OCP effects in Germanic possession: dialectal and diachronic evidence

The possessor linking construction (PLC) in (1) is widespread across Germanic varieties but there is no consensus on its (syntactic) origin or on the function and categorical status of the bold-faced element. In this paper, we connect insights from the diachrony of genitive-marked possessors with the rise of the PLC. The main argument is that the decline of genitive marking motivates the rise of the PLC, as a strategy to avoid a distinctness violation (OCP effect, Richards 2010) between the possessor and the possessee. This is supported by novel diachronic data from Middle Low German (MLG, c.1250-1600) (CHLG, ReN)[1], as well as synchronic data from Alemannic (SynALM).[2]

1) a. des isch em   Vater   **sin** Platz   (Alemannic)
      this is the.MASC.SG.DAT father   his seat
      'this is father's seat'
   b. den   Pasturn   **sien** ole(n)   Hoot   (Low German, from Berg 2013:36)
      the.OBL priest   his   old(WK) hat
      'the priest's old hat'

Diachronically, we propose that the PLC has its origin in a prenominal genitive construction, based on two observations. Firstly, from MLG through to modern Alemannic we commonly get PLCs where the possessor is genitive-marked, e.g. (2)-(3). Secondly, the PLC and prenominal genitives share an animacy restriction, see (4), which has a long history for prenominal genitives in German, having started in late Old High German (cf. Demske 2001).

2) a. **Lorins**   **syn**   **bede**   was gar   entwicht
      Lorin.MASC.SG.GEN his.FEM.SG.NOM request.FEM.SG.NOM was PTCL desecrated
      'Lorin's request was even desecrated.' (MLG: Kortw. Hist. Laurin)
   b. Men wat in **disses**   **Mans**   **syn**   **Hovet**
      but what in this.MASC.SG.GEN man.MASC.SG.GEN his.NT.SG.ACC head.NT.SG.ACC
      is begrepen
      is understood
      'But whatever in this man's head is understood...' (MLG: Lauremberg)

3)   des isch d-**es** Vader-**s**   **sin** Platz   (Alemannic)
      this is the-GEN father.GEN   his seat
      'this is father's seat'

4) a. Maria-**s**   Buch   (NHG, animate possessor)
      Maria.GEN book
   b. *Buch**s**   Einband   (NHG, inanimate possessor)
      book.GEN   cover
   c. ??d-**es** Buch-**s**   Einband   (NHG, inanimate possessor, archaic)
      the-GEN book-GEN   cover
   d. *d-**er**   Bücherei Buch   (NHG, inanimate possessor)
      the-GEN/DAT library   book

A further diachronic observation informs our claim for the categorial status of the possessive element (*sein-, ihr-*) in the PLC. We observe that the decline of genitive case-marking underway across varieties of German throughout their history, since at least the middle period (Kiefer 1910) gives rise to an OCP effect, i.e. that two adjacent identical syntactic objects require an intervening linking element, without which the structure is ruled out by a distinctness violation (Richards 2010), e.g. (5). Moreover, we show that the actual type of linker is not so important and can vary a lot in its source, e.g. (6-10); what matters is its sheer presence.

5) a. d-**es**　　Mann-**es**　Haus　　　(NHG, archaic)
　　 the-GEN man-GEN　house
　 b. *d-**er**　　Frau　　Haus
　　 the-GEN woman　house
　 c. der Frau　　**ihr** Haus
　　 the woman her house

6) a. d-es　　　Mann　　**-es** Auto　　b. das　　　Auto d -**es**　Mann-es　　　(NHG)
　　 the-GEN man　　　-GEN car　　　　the.NOM car　　the-GEN man -GEN
7) a. d-er　　　vrow　　**-en** moder　　b. suke　　　d -**er**　vrow-en　(MLG: Arznei)
　　 the-GEN woman　-GEN womb　　　　sickness　　the-GEN woman.GEN
8) a. Petra　**-s**　　　Auto　　　　　b. das　Auto Petra -**s**　　　　　(NHG)
　　 Petra　-GEN　　car　　　　　　　the　car　Petra -GEN
9) a. de-m　　Mann **sein**　Auto　　b. ***sein** Auto Ø de-**m**　　Mann　　　(NHG)
　　 the-DAT man　　his　car　　　　his　　car　Ø the-DAT man
10)a. *d-er　　Frau　**Ø** Auto　　b.　das　Auto d-**er**　　Frau　　　(NHG)
　　 the-GEN woman Ø　car　　　　　the　car　the-GEN woman

More broadly, we will show how these observations can inform a more general account of adnominal possession (including PPs and postnominal genitives). Specifically, we show that the diverse possessive constructions are based on a unified syntactic structure where the relation between the possessor and the possessee remains the same, but where their relative ordering is irrelevant and can thus vary, see (7). Moreover, all the diverse possession constructions in (7) feature an element which encodes the possessive element and at the same time which has to occur in a particular position, namely between the possessor and the possesse in order to prevent a distinctness violation. In this sense, we claim that all of the bold elements in (7) have this double function and can be analysed as linkers, i.e. functional elements inserted between nouns and their dependents (i.e. modifiers or complements), the latter including possessives, in order to prevent a distinctness violation. We do not discuss PPs here for reasons of space but we will show that the ability of a fronted PP without a linker is driven by information structure and should be considered separately, see Roehrs (2019).

References
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