

Germanic possessor doubling is possessor linking

The construction in (1), often called ‘possessor doubling’, is widespread among the Germanic languages but to this day there is no consensus on its (syntactic) origin or on the function and categorical status of the bold-faced element. The paper sheds new light on these issues by discussing data from various diachronic and synchronic sources. We focus on the interaction between two previously observed constraints on the construction which have not been considered together: the animacy restriction and the positional restriction. We show that (i) the origin of the construction is a prenominal genitive rather than a free dative and (ii) what looks like a possessive pronoun is a functional element with properties of a ‘linker’. To reflect this, we henceforth refer to constructions as in (1) as the ‘possessor linking construction’ (PLC).

Our account centres on two principle observations. Firstly, the well-known animacy restriction for the PLC can be extended to prenominal genitives, see (2). Furthermore, there is indication that this animacy restriction has a long history in German, having started in late Old High German (cf. Demske 2001). This observation allows us to make a connection between possessive linking and prenominal genitives, at the same time accounting for animacy in the former, in turn lending support to our hypothesis for the prenominal genitive origin of the PLC. Secondly, from Middle Low German (MLG) through to modern Alemannic we commonly get PLCs where the possessor is genitive-marked, e.g. (3)-(4).

For the diachronic aspect, we furnish our claims with novel data from MLG, (c.1250-1600), via the Corpus of Historical Low German (CHLG)¹ and supplementary data from the Referenzkorpus Mittelniederdeutsch/Niederrheinisch (ReN).² The PLC is a well-known feature of MLG (cf. Norde 2012), however its precise morphosyntactic properties and distribution have been neglected, partly due to the fact that the rich MLG attestation was until recently not readily accessible for corpus-based syntactic investigations. We also take into account synchronic dialectal evidence from Alemannic based on data from the project Syntax of Alemannic (SynALM).³

While both modern LG and HG varieties have the PLC, see (1), they differ substantially in their morphosyntactic properties. While HG retains a three-case system, morphological case-marking is almost entirely absent in LG, and the language is thus often claimed to pattern with English. But data from MLG show that the PLC at this stage exhibits similar properties to those noted of MHG (Weiß 2012), namely dative or genitive-marking on the possessor, e.g. (3) and (5). Furthermore, like MHG (Weiß 2012), in the MLG data unambiguous PLCs where the possessor is dative-marked are rare, but there are quite a number of unambiguously genitive-marked PLCs. This would indicate a genitive source being more likely.

We also propose a motivation for the emergence of the PLC related to the decline of the genitive. For the modern stage, there is a sharp contrast between masculine and feminine prenominal genitives, see (6). In MLG, however, feminine prenominal genitives are commonly attested, e.g. (7), where there is still nominal inflection intervening between the two nominals. In the modern stage, feminines no longer have nominal inflection and a prenominal genitive structure is ruled out, see (6-b), unless a possessive linking element is inserted between the two nominals, rendering a PLC, see (6-c). We take this data as indication that the possessive element in the PLC is a functional head with the properties of a linker, which i) marks the relation of the two DPs involved as possessive and ii) prevents a distinctness violation (cf. Richards 2010).

In sum, we propose a synchronic analysis together with a diachronic account of the PLC, thereby contributing to the previous debate on its origin and categorical status of the possessive element.

¹ <https://www.chlg.ugent.be>

² <https://www.slm.uni-hamburg.de/ren.html>

³ <https://cms.uni-konstanz.de/fileadmin/archive/syntax-alemannisch/>

- 1) a. des isch em Vater **sin** Platz (Alemannic)
 this is the.MASC.SG.DAT father his seat
 ‘this is father’s seat’
 b. den Pasturn **sien** ole(n) Hoot (Low German, cited from Berg 2013:36)
 the.OBL priest his old(WK) hat
 ‘the priest’s old hat’
- 2) a. Maria-**s** Buch (animate possessor)
 Maria.GEN book
 b. ***Buchs** Einband (inanimate possessor)
 book.GEN cover
 c. ??**d-es** Buch-**s** Einband (inanimate possessor, archaic)
 the-GEN book-GEN cover
 d. ***d-er** Bücherei Buch (inanimate possessor)
 the-GEN/DAT library book
- 3) a. **Lorins** **syn** **bede** was gar entwicht
 Lorin.MASC.SG.GEN his.FEM.SG.NOM request.FEM.SG.NOM was PTCL desecrated
 ‘Lorin’s request was even desecrated.’ (MLG: Kortw. Hist. Laurin)
 b. Men wat in **disses** **Mans** **syn** **Hovet**
 but what in this.MASC.SG.GEN man.MASC.SG.GEN his.NT.SG.ACC head.NT.SG.ACC
 is begrepen
 is understood
 ‘But whatever in this man’s head is understood...’ (MLG: Lauremberg)
- 4) des isch **d-es** Vater-**s** **sin** Platz (Alemannic)
 this is the-GEN father.GEN his seat
 ‘this is father’s seat’
- 5) a. Js **eyner** **vrowen** **ere** **man**
 is a.FEM.SG.DAT/GEN woman.FEM.SG.DAT/GEN her.MASC.SG.NOM man.MASC.SG.NOM
 doyt...
 dead
 ‘If a woman’s man is dead...’ (MLG: Soest)
 b. So schole wy **den** **Radmannen** **ere**
 so shall we the.MASC.PL.DAT councilmen.MASC.PL.DAT their.NT.PL.ACC
wort ... weder antworten
 word.NT.PL.ACC again answer
 ‘So we shall answer the Councilmen’s words.’ (MLG: Oldenburg)
- 6) a. **d-es** Mann-**es** Haus (archaic) b. ***d-er** Frau Haus c. der Frau **ihr** Haus
 the-GEN man-GEN house the-GEN woman house the woman her house
- 7) a. He dede nach der **vrowen** mot
 he did according-to the.FEM.SG.GEN woman.FEM.SG.GEN thought
 ‘He did so according to the woman’s thought.’ (MLG: Flos)
 b. Dorch Clarissen willen mochte se des nicht laten.
 through Clarisse.FEM.SG.GEN will wished she that NEG let
 ‘Through Clarisse’s will she didn’t want to allow that.’ (MLG: Flos)

References

- Berg, Kristian. 2013. *Morphosyntax nominaler Einheiten im Niederdeutschen*. Heidelberg: Winter. Demske, Ulrike. 2001. *Merkmale und Relationen: Diachrone Studien zur Nominalphrase des Deutschen*, vol. 56. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. Norde, Muriel. 2012. On the origin (s) of the possessor doubling construction in Norwegian. In *Language for its own sake. Essays on Language and Literature offered to Harry Perridon*, 327–358. Amsterdam: Scandinavisch Instituut. Richards, Norvin. 2010. *Uttering trees*, vol. 56. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Weiß, Helmut. 2012. The rise of DP-internal possessors: on the relationship of dialectal synchrony to diachrony. Vogelaar, Gunther de/Guido Seiler (eds.), *The dialect laboratory: dialects as a testing ground for theories of language change*, 271–293. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.