et al. 1927:625)
- (9) *Leest met voorsichtigheid wat Dichters van **haar** geven* ‘Read with care what Poets give of **themselves** (~ share about themselves)’ (Constantijn Huygens, preface to *Hofwijck*, 1653, in: Huygens 1653)
- (10) *Alle quellagien schijnen bij wanhoop **haar** [= die geesten] noch schóón* ‘Even in despair all complaints seem beautiful to **them** [= to those ghosts]’ (P.C. Hooft, *Mommerij*, early 17th century, in: Leendertz and Stoett 1900:6)

⁵ What precisely triggered that expansion remains debated. See, e.g., Van Helten (1887:449), Van Halteren (1906:39) and Howe (2013:206).

- (11) *Doen raackten hy by de Spangjaarts in dienst, hier inde krijgh, ick weet niet wat hy **heur** gedaan had, sy koochten hem een vijgh* ‘Then he was employed by the Spaniards, here in the army, I don’t know what he did [to] **them**, but they deceived him’ (Bredero, *Spaanschen Brabander*, 1618, in: Ten Brink et al. 1890b:156)
- (12) *de Knechts die **haar** as Vrouwen cieren* ‘the servants who adorn **themselves** as women’ (Bredero, *Rodd’rick ende Alphonsus*, 1613, in: Ten Brink et al. 1890a:28)

By the 17th century, Middle Dutch *hem* (in the meaning ‘them’) had become obsolete. On the other hand, the popularity of *hun* – a cognate of High German *ihn* – was on the rise. The literary authors mentioned above, aware of the available alternatives, often used *haar* and *hun* and to a lesser extent *hen* interchangeably, not rarely in one and the same sentence (cf. Van Helten 1887:123). In (13), both *hun* and *haar* refer to *mijn Rijm-Broeders* ‘my fellow poets’. Likewise, to express reflexivity, they alternated freely between *haar* and the then-emerging *sich* (14) (cf. Van der Horst 2008:1098).

- (13) *ick (...) hebbe aenghenomen niet ’t gheen voor **hun** te swaar, maar dat voor **haar** t’onwaardich scheen* ‘I have undertaken not what was too difficult for **them**, but what seemed unworthy of **them**’ (Bredero, *Aan de Lesers en Lief-hebbers der Nederlandsche Poësy*, in: Ten Brink et al. 1890a:307)
- (14) *D’uytheemsche laten **sich** van alle kanten vinden, En [laten] onderlingh met u eendrachtigh **haer** verbinden* ‘The foreigners let **themselves** be found from all sides, and [let] **themselves** be united with you in harmony’ (Vondel, ca. 1622, in: Spies 1987a:12)

Notwithstanding the increased competition from *hun*, the primary and secondary sources at my disposal suggest that, from the early 16th to the mid-/late 17th century, *haar* was the most widely used all-gender 3pl object pronoun in both written and spoken Dutch. Tellingly, the influential Dutch State Bible from the year 1637 employed *haar* as its default all-gender 3pl possessive and object pronoun (15). In their pre-ambular linguistic guidelines (the *Resolutiën*), the translators justified this choice by stating that the use of plural *haar* for all genders was *usitatissimum* (“very common”) (De Vos 2022:120; cf. Van der Horst 2008:1109).

- (15) *Hy sondt eene vermenginge van ongedierte onder **haer**, dat **haer** verteerde: ende vorschen, die **haer** verdorven* (Dutch State Bible, anno 1637, Psalms 78:45, with *haer* referring to the Ephraimites) ‘He sent among **them** swarms of flies, which devoured **them**, and frogs, which destroyed **them**’

Haar was the predominant 3pl object pronoun also in writings reflecting more informal, spoken registers of the time. For instance, in a corpus of 17th-century

private letters, Van Megen (2002:273) found that *haar* was the principle 3pl object and possessive pronoun, with *hen* and *hun* entirely absent. Example (16) is from the mid-17th century travel journals of Admiral Michiel de Ruyter, who used *haar* as his primary 3pl object pronoun at the expense of *hen* and *hun* (Van der Horst 2008:1109, drawing on Koelmans 2001).

- (16) *de twee hoocksen wijn waren voor de heeren Cornelis Kylgry en Meteren, dye ick voor **haar** betaelt hebbe* ‘the two casks of wine were for the gentlemen Cornelis Kylgry and Meteren, which I purchased for **them**’ (Michiel de Ruyter, anno 1658–1660, in: Naber 1908:69)

The popularity of *haar* as a plural pronoun during the Late Middle and Early Modern Dutch periods is difficult to overstate. It underlies numerous Middle Dutch compounds, such as *haer(ge)lijc* ‘each of them’ and *haerlijcander* ‘each other’, as well as the composite 3pl pronouns *haerlui* and *haerlieden/r* (with *lui* and *lieden~lieder* both meaning ‘people’) which quickly rose in popularity in the 17th century especially in the south west of the Dutch language area (De Vogelaer and Coussé 2008; Van Loey 1958a). Also notable is the sheer diversity of *haar* spellings attested up to the 1700s, presumably reflecting a wide range of pronunciations.⁶

Table 4 summarizes the standard Dutch pronominal paradigm in the 16th and 17th centuries (based on De Korne and Rinkel 1987:37, 38).

Note that *haar* was the predominant 3pl object pronoun not only in the Netherlands but also in Belgium. As Van Loey (1958b: 16/36, my translation) notes, in Huygens’ *Trijntje Cornelis* from 1653, written in Antwerp dialect, “there is no trace of *hun*”. Indeed, the standard 3pl object pronoun in that comedy is *haer~heur* (17).

- (17) *ick wilt men kinders leeren, En seght **heur** alle doôgh (...)* ‘I want to teach it to my children, and tell it to **them** every day (...)’ (Huygens 1653, reflecting Antwerp Flemish, in Hermkens and Verhuyck 1997:44).

