

Possession: Puzzles in meaning and form



1. Introduction

Possession has intrigued linguists for mainly two reasons (see for example also [Coene and D'Hulst, 2003](#); [Myler, 2014](#)). The first among these is its polymorphous morphosyntactic realization. In most languages, a single possessive relation can be expressed by using various different grammatical structures. We illustrate this with an example from Dutch. All five expressions in (1) encode the same possessive relation between Johan, the possessor, and a car, the possessee.

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|---|--|---------|
| (1) a. <i>Johan-s auto</i>
Johan-POSS car
‘Johan’s car’
b. <i>de auto van Johan</i>
the car of Johan
‘Johan’s car’
c. <i>Johan z’n auto</i>
Johan his car
‘Johan’s car’ | d. <i>Johan heeft een auto</i>
Johan has a car
‘Johan has a car’
e. <i>Die auto is van Johan</i>
That car is of Johan
‘That car belongs to Johan’ | [Dutch] |
|---|--|---------|

In addition, the set of grammatical structures that is used to express possession varies from language to language. There is even variation among closely related languages. German, which is closely related to Dutch, has equivalents for each of the five strategies in (1), but, unlike Dutch, can also use the postnominal genitive to express possession, as in (2).

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|---|----------|
| (2) <i>das auto des professor-s</i>
the car the.GEN professor-GEN
‘the professor’s car’ | [German] |
|---|----------|

The second property of possessive structures that has fascinated researchers for years is the versatility with respect to the meanings these structures express. For instance, the Dutch postnominal possessor introduced by *van* ‘of’, (1b), can be used to express a wide range of different relations, among those given in (3).

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|--|--|---------|
| (3) a. <i>de auto van Johan</i>
the car of Johan
‘Johan’s car’
b. <i>de zoon van Johan</i>
the son of Johan
‘Johan’s son’
c. <i>de neus van Johan</i>
the nose of Johan
‘Johan’s nose’ | [legal ownership, responsibility,
designer, etc. . .]
[kinship]
[body part] | [Dutch] |
|--|--|---------|

- d. *de deur van de auto* [part-whole]
the door of the car
'the door of the car'
- e. *de boosheid van Johan* [source]
the anger of Johan
'Johan's anger'
- f. *de verwijdering van Johan* [theme]
the removal of Johan
'Johan's removal'
- g. *het geren van Johan* [Agent]
the running of Johan
'Johan's running'

In the case of (3a), one obvious reading is that Johan legally owns the car, but other readings are also available. For instance, (3a) is also possible in a context in which Johan has the responsibility of securing a particular car, or when Johan is the designer of the car, or when Johan is a police officer that has been assigned the duty of following a particular car, etc. The data in (3) thus show that possessive constructions can be used to express a whole range of meanings.

The polymorphous realization of possession and the versatility with respect to the meaning expressed by possessive structures have been extensively studied by linguists. We will henceforth refer to these two issues as *the polymorphous realization puzzle* and *the meaning versatility puzzle* respectively.¹

2. The meaning versatility puzzle

The meaning versatility puzzle has led some linguists to believe that the meaning of the possession relation is not constrained at all and can be anything. One of the most explicit formulations of this belief is that of Williams (1982:283) who states that "The [possession] relation [...] can be any relation at all." This is far from the whole story though and in what follows we will step by step introduce the insights that have emerged from the – mainly semantics – literature.

2.1. The sortal-relational distinction

Partee (1983/1997) and Barker (1995) were among the first to show that there are restrictions on the interpretation of possession relations, in particular in out-of-the-blue contexts. For instance, while multiple possessive interpretations are freely available in (4a), kinship is the only interpretation that presents itself in (4b).

- (4) a. *Johan-s boek* [authorship, readership, etc.] [Dutch]
Johan-POSS book
'Johan's book'
- b. *Johan-s zoon* [kinship]
Johan-POSS zoon
'Johan's son'

The difference between (4a) and (4b) lies in the noun types: nouns like *zoon* 'son' in (4b) inherently express a relation, while nouns like *boek* 'book' in (4a) do not. This distinction is therefore also referred to as that between *relational* and *sortal* nouns (Löbner, 1985; Partee, 1983/1997; Barker, 1995, 2011).

The sortal-relational distinction is standardly analyzed in terms of presence or absence of argument structure (Barker, 1995, 2011; Partee, 1983/1997). Relational nouns have argument structure that specifies the particular relation between the possessor and the possessee. This is illustrated for *son* in (5):

- (5) $\llbracket \text{son} \rrbracket = \lambda y \lambda x (\text{son_of}(y)(x))$

¹ Although most of the literature on possession is concerned with these issues, the two issues are rarely given names. Myler (2014)'s study on predicative agreement is an exception to this. He refers to the polymorphous morphosyntactic realization of possession as the *too many (surface) structures-puzzle*. He dubs the issue of the versatility with respect to the meaning of possessive constructions the *too many meanings-puzzle*. We will not adopt these names, since we do not agree with the negative connotation of *too many* in these names.

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