

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371576559>

Dit is Laura-se (trui). The spreading of the possessive se construction in Dutch

Article in *Linguistics in the Netherlands* · June 2023

CITATIONS

0

1 author:



Jacqueline van Kampen

Utrecht University

79 PUBLICATIONS 447 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Dit is Laura-se (trui). The spreading of the possessive *se* construction in Dutch

Abstract

Dutch children temporarily use a possessor *se* construction with proper/kinship names and pronouns, like *dit is Laura-se/opa-se/hem-se jas* ('this is Laura's/grandpa's/his coat'). The *se* possessive is not available in standard Dutch, although examples of it are found on the internet. The *se* possessive is fully productive with all nouns in Afrikaans.

In standard Dutch prenominal possessive constructions show a wide range of variations and restrictions. Dutch children avoid the complexity of the system, but what makes the children apply the *se* possessive in the first place? I will show that it is due to three properties specific to Dutch. Nevertheless, the *se* possessive does not persist in standard Dutch as it did in Afrikaans. The Dutch Achilles' heel might be the early use of weak possessive pronouns.

Keywords: possessor-possessum constructions, possessive *se*, acquisition, Dutch, Afrikaans, diachronic syntax

1. Introduction

Possessive noun phrases in Dutch show a wide range of variations and restrictions. It takes Dutch children quite some time to acquire all possibilities. Data from CHILDES corpora (MacWhinney 2015) and diary notes show that Dutch children aged over 3½-4 use a specific construction not available in the standard Dutch input (Van Kampen & Corver 2006). Some examples of this so-called *se* possessive are given in (1). Note that in (1c) the possessum 'bloemen' is unpronounced.

- (1) a. Iedereen vindt z'n mamma-*se* kusjes het lekkerste. (Sarah 5;05.04)
Everybody finds his mummy's kisses the nicest.
b. Ze zijn bij hun-*se* vader. (Nathan 5;04.08)
They are with their father.
c. Je moet Berry-*se* (~~bloemen~~) nog ophalen. (Laura 8;02.16)
You must still fetch Berry's (flowers).

The *se* possessive is a long-lasting phenomenon. All children in the CHILDES corpora at the relevant age use it. It is also frequently attested in diary notes.

The remainder of the paper will discuss the following. The next section gives an overview of the various options in standard Dutch. Section 3 focuses on the acquisition order of possessor-possessum constructions in Dutch, before the children start using possessive *se*, of which examples are given in section 4. In the subsequent sections I discuss the syntactic status of *se* (section 5) and two acquisition factors that contribute to the appearance of *se* in child Dutch (section 6). Finally, section 7 argues that the *se* possessive is due to three language-specific properties that also contributed to the appearance of the *se* possessive in Afrikaans (section 8). Section 9 discusses why it does not persist in adult Dutch (yet).

2. Variation in possessive constructions in Dutch

The Dutch pronominal possessive paradigm is given in Table 1. The singular pronouns have in addition a weak variant.

Table 1 Dutch possessive pronouns

	<i>strong pronoun</i>	<i>weak pronoun</i>
1p.sg.	mijn ‘my’	m’n
2p.sg.	jouw ‘your’	je
3p.sg.masc.	zijn ‘his’	z’n
3p.s.g.fem.	haar ‘her’	d’r
1p.pl.	ons ‘our’	
2p.pl.	jullie ‘your’	
3p.pl.	hun ‘their’	

Standard Dutch can express almost all possessive relations by a periphrastic *van* construction with the possessor following the possessum head as in (2). Weak personal pronouns constitute an exception (2e).

- (2) a. De auto van Jan. proper name
The car of John.
- b. De auto van hem. strong personal pronoun
The car of him.
- c. De auto van de man. animate noun
The car of the man.
- d. De poot van de tafel. inanimate noun
The leg of the table.
- e. *De auto van ‘m weak personal pronoun

Prenominal possessive constructions, by contrast, are subject to various restrictions. Dutch may express possessive relations by a simple possessive pronoun, but only for animate referents. See (3).