Given the modern-day distribution of the phenomenon in the north and north-eastern Dutch dialects as well as in West Frisian and a considerable number of Low German dialects (see Section 3), it can be concluded that the feature, at its peak, must have enjoyed popularity across the entire Dutch language area, perhaps with the

⁶ Due to the lack of standardized spelling it is not always clear how these forms were pronounced, especially in the case of diphthongs. The spellings <haer> and <h r> must have corresponded to modern-day standard Dutch *haar* [ha:r] and dialectal *heur* [h r] respectively. However, the vowel in the written form <huer>, for instance, could have represented [ ], [u], or even [y] and a form like <hoar> may have been pronounced [ho:r] or [ha:r] or something in between. Among this vast array of spellings, one also finds a number of <o> forms, such as *hoor*, *hoir*, *hor* and *or*. We briefly return to those in Section 4.2.

Table 4: Standardized 16th- and 17th-century Dutch pronominal paradigm.

| | Subject | Object | Possessive | Reflexive |
|------------|---------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
| 1sg | <i>ick</i> | <i>my</i> | <i>myn</i> | <i>my</i> |
| 2sg | <i>du/ghy</i> | <i>dy/u</i> | <i>dyn/u/uw</i> | <i>u</i> |
| 3sg masc | <i>hy</i> | <i>hem</i> | <i>syn</i> | <i>hem / sich</i> |
| 3sg fem | <i>zy</i> | <i>haer</i> / <i>se</i> | <i>haer</i> | <i>haer</i> / <i>sich</i> |
| 3sg neuter | <i>het</i> | <i>het / hem</i> | <i>syn</i> | <i>sich</i> |
| 1pl | <i>wy</i> | <i>ons</i> | <i>ons(e)</i> | <i>ons</i> |
| 2pl | <i>ghy</i> | <i>u</i> | <i>u/uw</i> | <i>u</i> |
| 3pl | <i>sy/se</i> | <i>haer</i> / <i>hun/hen/se</i> | <i>haer</i> / <i>hun</i> | <i>haer</i> / <i>hen/hun/sich</i> |

exception of the southeast, where the modern standard Dutch 3pl object pronoun *hun* is thought to have originated (Van Loey 1958b).

To summarize: by the early 17th century, coinciding with the Dutch/Zeelandic foundation of Fort Kyk-Over-Al in 1616, *haar* had become the dominant all-gender 3pl object pronoun across a wide geographic area. Despite growing competition from *hun* (and *hen*), it enjoyed wide currency in both formal and informal varieties of Dutch.

2.3 The decline of plural *haar* from the standard

Whereas plural *haar* flourished, the seeds of its decline in the standard were already being sown. A major catalyst for this decline was the influence of prominent writers and language codifiers, who recommended reserving plural *haar* (both object and possessive) for feminine referents (in keeping with singular *haar*), while assigning *hun/hen* to masculine and neuter.

These recommendations soon shaped usage. A comparison of two versions of Vondel’s seafaring poem *Hymnus*, from 1622 to 1650 respectively, shows that several instances of plural *haar* in the 1622 version had been replaced by *hen* and *hun* in the 1650 revision (Spies 1987b:170, 171).

Nevertheless, grammarians struggled to agree on a consistent paradigm for non-subject 3pl pronouns. Some authorities adopted the proposed gender distinction, but others continued to endorse *haar* for all genders. Others preferred *hun* or *hen* in that role, to the exclusion of *haar*. Still others proposed a case-sensitive system: *haar* for genitive/possessive, *hun* for dative, and *hen* for accusative. A further layer of complexity came from attempts to introduce a semantic or functional split between the allomorphs *haar* and *heur*: Ampzing (1628) used this vocalic distinction to mark singular versus plural, while Kok (1649) assigned *haar* to feminine and *heur* to masculine

Table 5: Ten Kate’s (1723:470, 471) description of 3pl object and possessive pronouns in formal and informal Dutch.

| | “Pompous and chicque” | | “Common style” |
|-------------------|---|---------------------|----------------|
| | masc. / neut. | Feminine | All genders |
| Post-preposition: | <i>hen ~ hun</i> <i>haerlieden</i> (all genders) | <i>haer ~ heur</i> | <i>haer</i> |
| Object: | <i>hen ~ hun</i> <i>haerlieden</i> (all genders) | <i>haer ~ heur</i> | <i>haer</i> |
| Possessive: | <i>hunne</i> | <i>hare ~ heure</i> | <i>hare</i> |

referents. The prescriptive chaos – aptly dubbed “a big mess” by Buitenrust Hettema (1905:95) – is discussed in detail by Geerts (1966), Dibbets (1995) and De Vos (2022).

Despite the lobby for *hun* and *hen*, *haar* appears to have remained in use as a 3pl object and possessive pronoun for all genders in mainstream spoken Dutch well into the 18th century, revealing a gap between prescriptive norms and linguistic reality. One key source attesting to this is Ten Kate (1723), whose description is summarized in Table 5.

In the 19th century, calls for a gender distinction in 3pl object and possessive pronouns (*haar* vs. *hen/hun*) were renewed by scholars such as Bilderdijk (1828:117, 119), Brill (1849: 236) and Van Dale (1867: 69). However, to the best of my knowledge, the distinction never took hold in mainstream Dutch or in any dialect.⁷

Rather, mainstream 19th-century Dutch seems to have reverted to a Middle Dutch-style system in which *haar* was retained as ‘their’ but no longer as ‘them’, for which *hun* and *hen* had become the dominant options. Molenaar (1898:459) reported that it was “well-known” that *haar* was still used “daily” as an all-gender plural possessive – but not as an object pronoun (cf. Van Lennep 1865[2007]:61; Van der Horst

7 Howe (2013:206), drawing on Franck 1910:180), claims that Middle Dutch *haar* in the meaning of ‘them’ was initially restricted to feminine referents. However, that seems inaccurate. As a plural possessive, *haar* was used for all genders in the Early Middle Dutch period, and so it stands to reason that its extension into the plural object slot applied to all genders, too (cf. De Smet 1988:59). The online *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst* (ANS 2024) state that *haar* occurs in “archaic” forms of Dutch as a strictly feminine 3pl pronoun, but this claim also seems questionable; I have not found evidence that a 3pl gender distinction ever became systematic in any variety of Dutch. Moreover, the ANS is clearly misinformed in their discussion of “regional” Dutch, mentioning only the plural *haar*-clitics *r* and *d’r* and incorrectly implying that these are limited to feminine plurals. That said, some dialectal data warrant further study: Fokkema (1937:156) suggests a *hun* (masculine) versus *har* (feminine) distinction in Stadsfries, and De Vin (1952:39) gives 3pl *eur* (feminine) versus *ulder* (masculine & neuter) for the Zeelandic dialect of Schouwen-Duiveland.

