

*John his book vs. John's book:  
Possession marking in English \**

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From the Late Middle Ages onwards, the inflectional system in English (as in the other West Germanic languages) was largely reduced and gradually replaced by analytic prepositional phrases. Genitive case-marking, in particular, was first generalised to the (most) marked *-s* ending across all the nominal declensions, and then mainly replaced by the *of*-prepositional phrase. This process has never been completed: it is assumed that it reached a steady point around the fourteenth century, when the occurrences of the two patterns, the *of*-genitive (*the word of God, an image of a man*<sup>1</sup>) and the *s*-genitive (*Gods word, the constable's son*), closely resembled the contemporary situation (see Mustanoja, 1960: 75). As a matter of fact, we still find the *s*-genitive in today's English.

The *s*-genitive in Present Day English (henceforth PDE), however, is more of a possession marker than a case marker. It is no longer an inflectional ending, but behaves as a clitic whose occurrence is governed by strong semantic and pragmatic constraints (see Hudson 1995, Traugott 1972, Zwicky 1987).

In this paper, I intend to investigate the diachronic development of the *s*-genitive and relate it with the development of genitive structures in other Germanic languages.

The unusual development of the PDE *s*-genitive can be historically motivated, if the 's form is supposed to be not a mere leftover of the Old English (henceforth OE) case-marking, but the outcome of the merging of two patterns: the inflectional genitive ending (levelled to *-s*) and the construction *John his book* (henceforth 'possessive-linked genitive')<sup>2</sup> during the Middle and the Early Modern English phases.

As my corpus analysis will show, the semantic and syntactic constraints ruling the occurrence of the 's pattern in the time interval of the rise of the 's-pattern (1400 - 1650) are the same ones as those ruling the occurrence of the possessive-linked genitive.

This hypothesis is further confirmed by cross-language comparison (with the other West Germanic languages, especially Afrikaans).

## 1. Corpus

For my analysis, I used a corpus based on prose texts ranging from 1400 to 1650 mainly taken from the *Helsinki Corpus* (see Primary Sources), dividing it into the following synchronic stages: 1400-1449 (I), 1450-1499 (II), 1500-1559 (III), and 1560-1630 (IV).

This corpus comprises almost 10,000 tokens, which not only include the *s*-genitive and the *of*-genitive, but also all the other nominal constructions that can encode

genitive functions, such as the *to-* genitive (*servant to Polonius*), the possessive linked genitive (*Monsieur Boissy his army*) and the zero genitive (*boys' game*) – other structures, such as *the butcher wyff* and *for Marie luvē*, are classified as OTHER as in Table 2.

Given to their scanty occurrences, the *to*-genitive, the possessive linked genitive, the zero genitive and the OTHER-class (as clear in Table 2), the quantitative analysis focuses on the two competitive structures, i.e. the *s*-genitive and the *of*-genitive. At this stage, I simply consider the two patterns as possible alternatives in order to make their pragmatically and semantical either difference or isomorphy stand out from the corpus analysis itself and not from prejudices deriving from PDE.

As for the other Germanic languages, my attention only focuses on the corresponding genitive structures, i.e. the analytic pattern, the inflectional one and the possessive linked genitive. Given to the scanty occurrence of the last one (especially in comparison to the other two), the corpus analysis is limited to the first two morphosyntactic strategies. For both German and Dutch I selected a corpus of prose ranging from the 12th century to the 17th century, trying to have examples of different genres (see Primary Sources).

## 2. Old English case marking vs. Middle English

The crisis of nominal inflection is already apparent in OE, because of the formal syncretism of the different inflectional classes. The following scheme shows that even in the strong nominal declension the process of syncretism was already advanced. The first paradigm belongs to a-stem nouns (masculine and neutre); the second to the o-stem nouns (feminine): these two paradigms have the greatest number of case distinctions. In the weak declension there was only a formal opposition between the nominative case and all the other cases for the singular. Formal syncretism affected the pronominal system (and articles) as well.

	Masc.Sing.		Masc. Pl.		Fem. Sing.		Fem.Pl.	
Nom	<i>se</i>	<i>stan(-∅)</i>	<i>þa</i>	<i>stan-as</i>	<i>seo</i>	<i>tal-u</i>	<i>þa</i>	<i>tal-a/e</i>
Acc	<i>þone</i>	<i>stan(-∅)</i>			<i>þa</i>	<i>tal-e</i>		
Dat	<i>þæm</i>	<i>stan-e</i>	<i>þære/ stan-um</i>		<i>þære/ þara</i>	<i>tal-e</i>	<i>þæm</i>	<i>tal-um</i>
Gen	<i>þæs</i>	<i>stan-es</i>	<i>þara/ stan-a</i>		<i>þære/ þara</i>	<i>tal-e</i>	<i>þara/ tal-ena</i>	<i>þære</i>

'the stone/s'

'the tale/s'

*Scheme 1: examples of OE inflection*

Because of the decay of the OE inflectional system, English has come to depend upon particles – mainly prepositions and conjunctions – and word order to express grammatical relations which had previously been expressed by inflection.

As regards the genitive in particular, in Middle English (henceforth ME), all nouns, both masculine and feminine, levelled the genitive ending to *-es* (*-is*), although with slight differences depending on geographical areas. The article had no longer case distinctions. Therefore, the ME nominal paradigm was limited to two morphological

cases: one form for the general case and the other for the genitive singular – *the kyng* vs. *the kynges*.

As far the word order is concerned, in OE the inflected genitive could occur in both pre- and post-nominal position (examples 1-4). In ME the inflected genitive is instead restricted to the prenominal position – in this regard, like PDE *s*-genitive. If the possessor was complex – namely, extended by a prepositional phrase or by an apposition –, it was usually split (examples 5-6) – in this regard, like OE genitive.

- (1) *Cristes cyme / godes bebod / þara manna tintrego* (ÆCHom ii. 281/298/321)  
“Christ’s coming / God’s command / the men’s punishment”
- (2) *þa dohtor ðæs ealdormannes* (Chron A 896.32)  
“the daughter of the aldorman”
- (3) *ealle þa bearn ðara Atheniensa* (ÆLS II.236)  
“all the descendants of the Athenians”
- (4) *domess dagess starke dom* (Orm 3810)  
“doom’s day’s strong doom”
- (5) *Malcomes cynges dohter of Scotlande* (Chron.E 1138.37)  
“Malcom’s king’s daughter of Scotland”
- (6) *heere endeth the Wyves Tale of Bathe* (Ch. CT D)  
“here ends the wife’s tale of Bath”

The occurrence of the *s*-genitive is anyhow much more restricted in ME than in OE, first of all because of the competition of the analytic *of*-periphrasis.<sup>5</sup> The *of*-phrase has existed as a substitute for the genitive case since the twelfth century. Radiating from an original local meaning “out of, from”, it acquired more and more genitive-like functions through a process of semantic bleaching – namely what is called ‘source event schema’ (see Heine 1997: 144). From the beginning it encodes subjective, objective, possessive and descriptive genitive besides being used as a partitive.

- (7) *þ[e] ilce forgiueneſse of Christe ... and of þonne abbot and of þone muneca*  
(Chron. E 675.36)  
“the same forgiveness of Christ and of the abbot and of the monks”
- (8) *gif se eorl forðferde ...wære se cyng yrfenuma of eallon Normandig.* (Chron.E 1091.226)  
“if the eorl died ... was the king heir of all Normandy”
- (9) *þa engles of heofene ham ibliſſieð* (Lamb. Hom. 41)  
“the angels of heaven them bless”
- (10) *alle þe landes of þ[e] abbotrice* (Chron.E 1138.265)  
“all the lands of the abbey”
- (11) *an þære preosta and an of þam nunnum* (Ælfric Lives ii. 278)  
“one of the priests and one of the nuns”

The earlier part of ME is characterised by a fairly abundant use of the inflectional genitive as compared to the *of*-periphrasis, even in partitive use. Later on, the roles of the two types of genitive are reversed: thus, the phrase *for mines drihtenes lufe* in *Lawman A* (19728) becomes few decades later *for love of mine drihte* in *Lawman B*.

It is usually claimed that down to the thirteenth century the use of the periphrastic genitive made slow progress, increasing rapidly in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the distribution of the two genitive patterns would be stabilised. Some idea of the relative frequencies of the two types as attributive genitives can be obtained from the following table drawn up according to Fries (1938: 74).

Period	Inflectional Genitive	Periphrastic Genitive..
9th cent. - 10th cent. (beg.)	99.5%	0.5%
later 10th- beg. 11th cent.	99%	1%
11th cent.	98.8%	1.2%
12th cent.	93.7%	6.3%
13th cent.	68.6%	31.4%
14th cent.	15.6%	84.4%

Table 1: Percentage of the frequency of *s*-genitive vs. *of*-genitive

### 3. Early Modern English

It is commonly known that in the Early Modern English (henceforth EModE) period nothing changed but the spelling of the *s*-genitive with the establishment of the apostrophe. While in the second half of the sixteenth century the mark of the genitive, -(e)s, was still as a rule attached to the noun and the use of the apostrophe was optional, during the seventeenth century the variant 's became more and more frequent, to such an extent as to be fully established as the only form by 1690-1700. The plural marking (*boys'*) was to follow in the eighteenth century due to analogy (Görlach, 1991).

Besides that, this period is also significant for the establishment of the occurrence of the *s*-genitive. Contrarily to what is taken for granted in handbooks (see Fischer 1992: 225ff., Mustanoja 1960: 75), the development of the *s*-genitive does not reach its pitch at the end of the fourteenth century. During the following two centuries there is further fluctuation: after a large decrease, the *s*-genitive gains ground and increases its frequency.

