A cognitive account of the genitive case in present-day Dutch

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This paper is an investigation of a case preserved and used productively in a language that does not have a case system, namely the genitive case in present-day Dutch. A solution is proposed to account for this unexpected productivity.

In earlier periods of Dutch, the genitive – as part of a now defunct system also containing nominative, accusative and dative case – had performed a number of roles: for example, it was used to indicate a connection between two NPs (1a) (e.g. a possessive relationship), in expressions of time (1b), and it was governed by various verbs and adjectives. By the end of the 19th century the genitive case had an archaic character (de Vooys 1970: 174). Many fossilised remnants of the genitive case remain (1) (as do, to a lesser extent, remnants of the dative case) but the genitive is generally said to be no longer a part of Dutch morphology (e.g. Booij 2002: 36).

- (1) a. het Leger des Heils the army the GEN salvation.GEN 'the Salvation army'
- b. 's middags the.GEN afternoon.GEN 'in the afternoon'

Some roles of the genitive were assumed by the preposition *van* 'of' (2a), the possessive *-s* construction (2b), and a construction in which a possessive pronoun serves as possessive marker (2c).

(2) a. de fiets van Jan b. Jans fiets c. Jan z'n fiets the bike of Jan Jan.Poss bike Jan Poss bike 'Jan's bike' (lit. 'Jan his bike')

However, novel genitive formations are still produced and encountered in modern Dutch. On the basis of usage data from the *Eindhoven* corpus (written and spoken), the *INL 27 Miljoen Woorden Krantencorpus 1995* (written) and the *Corpus Gesproken Nederlands* (spoken), this paper illustrates the nature of the productive use of the genitive in Dutch and proposes a theoretical account of the phenomenon. It will be shown that the productivity of the genitive – exemplified by the novel examples in (3) – is limited to use with NPs and that all the encountered genitives could be paraphrased with *van*.

- (3) a. de leunstoel des schrijvers the armchair the GEN writer GEN 'the writer's armchair' (27MWC)
- b. het probleem der overbevolking the problem the GEN overpopulation 'the problem of overpopulation' (CGN: fv600879)
- c. *één der* bejaarde bewoners/ coalitiepartijen/ speelse dolfijnen one the.GEN elderly residents/ coalition parties/ playful dolphins 'one of the elderly residents/coalition parties/playful dolphins' (27MWC)

While the examples in (3a-b) show flexibility with regard to both possessor and possessum, (3c) is more constrained, with one fixed element (één der) and one free element.

Examples such as those in (3), particularly (3a-b), pose a problem for an account of Dutch syntax because they require the assumption of extra rules to account for a non-

canonical and optional (and relatively rare) process, namely case morphology in a language without a case system. One solution, proposed by Weerman & de Wit (1999: 1184), is to state that the Dutch genitive is formed by a 'conversion rule' from a construction with *van*, e.g. (2a), and to conclude that 'there is no such thing as a morphological genitive in Modern Dutch' (Weerman & de Wit 1999: 1164).

Such an approach, however, does not account for speakers' ability to (usually) use the correct genitive marker (*des* or *der*) depending on the number and gender of the noun – corpus data suggest that the morphological structure of the nouns involved is used as guidance – and, in the case of constructions with *des*, to attach the agreeing suffix -s to the subject noun (as in 3a). Even if the genitive is used as an artificial conversion of a *van*-construction, it clearly still involves some morphological knowledge on the part of language users. Furthermore, the approach does not explain the examples encountered in spontaneous, informal speech (such as (3b)). Nor does it account for mismatches between the marker and subject (4), which also suggest that the Dutch genitive is used by speakers as a productive morphological process.

(4) *de mildheid des jaren
the mildness the.GEN.MASC/NEUT year.PLU
'the mildness of the years'

This paper proposes that the Dutch genitive can be accounted for as a living and productive morphological process (rather than a fossilised relic or an artificial conversion rule) in a cognitive approach. In a constructionist framework, the Dutch genitive may be described as a type of construction, namely a 'partially lexically filled [...] linguistic pattern' (following the definition in Goldberg 2003: 219); it may also be viewed as a type of 'formulaic sequence' (as defined by Wray 2000: 465). It is proposed, based on the situation observed in the corpora (namely the productivity within a relatively constrained structure in written and spoken language), that the productive Dutch genitive is used in frames with gaps – X and Y in (4) – that can be filled by NPs. Thus, parallel to the examples in (3), the following frames are posited, within which the genitive maintains its productivity (albeit restricted in comparison with earlier periods) in present-day Dutch:

(CGN: fn008413)

 $(4) \qquad a. \ X \ des \qquad Y.s \qquad \qquad b. \ X \ der \qquad Y \\ X \ the.GEN \ Y.MASC/NEUT.GEN \qquad \qquad X \ the.GEN \ Y.FEM/PLU \\ `X \ of \ (the) \ Y` \qquad \qquad `X \ of \ (the) \ Y`$

c. één der Y one the.GEN Y 'one of the Y'

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