2008:1676). A similar trend is still found in some 19th-century literary texts (Brill 1849:242; Van Loey 1958b:6).⁸

The final blow to plural *haar* came with the accelerating standardization of the 19th and early-20th centuries. This included the proliferation of school grammars aimed at bringing spoken and written language into closer alignment (see Van der Sijs et al. 2009). Since plural *haar* had already been largely expunged from the written standard, its fate in mainstream spoken usage was now effectively sealed as well.

Nevertheless, plural *haar* remained vital in various non-standard varieties of Dutch.⁹

3 Dialectal distribution of plural *haar* at ‘present’ (19th/20th century)

It is difficult to overstate the remarkable variation in Dutch dialects with respect to 3pl pronouns (see, for instance, De Rooij 1990, De Vogelaer 2006). The following overview does not claim to do justice to that complexity. Rather, it offers a general survey, without aiming at exhaustiveness, of dialects in the Netherlands (3.1) and Flanders (3.2) that appear to have retained a form of *haar* as a 3pl object pronoun.

The analyses rely to a considerable extent on dialectal data from Winkler (1874a, 1874b)¹⁰ and the *Reeks Nederlandse Dialectatlassen* (RND).¹¹ The obvious drawback of these sources is that the former reflects the late 19th century, while the latter covers

8 The *haar*-derived clitics *ər* and *dər*, meanwhile, had begun a life of their own. Brill (1849:239, 242), giving examples such as *ik heb het ‘er al gezegd* ‘I already told **them** [masc.]’, claims these clitics still served as unstressed all-gender 3pl object pronouns in mainstream speech. At present, to the best of my knowledge, this usage is absent in standard mainstream speech. However, it is still very much alive in non-standard varieties of Dutch (see Section 3).

9 Royen (1933) offers an interesting collection of citations from mainstream newspapers and magazines in which *haar* is used as an all-gender 3pl pronoun. He speculates that the authors in question are often speakers of dialects in which *haar* or *heur* still means ‘them, their’ and complains that these “ungrammatical” usages of plural *haar* are turning into an “epidemic” (Royen 1933:293).

10 Winkler (1874a, 1874b) contains translations of the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* (Luke 15:11–32) for no less than 186 places across the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. Line 12 of the Parable contains two 3pl object pronouns, an accusative: *de jongste van hen* ‘the youngest of **them**’, and a dative: *En hij deelde hun het goed* ‘And he divided the property between **them**’, both with masculine reference.

11 The online dialect database *Reeks Nederlandse Dialectatlassen* (henceforth RND, Blancquaert & Pée 1925–1982) offers phonetically transcribed dialectal renderings of 141 sentences, including verbal paradigms, for hundreds of Dutch and Belgian villages and towns spread out over a total of 16 dialectal areas. The one – and, unfortunately, only – sentence in the questionnaire designed to elicit 3pl object pronouns is sentence 16: *Ik ben blij dat ik met hen niet meegegaan ben* ‘I am happy that I did not go with **them**’.

the early to mid-20th century. In other words, they may not fully capture the present-day state of the dialects. Nevertheless, they remain the best resources for studying 3pl object pronouns in non-standard varieties of Dutch, as the more recent dialect surveys MAND and SAND are not well suited to that purpose.¹² Future research is therefore needed to determine whether, and to what extent, the Winkler and RND data continue to reflect present-day usage.

Section 3.3 complements the overview with a brief examination of plural *haar* pronouns in two closely related North Sea West Germanic languages: Frisian and Low German.

3.1 The Netherlands

Amidst the impressive diversity of 3pl object pronouns in the Dutch dialectal landscape, three major subtypes can be identified.¹³

- (a) *Hun*. This is the official 3pl dative and possessive pronoun in standard Dutch. Dialectally, it is the predominant 3pl object pronoun in the south of Dutch Limburg, the southeast of North Brabant, and Belgian Limburg including the bordering area of Flemish Brabant (De Rooij 1990:125);
- (b) Compounds of the type *hullie* and (*h*)*ulder*. These predominate in non-standard varieties of Holland (North and South), North Brabant, Zeeland, and West and East Flanders. Note that the etymon of the first syllable – *hun* or *heur* – of these compounds remains disputed (we shall briefly return to this issue below);
- (c) *Haar~heur* and derived clitics *r* and *d'r*.

Drawing on RND sentence 16, De Rooij describes the distribution of the latter type – arguably the largest subtype – as follows:

¹² Neither MAND nor SAND provides systematic data on plural object pronouns in Dutch. As for MAND (volume II = Goeman et al. 2008), the map on page 46b shows a suspiciously wide distribution of plural *haar*. After contacting the authors, I learned that the primer sentence for the map contained “haar” instead of “hun”, thus eliciting the feminine 3sg, rather than the intended all-gender 3pl pronoun. As for SAND (Barbiers et al. 2005), the online searchable database (DynaSAND: <https://sand.meertens.knaw.nl/>) provides systematic data only for subject pronouns, not object pronouns.

¹³ The types involving *ze* (and related compounds such as *zulder* and *zullie*) and *hen* are ignored here for the sake of brevity and convenience. *Ze* is, of course, a clitic 3pl subject and object pronoun in standard mainstream Dutch and occurs widely across the Dutch language area. The strong form *zij* as well as the derived compounds *zullie*, *zulder*, etc., on the other hand, are rare in object or possessive position (De Rooij 1990:128). The use of *hen* – the official 3pl accusative in standard Dutch – is likewise marginal across non-standard varieties of Dutch (De Rooij 1990).

[t]he old form *haar* (common gender) (...) [occurs] in a large eastern region, which roughly includes the Dutch dialects east of the IJssel and those of North Limburg; (...) the form *haar* even forms a contiguous area in the south of East Flanders.