It is worth while noticing that the re-rise is linked to the 's-genitive for two reasons: first, the occurrence of the *s*-genitive re-rises only if the total *s*-forms are considered irrespective of their graphics; second, this is the pattern which increases sensibly in the last two intervals (the relevance of these two remarks will be evident in the course of the argumentation).

Forms	1400-1449 (I)		1450-1499 (II)		1500-1559 (III)		1560-1630 (IV)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
of	1341	89.6	2059	81.2	2257	81.3	1826	76
(e)s	119	8	371	14.6	184	6.6	188	7.8
's	0	0	0	0	136	4.9	261	10.9
total „s“	119	8	371	14.6	320	11.5	449	18.7
his	1	0.1	39	1.5	11	0.4	10	0.4
to	3	0.2	1	0.1	41	1.5	29	1.2
zero	15	1	22	0.8	10	0.3	4	0.2
others	17	1.14	43	1.7	137	4.9	85	3.5

Table 2: Distribution of genitive forms according to time intervals

Looking at Figure 1., the occurrences of the *s*-genitive vs. *of*-genitive appear to be discontinuous and do not reflect the so-called S-curve development – characteristics of language change –, but what I name a W-curve development.

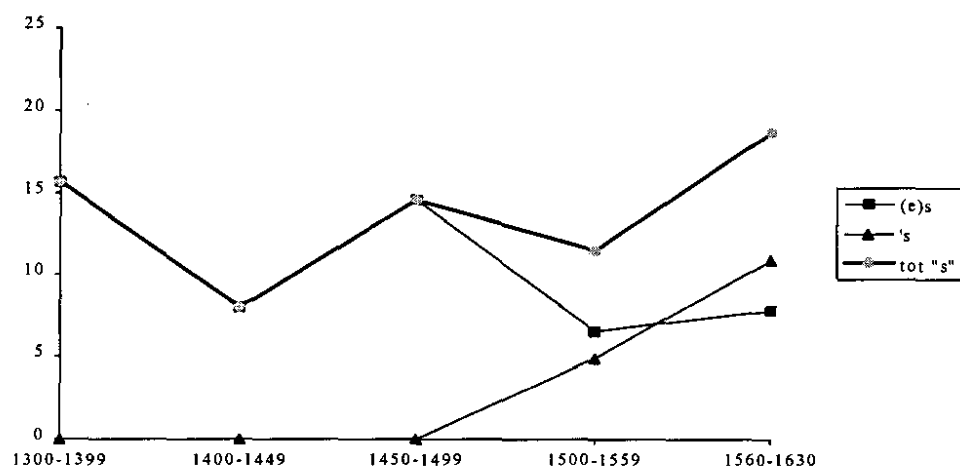


Figure 1: Distribution of the s-genitive vs of-genitive in late ME and EModE

To this aberrant development corresponds the emergence of the 's-genitive and the so-called group-genitive and conjoined genitive, where the suffix is attached either to the end of the entire NP (example 12) or to the last constituent of coordinated genitives (example 13-14). The very fact that the morpheme *-(e)s / 's* should no longer be suffixed to its head, as was the case in OE (cf. example (11)), proves that its status changed.

- (12) *the grete god of loves name* (Ch.HF 1489)
- (13) *to the number of 20 men and women's severall depositions* (Egert. P. 470)
- (14) *he is neither for this countrey nor for our soldiers liking* (Leic. C. 310)

At the same time, the *s*-genitive starts to occur without any head noun, which it is, however, recoverable from the context. This independent genitive not only occur with the names of churches in locative complement – the only case of an independent genitive already witnessed in ME – but with all noun classes, as in examples (15)-(17).

- (15) *they would with all speed to the Earl of Shrewsbury's [house]* (L.of Wol. 345)
- (16) *thorow my words and M. Walkers [words]* (Madox, 34)
- (17) *knowe his wife from other mens [wives]* (Harman, 49)

Three apparently perplexing facts are involved in the development of the genitive patterns in English: (a) the *s*-form displays more and more independence to such an extent that in PDE it behaves as a clitic or pronominal element; (b) if it were a remnant of OE inflection, it would represent an isolated case of degrammaticalisation in the history of the English language; (c) in any case, the development of the *s*-form is contrary to all theories of language change, since the inflected genitive decreases dramatically in the fifteenth century to rise again during the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries.

To have a deeper insight on the mechanism of such development, it can be useful to investigate the possible internal and external factors determining such behaviour. I will analyse how certain characteristics or functions of the possessor can have favoured or disfavoured the occurrence of the *s*-genitive.

### 3.1 Internal factors: animacy, definiteness, topicality.

The OE inflected genitive (either preposed or postposed) can express all the genitival functions: the genitive case-marking can attach to nouns of any gender and number according to the declension they belong to. In late ME and in EModE it is the *of*-periphrasis which displays no constraints, whereas the *s*-genitive complies with rigid syntactic, semantic and functional restrictions.

As mentioned above, the first strong constraint on the occurrence of the *s*-genitive is syntactic and concerns its position in the phrase: i.e. it can be exclusively prenominal.

Another constraint regards the semantics of the possessor, i.e. its animacy and topicality. As is evident in Tables 3a.-b., the *s*-genitive almost exclusively occurs with animate possessors (relatively for the time span 1400-1630). Only if the possessor is animate, is the *s*-genitive possible. If the possessor is inanimate, the most likely option is the prepositional phrase: in other words, inanimate *s*-genitives are rare and at most personifications.

Furthermore, the occurrence of *s*-genitive with animate possessors increases along the four intervals to such an extent that in the last one, the *s*-genitive in an animate environment is slightly more frequent than the *of*-genitive. Again, it is the 's-genitive that increases and determines the overtaking.

Animate Possessor	Form	1400-1449		1450-1499		1500-1559		1560-1630	
		n.	%	n.	%	n.	%	n.	%
	<i>of</i>	398	78.4	735	68.1	512	63.2	398	49.7
	<i>(e)s</i>	110	21.6	344	31.9	171	21.1	183	22.9
	's					127	15.7	219	27.4
	<i>tot 's'</i>	110	21.6	344	31.9	298	36.8	402	50.3

Table 3a: Distribution of *s*-genitive vs. *of*-genitive according to [+animate]

Inanimate Possessor	Form	1400-1449		1450-1499		1500-1559		1560-1630	
		n.	%	n.	%	n.	%	n.	%
	<i>of</i>	732	98.9	1082	97.7	1614	98.9	1287	96.8
	<i>(e)s</i>	8	1.1	25	2.3	11	0.7	4	0.3
	's					6	0.4	38	2.9
	<i>tot 's'</i>	8	1.1	25	2.3	17	1.1	42	3.2

Table 3b: Distribution of *s*-genitive and *of*-genitive according to [-animate]

The occurrence of the *s*-genitive is not only bound to the factor animacy (meaning 'human', cf. Table 3), but also to the referentiality or topicality of the animate possessor (see Table 4).

The possessor can be referential and non-referential (this latter case has not been included in my analysis). If referential, it can be either indefinite or identified. If it is indefinite (henceforth 'new'), it carries new information and cannot be identified textually or extracontextually, as in such sentences as *a woman's body, the image of a bishop*.

If it is identified, it can be so on the basis of both textual and extra-contextual knowledge: "textually known or given" (henceforth 'text') means that in the text the hearer should find the elements necessary to identify the referent of the NP, i.e. what is generally called explicit and implicit anaphor (Hawkins, 1978); "extracontextually known or given" (henceforth 'extra') means that the hearer has to find the necessary elements for the identification of the referent either in the communication context or in

the shared knowledge with the speaker, i.e. proper names, unique referents, such as *sun*, *Lord*, etc and high-rank referents, such as *the king*, *the bishop*.

During the four intervals the *s*-genitive show a remarkably different behaviour (see Table 4).

In the first two intervals, the *s*-genitive with an extracontextually given possessor exceeds that one with textually given ones. In the following two intervals, it is the other way round: that is, the *s*-genitive with textually given possessors is more frequent than with globally given possessors. In all intervals, indefinite possessors ('new') are indisputably rare.

Here again, the overtaking of the locally given *s*-genitive NPs is linked to the 's-form, which turns out to be the most sensible pattern to the topicality environment.

Definiteness/ Topicality	1400-1449 (I)			1450-1499 (II)			1500-1559 (III)			1560-1630 (IV)		
	(e)s	's	tot „s“	(e)s	's	tot „s“	(e)s	's	tot „s“	(e)s	's	tot „s“
<b>Human</b>												
Non-referential (generic)	26	-	26/ 23.6 %	32	-	32/ 9.3 %	6	11	17/ 5.7%	19	32	51/ 12.4 %
<b>Referential</b>												
extra	42	-	42/ 38.2 %	166	-	166/ 48.2 %	55	53	108/ 36.2 %	79	76	155/ 37.6 %
text	38	-	38/ 34.5 %	137	-	137/ 39.8 %	108	62	170/ 57.1 %	67	99	176/ 42.7 %
new	3	-	3/ 2.7 %	6	-	6/ 1.7 %	2	-	2/ 0.7 %	9	13	22/ 5.3 %
<b>Animals</b>	1	-	1/ 0.9 %	3	-	3/ 0.9 %	1	1	2/ 0.4%	4	4	8/ 2. %

Table 4: „s“-genitive: Topicality and Definiteness in [+animate]

Indeed, during the fifteenth century, the *-(e)s* ending is used for proper names and unique-referenced nouns (e.g. *God*, *John*) and high rank referents (*the king*); afterwards, it occurs increasingly with definite contextually referential common nouns, (e.g. *the woman*, *the father*, *the ploughman*,). Consequently, it can be stated that in late ME the *s*-genitive is highly indexical, occurring with a limited number of lexical items, such as *God*, *king* and *queen*, which are used as proper names or modified only by a determiner.

