

# Introduction

Kersti Börjars

 David Denison

Alan K. Scott

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## **Morphosyntactic Categories and the Expression of Possession**

**Edited by Kersti Börjars, David Denison and Alan K. Scott**

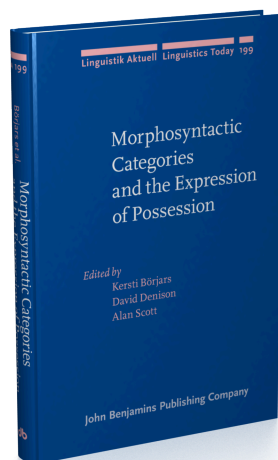
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# Introduction\*

Kersti Börjars, David Denison & Alan Scott

The papers in this volume deal with the morpho-syntax of possessive markers and the distribution of phrases expressing possession in a range of languages, but the English possessive 's takes centre stage. In terms of attention received per character, the English possessive is probably one of the most intensively studied elements in the linguistic literature. This is because it provides a window on a range of issues that have a direct impact on assumptions about the architecture of grammar. A study of the possessive 's leads to questions about the relation between morphology and syntax and how these interrelate with phonology, it bears on assumptions about historical change, on the interaction between semantic and structural constraints on a construction and on the interaction between syntax and information structure.<sup>1</sup> In almost every single one of these areas, the behaviour of possessive 's has led to discussion and disagreement in the literature. The articles in this volume illustrate this breadth of issues raised by the behaviour of the English possessive 's and the variation in analysis of that behaviour. It is also interesting that corresponding elements in other languages give rise to similar issues. In the case of Germanic languages (see Haegeman this volume and Koptjeskaja-Tamm this volume) that may not be surprising, but there are also parallels with similar constructions in a range of other languages, as illustrated by Bögel and Butt (this volume) and O'Connor, Maling and Skarabela (this volume).

Historically, the possessive has developed from an ending which formed part of a full-blown case system. The Old English genitive contrasted with nominative, accusative and dative, and as a case form it not only appeared in adnominal possessors but also marked noun phrases governed by certain verbs and prepositions. Furthermore -(e)s was only one of the endings marking the genitive case. The properties and distribution

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1. Throughout this introduction, we use CONSTRUCTION in the non-technical traditional sense, not in the sense of Construction Grammar.

of Present-Day English possessive 's are complex, but so is the history of its development from the original case marking, and a number of the articles in this volume take a historical perspective (in particular Allen and Juvonen, this volume). The Germanic languages vary in the way in which the genitive marker has developed. Icelandic maintains a case system similar to that of earlier stages of Germanic, the Mainland Scandinavian languages have undergone a change similar to that of English, whereas Dutch and German have developed a similar element, but with a much more limited distribution. Haegeman (this volume) provides a detailed examination of a variety of Dutch spoken in West Flanders which has developed two separate expressions of possession, neither of which derives from the original genitive.

Considering the formal properties of the Present-Day English possessive 's (and by extension of the Mainland Scandinavian languages), the possessive has traditionally been described as a clitic, that is as an essentially syntactic element which shares some properties with morphological elements. In the theoretical literature, it has been analysed as a syntactically independent element, usually found under the D node (e.g. Abney 1987), but one which differs from a word in that it lacks independence and hence needs a host. The connection to this phonological host is generally assumed to be less integrated for a clitic like possessive 's than it is for a morphological affix (see for instance the influential criteria put forward by Zwicky & Pullum 1983). Any analysis of possessive 's will then have to deal with this dual behaviour. In this volume, Anderson and Hudson illustrate the range of ways in which this can be done.

Though the analysis of clitics as standardly defined is in itself a complex matter for morphosyntactic theory, evidence emerged that the behaviour of the possessive 's is more complex than had been assumed. Zwicky (1987) showed that 's displays a closer attachment to its host than expected of a clitic; it has properties more akin to those of an affix. Hence the simple dichotomy between affix and clitic does not offer a sufficiently subtle classification to accurately describe the behaviour of possessive 's. This has led to an analysis of it as a PHRASAL AFFIX or EDGE AFFIX (see for instance Zwicky 1987; Miller & Halpern 1993; Payne 2009). In some of the literature, these two terms are used interchangeably to indicate that an element positions with respect to a phrase as a clitic would, but it attaches like an affix. In more recent work, a distinction is made between the two, as discussed by Anderson (this volume). Both phrasal affixes and edge affixes are the result of a feature introduced at phrasal level, but they differ in how they find their exponence. On this more subtle view, the phonological material associated with a phrasal affix is the result of an operation on the phrase – it is phrasal morphology in Anderson's terms (2005, this volume), with post-lexical rules being responsible for the final shape of the possessive marker. These elements are the SPECIAL CLITICS of Zwicky (1977). An edge affix, on the other hand, results when a phrasal feature percolates down the right or the left side of the branches of a tree until it reaches a terminal node, a word, where it is realised by ordinary

