Definiteness and adverb-object order in Dutch

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Scrambling in Dutch concerns the relative order of an adverb and direct object in the Mittelfeld. The object can either precede the adverb (the scrambled order) or follow it (the unscrambled order). In the theoretical linguistic literature scrambling in Germanic languages is related to the definiteness and anaphoricity of the direct object. The scrambleability of definite objects is a matter of debate. Accounts based on Diesing's Mapping Hypothesis (e.g. Diesing and Jelinek 1995 for German, Diesing 1997 for Yiddish) claim that referential definites (i.e. uniquely referring objects) scramble obligatorily, whereas non-referential ones (i.e. non-uniquely referring objects, e.g. reading the newspaper) can occur in the unscrambled position. Van der Does and de Hoop (1998) and de Hoop (2003), by contrast, claim that scrambling should be optional for both types of definites.

In this talk I present 4 empirical studies on the scrambling behaviour of definite objects in Dutch (a corpus study, a rating study, and 2 production studies). The results of these studies strongly suggest that although the scrambled position is available for definite objects, it is not the preferred option (in production). I propose that the results can be interpreted along the lines of Wasow's (2002) late-commitment strategy on behalf of the speaker through which he tries to buy as much time for articulation of the object as possible by using the unscrambled order. Word class size is taken as the relevant accessibility measure to account for these patterns. Full nominal phrases belong to a larger class and hence have lower accessibility than adverbs and hence (generally) take longer to produce.