- (3) a. De auto van Jan. zijn/z’n auto.
The car of John. his car
- b. De poot van de tafel. *zijn/z’n poot.
The leg of the table. his leg

The 3rd person weak pronouns may in addition be accompanied by an animate noun phrase in informal Dutch. The weak pronoun *d’r* is used with female referents (4b). This so-called doubling construction, the possessive pronoun is “doubled” by an XP possessor, also shows up in informal Dutch with the question pronoun *wie* (4c), the quantifiers *iemand*, *niemand* and *ieder(een)* (4d) and the reciprocal *elkaar/mekaar* (4e). When the possessor is a complex phrase, *z’n* refers to the entire phrase, as in (4f).

- (4) a. Jan/de buurman *z’n* auto.
Jan/the neighbor’s car.
- b. Laura/de zuster *d’r* auto.
Laura’s/the nurse’s car.

- c. Wie z'n auto?
Whose car?
- d. Iemand/niemand z'n eigendom; ieder(een) z'n geluk.
Somebody's/nobody's property; everybody's happiness.
- e. Elkaar/mekaar z'n zoenen.
Each other's kisses.
- f. [De jongen die daar loopt] z'n trui.
[The boy that walks there] his sweater.

In both the simple and doubling construction *z'n* is often realized as *se/ze* in spoken Dutch.

One can also refer to animals with the weak pronoun *z'n*, but generics as in (5a) are excluded. The possessive noun phrase in (5b) is from an adult (VanKampen corpus). It was intended as specific. In other words, the possessor expressed by *z'n* is not just animate, it has to be individuated.

- (5) a. *De reiger z'n poten zijn lang.
The heron's legs are tall.
- b. De eekhoorn z'n handje.
The squirrel's hand.

Proper and kinship names, male and female, allow in addition the Saxon *-s* construction, as in (6a). The same holds for a question pronoun (6b), a quantifier pronoun (6c) and a reciprocal (6d).

- (6) a. Jans/Laura's/papa's/mama's/ auto.
Jan's/Laura's/daddy's/mummy's car.
- b. Wiens moeder.
Whose mother.
- c. Iemands/niemands eigendom; ieder(een)s geluk.
Somebody's/nobody's possession; everybody's happiness.
- d. Elkaars/mekaars zoenen.
Each other's kisses.

The prenominal possessive construction shows a lot of variation and all types were attested in the speech of the caretakers, except for *ieders/iedereens*.

The utterances in (4)-(6) give examples with an overt possessum noun. The noun may also be unpronounced. In that case, Dutch uses the periphrastic *van* construction with a demonstrative pronoun that refers to the possessum. Again, all types of possessors allow the *van* construction: full personal pronouns (7a), proper/kinship names and animate nouns (7b), inanimate nouns (7c).

- (7) a. Jouw auto is groen en *die van* mij/jou/hem/haar/ons/jullie_{plural}/hun is blauw.
Your car is green and mine/yours/his/hers/ours/yours/theirs is blue.
- b. Mijn auto is blauw en *die van* Jan/Sarah/mijn moeder/de buurman is groen.
My car is blue and Jan's/Sarah's/my mother's/the neighbor's is green.
- c. Het blad_{neuter} van de eettafel is blauw en *dat_{neuter} van* de salontafel is groen.

The top of the dinner table is blue and that of the coffee table is green.

Another possibility is restricted to possessive full pronouns that get a suffix *-e*. In that case, the definite article is obligatorily present. See (8). The plural pronoun *jullie* ('your') only allows the *van* construction.

- (8) *Jouw auto is groen en de mijne/jouwe/zijne/hare/onze/hunne is blauw.*
Your car is green and mine/yours/his/hers/ours/theirs is blue.