Our own reading of the literature – including both primary and secondary sources – largely confirms De Rooij's findings. In the eastern Netherlands – from Groningen through Drenthe, Overijssel (including Vriezenveen; Entjes 1970:292), Gelderland, and the north of Dutch Limburg – cognates of *haar* are widely used as all-gender 3pl object pronouns. Phonetic variation is notable across these *haar* regions.¹⁴ The dominant vowel in plural *haar* cognates is rarely [a] (except in West Frisian, see Section 3.2), but rather [œ] (in the northeast and southeast of the Netherlands) or [e] (in the middle-east). In these regions, in unstressed position, strong *haar*-forms alternate with the clitics *ər* and *dər* (typically written <'r> and <d'r>). These *haar*-clitics are in widespread use also in modern mainstream Dutch, but only with a singular feminine reference.

Some examples from north to south:¹⁵

- (18) (...) *En he deilde **heur** 't gout tou* 'And he gave **them** the goods' (Sellingén, Groningen, in Winkler 1874a:399)
- (19) *de jonkste van **heur*** 'the youngest of **them**' (Meppel, Drenthe, in Winkler 1874a:388)
- (20) *En he deelde **èèr** 't good* 'And he divided [among] **them** the goods' (Oldenzaal, Overijssel, in: Winkler 1874a:363)
- (21) *Ik bin blij dak ni mit **ør** met *bānəgəən** 'I am glad I did not go with **them**' (Varseveld, Gelderland, RND sentence 16)
- (22) *en hae goof eur d'n beejnaam Boanerges* 'and he surnamed them Boanerges' (Venlo, Dutch Limburg, in: Bakkes 2002:65)

As expected, dialects that retain *haar* as a 3pl object pronoun typically also use it as a 3pl possessive. However, the reverse does not always hold. In other words, [*haar* = 'them']-areas are a subset of [*haar* = 'their']-areas.

In most present-day non-standard varieties of North and South Holland, North Brabant, Zeeland and Flanders, *haar*~*heur* is used exclusively with singular feminine

¹⁴ For the Netherlands and Flanders combined, De Rooij (1990: 124) gives *haar*, *har*, *heur*, *hur*, *hor*, *heer*, *eer*, *eir*, *ear*, *aer*, *haer*, *häär*, *ea*, *uer*, *neur* and *hae* as examples of phonetic variants, without further specifications.

¹⁵ For all examples, the orthography from the original source was maintained.

reference. The compounds *hullie* and *(h)ulder* (~*udder*, etc.) are now arguably the most popular 3pl object pronouns in these regions, with *hun* in second place. However, likely as a survival from earlier times, in unstressed position, the *haar* clitics *ər* and *dər* still commonly occur in these areas in plural object function. For North Brabant, compare (23) with (24):

(23) *Ik ben blæ dakni me.i hali me.igəgum zæi* ‘I’m glad that I didn’t go with **them**’ (Rijsbergen, North Brabant, RND sentence 16)

(24) *en de voader goaf oan allebaai wat ’r toekwam* ‘and the father gave to both what belonged [to] **them**’ (Rijsbergen, North Brabant, in: Winkler 1874a:306)

For the use of these plural object clitics in Zeelandic, see De Schutter (1966:85). See Weigert (1959) for the city of Leiden (South Holland).¹⁶

A brief discussion is in order regarding the etymology of *(h)ullie* and *(h)ulder*, which thrive as 3pl object pronouns in non-standard varieties of North and South Holland, Zeeland, North Brabant, and much of Flanders (see De Rooij 1990). As noted, the Dutch language area is characterized by a vast array of plural compound pronouns. For many of these, the original morpheme boundaries have been lost, often obscuring their etymology and frequently prompting controversy among dialectologists (as has been the case, for instance, with the standard Dutch 2pl pronoun *jullie*, or the Afrikaans 3pl pronoun *hulle*).

Etymological uncertainty also applies to the compounds *hullie* and *(h)ulder*. Whereas the second component clearly derives from a form of *lieden* ‘people’ (*lui*~*lieder*), assessing the etymon of the first syllable is not straightforward, given that, on strictly phonetic grounds, both *hun* and *heur* would seem equally plausible. In the literature, *hullie* and *(h)ulder* are often casually classified as *hun*-compounds (e.g. Vercouillie, 1882–1890: 26; Winkler 1874b:200; De Schutter 1966:83; De Rooij 1990:128, 1991:5; Van der Sijs 2001:513; Van Driel 2004:57). However, several clues are available supporting their classification as *heur*-compounds.

First and foremost, historical analyses of plural pronoun usage in Dutch, such as Van Loey (1958b) and De Vogelaer and Coussé (2008), clearly indicate that the 3pl pronoun *hun* has its origins in the (south)east, particularly Limburg and (eastern) Flemish Brabant, whereas plural *haar* and derived *-lieden* compounds emerged in the

¹⁶ In the role of 3pl *possessive*, an analysis of RND sentences 12 and 86 suggests that these *haar* clitics are even more widespread and can be found amply even outside of the core *haar* regions. In fact, they appear to constitute the largest 3pl *possessive* subtype across Dutch dialects, topping *hun* (Goeman et al. 2008:37), and Van Loey (1958b:16; cf. Van der Horst 2008:1676) even classified them as a part of mainstream colloquial Dutch (“omgangstaal”).

more coastal areas where, at present, *(h)ullie* and *(h)ulder* predominate (De Vogelaer and Coussé 2008:26; Mooijaart 1992:256; Van Loey 1958a:319, 320; 1958b; Van Bree 2012:238).¹⁷

Secondly, as noted, most of the *(h)ullie*~*(h)ulder* areas still use *haar*-derived clitics in unstressed position in the meaning of ‘them, their’, suggesting that these regions did indeed once adhere to the plural *haar*-type. Based on this evidence, it is difficult to disagree with seasoned dialectologists such as Schoenfeld (in Van Loey 1970:144), Kloeke (1934:22), Van Loey (1948:39, 1958a:320, 1958b:23) and Goossens (1993:67), all of whom analyze *hullie* and *(h)ulder* as derivations of *heurlie*(*der*), not *hunlie*(*der*).¹⁸ For very similar linguistic-geographic reasons, the current consensus among specialists of Afrikaans is to analyze the all-purpose 3pl pronoun *hulle* as a contraction of *heurlie*~*lui* (Goossens 1993:69; Van Bree 2012:236). An additional argument for this attribution is that 17th- and 18th-century colonial documents from South Africa occasionally feature *haarlui* and *heurlui* – but not *hunlui* – as a 3pl subject pronoun (Scholtz 1970:96).