word-level morphology. Anderson (this volume) argues that possessive 's is a phrasal affix in these terms, whereas Miller & Halpern (1993) and Payne (2009) argue that it is an edge affix. Bögel & Butt (this volume) deal with the Persian and Urdu possession marking *ezafe* construction, which has been analysed as involving the morphological component. They argue that a better analysis treats *ezafe* as a syntactically independent element which gets its non-independent properties through post-lexical prosodic constraints. Though their analysis is couched in a different framework from that assumed by Anderson, the resulting analysis shows similarities with his.

The unorthodox clitic behaviour of the possessive 's in terms of attachment to its host has then been extensively discussed in the literature. However, another property crucial to its analysis as a clitic has not been disputed; its status as a right edge element. However Denison, Scott & Börjars (2010) provided evidence from a spoken corpus that the distribution of possessive 's is not entirely consistent with the placement of a right edge element, be it a clitic, a phrasal affix or an edge affix. Crucial to its description as a clitic is the so-called 'group genitive' construction (Jespersen 1909), in which the possessor is post-modified, so that the possessive 's would be expected to attach straightforwardly on the final word, much like the auxiliary clitic 's (for *is* or *has*) does. However, data analysed by Denison, Scott & Börjars (2010) showed that group genitives are very rare and that speakers employ a number of alternative strategies in order to avoid attaching the possessive 's to an element other than the head. Börjars, Denison, Krajewski & Scott (this volume) analyse the data in more detail and suggest that this can be described as 'structural persistence': the structural behaviour of the element from which the possessive 's developed influences the distribution of the current element (compare Hopper 1991).

One of the alternative constructions that Börjars, Denison, Krajewski & Scott argue provides evidence that speakers avoid the group genitive is the 'split genitive', a construction in which the postmodifier occurs to the right of the possessive 's, thereby allowing the possessive 's to attach to the head noun, as in *the man's car who you were talking to*. Split genitives occur in earlier stages of English but have been assumed to have disappeared by the 17th century. Given their existence in a modern corpus, the question arises whether they in fact did not disappear but just decreased in frequency for a period of time (as the possessive 's itself did, see discussion in Szmrecsanyi, this volume). Allen (this volume) provides a detailed historical corpus analysis of the distribution of possessors with postmodification and concludes that the two constructions are not related, so that the modern split genitive is not a continuation of the older construction.

Historical corpus studies have played an important role with respect to a number of disputed issues relating to the development of the English possessive 's and its Germanic cognates. For English, the role of the so-called *his*-genitive, as in *adam is sune* 'Adam's son', in the development of the modern possessive 's has been a point

of dispute. One line of argument is that the construction involves the possessive pronoun *his*, on a par with the Dutch construction *Adam z'n zoon* 'Adam's son' (literally 'Adam his son'), and that the possessive 's developed from this element. However, Allen (2003) settles this debate by convincingly demonstrating that (*h*)*is* in these English examples is in fact an orthographic variant of 's. Haegeman (this volume) provides a detailed examination of two possessive constructions in West Flemish which are superficially similar both to each other and to the Dutch construction. However, Haegeman's detailed study shows that some of the apparent historical connections are just that: apparent.

Historical studies of the changes involved in the development from the genitive *-(e)s* ending to the modern possessive 's have also led to a lively debate about the nature of this development. Under the traditional approach to morphosyntactic categories, there are only two types of bound element, affixes and clitics. The original genitive case ending had the hallmark of an affix, and since the present-day element behaves differently, it must be a clitic, the argument goes. This would be a change from more to less grammatical and hence an example of degrammaticalisation. In fact the English possessive 's has been taken as a paradigm example of degrammaticalisation by many (see Janda 2001; Willis 2007 and many others). The cognate Swedish element has given rise to a similar debate (see Norde 1997, 2001a, 2001b, 2006; Delsing 1999, 2001; Börjars 2003).