In the case of very complex NPs, the *of*-genitive is the only option. Only during (and in particular at the end of) the sixteenth century do the occurrence of the *s*-genitive – at that time 's-genitive – comply with the conditions [+animate] [+human] [+Det Ref] without any limits on the number and quality of modifiers.

### 3.1.1. Possessor and possessum relationship.

Genitive case (so as its prepositional replacers) encodes different semantic and grammatical functions. I will not enter this question in details (for a more exhaustive discussion, see Rosenbach - Vezzosi (to appear)), but I will just briefly describe the methodology adopted here.

A first classification according the traditional terminology of genitive functions showed that in all four intervals the *of*-genitive represents the functionally unmarked option and is far more frequent. The *s*-genitive occurs almost exclusively to encode possessive relationships, abstract possession, subjective and objective functions.

It cannot be ignored that even from a functional perspective the increase of the *s*-genitive is linked to the 's-genitive: it is exactly this pattern that more and more

frequently encodes possessive, subjective functions and, in a lesser degree, objective functions.

	1400-1449 (I)				1450-1499 (II)				1500-1559 (III)				1560-1630 (IV)			
	(e)s	's	tot 's'	of	(e)s	's	tot 's'	of	(e)s	's	tot 's'	of	(e)s	's	tot 's'	of
Poss.	85 16.8%		85 16.8%	420 81.2%	224 23.2%		224 23.3%	738 76.7%	199 20.7%	93 9.6%	292 30.3%	673 69.7%	128 13.9%	185 20.2%	313 34.1%	605 65.9%
Subj.	20 9.4%		20 9.4%	193 90.6%	71 17.1%		71 17.4%	338 82.6%	16 10.75%	16 10.75%	32 21.5%	117 78.5%	23 10.4%	48 21.6%	71 32%	151 68%
Obj.	6 2.2%		6 2.2%	268 97.8%	30 7.8%		30 7.8%	355 92.2%	4 1.8%	2 0.9%	6 2.8%	212 87.2%	4 1.1%	9 2.5%	13 3.6%	341 96.4%
Descr.	4 2.1%		4 2.1%	183 97.9%	2 0.7%		2 0.7%	299 99.3%	10 2.5%	9 2.3%	19 4.8%	380 95.2%	30 10.8%	13 4.7%	43 15.5%	235 84.5%
Partit.			- 100%	69 100%			- 100%	96 100%	1 0.5%		1 0.5%	217 99.5%			- 100%	165 100%
Apps.	2 3.3%		2 3.3%	58 96.7%	26 33.8%		26 33.8%	51 66.2%	11 8.9%	6 4.8%	17 16.7%	107 86.3%	1 1.8%		1 1.8%	56 98.2%
Locat.			- 100%	42 19%	1 1.9%		1 1.9%	53 98.1%		1 0.7%	1 0.7%	137 99.3%	1 13%		1 13%	76 98.7%
Time			- 100%	16 3.8%	1 3.8%		1 3.8%	25 96.2%			- 100%	249 100%			- 100%	29 100%
others	2 2.6		2 2.6	74 97.4%	15 12.9%		15 12.9%	101 87.1%	31 16.2%	12 6.3%	43 22.5%	148 77.5%	4 2.4%		4 2.4%	164 97.6%

Table 5: Function → Form correlation

The further steps of my analysis focus on the instances which allow for the occurrence of the *s-* genitive, excluding those instances where only the *of*-genitive occur, e.g. partitive constructions (such as: *one of his footmen*): in other words, on human possessor which possessive, subjective or objective functions.

The relationship between possessum and possessor has been refined according to the general framework of possession (cf. Seiler 1983, Heine 1997, Taylor 1989), which includes both possession in the strict sense (semantic relationship) and valency relations (grammatical relationship).

Within the concept of possession 2 broad categories are distinguished: + prototypical possession (+proto), - prototypical possession (-proto).

These can again be defined along 3 dimensions: human relationships, part/whole relations and ownership.

Prototypical instances of human relationships are kin terms (*Simon's father*); prototypical instances of part/whole relations are body parts (*our lord's feet*) and of ownership is possession proper of concrete things (*our host's house*).

Less prototypical instances of human relationships are social relationships (*Saint Paul's teacher*); less prototypical instances of part/whole relations are mental and/or physical states (*Hamlet's lunacy*); and corresponding to prototypical ownership, there is abstract possession (*the man's name*).

The term 'valency' includes all the instances, where the possessor plays the role either of a subject or an object (e.g. *God's love, the king's murder*).

Form a comparison of the two functional macro-distinctions, possession turns out to be the strongest factor for the realisation of the *s-*genitive (see Figure 2a) in all intervals.



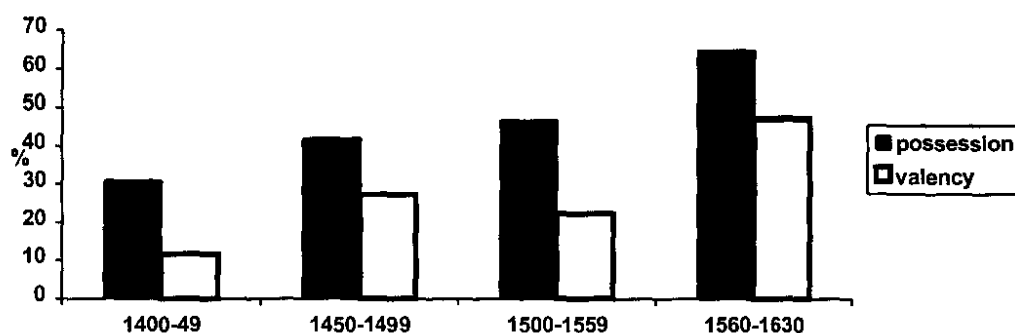


Figure 2a : Possession vs. valency functions of the *s*-genitive

If only the subjective function is taken into account and compared with possession, then the picture changes inasmuch as the preferences for the *s*-genitive in the possessive and the subjective functions increase at the expense of the *of*-genitive throughout the four intervals (see Figure 2b), to such an extent that in the last interval their frequency is almost equal.

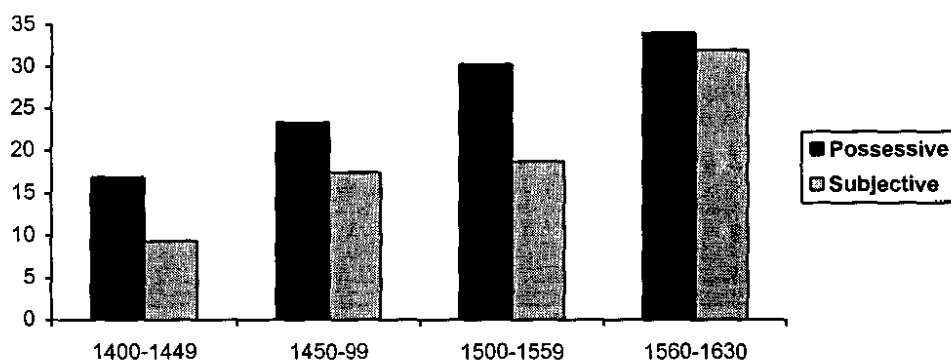


Figure 2b: Realization of possessive and subjective functions by *s*-genitive (in %)

### 3.2. Interaction of factors in the selection of the *s*-genitive.

If the analysis of the single factors accounts for the favourite contexts for the realisation of the *s*-genitive, taken one by one, even more interesting is the interaction between topicality and possessive relationship. This analysis takes as variants the two broad types of possession relationship – prototypical possession (+proto), and less prototypical possession (-proto) –, and the two types of valency relation – subjective or agent-action (agent) and objective or object-action (object) (see Seiler 1983: 95) . The results point out a fracture between the ME and EmodE periods.

In the first phase (1400-1449), the *s*-genitive is instantiated in every function only with a highly topical possessor ('extra'), and its frequency decreases along the continuum: + proto > - proto > agent > object. With textually given ('text') possessor, the realisation of the *s*-genitive is restricted to prototypical possession.

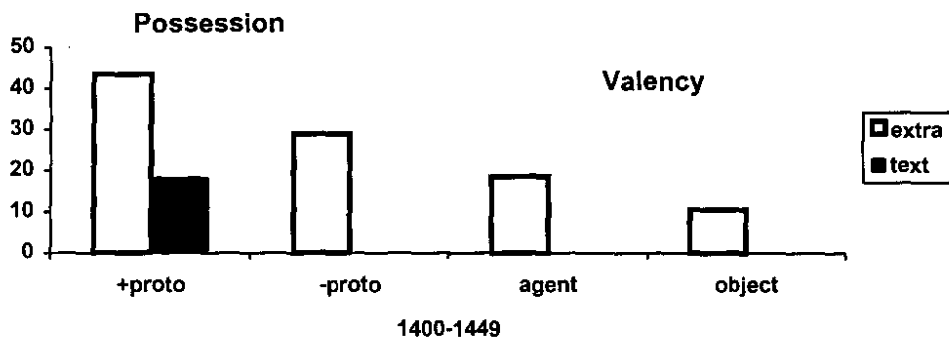


Figure 3a: Interaction of topicality and possessive relationships concerning the realisation of the *s*-genitive

In the second interval (1450-1499) there is a consistent increase of the *s*-genitive with both extracontextually given and textually given possessors along the same continuum – + proto > - proto > agent > object –, inasmuch as textually given *s*-genitive is instantiated mainly in prototypical possession, then in less prototypical possession and last in agent-action, but not at all in object-action.