Zeelandic – of particular interest in the context of Skepi *or* (see Section 4) – offers additional evidence for deriving *(h)ullie* and *(h)ulder* from *heurlie*(*der*). Indisputable *heur* compounds of the type *(h)eurli*(*e*)~*(h)eurle* have regularly been documented for Zeelandic (e.g. Van Weel 1904:60; Te Winkel 1905:71; Scholtz 1970:96, Van Bree 2012:236), typically serving 3pl subject roles in addition to object (25) and possessive (Leopold and Leopold 1882 contain multiple examples of *heurlie*~*heurlle* in all three syntactic roles). For the Zeelandic dialect of Goeree, *hullie* (spelled <heulie> ~ <heuljə>) is explicitly given as an allomorph of *heurlie* by Den Eerzamen (1924:297, 1937:135, 154), with *dər* as an unstressed variant.

- (25) *Mar dát bluift onder heurli* ‘But this stays between **them**’ (Goeree, in: Leopold and Leopold 1882:171)

Evidence specifically for the *(h)eurlieder* → *(h)ulder* etymology comes from the Axel area of Zeeland, south of the Schelde, where *ulder* (‘them, their’) is alternatively realized as *eurder* (Ghijsen 1964: entry for *ulder*). In Section 4, we return to Zeelandic as we examine the provenance of Skepi *or*.

¹⁷ Forms like *haarlieden* were attested in West Flanders and (southern) Zeeland as early as the 13th century, which contrasts with the total absence of *hunlieden* in that area in that same period (Mooijaart 1992:256).

¹⁸ Similar arguments have been presented by Goossens (1993) in the context of the etymology of the Afrikaans 3pl pronoun *hulle*.

3.2 Flanders

In Flemish-speaking Belgium, the situation is similarly complex. Based on the distribution of 3pl object pronouns, Flemish dialects can be very roughly subdivided into three areas, *hulder* (and its variants) predominates in West and East Flanders, *hullie* in Flemish Brabant, and *hun* mainly in Antwerp and Limburg. In other words, synchronically, Flanders does not belong to the plural *haar* area. A possible exception is an area in the south of East Flanders (referenced above by De Rooij 1990:128). In this area, which roughly corresponds to the Dender River area, forms that look related to *(h)eur* are indeed the norm in the role of 3pl object and possessive pronoun (e.g. 26), with variants ranging from [œr] and [ur] to diphthongized [œjər] and [ojər].

- (26) *Kbēm ble.; dak me œ:r ni me:gəgum: bæn* 'I'm glad I didn't go with **them**'
(Erwetegem, East Flanders, RND sentence 16)

However, Goossens (1993) presents the plausible hypothesis that these seemingly exceptional *haar*-forms – typically realized with an [œ] vowel – are in fact not derived from *haar* but represent contractions of *(h)ulder*, resulting from loss of the intervocalic consonant cluster. The fact that the first-, second- and third-person plural pronouns in the Dender River region are *weur*, *geur* and *eur* '3pl' whereas surrounding areas have *wulder*, *gulder* and *ulder*, constitutes compelling evidence for this hypothesis (Goossens 1993:65). One might add that some forms in the Dender River area have remained bisyllabic (e.g. <euier> in Geraardsbergen), which is more easily explained if one assumes they derive from *ulder*, rather than *heur*.

As noted, historically, Flanders doubtlessly belongs to the plural *haar* (or rather *heur*) area (see Van Loey 1958b; Goossens 1993), which raises the question why plural *haar* seems lacking in modern-day Flanders. I assume the main reason is that as early as the Late Middle Ages, *haar~heur* + *lieden/r* compounds emerged forcefully in the region (De Vogelaer and Coussé 2008:26; Mooijaart 1992:256), presumably initially as 'high' variants. These then gained widespread popularity, lexicalized, and eventually resulted in eroded forms such as *hulder* and *hullie*. Although the existing dialectological literature does not explicitly describe the path from *heurlieden/r* to modern Flemish *hulder* and *hullie*, it is clearly implied in the works of for instance Van Loey (1958b) and Goossens (1993).

In Antwerp, often considered a separate dialect area, the dominant 3pl object pronouns are presently *hun* and *hullie* (Ooms and Van Keymeulen 2005). Historically, however, like the rest of Flanders, Antwerp was part of the plural *haar*-region. At the turn of the 20th century, *heur* was still given as a 3pl object pronoun

for all genders in Cornelissen and Vervliet (1900:558)'s dictionary of non-standard Antwerp speech.

3.3 Frisian and Low German

To complement the overview, we briefly cast our eye on two other languages pertaining to the North Sea West Germanic (or Ingvaemonic) dialect area: Frisian and Low German.

In modern mainstream Frisian (a.k.a. West Frisian), a cognate of *haar*, to wit *har*, is polysemous between 'her', 'them' and 'their' (Hoekstra 2001:90) (27, 28), with an allomorph *harren* only for plural. Also, albeit sporadically, variants with a rounded [o] or [ɔ] can be heard, such as in Ameland and Dokkum (29).

- (27) *də mulə is **har** drux* '(lit.) the mouth is [to] **them** dry' = 'their mouth is dry' (Arum, Friesland, RND sentence 86)
- (28) *Tsjerk en **har*** '(lit.) Tsjerk and **them**' = 'Tjerk and his family' (standard West Frisian, Hoekstra 2001:785)
- (29) *de jongste van **hor** (...). In hij gaf **hor hoor** goud* 'the youngest of **them** (...) and he gave **them their** property' (Dokkum, Friesland, in: Winkler 1874a:477)

In the bigger cities, where so-called Stadsfries 'Town Frisian' is spoken,¹⁹ the 3pl possessive and object pronoun is *hun* (e.g. De Haan 2010:257).

The dialect known as Stellingwerfs, spoken in a sizeable area in the south east of the Dutch Frisia province but thought to be more closely related to Low Saxon than to actual West Frisian, features *heur* (presumably [hœr]) in 3pl object position (30).

- (30) *dan slaon ze wel es van **heur*** 'then they might push back' (lit. 'then they beat from **themselves**') (Stellingwerfs, in: Bloemhoff and Niebaum 1991:54, my translation)²⁰

East Frisian (the only remaining descendent of which is Saterfrisian, spoken in a small enclave called Saterland just outside the actual region known as East Frisia) and North Frisian both largely follow the Old/Middle English and High German

¹⁹ Town Frisian is essentially Dutch (mainly Hollandic) with a Frisian substrate.