The construction in (8) was only attested with *de mijne* (7x) and *de jouwe* (7x), mainly by the adults. In informal Dutch one also finds *mijnes* and *jouwes* without article. In the corpora *mijnes* is used 21x and *jouwes* 13x, mainly by the children.

The Dutch child has to learn all possibilities and impossibilities of the possessive system. The complexity of the system may constitute an acquisition hurdle. It will not be acquired at once. The development shows a successive learning path. The next section will first discuss the longitudinal development of possessor-possessum relations. It will be shown that the children use all standard Dutch variations before using the *se* possessive. Section 4 will give a selection of possessive *se* in child Dutch. The entire data collection is available at <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jacqueline-Van-Kampen>

3. Acquisition order of possessor-possessum relations

The data for the first acquisition steps below come from the longitudinal Groningen and VanKampen corpora. Data from the VanKampen and SchlichtingVanKampen corpora will exemplify the *se* possessive in later acquisition steps.

Some children start using possessive constructions earlier than others. However, all children show the same acquisition order. Therefore, I take the longitudinal acquisition of Sarah (VanKampen corpus) as an example and will give additional data from other children.

The *van* construction appears around 2;6 with all types of nominal possessors.

- (9) a. *Die is handen van eendje.* (Sarah 2;06.11)
That is hands of ducky.
b. *Pitje van appel.* (Abel 2;05.27)
Seed of apple.
c. *Auto van Tomas.* (Tomas 2;06.00)
Car of Tomas.

Grammatical possessor markings are still often missing at that point. The weak pronoun *z'n* comes in a few months later, but the first examples of *z'n* are not doubled by a possessor noun. See (10).

- (10) a. *Op se rug.* (Sarah 2;08.19)
On his back.
b. *Arjen is in z'n werk.* (Abel 2;10.00)
Arjen is at his work.

The Saxon *-s* and the doubling construction appear just before the age of 3. Most early examples of the doubling construction are with a masculine possessor, but occasionally *z'n* is used with a feminine possessor, as in (11a).¹

- (11) a. Mama *z'n* tas. (Abel 2;10.28)
 Mummy's bag.
 b. Hij wil in Ruben *z'n* bed. (Josse 3;01.24)
 He wants in Ruben's bed.

The examples in (12) represent possessor-possessum relations with the Saxon *-s*.

- (12) a. Ik heb niet van papa's mes aangekooft. (Sarah 2;10.15)
 I did not touch daddy's knife.
 b. Gerards koffie ook? (Josse 3;00.06)
 Gerard's coffee also?
 c. Naar mama's ziekenhuis. (Tomas 3;01.02)
 To mummy's hospital.

All children use the *van* construction, the weak pronoun *z'n* (single and doubled) and the Saxon *-s* around the age of 3. However, it is not immediately obvious that the child has at this age acquired all rules mentioned in section 1. The *van* construction is not restricted, and the children use most of the time the *van* construction. Prenominal possessor constructions, by contrast, are subject to various restrictions. The Dutch child has to consider all the possibilities to acquire the proper prenominal distinctions <± proper name>, <± individuated>, <± pronominal>. That may take some time. The next section discusses the child data of the possessive *se* construction.

4. The spontaneous appearance of possessive *se* in child Dutch

Children start using the *se* possessive after all other prenominal possessive constructions. For Sarah the first *se* possessives are found around 4 years. The recordings of the children from the Groningen corpus end before that age. By consequence, *se* possessives are virtually absent in that corpus. Again, I will discuss the appearance of the construction for Sarah, but I will give additional data from diary notes and from the SchlichtingVanKampen corpus.

*4.1 Possessive *se* with possessum present*

The children are highly creative in the formation of possessive *se*. Three types of possessors can be distinguished. The first type consists of proper and kinship names that allow both the Saxon *-s* and the doubling construction. The examples in (13) have *se* adjacent to the possessor followed by the possessum. Note that the feminine names in (13a,b) are also combined with *se*. I will come back to this in section 6.2.