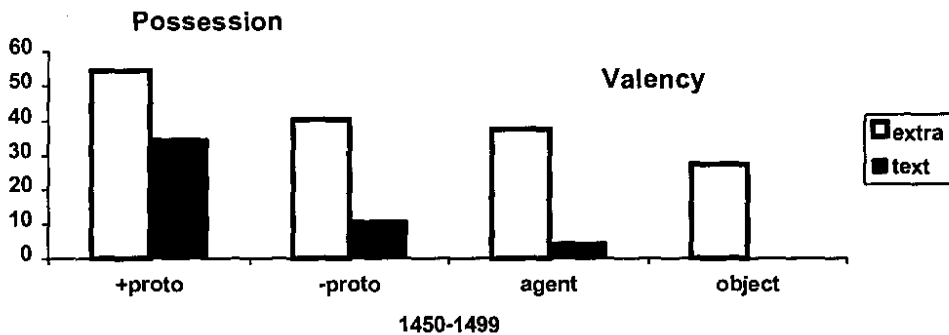


Figure 3b: Interaction of topicality and possessive relationships concerning the realisation of the *s*-genitive

In brief, *s*-genitives with extracontextually given possessors are always attested, albeit with a clear preference for possessive relationships over valency (more *s*-genitives with +/- prototypical possession than with valency). The type of relationship, however, plays a more decisive role with textually given possessors. In this context, the *s*-genitive extends its domain from a prototypical possessive relation in the first interval to a less prototypical possession and agent-action in the second interval.

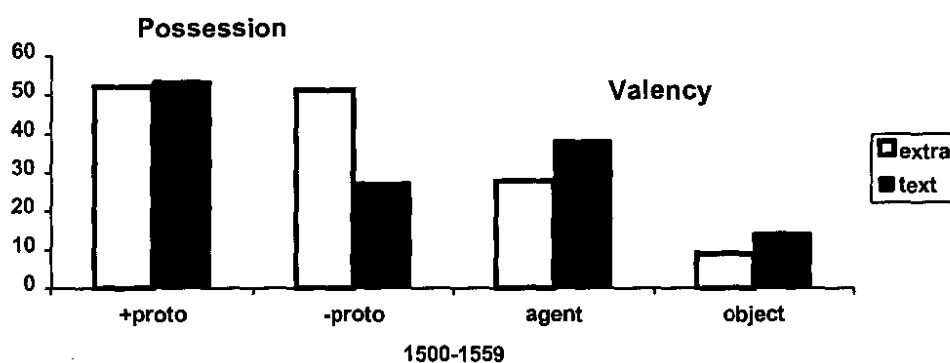


Figure 3c: Interaction of topicality and possessive relationships concerning the realisation of the *s*-genitive

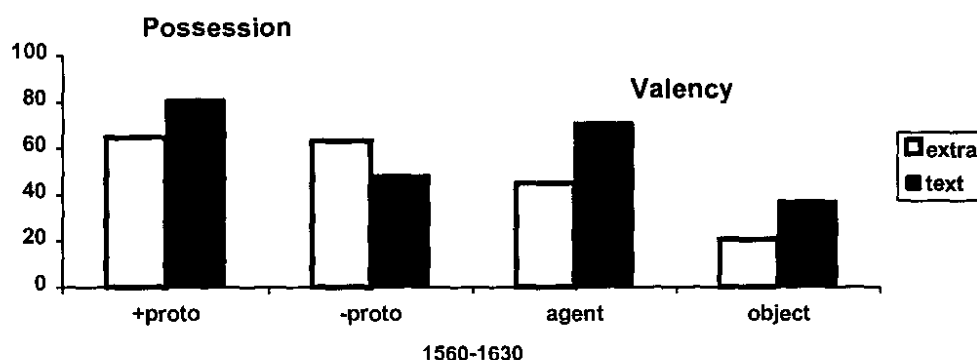


Figure 3d: Interaction of topicality and possessive relationships concerning the realisation of the *s*-genitive

In the last two intervals (1500-1559, 1560-1630) the *s*-genitive increases everywhere, in particular with textually given possessors. In this context the type of possessive relationship still determines the frequency of the *s*-genitive, but differently from the first two intervals. In the first two intervals, the *s*-genitive with both extracontextually and textually given possessors increases along the same continuum – + proto > - proto > agent > object –. From the third phase onwards the *s*-genitive encoding agent-action exceeds less prototypical possessive relations. In other words, the *s*-genitive increases along two parallel continua:

+ proto > - proto  
agent > object

It seems that the factors determining the realisation of the *s*-genitive have been re-ranked. The meaning of this re-ranking is more evident if compared with the general pictures of the development of the *s*-genitive: its re-rise coincides with the appearance of the 's'-form, with the reranking of the factors and with the emergence of its clitic-like behaviour.

### 3.3. External factor: genre.

So far, only internal factors relevant to the realization of the genitive have been dealt with. It is still to be seen how external factors might affect the occurrence of the *of*-genitive vs. *s*-genitive with animate possessors.

To this end, the textual corpus is stratified in a continuum from „maximally formal“ (e.g. religious treatise, law), to tragedy, to formal narrative (romance, biography), to comedy and to „maximally informal“ (e.g. private letter, diary) for each interval (table 6).

From a synchronic point of view, in the first period (I) the maximal use of the *s*-genitive corresponds to the highest degree of formality. In all the other periods the *s*-genitive tends to prevail in the more informal texts. The extreme values occur in comedy and tragedy. Tragedy cannot simply be comparable to the rest of our (prose) corpus since it is in verse, in which morphosyntactic structures might depend heavily on metre (see also Altenberg 1982: 273ff.). From a diachronic point of view there is a tendency towards a more extensive use of the *s*-genitive than the *of*-genitive in informal registers (e.g.: max. informal: I: 12.5% → IV: 60%).

Since this analysis filters the use of language through different genres, a word of caution seems to be necessary in the sense that the synchronic perspective adopted here might not reflect an increase of the *s*-genitive within the single genres, but could be simply due to the fact that these genres are drifting towards a more informal style in themselves (see Biber & Finegan 1989). In this case, the variation of patterns would depend on a change in style/genre rather than on a change in the language.

The development of the *s*-genitive, however, does not seem to be an instance of extension of a high-register feature into more informal register. From the diachronic perspective it clearly turns out that we are dealing with a new pattern, which extends its domain of usage starting from more informal registers, in accordance with what we would expect in any spontaneous or ‘normal’ language change.

In other words, if the *s*-genitive were a left-over of the Old English inflection or if it were a feature of latinisation, it should be more frequent in highly formal genres. As a matter of fact, it is true only for the first interval, and contradicted in the other three.

Of course, more in-depth analyses need to be done to get more comprehensive insight in the explanation and development of the genitive variation in this early period of English.

Genre	1400-1449 (I)				1450-1499 (II)				1500-1559 (III)				1560-1630 (IV)			
	(e)s	's	tot „s“	of	(e)s	's	tot „s“	of	(e)s	's	tot „s“	of	(e)s	's	tot „s“	of
max. formal	87	-	87	270	142	-	142	381	5	1	6	62	34	-	34	73
	23.4%		23.4%	72.6%	26.1%		25.8%	72.8%	6.9%	1.4%	8.3%	86.1%	30.1%		30.1%	64.6%
tragedy														96	96	53
														61.9%	61.9%	34.2%
narrat. formal					60	-	60	147	26	-	26	45	21		21	54
					27.9%		27.9%	68.4%	33.3%		33.3%	57.7%	24.7%		24.7%	63.5%
narrat. inform	7		7	30	77		77	143	46	16	62	166	39	13	52	124
	18.4%		18.4	78.9%	31.4%		31.4%	58.4%	18.5%	6.4%	24.9%	66.7%	20%	6.6%	26.5%	63.3%
comedy										41	41	22	1	102	103	50
										52.6%	52.6%	28.2%	0.6%	65.4%	66%	32.1%
max. inform	16		16	99	64		64	63	94	72	166	217	87	7	94	44
	12.5%		12.5%	77.3%	47.4%		47.4%	46.7%	19.9%	15.3	35.2%	46%	55.5%	4.5%	60%	28%

																			%												
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Table 6: of- vs. s-genitive → genre/register variation

4. Cross-linguistic comparison: the case of Middle Dutch and Middle High German  
The decrease of inflectional forms and their gradual replacement with prepositional phrases is not only typical of English, but also the other West Germanic languages experience a similar change from the twelfth century to the Early Modern period (cf. Duinhoven 1988 and Paul 1959). My analysis is limited to the two major ones: i. e. High German and Dutch.

Both of them were still inflectional languages in the Middle period, although their case-markings were already affected by the effects of drastic syncretism, as happened with English.

Middle Dutch nominal Inflection	masc. neutr.		fem.	Middle High German Nominal Inflection	masc. neutr.		fem.	
	-es	-s	-en		-n	-es	-s	- <del>∅</del> -(e)n
G. sg.	-es	-s	-en	-n	G. sg.	-es	-s	- <del>∅</del> -(e)n
G. pl.	-en	-e	-en	-e	G. pl.	-(e)n	- <del>∅</del>	-(e) - <del>∅</del>

Scheme 2: nominal inflection in MD and MG

In Middle Dutch (henceforth MD) and in Middle German (henceforth MG) genitival functions were still exhaustively expressed by the inflected genitive case: the possessor could be both prenominal and postnominal.

