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Feature percolation in the Dutch possessive

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1. Introduction

In this squib, I discuss the Dutch possessive construction. I will show that it is fully recursive, but in a very restricted way: it may only have a complex left branch, if the left branch of that left branch is marked as possessive as well. To quote Ross (1967): it's turtles all the way down. This leads to a leftmost path in the tree that shows connectivity in the graph-theoretical sense: if a node A is marked as [poss] and another node B is likewise marked as [poss], then any nodes in a path from A to B are also marked as [poss]. Such a state of affairs may be described in terms of path conditions (Koster 1978, 1986; Kayne 1981, *inter alii*), or feature percolation (Gazdar 1982).

2. The problem

Like English and Swedish, Dutch has lost its historical genitive (cf. Janda 1981 for English, Norde 1997 for Swedish, and Weerman & de Wit 1999 for Dutch). Taking its place, in part, there is a possessive construction, which however is largely restricted to proper names, and word groups with the syntactic status of a complex proper name, such as *President Obama* or *Doctor Livingstone*.¹ One of the things setting it apart from the historical genitive is the fact that the possessive construction always appears before the head noun, never after it (cf. examples (1e) and (1f)). English constructions such as *a friend of Jan's* do not have a counterpart in Dutch (cf. example (1g)).

- (1) a. Jans vader
 Jan's father
 b. Charlottes moeder
 Charlotte's mother

1. Overdiep (1949: 267) mentions cases like *Willem de Zwijgers levenswerk* 'William the Silent's life achievement'. Here the phrase *Willem de Zwijger* has to be viewed as a complex name.

- c. President Obama's rede
President Obama's speech
- d. Koningin Beatrix' kapsel
Queen Beatrix' hairdo
- e. *de rede president Obama's
the speech president Obama's
- f. *het kapsel koningin Beatrix'
the hairdo Queen Beatrix'
- g. *een vriend van Jans
a friend of Jan's

In addition to proper names, some pronouns and pronoun-like expressions can be used in the possessive construction (cf. Overdiep 1949: 267; Paardekooper 1979: 451):

- (2) a. niemands vriend
nobody's friend
- b. iemands verjaardag
somebody's birthday
- c. andermans geld
other.people's money
- d. elkaars boeken
each.other's books

as well as certain bare singular nouns which may be used as quasi-names such as *Vader* 'Father', *Moeder* 'Mother' and the like:²

- (3) a. Vaders tatoeage
Father's tattoo
- b. Moeders piercing
Mother's piercing
- c. Dominees tuin
Parson's garden

2. The use of name-like nouns is rather restricted. So *Vader* can only be used to refer to the speaker's father when he/she is speaking to other family members, or when it is otherwise clear that the father of the speaker is intended. The use of *Dominee* 'minister, parson' without an article seems limited to conversations between members of the same church, in reference to their own parson, and may well be somewhat archaic by now.

So far, the Dutch data largely mirror their English counterparts. When we consider possessors with a determiner, however, some differences show up:³

- (4) a. *de professors vader
the professor's father
b. *de presidents verkiezing
the President's election
c. *de koningins rede
the Queen's address
d. *elke professors salaris
every professor's salary

Instead of the 's possessive, other constructions are preferred, either one involving a possessive pronoun, or a paraphrase with *van* 'of' (cf. e.g. de Vries 2006):

- (5) a. de professor z'n vader de vader van de professor
the professor his father the father of the professor
b. de president z'n verkiezing de verkiezing van de president
the president his election the election of the president

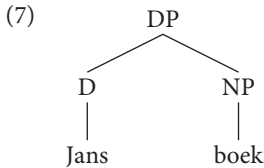
From the data presented so far, it would seem that simple bare nouns and pronouns are acceptable in the possessive construction, whereas complex phrases with determiners are not. Matters are complicated however by the fact that complex possessive specifiers are possible as soon as their left member is also possessive (Haeseryn et al. 1997: 163):

- (6) a. haar moeders kat
her mother's cat

3. There are some other noteworthy differences with English as well. In particular, Dutch possessives have to be [+human], whereas their English counterparts are not restricted to [+human] possessors. Compare *yesterday's paper*, *my car's tail-light* with the Dutch translations **gisterens krant*, **mijn auto's achterlicht*. As usual, the feature [+human] has to be viewed in a rather broad sense, allowing for collectives, names of organizations and companies to be treated as [+human], cf. *Engelands rol* 'England's role', *Vroom en Dreesmanns vlaggeschipwinkel* 'Vroom and Dreesmann's flagship store'. Overdiep (1949: 268) mentions that some northern dialects also occasionally permit [-human] possessors. The restriction to [+human] possessors might be linked to the observation in the main text that grammatically simple possessors are typically names, given the fact that names are typically reserved for human beings, organizations (including states) and companies.

- b. Jans moeders kat
Jan's mother's cat
- c. mijn vaders moeders kat
my father's mother's cat
- d. zijn vrouws broer⁴
his wife's brother

This means that an analysis like that of Weerman and de Wit (1999) cannot be correct.⁵ According to that paper, the structure of *Jans boek* is as in (7) below:



Sentences such as those in (4) above are correctly ruled out by the structure in (7), but then so are the grammatical structures in (6). Note that the examples in (6) are also of some theoretical importance, since they cast doubt on one of the criteria used by Weerman and De Wit in establishing that the prenominal possessives of modern Dutch are not genitives. Weerman and De Wit argue that genitives always involve a complete phrase (DP), whereas prenominal possessives are lexically simple. This criterium clearly cannot be maintained any longer. But how can we rule in the examples in (6), while still ruling out the examples in (4)?