- (13) a. Iedereen vindt z'n mama-*se* kusjes het lekkerste. (Sarah 5;05.04)
 Everybody finds his mummy's kisses the nicest.
 b. Stijntje-*se* moeder kwam ons halen. (Sarah 6;07.14)
 Stijntje's mother came to fetch us.

¹ I had to rely sometimes on the transcriptions, because not all audio recordings are available in CHILDES.

- c. Opa-*se* auto is oud. (Nathan 6;01.00)
Grandad's car is old.
- d. Op Okkie-*se* trap. (Sanne 4;00.09)
At Okkie's staircase.

The second type consists of the personal pronouns that also allow both the Saxon *-s* and the doubling construction. See (14).

- (14) a. Wie-*se* schoen is dit? (Sarah 6;03.00)
Whose shoe is this?
- b. We vinden elkaar-*se* zoenen lekker. (Sarah 5;09.03)
We find each other's kisses nice.
- c. Mekaar-*se* spullen. (Sarah 6;03.00)
Each other's things.
- d. Hij ging in iemand-*se* bed liggen. (Laura 4;07.30)
He went lying in somebody's bed.

The third type consists of strong personal pronouns that have no Saxon *-s* nor the doubling construction in standard Dutch. See (15).²

- (15) a. Mijne-*se* is het lichtste. (Laura 8;01.17)
Mine is the lightest.
- b. Hem-*se* schaatsen. (Nathan 6;02.01)
His skates.
- c. Jullie-*se* poppen. (Sarah 5;07.00)
Your dolls.
- d. Hun-*se* vader. (Nathan 5;04.08)
Their father.

In sum, the children use possessive *se* with proper/kinship names and the pronouns where in adult Dutch the Saxon *-s* and the doubling construction is accepted. However, *se* also appears with strong personal pronouns that only allow the *van* construction. Therefore, I consider the use of the *se* possessive as attempts of the older children to generalize over the distinctions <± proper name> and <± pronominal> for the possessor. The *se* possessive was not attested with common nouns. This might just be a coincidence, because prenominal common nouns + *z'n* doublings with individuated common nouns are rare anyway. The children used that construction only 4 times and the adults 5 times in the entire database.

From the child data the generalization in (16) can be drawn.

- (16) Possessive *se* generalization (child Dutch)

The possessive *se* construction has an internal structure X-*se*, where X is a proper or kinship name, or a strong pronoun.

² *se* is not the only possessive marking used with strong pronouns. One also finds *joune* ('yours' singular), *jullie d'r* ('yours' plural). Note that in (15a) *se* is attached to the possessive pronoun *mijn*.

When more data would be available, X might also include individuated common nouns.

Possessive *se* has in common with the pronoun *z'n* and the Saxon *-s* that it expresses reference to a possessor. Three factors may explain the spontaneous appearance of possessive *se*. A first factor may be that *se* is a reduction of the weak pronoun *z'n* of the doubling construction. In spoken Dutch, *z'n* is often pronounced as *se/ze*. It may be extended to non-masculine referents, because young children refer to female referents mostly with *z'n*, not with *d'r*. Section 6.2 will discuss the use of masculine pronouns with feminine referents. The second factor is that the Saxon *-s*, that is already used by the child with male and female proper and kinship names, gets an *-e* ending. In section 6.1 I will argue that the *-e* ending may be due to a hypercorrect application of the attributive *-e* that is also found with adjectives. That factor is supported by the children's use of possessive *se* without a possessum noun of which examples are given in the next subsection.

4.2 Possessive *se* without possessum present.

The possessive *se* construction also appears with an unpronounced possessum noun. See the examples in (17) with a possessor that is a female/male proper name, a kinship name or a pronoun.