Middle / Early Modern Dutch	
preposed genitive	postposed genitive
(18)a. <i>mijns reinen lichamen vrucht</i> (Gysseling, 1977, 53) my-G pure-G body-G fruit	b. <i>de verdeling der werkzaamheden</i> (Pauw, 1893, 256) the division the-G works
(19)a. <i>des keyzers brieven</i> (Gysseling, 1977, 53) the-G emperor-G letters	b. <i>het hoofd der Protestanten</i> (Pauw, 1893, 256) the head the-G Protestants-G
(20)a. <i>Jans soene, Pieters soens, mijns broeders kinde</i> John-G son, Peter-G son-G, my- G brother-G child (Pauw, 1893, 231)	b. <i>alle der sieker deder</i> (Gysseling, 1977, 67) all the-G evil deeds-G
(21)a. <i>een svaders lieue vrint</i> (Vooy's, 1953, 63) one the-G father-G dear friend	b. <i>na de ghewoente syns ambachts</i> (Vooy's, 1953, 75) according to the customs his-G office-G
(22)a. <i>die gods soene</i> the-pl. God-G sons (Gysseling, 1977, 54)	b. <i>die engel Gods hem toe sprak</i> (Stoet, 1909, 143) the angel God-G them to spoke

Middle / Early Modern German	
Preposed genitive	Postposed Genitive
(23)a. <i>liebdes gastdes wille</i> (Der Stricker, 120;91) dear-G spirit-G will	b. <i>das wort Goddes</i> (Sachs, 14; 46) the word God-G
(24)a. <i>Adames valle</i> (Der Stricker, 38; 6) Adam-G valley	b. <i>der widergeburt vnd verneüerung des heyligen geists</i> (Sa.chhs, 263) the re-birth and renewal the-G holy-G spirit-G
(25)a. <i>uf der waren minne trit</i> (Kon. Würzburg: 54; 10) on the-G true-G love-G spur	b. <i>de grotere des huses</i> (Sächs. 128, 31) the size the- G house-G

In spite of the retention of a weak and strong declension, the analogical spread of the most marked ending (-s) already affected both the weak nouns (MD *here* > *des herens* instead of *des heren*; MG *hërze* > *des hërzens* instead of *des hërzen*) and consonant-stem nouns (MD *vater* > *des vaters* instead of *des vater*, *man* > *des mans* instead of *des*

*mannen*; MG *brouder* > *des brouders* instead of *des brouder*, *man* > *des mannes* instead of *des mannen*).

Both languages still had an adjective inflectional system with weak and strong case-marking (see scheme 3), dependent on the occurrence of other determiners (e.g. a definite article).

MD				MG			
Adj. Inflection	m. n.	fem.	pl.	Adj. Inflection	m. n	fem.	pl.
strong declension	-s	-er -ere	-er -ere	strong declension	-s	-er ere	-er -re -ere
weak declension	-en	-en	-en	weak declension	-en	-en	-en

Scheme 3: Adjectival inflection in MD and MG

What is described in grammars is not always supported by textual evidence. For example, there was no longer an exceptionless correspondence between definite NP and weak adjective declension and indefinite NP and strong adjective declension.

	weak ending	ambiguous ending	strong ending	Ø ending
Middle Dutch	<i>des goeden ridders</i>	<i>des goete ridders</i>	<i>des goets ridders</i>	<i>des goet ridder</i>
Middle High German	<i>des guoten ritters</i>	<i>des arme ritters</i>	<i>der größer engeste</i>	<i>des künex guot</i>

Scheme 4: Exceptions to grammatical descriptions

Such variability in adjective inflected ending can be related on the one hand to the tendency of MD and MG to mark only one element of the complex NP, on the other hand to the trend towards analogical extension of one and the same form throughout all both adjectival and nominal declensions.

Besides the inflected genitives, MD and MG already displayed the alternative analytic construction with the prepositions *van* and *von* respectively. Although grammars mention this pattern with exclusive reference to partitive genitives and genitives of origin, textual data provide evidence of the fact that this pattern was not only common, but encoded all the genitival functions (see ex.26a-30a. and 26b.-30b.).

Middle / Early Modern Dutch	Middle / Early Modern German
Prepositional genitive	Prepositional genitive
(26)a. <i>Een schoen mirakel van een maldere</i> (Vooy, 1953, 83) one beautiful miracle of one kind	b. <i>en ander drom von der sule</i> (Sächs. Weltchr. 76, 29) another dream of the soul
(27)a. <i>Om te hebben minne van enen wive</i> (Vooy, 1953, 83) in order to have love of one woman	b. <i>de grotere von deme hus</i> (Sächs. Weltchr. 128, 31) the size of the house
(28)a. <i>al de juden van der stat</i> (Gysseling, 1977, 65) all the Jews of the town	b. <i>suess geschray von frowen und junckfrouwen</i> sweet scream of women and girls (Sach. 222)
(29)a. <i>die ceure van den saye</i> (Gysseling, 1977, 65) the choice of the material	b. <i>ein antwort vom heyliegn geyst</i> (Luther 425, 2) an answer of the holy spirit
(30)a. <i>de ooms van den coninc van Vrankerike</i> the uncles of the king of France (Gysseling, 1977, 65)	b. <i>ein Herz von einem kinde</i> (Jul. 203, 2) a heart of a child

This pattern was in competition with the inflected genitive, which was by no means the only way of expressing genitival functions.

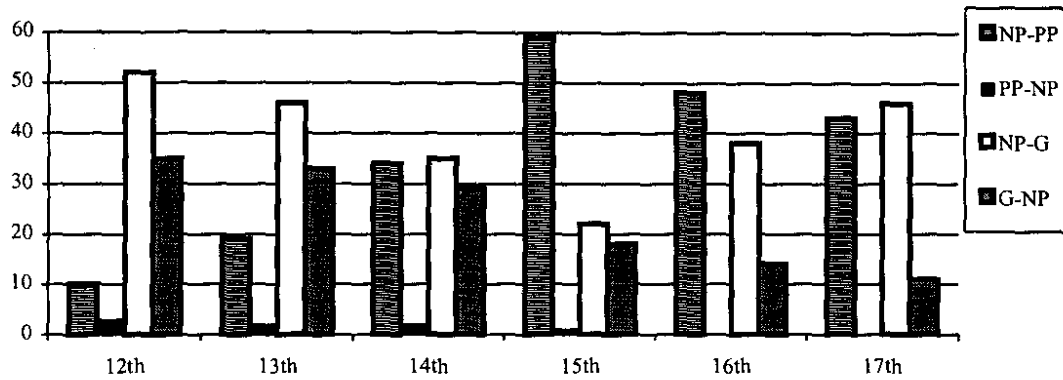


Figure 4: Distribution of prepositional von-phrase, prenominal (PP-NP) and postnominal (NP-PP), and of inflected genitive, prenominal (G-NP) and postnominal (NP-G) in Middle High German

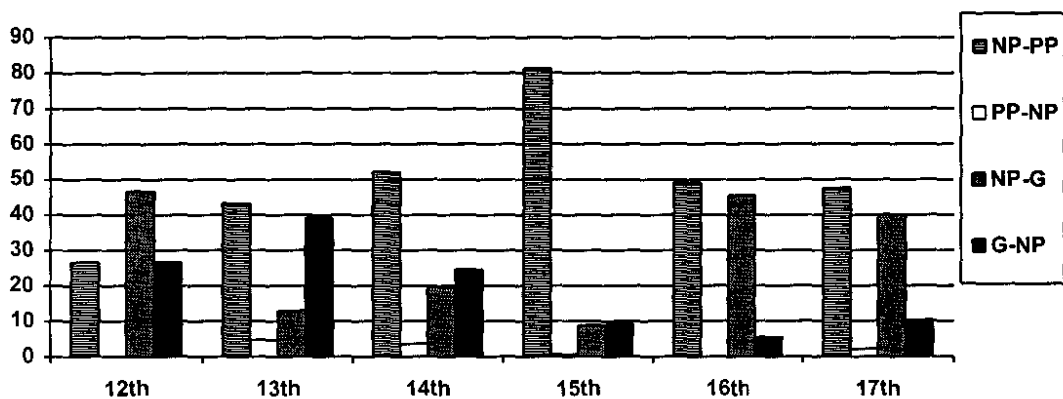


Figure 5: Distribution of prepositional von-phrase, prenominal (PP-NP) and postnominal (NP-PP), and of inflected genitive, prenominal (G-NP) and postnominal (NP-G) in Middle Dutch

In Figures 4 and 5, the analytic pattern increases till the fifteenth century, becoming the most frequent genitive strategy, whereas the pre- and post-nominal inflected genitive drops to around 10%. The decrease of the synthetic genitive coincides with the increase of the analytic one. After the fifteenth century, in Early Modern Dutch (henceforth EModD) and Early Modern German (henceforth EModG) most modifiers turn out to be again post-nominal.

