

Semantic factors influencing the change in position of German adnominal genitives in the 17th to 19th centuries

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In contemporary German, adnominal genitives usually follow the noun they modify: *das Haus der Frau* (the house the-GEN woman-GEN ‘the woman’s house’). This is especially true for common nouns; proper nouns have at the same time retained the ability of appearing before the head noun: *Marias Haus* (Maria-GEN house ‘Maria’s house’) but may also appear postnominally. This current word order in noun phrases with adnominal genitives is the result of a diachronic change that has been going on for several hundred years. In Old High German, genitive attributes usually appeared in the prenominal position but from the later Old High German period onwards, more and more adnominal genitives have changed to the postnominal position, starting with abstract common nouns. Since the 18th century, it has been mostly proper nouns that still appear prenominally (c.f. Demske 2001).

This syntactic change is well-studied and a number of morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors have been found to influence this phenomenon (for an overview, see e.g. Ackermann 2021). With the exception of Ackermann’s (2021) study on onymic genitives, those factors have usually been studied in isolation, although it has, of course, been noted that properties such as the animacy of the attribute and the semantic relation between the attribute and the noun it modifies (e.g. possessive, partitive) interact with one another. With regards to the semantic relation between the nouns, it has additionally been proposed that the two word orders can correlate with distinct readings, especially with regards to subjective and objective genitives, meaning that *Lenas Entdeckung* (Lena-GEN discovery) will likely be read as a discovery made by Lena, while *die Entdeckung Lenas* (the discovery Lena-GEN) suggests the reading that Lena is being discovered (c.f. Eisenberg & Smith 2002).

In my talk I will analyse noun phrases containing adnominal genitives from three corpora: the Deutsches Textarchiv corpus, which contains written texts from the 17th to 19th centuries, the RIDGES corpus consisting of texts about herbology from the 15th to 19th centuries, and the SiGS corpus, which is made up of handwritten protocols of witch trials from the 16th and 17th centuries. I investigate three semantic properties of noun phrases containing a genitive attribute, namely the animacy of the attribute, the semantic relation between attribute and the head noun, and whether the adnominal genitive is a proper noun or not. These three factors will be analysed in isolation and in interaction as independent variables in a *random forest* model (Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012).

This analysis will show which adnominal genitives are the last to change to the postnominal position at a time when most genitives have already changed to the postnominal position. It will also show the importance of differences in text genre (c.f. Peter 2015). I propose that proper nouns and highly animate nouns (i.e. nouns denoting humans, superhumans, animals and plants), as well as nouns found to be in a subjective, objective, possessive or auctorial relation with the noun they modify will be found to occur in the prenominal position much later than common nouns in general. It is especially inanimate attributes and those that occur in a different kind of semantic relation with the head of the phrase that will appear mostly postnominally early on.

References

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