Historical studies of possessive 's have revealed interesting variation over time, space and genre. Juvonen (this volume) considers a number of both formal and functional properties of the possessive construction and shows that there is substantial variation in use in the Late Middle and Early Modern period, both with respect to genre and area. In present-day English, the main parameter of variation relates to the use of possessive 's versus the *of* possessive. Based on tests involving native speakers' grammaticality judgements, Rosenbach (2002, 2003, 2005) established the relative importance of different factors in the choice between the two constructions. She tests for animacy and topicality of the possessor and for the degree of prototypicality of the possessive relation and concludes that animacy is the most important factor, followed by topicality, with nature of possessive relation being the least important factor. In a sophisticated statistical analysis of corpus data, Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi (2007) consider a broad range of potential factors in variation. One conclusion drawn on the basis of their analysis is that the use of the possessive 's construction is spreading at the cost of the *of*-construction and more so in some genres than in others. They argue that this is at least partly due to the fact that the possessive 's construction can be described as a more compact and economic coding option than the *of*-possessive. In this volume, Szmrecsanyi keeps genre constant in a thorough statistical analysis of newspaper texts from the Late Modern English period. He shows that the increase in the use of the 's possessive

has not been linear but has a V-shape, with a slump in the first half of the 19th century, largely due to animacy less strongly favouring the 's possessive, though he shows that it involves a complex interaction of a range of factors.

A variation less studied in the literature is that between the COMPOUND POSSESSIVE (*a Picasso painting*) and the 's possessive. Koptjevskaya-Tamm (this volume) is a notable exception. Given that the compound possessive can be described as formally more compact and economic than the possessive 's, and given Hinrich & Szmrecsanyi's (2007) assumption that the rise of possessive 's is due to its compactness, it would be interesting to see an analysis of the relative frequency of these two constructions. Another less well-studied expression of possession is the focus of Payne (this volume) – a construction he refers to as the OBLIQUE GENITIVE, as in *a friend of the Prime Minister's*. Though it occurs as an alternative to other ways of expressing possession, he argues that it is an independent construction with its own distinctive properties and one of the choices available to speakers.

The study of the choice between different ways of expressing possession has formed a key theme in the study of the English possessive 's. It is interesting here to note that most if not all of the languages referred to in this book have more than one way of expressing possession. In some cases, two ways of expressing possession differ in the order of possessor and possessum, as in the two English constructions POSSESSOR'S POSSESSUM versus POSSESSUM *of* POSSESSOR, and the two Urdu constructions described by Bögel & Butt (this volume). West Flemish, as described by Haegeman (this volume), has two alternative constructions, both with the POSSESSOR < POSSESSUM order. O'Connor, Maling & Skarabela (this volume) consider the factors influencing the choice between constructions in a broader typological perspective. They perform a corpus study of American English (through parts of the Brown corpus) with respect to three factors: animacy, weight and topicality (for which they use NP form as a proxy). They find clear statistical correlations between these factors and the choice of expression of possession, and the results correspond to earlier work by Rosenbach (2002) and by Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi (2007). These statistical correlations lead to important questions for syntactic theory: are these tendencies part of the grammar, or do they belong in some extra-grammatical component that captures language use separately from grammar? One argument that has been used in the literature to argue in favour of stochastic information being included in grammatical knowledge is that captured as 'soft constraints mirror hard constraints' (see Bresnan, Dingare & Manning 2001). If a factor is implicated in a categorical distinction in one language, it must be assumed to be part of the grammar. Then, according to this line of reasoning, it can reasonably be assumed that the same factor is part of the grammar also when it does not have categorical effects but just determines the likelihood of a particular construction being used. By comparing the outcome of their study of an English corpus with the behaviour of possessives in a typologically diverse set

of languages, O'Connor, Maling & Skarabela (this volume) show exactly these effects for the possessive. The factors that lead to preferences in English show categorical effects in other languages. They conclude from this that the statistical preference patterns displayed by English usage need to be represented in a model of grammar. Hudson (this volume) and Börjars, Denison, Krajewski & Scott (this volume) are sympathetic to this approach.

The diversity of approaches and conclusions of the chapters in this volume attest to the productive and inquisitive spirit that characterised the Manchester workshop. This volume can hardly resolve once and for all the debate on the status of the English possessive *-s*; the chapters presented here do, however, represent the current state of the art of research into possession marking in the Germanic languages and beyond.