In particular the postposed genitive, which had almost faded away in the fifteenth century, appears to come back to life, becoming the most productive pattern for expressing genitive functions. Since the semantic role of a NP could no longer be expressed by a distinctive morphological case form, the restored genitive loads all the case information onto deictic and possessive pronouns and onto the definite and indefinite articles that still retained formally distinguished case forms. More precisely, deictic and possessive pronouns retained a trace of the so-called pronominal declension (namely genitive singular masculine and neutre *-es*, feminine *-er*, plural *-er*), and articles, which were not yet affected by formal syncretism, showed one form for the genitive feminine singular and genitive plural *der* and one for the genitive singular masculine and neutre *des*.

This newly reintroduced postposed genitive apply to complex NPs and is soon in full swing: in the following centuries, the postnominal genitive occurs more or less as often as the prepositional one, as if they were co-variants. Their usage and frequency remain

almost unaltered in Dutch, whereas in German the postposed genitive overtakes the prepositional genitive, occurring far more frequently (see Figures 4 and 5).

The preposed genitive in the course of MD and MG then becomes specialised. First of all, the *-s* ending is analogically extended soon to all the possessors as a general genitive marker. At the same time complex NPs (even if made up of a determiner and a noun) tend to be discarded from prenominal position and only one constituent NP endowed with the features [+human] [+DetRef], in particular proper and addressing names, is favoured (cf. Kiefer 1910, Rausch 1897, Roorda 1855 and Stoett 1909). Unlike the prepositional and the postposed genitive and unlike the preposed genitive of the earlier phases, (which could freely combine with indefinite quantifiers (see ex. 21a) and less frequently with definite quantifiers, as in ex. (22a)), the preposed genitive can no longer co-occur with determiners, and thus acquires a similar function to that of a determiner, playing an important role in the referential identification of the head NP (see Lyons 1986 and Plank 1992).

The slight decrease before the sixteenth century and the following frequency stabilisation reflect on the one hand the restriction on the number of types of possessors that could occur in preposed genitive, and on the other, its specialisation as an anchoring element.

#### 5. What on earth happened during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?

From the comparison of Figures 1, 4 and 5 (and Table 2) one can identify a critical century, the fifteenth century, which represents a kind of border between two stages of language development – in the history of English, Dutch and High German –. In this century, the various genitive strategies seem to reach a critical point, after which there is no homogeneous continuation. Until the fifteenth century, the change agrees with the typological change from SOV to SVO, showing the increase of prepositional phrases and the decrease of inflected forms. After the fifteenth century, language drift seems to have been overturned: in EModD and in EModHG, inflected forms became as frequent as analytic ones.

Although to a lesser extent, the same development is traceable also in EModE (cf. Table 2 and Figure 1), where after a drastic decrease, the inflected synthetic form gains ground again. This inversion of directionality of change is typologically unexplainable. Since the replacement of the inflected genitive by prepositional phrases is generally regarded as being triggered off in order to avoid ambiguity due to phonological erosion, how could the same conditions favour two opposite changes?

There is no simple explanation for all the three languages taken into account. I argue that in all cases an important role was played by standardisation processes, responsible for the keeping and restoration of inflected forms. In my opinion, however, in the case of English another factor interfered: the phonological similarity of the inflected genitive and the possessive linked genitive, a pattern common to all Germanic languages.

#### 6. John his book – Jan z'n boek – Johannes sein Buch

In the Middle phase, both English, Dutch and High German displayed a genitive construction, i.e. the possessive-linked genitive, where the possessor and noun NP are linked by a possessive pronoun.

Since in MD and in MG there were still case distinctions, three patterns occurred depending on the case of the possessor: namely dative, genitive and unmarked direct



case. Because of the lack of noun case-marking, in English only one pattern is witnessed.

MD/EModD	MG/EModG	ME/EModE
(31) a. <i>Grote Kaerle sijn zoon</i> (Stoett, 1909, 146) Charles-D the Great his son	b. <i>den herren ir eigen</i> (Sächs 67, 13) the-D men their eyes	c. <i>þe cnapechild his shapp</i> (Orm. 4220)
(32) a. <i>die ionghe man sijn bloet alte</i> (Stoett, 1909, 146) the young man his blood old	b. <i>einem Menschen sein Gedachtnis</i> (Simpl. 113,11) a-D man his memory	c. <i>Hengest his sone</i> (Lawman B 16772)
(33) a. <i>Heerts kalf zijn vleesch</i> (Stoett, 1909, 146) stag's fawn its meat	b. <i>dem esel sein gesiht</i> (Rg. 4d,33) the-D donkey his face	c. <i>Gwenayfer his love</i> (Lawman B22247)
(34) a. <i>hertoghe Philips zinen zone</i> (Stoett, 1909, 146) duke Philip-G his son	b. <i>dem Teufel sein Rachen</i> (L 110,9) the-D devil his anger	c. <i>my lorde is gode lordship</i> (Past P15; 39)
(35) a. <i>sinre liver muder hare herte</i> (Vooys, 1953, 84) his-G/D dear mother her heart	b. <i>der selen iren naturlichen louf</i> (Ec. 9, 23) the-D/Gsouls their natural love	c. <i>the queen Majestie her request</i> (Voy 144)

In these three languages the possessive linked genitive occurred in the same way: in the written language, it obeyed the same constraints, it emerged during the same centuries and played the same functional and pragmatic role.

First of all, the occurrence of the possessive-linked genitive was never highly frequent in written language. No more than sporadically does it occur in the Old phases of German and English. In English in particular there are very few cases to my knowledge (see also Allen 1997).

The possessive linked genitive becomes more common during the last period of the Middle phase and the Early Modern phase, when (in both EModG, EModD and EModE) the possessive linked genitive pops up in written texts, generally of narrative and informal nature. In the case of English, there are such works as *Leicester Chronicle*, in which this pattern occurs significantly, and which therefore allow to deduce its properties.

From the beginning this pattern is characterised by a particular constraint: the possessor either has been already mentioned or is contextually highly topical; in no cases can it be determined by the features [-Det] or [-Ref].

In its textual occurrences in EModD, EModG and EModE, the possessive-linked genitive tends to coincide with the introduction of the topical NP in the discourse. Since its possessor either corresponds to the discourse topic or is extratextually known, this pattern has a similar function to the preposed genitive, that is it played an important pragmatic role for the referential identification of the NP head through the topicality of the possessor. The function of the possessive-linked genitive is mainly possessive (prototypical possession and kinship relations).

In written texts, the possessive-linked genitive is at its height in the fifteenth-sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, exactly during the period when the preposed genitive reaches its lowest frequency. These two facts are closely related. Thanks to their functional similarity, once the preposed genitive was restricted to proper names or proper-name-like nouns, the anchoring function with complex possessors could be assigned to the possessive linked genitive.

In 19th-century Dutch and High German, the possessive-linked genitive seems to have completely disappeared in eighteenth century written standard. The very rare

examples occur at the most in dialogues between illiterate people – Schiller and Wieland, for example, use this structure only for people speaking (cf. Kiefer 1910, Rausch 1897).

In spite of the ferocious censorship, the possessive-linked genitive has so far survived in both German and Dutch in the spoken register. In Dutch it represents a super-regional variant of genitive strategies, and can encode subjective and objective genitive (see Marle 1985). The possessive linked genitive, in the informal register, replaces the preposed genitive to express close or possessive relationships between two NPs, as being phonologically more conspicuous.

↓	+ formal/ written	<i>mijn broers auto</i> <i>de auto mijnes broers</i> <i>de auto van mijn broer</i> <i>Broers auto</i>	<i>mijn moeders huis</i> <i>het huis mijner moeder</i> <i>het huis van mijn moeder</i> <i>Mums huis</i>
	+ colloquial/ informal	<i>mijn broer z'n auto</i> 'my brother's auto'	<i>mijn moeder d'r huis</i> 'my mother's house'

In German, it survives exclusively in dialects, where it represents the only alternative to analytic structures and is even preferred in case of close possessive relationship (cf. Paul 1959).

↓	written / formal	<i>meines Vaters Koffer</i> <i>der Koffer meines Vaters</i> <i>der Koffer von meinem Vater</i> <i>Vaters Koffer</i>	<i>meiner Mutter Tasche</i> <i>die Tasche meiner Mutter</i> <i>die Tasche von meiner Mutter</i> <i>Mutters Tasche</i>
	spoken / dialect	<i>meinem Vater sein Koffer</i> "my father's case"	<i>meiner Mutter ihr Tasche</i> "my mother's bag"

Unlike Dutch and High German, English seems to have completely lost the possessive-linked genitive in both its written and spoken register by the mid-eighteenth century.

It is indisputable that in the English context it was also considered to be a colloquial and informal construction "which was introduced into written and printed texts at a time when the number of texts and their readers dramatically expanded. In the sixteenth century the construction appears to have spread into 'respectable' prose" (Görlach 1991: 82). Given the condemnation by grammarians because of its discontinuity (i.e. resumption), its pragmatical motivation and its high iconicity (cf. Marle 1997, Milroy & Milroy 1985, Stein 1994), it is no surprise that it disappeared from written language.

The sequence of their components reflects the temporal and perceptive sequence of the referential identification: the preceding position of the more topical NP, which is the possessor in this case, gives the hearer the right point of reference for the identification of the following NP and obeys the topicality principle. The possessive pronoun provides the NPs with an unambiguous morphosyntactic link, since it repeats part of the morphological information already expressed through the possessor, and therefore

allows complex noun phrases to occur in pronominal position without compromising the communicative efficacy of the message. These same discontinuity and iconicity, which provoked the grammarians' disdain, are then the source of its pragmatical efficiency.