- (17) a. Het is Agnes-*se* (~~bank~~). (Sarah 5;09.00)
It is Agnes' (couch).
b. Dat is Joep-*se* (~~voetbalclub~~). (Sarah 5;01.22)
That is Joep's (football club).
c. Bij Dane-*se* (~~trui~~) is (he)t zo. (Kirsten 4;05.09)
With Dane's (pull) is it such.
d. ... en *z'n* pappa-*se* (~~kusjes~~). (Sarah 5;05.04)
... and his daddy's (kisses).
e. Dit is wie-*se* (~~pop~~)? (Sarah 6;03.00)
This is whose (doll)?

In standard adult Dutch all examples in (17) and (18) below are ungrammatical, cf. the grammatical examples in (7b).

- (18) Dit is Laura's trui en dat is *Joeps/*Joep *z'n*.
This is Laura's sweater and that is Joep's one.

When there is no noun possessum, *se* is also used in child Dutch, although neither the Saxon *-s* nor the doubling construction with *z'n* is allowed in adult Dutch. So what explains the temporary appearance of [*dat is Joep-se* Ø] in child Dutch? The answer I will give lies in the acquisition of the *-e* ending with attributive adjectives (section 6.1), but first I will discuss the syntactic status of *se*.

5. The syntactic status of *se*

It has been argued that the Saxon *-s* is a determiner constituent, just like the prenominal possessive pronoun (Corver 1990). Both are in complementary distribution with the definite article of the possessum.

- (19) de broer van Jan Jans/Jan *z'n* broer *de Jans/Jan *z'n* broer

the brother of John Jan's brother the Jan's brother

In the same vein, possessive *se* is a determiner constituent in complementary distribution with the definite article.

- (20) de trui van Laura Laura-*se* trui *de Laura-*se* (trui)
 the sweater of Laura Laura's sweater the Laura's (sweater)

Children never add an article when using a possessive marking **de Laura-se (trui)*, **het papa's mes* ('the daddy's knife'). The article would not make a semantic contribution. It does not add definiteness.

When Sarah starts using the *van* construction, determiners are still often absent. At the age of 2;6 the amount of determiners in obligatory contexts is 50% in the speech of Sarah. It rises to 80% at 2;10 when she starts using possessive markings. See Van Kampen (2007) for the longitudinal graph. I suggest then that Sarah acquires the determiner status of possessive *z'n*, *-s* and *se* with the acquisition of the other determiners.

In the possessive constructions discussed here, the possessor is attributively used. It forms a phrase with the possessum that follows. The prenominal possessor is an attributive constituent with a noun, like attributively used adjectives. Three characteristics of *se* in *dit is Laura-se (trui)* can now be distinguished. 1) it indicates possession with an individuated noun (*Laura*); 2) it replaces the definite determiner *de* (*trui*) and 3) *Laura-se* is attributively used with a possessum noun. The possessum may be left unpronounced *Laura-se (##)*.

The next subsection discusses attributively used adjectives in Dutch. The idea behind this is that the acquisition of attributive adjectives plays a role in the appearance of prenominal possessive *se*.

5.1 The attributive [-e (N)] construction

Dutch adjectives get an *-e* ending when used attributively with a noun, see (21). This holds for non-neuter nouns (21a), for definite neuter nouns (21b) and for plural nouns (21c).

- (21) a. de/een groene bank.
 the/a green couch
 b. het groene huis_{neuter}.
 the green house
 c. (de) groene banken/huizen_{neuter}.
 (the) green couches/houses

There is one exception. When the noun is neuter, indefinite and singular there is no *-e* ending.

- (22) een groen huis_{neuter}.
 a green house

Now, importantly, there is another restriction related to the presence or absence of the *-e* on adjectives. When the attributive adjective has the *-e* ending, the noun may be left unpronounced, as is the case for *trui* in (23).

- (23) Ik zie twee truien.
I see two sweaters.
- Welke is opgevouwen?
Which one is folded?
 - De blauwe is opgevouwen.
The blue one is folded.