²⁰ Somewhat surprisingly, in the RND entry for Noordwolde (part of the Stellingwerf dialect area), sentence 16, the response sheet explicitly mentions that younger informants prefer *heur* for 'them', whereas older speakers use *hun*. This is the reverse of what one would expect, since *heur* is almost certainly the more traditional 3pl object pronoun in this area.

pattern in the sense that the feminine 3sg object and possessive pronoun, a cognate of *haar / ihr*, doubles as an all-gender 3pl possessive, but not as a 3pl object pronoun (Howe 2013:192, 194; Hoekstra and Slofstra 2023).

Generally, as in High German, the Low German 3pl possessive is a cognate of *haar / ihr* in most varieties. For the Low German 3pl *object* pronoun the situation is more diversified. Three larger Low German subgroups are distinguishable:

- varieties with [jVm] (*jüm, jem*, etc.);²¹
- varieties with a cognate of Dutch *hun* / High German *ihnen* (*en, enne, inne, un*, etc.);
- varieties with a cognate of Dutch *haar* / High German *ihr* (typically *(h)er* or *(h)ör*).

Foerste (1952:1818) summarizes the geography of that third group as follows:

In two large contiguous regions, Northwestphalia-Oldenburg-East Frisia, and the greater part of Holstein and East Low German (excluding East Prussia), *er* (Westphalian *iär*, East Frisian *hör* (...)) has prevailed.

This roughly corresponds to the dialectal data found in Winkler (1874a, b), although Winkler's results for North Rhine-Westphalia give a more mixed picture, with cognates of *hun / ihnen* in the big cities of Cologne and Düsseldorf (<önne> and <inne> respectively) but cognates of *haar / ihr* in the towns of Gelderen, home to the Westphalian variety known as Kleverlandish (31), and, more northward, Vreden.

- (31) *De jongste van ör* 'the youngest of **them**' (Gelderen - Kleverlandish, North Rhine-Westphalia, in: Winkler 1874a:244)

Further northwards, six out of seven Winkler entries for East Frisia – where mainly Low German, not East Frisian, is spoken – have *haar* cognates in the role of 3pl object pronoun (e.g. 32). North-eastwards, one finds [e:r] 'them' for instance in the villages of Eckwarden, Jever, Rastede and Schlutup, all in the Hamburg-Bremen area, though *jüm* 'them' is well represented in that area, too. Cognates of *haar* meaning 'them' are furthermore found in the town of Stavenhagen, above Berlin, and even as far down as Meitzendorf (33).

- (32) *Un de olle deeilde dat gäioud under höör* 'And the old man divided the property among **them**' (Leer, East Frisia, Lower Saxony, in: Winkler 1874a:212)

- (33) *Un hei deilde under eer siin alls* 'And he divided among **them** his all' (Meitzendorf, Saxony-Anhalt, in: Winkler 1874a:37)

²¹ Note that some of these varieties display compound possessives of the type *jümmer* where the second, suffixed element is thought to be a reflex of *haar/ihr* (Foerste 1952:1818).

Note that there is no evidence of the occurrence of the afore-mentioned *-lieden*-compounds in Low German, which is in keeping with the afore-mentioned fact that such compounds emerged in the west of the Dutch language area.

3.4 Summary

To summarize, the use of *haar* cognates as 3pl object pronouns remains robust especially across the eastern dialects of Dutch, even as far south as the north of Limburg. It remains prominent also in West Frisian and northwest Germany. In Flanders, Zeeland, Brabant and North and South Holland, all areas where plural *haar* must once have flourished, the 3pl object slot is now filled by other forms such as simplex *hun* and the composite pronouns *hulder* and *hullie*. However, a strong case can be made for analyzing the latter two as *haar*-compounds and, thus, as continuations of the old *haar* type.

4 Taking stock: the dialectal origin(s) of Skepi *or*

As shown above, the identification of Skepi *or* as a reflex of Dutch *haar* is supported semantically. But can its dialectal provenance be pinpointed more precisely? Given the limited direct evidence of which Dutch varieties were spoken by the early Essequibo settlers, any analysis must remain necessarily speculative, and no definitive geographic attribution can be claimed. That said, Zeelandic presents itself as the primary candidate, since colonization of the Essequibo River was a Zeeland-led enterprise from the start (Edmundson 1901:651–675). In what follows, we explore this hypothesis and discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

4.1 Plural *haar* in Zeelandic

At first sight, the Zeeland provenance may seem problematic, given that the plural use of *haar*~*heur* is not, at present, typical of that region. As noted, the form *(h)ulder* and to a lesser extent *(h)ullie* have been the dominant 3pl object pronouns there since at least the late 19th century. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that *(h)eur* still thrived as a 3pl object pronoun in 17th-century Zeelandic, given that, as discussed in Section 3.1:

- (a) The *haar*-derived clitics *ər* and *dər* are still in widespread use in Zeelandic as unstressed 3pl object pronouns (De Schutter 1966:87; De Rooij 1990:126);
- (b) The *heur*-compounds *heurlie* and *eurder* are documented for Zeelandic alongside, or in variation with, the modern 3pl pronouns *ullie* and *ulder*.

In addition, the following points can be made:

- (c) Although texts representing vernacular Zeelandic from the 17th century are scarce, relevant examples of 3pl object (*h*)*eur* can be found in archival documents;²²
 - (d) In the Pieter Willems dialect corpus from the 1880s,²³ *haar*-forms meaning ‘them’ are recorded for the southern Zeelandic towns of Hoofdplaat (34) and Sas van Gent (*eur* and *hoar* respectively). Moreover, Winkler (1874b:167) documented *haar* as a 3pl object pronoun in Nieuwe-Tonge (35):
- (34) ‘*k ain **eur** gezeid da (...) ‘I told **them** that (...)’ (Hoofdplaat, in: *Corpus Dialectmateriaal Pieter Willems*)*
- (35) *In toe deëlden-i **haar** z’n goet.* ‘And then he shared [among] **them** his property’ (Nieuwe-Tonge, in: Winkler 1874b:167)

On the basis of this evidence, the following scenario can be reconstructed:

1. The use of *haar* (in written discourse) and (*h*)*eur* (in spoken discourse) as 3pl object pronouns was widespread in Zeelandic in the 17th century, the period of colonization of the Essequibo River;
2. As the compound form (*h*)*eurlieder* became more frequent, the contracted forms *eurlie* and *eurder* – and their popular allomorphs *ullie* and *ulder* – gradually replaced simplex (*h*)*eur* over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries;
3. 3pl object clitics *ər* and *dər* have remained in use up to the present day as souvenirs of the older system.