4. Here are some attested examples of this type:

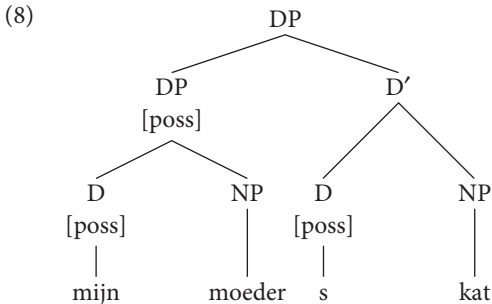
- (i) CDA-senator liet stuk bos kappen voor zijn vrouws paarden
(ANP news, March 30, 1995).
'CDA senator had a piece of woodland chopped down for his wife's horses'
- (ii) En Jezus gekomen zijnde in het huis van Petrus, zag zijn vrouws moeder
te bed liggen, hebbende de koorts. (Matthew 8: 14, Statenvertaling)
'And Jesus having arrived at the house of Petrus, saw his wife's mother lying
in bed, having a fever.'
- (iii) In een flashback komt Anton erachter dat Yegor zijn eigen zoon is en niet die
van zijn vrouws toenmalige vriend. (Dutch Wikipedia, s.v. Night Watch)
'In a flashback, Anton discovers that Yegor is his own son and not of his wife's
lover of that time.'

5. Corver (2007) makes a similar claim.

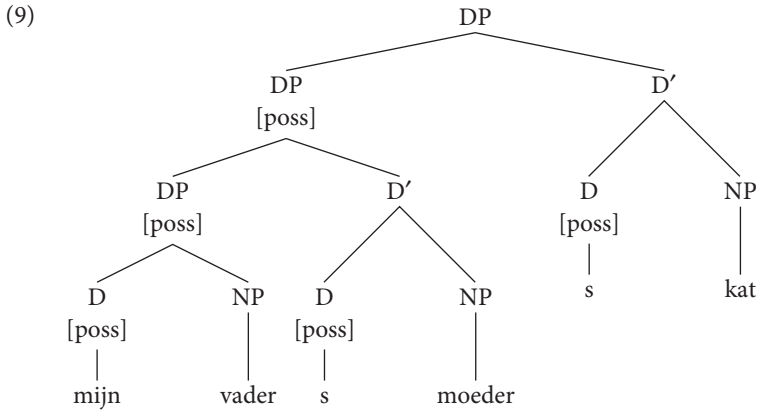
3. A solution

The solution I propose is in some ways standard, in some ways unorthodox. I will make use of the notion of agreement in a way that is nonstandard. I assume that feature matching and feature passing play a crucial role. The basic structure I will be assuming is fairly standard, and does not consider various complications that are irrelevant to the question at hand, such as the position of superlatives, numerals etc., and assumes that the ending *'s* is a syntactic head of category D, and the possessor its specifier. The structure and features are as in diagrams (8) and (9) below. The feature [poss] is involved in specifier-head agreement.⁶ The specifier must agree with the head D in this feature, and the feature is then passed on to the head daughter D. There the feature is spelled out as the possessive pronoun *mijn*. (Note that the left-branch DP is slightly simplified: the D' level has been omitted here.) The step of feature passing from DP to D daughter has to be obligatory, since otherwise the sentences in (4) might be generated as well. Note that analogous examples are acceptable in English (as indicated by the glosses), which suggests that this step is not obligatory in that language. Alternatively, one might also assume that Spec-Head agreement is not necessary in that language for the feature [poss]. This would also yield the required result.

For the basic cases, like *Jans boek*, I will assume a simpler structure, much like (7) above, in which the proper name *Jan* is adjoined to the head element *s*. I assume that this is possible only when the adjoined element is a simple head, and not a full DP. Note that my treatment does not permit *Jan* to occupy the same position as *mijn moeder* in (8), because it lacks the feature [poss]. However, *Jans*, being a determiner marked as [poss], may occupy the position of *mijn*.



6. If we assume that agreement is always a relation between sisters, a standard assumption in categorial and Montague grammar (cf. Keenan 1979 for an early statement in terms of function-argument structure – an asymmetric sisterhood relation), and in Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar (Gazdar et al. 1985), and some approaches to Minimalism (Zwart 2006), we have to view the agreement in question as mediated by D'.



What is rather unusual about the treatment proposed here is that the possessive determiner is usually viewed as being in agreement with the noun phrase it modifies (in languages that show such agreement overtly, such as French or Latin), but not as agreeing with an outside determiner. However, note that in French and Latin, the agreement is for features such as gender and number, whereas here we are dealing with another feature, [poss]. And it is well-known that expressions may agree in features with more than one element (cf. e.g. Hoeksema 1982). Otherwise, the mechanisms of percolation and agreement assumed here are quite standard and straightforward.

A few words need to be said here about markedness. Determiners may be unmarked for a certain feature. For instance, while *this* is clearly singular, and *these* is equally clearly plural, *the* is unmarked for number. It may combine equally well with singular and plural nouns: *the dog, the dogs*. If we view the feature [poss] in the same way, we might say that *my, your, Father's* etc. are marked [poss] and that *the, a, some* etc. are unmarked. By analogy with the previous case, we would expect these unmarked items to be compatible with a position marked as [poss], but the examples in (4) show that this is wrong. One option to consider is to view the [poss] feature not as privative, but as equipollent. That means that *mijn* in (9) is [+poss] and *de* in (4) is [-poss], and hence incompatible with nodes marked [+poss]. It would of course be a tad foolish to conclude, on the basis of this paper alone, that all syntactic features are equipollent, but if you find the present treatment sufficiently elegant, you might consider the option that some are.

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