However, when the attributive adjective does not get an *-e* suffix, the noun must be present.

- (24) Ik zie twee truitjes_{neuter}. I see two small sweaters.
- *Welk_{neuter} is opgevouwen? *Een blauw is opgevouwen.
Which one is folded? A blue one is folded.
 - Welk truitje_{neuter} is opgevouwen? Een blauw truitje_{neuter}.
Which small sweater is folded? A blue small sweater.

Simple prenominal possessive pronouns are also attributive constituents, although they do not inflect. An exception is the 1st person plural *ons/onze* that inflect like adjectives, i.e. *onze bank*, *ons huis*_{neuter}. However, when the possessum noun is unpronounced, as was illustrated in (8) with *de mijne is blauw*, the suffix *-e* is mandatory.³

Now consider again the utterance in (25).

- (25) Dit is Laura-*se* (~~trui~~).

The possessum in (25) remains unpronounced and the possessive marking gets an *-e* as with attributive adjectives. I propose tentatively that the children hypercorrectly apply the overgeneralized rule of attributive adjective inflexion *-e* to the attributive Saxon *-s* in *Laura-se N*. The next subsection discusses how the acquisition of adjectives supports this claim. Section 6.2 will consider the question how *se* gets to be used not only with masculine, but also with feminine referents.

6. Acquisition preliminaries

6.1 The acquisition of attributive adjectives

Dutch children acquire the restriction on the absence of the *-e* ending quite late. They overgeneralize the attributive adjective *-e* for a long time. In an experimental study, Weerman, Bisschop & Punt (2006) showed that children aged 3-5 years add an *-e* to the adjective with a singular neuter indefinite noun in 37% of the cases. Only nouns that were already acquired as being neuter were counted. Identical examples can be found in the corpora. For instance, Sarah uses already *boek* ('book') with the neuter article *het* for some months, but she adds an *-e* to the adjective with an indefinite singular noun.

- (26) a. Ik wil geen dikke boek_{neuter}. (Sarah 3;05.30)
I don't want a thick book.
- b. Uit een grote boek_{neuter}. (Sarah 5;02.13)

³ In (8) the definite article appears as well as the possessive pronoun. Corver & Van Koppen (2010) argue that in this case *de* is not a determiner, but a pro-form like *one* in *That car is green and this one is blue*.

From a big book.

There are no counterexamples where the *-e* on the adjective is lacking with *boek* in the Sarah files. Other neuter nouns show some flexibility as to adding the *-e* to the attributive adjective. Often *-e* is added while the child does not categorize the noun as neuter yet. See (27).

- (27) Heb jij de_{common} paard_{neuter}? Heb jij een groene paard_{neuter}? (Sarah 3;10.07)
Do you have the horse? Do you have a green horse?

Children also produce utterances without the noun pronounced, as in (28).

- (28) a. (Dan) moeten ze een nieuwe (~~glijbaan~~) kopen. (Sarah 2;08.06)
Then, they must buy a new (slide).
b. Dat is een mooie (~~toren~~). (Josse 2;11.09)
That is a nice (tower).
c. Een kleine (~~boot~~). (Matthijs 3;04.26)
A small (boat).

Sometimes children leave out a neuter, indefinite, singular noun. In that case, though, the *-e* is always present. Although the examples are rare, I found no counterexamples to this overgeneralization. It may be that the neuter *het* has not been acquired yet with the nouns in (29a,b). However, that does not hold for (29c). Sarah uses *het huisje* for some time already.

- (29) a. Dat is een mooie (~~boek~~_{neuter}). (Abel 2;11.10)
That is a nice (book).
b. (Toen) heb ik een nieuwe (~~beeld~~_{neuter}) gekocht. (Sarah 4;05.29)
Then I bought a new (statue).
c. Een huisje_{neuter}. Moet een kleine zijn. (Sarah 5;02.13)
A small house. Must be a little one.