4.2 Phonetic considerations

Two phonetic features of Skepi *or* merit discussion as they might be relevant to its provenance. The first clearly supports a Zeeland origin, whereas the second requires more careful consideration.

The first feature is the *h*-procope in *or*. Although not unheard of elsewhere in the Netherlands (see Bakkes 2002:60–62), *h*-procope is primarily characteristic of Flanders and Zeeland (cf. Weijnen 1991:281a; De Wulf 2003:217), including in the pronominal

²² Writing to the Chamber of Zeeland in the year 1668, in reference to “de Inwoonders” (the inhabitants) of Surinam, the Zeelandic naval commander Abraham Crijnsen notes: ‘*k En twijfel nijet, of sulcx sal **heur** wel schicken*, ‘I do not doubt that such will suit **them**’ (source: *Zeeuwse Archivalia* 2003).

²³ The *Corpus Dialectmateriaal Pieter Willems* contains data for a dozen or so Zeelandic localities below the Schelde. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for the reference to this corpus, which can be accessed under: <https://bouwstoffen.kantl.be/CPWNL/CPWNL.xq#inleiding>. Data on 3pl object pronouns can be found by using the primer sentence *Uwe zusters zijn hier geweest. Ik heb haar of hun gezegd dat...* ‘Your sisters were here. I told them that (...)’.

domain (Peters 1944).²⁴ This phenomenon is also seen in the Skepi 3sg pronouns *em* (from Dutch *hem*) and *ese* (likely from *hem+ze*) (see Table 1 in Section 1).

A question that needs to be asked is why *h*-procope did not affect other parts of the Skepi lexicon.²⁵ Speculatively, this may be indicative of the later, post-1771 influx of (mainly Hollandic) Dutch colonists into the Essequibo colony.²⁶ While ordinary vocabulary may have been influenced by these newcomers, closed-class items such as personal pronouns could have remained unaffected. This scenario implies that the Skepi lexicon consists of two or more layers, reflecting contributions from different Dutch source varieties and different periods of contact – but this hypothesis clearly requires further investigation.

A second issue concerns the vowel of Skepi *or*. Although Skepi has never been recorded, we can be fairly certain that *or* was pronounced [or] or [o:r], since it appears as <oar> in the diary of the English missionary Thomas Youd and as <or> in the work of the German botanist Ernst Karl Rodschied. By contrast, in present-day Dutch dialects [œ], [e:] and to a lesser extent [a:] realizations of *haar* (whether singular or plural) dominate, with Zeelandic, for the most part, showing [œr] (*eur*). Clear [o]-forms are now largely absent not only in Zeeland but throughout the Dutch language area. Although West Frisian *haar* cognates sporadically feature an [o] vowel (see Section 3.3), no linguistic or historical evidence is known to me that would justify speculating about the transfer of West Frisian speech patterns to Essequibo in the 17th century.

In Middle Dutch, however, spellings with <o> are attested, including <hoir>, <haor>, <hoor>, <hor>, <oor>, <or> and <ore>. Many of these attestations appear in texts linked to the east of the Netherlands (Bakkes 2002:61; De Smet 1988:58; Franck 1910:50; Hogenhout-Mulder 1983:32; Oudemans 1872:155; Van Halteren 1906:32; Van Loey 1948:39, 41), and the online Middle Dutch Dictionary (MNW 2024²⁷) even identifies <oor> as typical of Eastern Middle Dutch. Yet the MNW also documents <o>-spellings in Western Middle Dutch including Zeelandic-Flanders and Antwerp (see the MNW entries *ore* and *hore*). Not just the Zeelandic-Flanders, but also the Antwerp attestations

²⁴ The islands of Goeree-Overflakkee and Voorne-Putten, whose dialects are considered part of the Zeelandic continuum despite their political affiliation with South Holland, are a notable exception (De Wulf 2003:218), quite possibly due to Hollandic influence.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. Skepi *hus* ‘house’, or *ho:r* ‘to hear’, from Dutch *huis* and *horen* respectively.

²⁶ In 1771, the Chamber of Zeeland lost its monopoly on trade with Essequibo and Demerary. Merchants from Amsterdam and Utrecht subsequently established themselves there (Van de Voort 1973:105).

²⁷ Online accessible and searchable under <https://gtb.ivdnt.org/search/>.

are potentially relevant given the considerable historical-demographic ties between Antwerp and Zeeland (especially Middelburg) in the 17th century.²⁸

Having said that, it is not clear whether these <o>-spellings actually reflect genuine [o]-pronunciations. Some dialectologists (De Vooys 1947:83; Kern 1895:118; Van Halteren 1906:21, 32) have interpreted them as spelling variants for [(h)œr]. If that interpretation is correct, then Zeelandic/Flemish *eur* [œr] arguably remains the most plausible source form for Skepi *or*. A vowel shift from [œ] to [o] can reasonably be hypothesized and finds support in other parts of the Skepi lexicon, for example *soster* ‘sister’ (< Dutch *zuster* /zœstər/) and *kos* ‘kiss’ (< Dutch *kus* /kœs/). The latter is particularly suggestive, as *kos* itself is considered a Zeelandic form (Ghijzen 1964; Kloeke 1934:11).

In fact, an interesting parallel can be drawn with French Creole: in the Lesser Antilles and Haiti, French *eux* [œ] developed into the creole 3pl pronoun *yo* (Goodman 1964: 44–46). The African contact languages involved there likely overlapped considerably with those that shaped Skepi, raising the possibility that the same vowel development underlies both Skepi *or* (< Dutch *eur*) and French Creole *yo* (< French *eux*).