Why should English have lost so transparent and efficient a structure and abolished it also in more colloquial contexts, unlike the other Germanic languages?<sup>6</sup>

I would argue that its disappearance is mainly due to a process of grammaticalisation whereby the pronominal element *his* was reanalysed as belonging to the preceding NP and thus as a syntactic marker: *John [his book] > [John his] book*.

#### 6.1. To inflect or not to inflect: this is the question

According to the traditional view, PDE *-s* is historically derived from OE *-es*. Mustanoja (1960: 76) and others noticed that the front position already prevailed with proper names and personal (human) nouns in OE, that is those nouns that still occur most frequently in genitive forms today. From such a point of view, the present spelling is due to seventeenth and eighteenth century writing conventions, which elided the unstressed *e*-vowel of inflectional endings, namely *'d* in weak preterites and participles and *'s* in genitives and plurals (as well as the 3rd sg of *to be*).

The fact that only in genitive noun phrases was the apostrophe retained, whereas in all the other cases the unstressed (unpronounced) *e*-vowel was regularly restored, asks for other explanations.

In my opinion, in ME all the case-markings were lost or on the way to being lost; and so were the genitive endings. This assumption has as supporting evidence the fact that in the 15th century the occurrence of the *s*-genitive was lexically restricted, and therefore was no longer productive. Moreover, the fifteenth - sixteenth century texts show quite a great deal of instances in which the *-(e)s* morpheme seems to be suffixed to different constituents of the complex NP at random.

- (36) *for our sisters sake Elizabeth* (Voy. II, 74)
- (37) *for our sister Elizabeths sake* (Voy. II, 85)
- (38) *here [...] was brought unto the Kings and Queenes majesties presence* (Voy. II, 362)
- (39) *at the king and Queenes Majesties hands* (Egert. P. 381)
- (40) *have seene the Kings Majesties of England and the French Kings pavillions* (Voy. I 258)

In these examples the genitive case marking turns out to be unstable: in (36) the common noun (with the role of apposition) is case marked, while in (37) the genitive ending only appears in the proper name; in (38) both of the elements in coordination (*king* and *queen*) are case marked, whereas in (39) the entire coordinated NP is marked as genitive; in (40), although the inflected ending is still added to the head of the complex NP, the entire phrase *the Kings Majesties of England* is preposed, parallel to *the French Kings*.

Accordingly, this instability may suggest that the EModE writer was no longer confident with inflection and did not know for sure how and when to use the morphological ending *-(e)s*. Sometimes it is used as a real case-marker; sometimes as a clitic of the entire NP. Apart from the difference of spelling, the occurrence of the clitic-like *s*-forms are exactly like the following possessive-linked genitives:

- (41) *by the Vice-roy his direction and appointment* (Voy. VI. 298)

- (42) *his brother King Edward the iij<sup>th</sup> his children* (Egert. P. 37)  
 (43) *Edward the Second of England his Queen* (Bac. 303)

The possessive-linked genitive was undoubtedly the favourite option in case of cumbersome constructions (examples 49-50) and when a new topic was first introduced, as shown in examples (44)-(48):

- (44) *Pompey his pillar ... Pompeys pillar* (Voy. III 357)  
 (45) *O'Kelly his howse ... O'Kellye's contrey* (Egert. P. 144)  
 (46) *in all the prince of Orange his time ... the late prince of Oranges lieutenant* (Leic. C. 309)  
 (47) *my cosin Heidon his entry ... on my cosin Heidons part* (Stiff. P. 8)  
 (48) *Sir Fra.Walsingham his brother ... sir Frances Walshams death* (Stiff. P. 126)  
 (49) *from our Lord and great King of all Russia his Majesty* (Voy. II 353)  
 (50) *the King of Spaine his wifes sister* (Egert.P. 421)

Once inflection was no longer productive, (as is evident from the dramatic decrease and the lexical restriction of this pattern at the end of the fourteenth century and during the fifteenth century), people used the possessive-linked genitive to express close relationships between the two constituents, where the topicality of the possessor was significant for the identification of the head (as happens in the other West-Germanic languages).

The homophony of *-(e)s* and *his*, as the same EModE spelling (often *-is* or *-ys*) shows, and the convention of eliding *his* as in example (51) must have raised confusion.

- (51) *Who could refrain, / That had a heart to love, and in that heart / Courage, to make's love known?* (Sh. Mac.II.3.114-117)

The effort of generalising English according to the grammatical categories of Latin favoured the reanalysis of this sibilant ending as a case-marker. But the constraints this new pattern had to comply with were not those of the inflectional ending, but of the possessive-linked genitive.

The possessive linked genitive could occur only with human referential NPs to express mainly the possessive relationship, with or without a head. In ME *his* was already extended to all nouns regardless of gender and number, and could occur without any head noun thanks to its pronominal nature.

The *s*-genitive as well complies to the above mentioned restriction in the phase of its re-emergence (i.e. [+human] [+topical] possessor) and extends its domain of occurrence to complex NP possessor and to the independent genitive (examples 56-58).

- (52) *aftyr Syn Hyllary ys day* (Chron. London 189, 22)  
 (53) *my lorde is gode lordship* (Paston P15; 39)  
 (54) *Bothe for my mother ys sake and myn* (Paston 3.187)  
 (55) *the Pope and Emperor of Germany ys Ambassadors* (Egert. P. 289)  
 (56) *they would with all speed to the Earl of Shrewsbury's* (L.of Wol. 345)  
 (57) *thorow my words and M. Walkers* (Madox, 34)  
 (58) *knowe his wife from other mens* (Harman, 49)

To go back to the question of the graphical convention, I argue that in the case of the genitive, the *'s* spelling became a grammatical convention, instead of being abolished – as happened in the case of past participle and past verbal forms –, for two reasons:

because the 's did not correspond to the inflected genitive, but to a new element, which derived from a process of grammaticalisation of an independent element, a pronoun, and accordingly because it had a different distribution (parallel to that of the possessive-linked genitive and restricted to the prenominal position) and a different function (namely, an anchoring function).

From a theoretical point of view, the hypothesis that the clitic -'s derives from an independent morpheme like the possessive pronoun, would be far less problematic than the hypothesis of PDE 's-genitive as a left over of OE inflection, because it is overwhelmingly more common for a syntactic element to become inflectional than vice-versa.

If PDE genitive stems from an inflectional ending, then this historical development represents a change whereby a morphological element (one below the word-level) becomes a syntactic element (one bound only at the phrasal level, as a clitic). In other words, PDE -'s genitive would represent a case of so-called degrammaticalisation (Plank 1995), which is a quite exceptional phenomenon in languages, although possible.

## 6.2. Comparison with other Germanic languages

The behaviour of the EModE -'s resembled the West-Germanic possessive-linked genitive from the beginning. A striking parallel is the case of the Dutch possessive linked genitive and of its development in Afrikaans.

As shown in Table 5, in the first interval the *s*-genitive expresses mainly prototypical possession, to extend gradually its functional domain to the subjective function (and the objective only in particular lexically-restricted cases): in the last time interval, the occurrences of the *s*-genitive as subjective genitive are numerous (almost so frequent as with possessive function). A similar development can be observed in contemporary Dutch.

In Dutch the possessive linked genitive is generally associated with prototypical possession. Recently, however, sentences, such as *Peters opmerking* "Peter's observation", occur frequently and are widely accepted; at the same time, also some possessive-linked genitive with objective function, such as *Peter z'n lering / verbijstering* "Peter's instruction / bewilderment", are considered as acceptable.

Quite early, the possessive linked genitive in English used the masculine possessive pronoun as a default linking pronoun, irrespectively of the gender of the possessor. And in this respect it differs from the corresponding construction in the sister-languages, Dutch and German. But this happens only because we consider the Standard language or the super-regional variant.

If in Standard Dutch the possessive pronoun varies according to the gender of the possessor, in some Dutch dialects the masculine form is used also with feminine possessors, as apparent in examples 61a-b.

In both Dutch (see Limburgian for the example 60a, Groningen dialect example 60b (personal communication)) and German dialects (examples 59a-b (personal communication)) possessive linked genitive can also occur without a head noun, exactly like the 's-genitive in English.

- (59)a. *Louisse ihrer* [brieff] (Ech. 38,6)  
Luise hers
- b. *ich liebe mehr die Gedichte Hölty's als Hofegarten seine* (Heyse, 1838-49: 528)  
I love more the poems of Hölty than Hofegarten his

- (60)a. *Pjer z'nne fits is gestoale, me Marie d'rre nog neet*  
Peter his bike has been stolen, but Mary hers not yet
- b. *Wies boek is D? Jan zijnent*  
whose book is that? John his
- (61)a. *Jaantie zien kleid*  
J. his suit
- b. *moeder sen boek*  
mother his book

In Afrikaans (examples in 62 are taken from Donaldson 1993), the phonetically reduced masculine possessive pronoun is the general genitive marker, irrespective of the gender of the possessor. Unlike Dutch possessive linked genitive, but very like English 's-genitive, this marker is commonly used with inanimate possessor and temporal expression. In Afrikaans the functions of *se* are even wider than the function of the 's-genitive in English (see example 62g and 62i).