Children are able to make a distinction between predicative adjectives that never get an *-e* ending and attributive adjectives (Weerman, Bisschop & Punt 2006: 26). The (temporary) rule then is that attributive adjectives get an *-e*, but predicative adjectives not. The overgeneralization continues for some time, but around age 6 the attributive rule of \emptyset ending has more or less been acquired.

6.2 The acquisition of reference to female names

Possessor constructions doubled by the weak pronoun *z'n* appear regularly in the speech of the caretakers. The masculine form *z'n* is dominant in the doubling construction. With feminine names, the Saxon *-s* is used more frequently than doubling with *d'r*. Moreover, *z'n* is used to refer to animals and in the adult-child conversation animals play an important role. The same holds for puppets and cartoon characters. See the utterances of Sarah's mother in (30).

- (30) a. De eekhoorn *z'n* handje.
The squirrel's hand.

- b. Waar is de pop *z'n* hoofd?
Where is the puppet's head?

We have seen in section 3 that the children at first use *z'n* instead of the possessive feminine pronoun *d'r*. Other personal pronouns show the same tendency of overgeneralization to feminine referents (Van Kampen & Wijnen 2000). According to diary notes, Sarah did not use feminine pronouns at the age of 3 yet, only masculine ones.

This overgeneralization lasts for quite some time and it shows up in all corpora. In the Schlichting-VanKampen corpus of 4 children aged 3;05-5;04, I counted 41 examples of pronominal mistakes, 25 subject *hij* ('he') instead of *zij* ('she'), 7 object *hem* ('him') instead of *haar* ('her') and 9 possessive *zijn* ('his') instead of *haar* ('her'). Some examples are given in (31).

- (31) a. Hij heb niet staartjes. (Sarah 3;00.00)
He has no pigtales.
b. (Het) is een dametje. Ik geef hem een hand. (Matthijs 2;10.22)
(It) is a little lady. I give him a hand.
c. (Dat) gaat Saar in zijn mond stoppen. (Laura 3;07.19)
Saar puts it in his mouth.
d. Hij heeft een rokje. (Maike 5;03.30)
He has a small skirt.

In sum, an important cause for the extension of *se* to all proper and kinship names is the overgeneralization of masculine pronouns with feminine referents by the children. The next section will discuss why possessive *se* may appear in Dutch, but not in English or German.

7. Possessive *se*: a language-specific generalization

Dutch children spontaneously start using a general construction for possessive reference. Every individuated noun or pronoun can become attributive when *se* is added. From a syntactic point of view, the *se* possessive seems to be a splendid misunderstanding. The children erroneously overgeneralize attributive adjectival inflection to attributive possessives. The question now remains how *se* possessives come to be used so widely, particularly given that the structure is not in the parental input.

The *se* generalization appears after the age of 3½-4 when all pronominal possessive constructions are already used. The present idea is that possessive *se* appears in child Dutch because of the following three language-specific properties. 1) The unstressed weak possessive pronoun *z'n*, often pronounced as *se*; 2) the Saxon *-s*; 3) the attributive *-e* with adjectives. The second property is also available in English and German. However, the first property is not available in German, nor in English and the third property not in English. Therefore it is not expected that possessive *se* appears in the speech of English and German toddlers.

The Dutch child, by contrast, generalizes over these three properties. In support of the present view are the child's overgeneralization of the pronoun *z'n/se* to feminine names and the overgeneralization of the attributive *-e* to all adjectives and by hypercorrection to all attributively used possessors. That explains why *se* is used with all proper and kinship names to express possession, even when the possessum noun is unpronounced. Subsequently,

possessive *se* extends to all personal pronouns, not only the pronouns that allow the Saxon *-s*, but also the personal pronouns that don't allow the Saxon *-s*. However, the *se* generalization was not attested with individuated common nouns in the corpora, which may be due to the restricted use of prenominal common noun possessors in general.