4.3 Syntactic consideration

One might object that Dutch *haar*, unlike Skepi *or*, is not attested as a plural subject pronoun. This syntactic mismatch, however, is not particularly problematic. For one thing, it is conceivable that plural *haar* (or, indeed, Zeelandic *eur*) was at some point used in subject position. After all, in Dutch in general (Van Bree 2012) and Zeelandic in particular (De Vogelaer and Rooze-Stouthamer 2006:351), object pronouns are frequently seen to drift into subject roles. In several Zeelandic dialects, *ulder* and *ullie* occupy both the 3pl object and subject positions (De Vogelaer and Rooze-Stouthamer 2006:351; Goossens 1993:66; Van Bree 2012:237), and the same is true for the more original form (*h*)*eurli* (for Goeree see Den Eerzamen 1924, 1937; for West-Voorne see Van Weel 1904; cf. Scholtz 1970:96). Likewise, singular *haar* (~(*h*)*eur*) occurs as a

²⁸ It is well known that, despite political borders, Zeeland and Flanders at the time formed a contiguous and relatively coherent cultural-linguistic space (e.g., Van Rossem 2000:59). Moreover, in the decades following the fall of Antwerp (1585), Zeelandic cities such as Middelburg and Vlissingen experienced a considerable influx of Flemish merchants and craftsmen. This migration was so substantial that “[a]round 1622 half of the inhabitants of Middelburg (...) (about 20.000 people), originally came from the southern Netherlands” (source: *Zeeuws Archief*, n.d.). It is, in other words, highly likely that the Chamber of Zeeland employed a significant number of Flemish – specifically Antwerpian – sailors and merchants.

(feminine) subject pronoun in a number of Zeelandic townships (Barbiers et al. 2005:35; Kloeke 1934:12; Van Bree 2012:236).

More importantly, though, the question of whether *haar* (~*eur*) ever functioned as a plural subject pronoun is largely beside the point. In creole formation, pronoun selection is typically governed not by syntactic role but by *tonicity*, i.e. a word's ability to carry stress (see, for instance, McWhorter 2011:36). Put differently, creole pronouns are typically – no exceptions are known to me – derived from strong (non-clitic) forms in the lexifier. As long as the source form is tonic, both subject and object pronouns may provide the input for creole paradigms.²⁹

In short, the derivation of Skepi *or* from Dutch *haar* (or Zeelandic *eur*) does not hinge on whether the latter was ever used in subject position.

5 Conclusions

The discovery of the Skepi 3pl pronoun *or* has prompted a reexamination of an overlooked episode in the history of the Dutch language: the use of *haar* as an all-gender plural object pronoun.

The data analyzed in this article allow for the generalization that Proto-West Germanic seems to have been characterized by homophony between the 3sg feminine possessive and the 3pl genitive/possessive (all genders), a feature that still characterizes High German (*ihr*) to the present day. In several varieties, especially within the Dutch language area, the 3pl genitive/possessive form subsequently came to be used as a 3pl object pronoun. Although this feature later disappeared from the Dutch standard language, it has been retained in a surprising amount of modern-day dialects. It is precisely this feature – homophony between the words for *her* and *them* – that distinguishes these varieties from High German.

We also uncovered a salient subplot in the history of plural *haar*: the gender distinction collectively promoted by 17th and 18th century grammar writers for 3pl possessive and object pronouns ultimately failed to gain a foothold in colloquial

²⁹ Thus, the fact that the 1sg pronoun of Virgin Islands Dutch Creole is derived from Dutch *mij* (1sg object), whereas the 1sg pronouns of Skepi and Berbice Dutch are derived from Dutch *ik*, should not come as a surprise. Both *mij* and *ik* are, after all, tonic pronouns in Dutch in the sense that they can bear stress and occur in isolation. The same applies to Spanish- and Portuguese-lexicon creoles: some derive their 1sg from the tonic subject pronoun (*yo~eu* 'I'), whereas others derive theirs from the tonic object pronoun (*mi~mim*). Meanwhile, tellingly, not a single French-lexicon creole has a 1sg pronoun derived from the atonic French 1sg pronoun *je*. Instead, they all selected the French tonic object pronoun *moi* as the source item.

language. Today, no trace of such a distinction remains in the dialectal landscape. This failure is especially striking given that another prescriptive proposal from the same period – the *hun* (dative) versus *hen* (accusative) distinction – did succeed.

Regarding Skepi *or*, we found that the use of *haar* as a plural object pronoun in Dutch reached its zenith in the early 17th century, coinciding with the colonization of the Essequibo River by the Zeeland Chamber of the West India Company and the subsequent formation of Skepi Dutch Creole. Had Skepi emerged later, in the 18th or 19th century, its 3pl pronoun might well have been a cognate of *hun* or *ulder*, rather than *haar*.

In Section 4 we investigated the dialectal origins of Skepi *or*, arguing that while certainty is unattainable, Zeelandic emerges as the most plausible source given both historical and linguistic evidence. The plural use of *haar~eur* must have been common in 17th-century Zeelandic, even if later supplanted by other forms, and traces of it remain in modern clitics and compounds. Phonetically, the h-dropping seen in *or* aligns strongly with Zeelandic and Flemish speech, while the vowel [o] could plausibly reflect a shift from Zeelandic [œ], a process paralleled elsewhere in the Skepi lexicon and in the French Creole 3pl pronoun *yo*. Syntactically, the fact that *haar/eur* is not attested as a subject pronoun in Dutch is not problematic, since creole pronouns are generally derived from strong tonic forms irrespective of syntactic role. Taken together, these considerations point to Zeelandic *eur* as the most likely precursor of Skepi *or*, though alternative inputs cannot be ruled out.

Finally, several aspects discussed in this article suggest promising venues for future research. At a diachronic level, the rise and spread of [o]-forms across the Dutch language area deserves closer investigation. At a synchronic level, targeted questionnaires on 3pl object pronouns could help to better map the contemporary proliferation of plural *haar* across non-standard varieties of Dutch. Such research would not only refine our understanding of Dutch pronominal history, but also sharpen our view of how contact, variation, and innovation have shaped the Dutch linguistic heritage across time and space.

Research ethics: Not applicable.

Informed consent: Not applicable.

Author contributions: The author has accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission.

Use of Large Language Models, AI and Machine Learning Tools: None declared.

Conflict of interest: The author states no conflict of interest.

Research funding: None declared.

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