- (62)a. *die man se perd*  
the man's horse
- b. *die kind se toontjie*  
the child's toe
- c. *die kinders se toontjies*  
the children's toes
- d. *Suid Afrika se hoofstad*  
South Africa
- e. *die huis se dak*  
the house's roof
- f. *ons bure se vriende se seun*  
our neighbour'friend's son
- g. *die mense wat teentoor bly se hond*  
the men across the road's dog
- h. *Vyf van die twaalf mense wat nog in die hospitaal behandel word, se toestand is kritiek*  
Of five of the twelve people that are still being treated in hospital's condition is critical
- i. *ek se hond*  
(I's) My dog

The history of *se* is not easy to retrace because of the rare occurrence in written texts, which are heavily influenced by Standard Dutch. However, even in the 18th century, in the so-called Cape dialect (a sort of mixing of features from different Dutch dialects), we start finding some traces of the future genitive marker. Its first occurrences encode possessive function and prefer animate, topical possessors, but not exclusively (examples 63 are taken from Scholtz 1963 and 1980). Independent genitive is not seldom (example 63f).

- (63)a. *de oude tyden syn mens*  
the old times his men
- b. *myn fe syn drink kul*  
my cattle his drinking trough
- c. *de drie volk zijn spore*  
the three people his footprints
- d. *het waerdenen van de weduwe Juri cristofel smit sijnt goet*  
the values of the widow of the Jury Cristofel his goods
- e. *mijn dogter zijn goeder*

- my daughter his goods  
 f. *meijn aan teeken is ouwer dan nukerk seijn*  
 my annotation is older than nukerk his

To sum up, three crucial facts sustain the hypothesis of -'s as the result of the merging of the possessive linked genitive and the inflectional one: (a) the re-rise of the *s*-genitive depends on the rise of the pattern 's-genitive, which is more sensible to the animacy, topical and functional constraints and whose behaviour is very like the possessive linked genitive (it is only more frequent), and on *the* spread of the group genitive, which parallels the spread of the possessive-linked genitive (16th-17th century); (b) the *s*-genitive seems to be a feature typical of informal texts, contrarily to what would be expected in a case of residual phenomena and archaisms (see Table 6); (c) the other Germanic language which shows a similar genitive marker, i.e. Afrikaans, derived this one from the possessive pronoun within the possessive linked genitive.

Another evidence comes from Janda (1980: 250) and Wright (1905: 265): they claim that the 's-form turned up first in the South and Midlands, whereas in the North, where the possessive-linked genitive was last to show up in written texts, the genitive is generally marked by zero;

## 7. Conclusion

Due to socio-political and economic changes in fifteenth-sixteenth century society, lay society and merchant classes in particular claimed the importance of their vernacular as a means of cultural and not only business-like communication. For this reason, they required the 'polishing' and the normalisation of the language they had spoken until then, and the creation of grammars which should make uniform the usage of the vernacular and elevate it to the level of the prestigious languages *par excellence*, Latin, Greek (and Hebrew).

If the standards (English, Dutch and High German) were elaborated on the image of Latin, then it is not surprising that, since Latin was inflectional, grammarians tried and wanted to preserve the inflected forms and supported the intensive usage of synthetic structures (see Wal 1992).

Before the fifteenth century, written English, German and Dutch, although distant from the spoken varieties, were a mixture of various dialectal and foreign features and words, selected – when writing verse – to meet rhyme and metrical requirements rather than a real standard. Therefore, syntactically speaking, they permitted variations and were affected by natural change: among them, the increase of the transparent prepositional phrase at expense of ambiguous inflected forms.

After the fifteenth century, the written language was subject to the direct interference of grammarians, who wished to tidy up the inherent fuzziness and indeterminacy of spoken patterns, and to avoid the idiosyncrasies of spontaneous usage of the language. Giving prestige to their vernaculars meant shaping them on the example of Latin. Thus, in the case of Dutch and High German, grammarians restored the usage of inflection and at the same time banned the analytic structures as a mark of inelegance and illiteracy (eg. Agricola, *De inventione dialectica* 1479, Wimpfeling, *Gravamina Germanicae Nationis* 1510, Schottelius, *Teutsche Sprachkunst* 1641).

The re-establishment of the inflected genitive case, as a prestigious feature (in fact, only of determiners and articles) could not bring about a thorough restructuring of the language. The prenominal position was already the unquestionable domain of the -s genitive with an anchoring function. Therefore, the newly restored genitive could

squeeze only into the postnominal position. From Table 1 and Figures 4 and 5 it seems that the percentage of occurrences lost by the prepositional genitive has been gained by the postposed genitive. The possessive-linked genitive, then, was always looked down on and was never accepted in the written language, since it contradicted the basic filtering principles of standardisation, but kept on being used in informal (or very informal) styles.

In English, the inflection was so reduced and simplified that it was impossible to restore it. Nonetheless, a new 'inflection-like' element was introduced into English morphology. Since the reduced form of *his* merged with the inflected genitive *-s*, – more explicitly its pronunciation merged with the old inflection *-(e)s* –, and thus was confused with it, the possessive-linked genitive was reanalysed into the pattern *John's book*. Accordingly, the new construction *John's book* obeyed the constraints of the possessive-linked genitive, but formally resembled the old inflection. The apostrophe, due originally to graphic conventions, was retained and the vowel *e* was not restored, since this element (*'s*) was not merely a case-marker, unlike the ending *-ed* or the plural *-es*, but a pronominal element.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All the English textual quotations in the text and in the examples are taken from the Helsinki Corpus.

<sup>2</sup> Another interesting interpretation is put forward by Cynthia Allen (1997). According to her, the *s*-genitive is the continuation of the inflected form, which, once extended to all nouns irrespective of gender and number, lost its status as an inflected form: it became a free morpheme and a sort of a clitic. Her analysis is suggestive. But I think the cliticisation of an previously inflected form is more convincing if in the language there is a pattern on which to forge the new structure.

<sup>3</sup> See for further details Jespersen (1927: 250 ff.), Mustanoja (1960: 69ff.) and Visser (1963-73: 252 ff.).

<sup>4</sup> With the term 'possessor', I refer to the NP which is not the head of the genitive phrase as "possessor": for example, in *my father's house* and *the wheels of the bike*, the possessor is respectively *my father* and *the bike*. Other analytic devices are also witnessed: for example, the prepositional phrase with *to* and the possessive-linked genitive, e.g. *servant to Polonius* (Hamlet, I), *Gwenayfer his love* (Lawmann B22247).

<sup>5</sup> The figures refer to the following table, which includes all the other morphosyntactic devices expressing genitive functions. With the term 'total "s"' refers to the total occurrences of both the *'s* genitive and the *-(e)s* genitive.



Appendix:

Here following the tables with the corresponding exact figures and percentages relative to Figures 2a, and, 3a-3b-3c-3d.

Possession/ valency	1400-49				1450-99			
	s-genitive		of-genitive		s-genitive		of-genitive	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
+ prototyp.	22	31.4	48	68.6	92	50.5	90	49.5
- prototyp.	37	26.1	105	73.9	97	31.6	210	68.4
agent	16	14.8	92	85.2	59	30.1	137	69.9
object	7	9.2	69	90.8	18	23.7	58	76.3
#	82		314		266		495	

Table a: Possession and valency (1400-49 and 1450-99)

Possession/ valency	1500-59				1560-1630			
	s-genitive		of-genitive		s-genitive		of-genitive	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
+ prototyp.	87	51.2	83	48.8	143	69.1	64	30.9
- prototyp.	114	47.1	128	52.9	122	61	78	39
agent	20	29.4	48	70.6	52	57.1	39	42.9
object	3	10.3	26	89.7	8	24.2	25	75.8
#	224		285		325		206	

Table b: Possession and Valency (1500-59 and 1560-1630)

1400-49 interaction	globally given				locally given			
	s-genitive		of-genitive		s-genitive		of-genitive	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
+ prototyp.	20	33.9	39	66.1	2	18.2	9	91.8
- prototyp.	37	28.9	91	71.1			14	100
agent	16	18.6	70	81.4			22	100
object	7	10.6	59	89.4			10	100
#	80		259		2		55	

Table c: Interaction: Topicality (Givenness) and Possession/Valency (1400-49)

1450-99 interaction	globally given				locally given			
	s-genitive		of-genitive		s-genitive		of-genitive	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
+ prototyp.	84	52.8	75	47.2	8	34.8	15	65.2
- prototyp.	92	35.2	169	64.8	5	10.9	41	
agent	57	37.5	95		2	4.5	42	95.5
object	18	36	32	64			26	100
#	251		371		15		124	

Table d: Interaction: Topicality (Givenness) and Possession/Valency (1450-99)

1500-59 interaction	globally given				locally given			
	s-genitive		of-genitive		s-genitive		of-genitive	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
+ prototyp.	72	50.7	70	49.3	15	53.6	13	46.4
- prototyp.	102	51.3	97	48.7	12	27.9	31	72.1
agent	15	27.3	40	72.7	5	38.5	8	61.5
object	2	9.1	20	90.9	1	14.3	6	85.7
#	191		227		33		58	

Table e: Interaction: Topicality (Givenness) and Possession/Valency (1500-59)

1560-1630 interaction	globally given				locally given			
	s-genitive		of-genitive		s-genitive		of-genitive	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
+ prototyp.	91	63.6	52	36.4	52	81.3	12	18.7
- prototyp.	105	63.6	60	36.4	17	48.6	18	51.4
agent	22	44.9	27	55.1	30	71.4	12	28.6
object	5	20	20	80	3	37.5	5	62.5
#	223		159		102		47	

Table f: Interaction: Topicality (Givenness) and Possession/Valency (1560-1630)

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The above quoted examples and figures regarding the English language are taken from the *Helsinki Corpus*, Visser, F.T. (1963-1973), Mustanoja, T. (1960), *Oxford English Dictionary*, and *Middle English Dictionary* (Sherman – Kuhn 1963). In particular:

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The data referring to Figure 4 and 5 are taken from Vezzosi (in progress).

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