The complete blocking of possessive *se* in the child's speech by the already used possessive paradigm is late. The *se* possessive is even attested at the primary school age.

- (32) Mijne-*se* is het lichtste en Sarah-*se* niet. (Laura 8;01.17)
 Mine is the lightest and Sarah's one not.

However, the *se* possessive in child Dutch has not (yet) led to a diachronic change in standard Dutch, as it did in Afrikaans, which I will now briefly discuss.

8. *The se possessive in Afrikaans*

In Afrikaans the *se* possessive is almost completely generalized. It attaches to all types of common nouns and to the question, reciprocal and quantifier pronouns. The utterances in (33a) with a plural possessor and in (33b) with an inanimate possessor are from the Southwood corpus.

- (33) a. Die kinders-*se* helmets.
 The children's helmets.
 b. Dit is haar werk-*se* laptop.
 This is her work's laptop.

When the possessor is a complex phrase, *se* attaches to the entire phrase, as with the doubled *z'n* in Dutch. See (34) with a relative clause attached to the DP.

- (34) [Die man wat hier bly] *se* vrou.
 [The man that here stay] *se*/POSS wife.

When the possessum noun is unpronounced, the possessor is marked by *s'n*. See (35).

- (35) Dit is Donna-*s'n*/die bure-*s'n*.
 This is Donna's one/the neighbors' one.

Both the Dutch Saxon *-s* and the weak pronoun *z'n* have played a role in the rise of possessive *se* in Afrikaans (Den Besten 2004). Den Besten (2004: 29) proposes in addition another syntactic property. Nowadays, Afrikaans makes a distinction between attributive adjectives and predicative ones, as is the case in child Dutch. There is no grammatical gender in Afrikaans and most attributive adjectives get an *-e* ending, except for several monosyllabic adjectives. See Donaldson (1993: chapter 6) for the full list. The predicatively used adjectives do not get an ending. In early Cape Dutch pidgin, though, the adjective had no *-e* ending with names that were only used attributively, e.g. *Hottentoots vrouwen* ('Hottentotic woman' in a 17th-century text). However, adjectives that were also used predicatively, i.e. *Afrikaans*, *dorps* ('rustic'), kept the Dutch *-e* ending when used attributively, i.e. *Afrikaanse*, *dorpse*. Den Besten supposes that pidgin speakers hypercorrectly applied the *-e* ending not only to all

adjectives that end in *-s*, but also to possessives that end in *-s*. I suggested the hypercorrectly application of the attributive *-e* ending to possessive *-s* for the Dutch child data as well.

9. The Achilles' heel of the *se* generalization

The disappearance of possessive *se* in child Dutch takes several years and it lasts into the primary school period. Moreover, Brill (1938: 54-55) already remarks that Dutch children say *mijse, jouse, moederse, vaderse*. Some of the diary data are recent ones, but the corpora in the CHILDES database are from the early nineties. So, if the *se* possessive is such a beautiful generalization and a long-lasting phenomenon, why didn't it remain in standard Dutch at some point in history?

I have the following answers. First, *se* remains recognizable as a simple weak pronoun *z'n* *auto* in informal Dutch. Afrikaans has no weak personal pronouns, only strong ones. The 3rd singular possessive pronoun is *sy kar*.

Second, weak singular possessive pronouns were already used by the Dutch children before they start using possessive *se*. The mastering of the entire paradigm in standard Dutch restricts the use of possessive *se*. The pronoun *z'n* cannot be used with personal pronouns (36a), inanimate nouns (36b), female and plural nouns (36c).

- (36) a. *mijn z'n; jouw z'n; hem/haar z'n
 b. *de trui z'n
 c. *Laura/de kinderen z'n
 Laura/the children his

Third, the *van* construction is still dominant in Dutch, whereas possessive *se* is dominant in Afrikaans (Donaldson 1993). Table 2 gives the number of possessor-possessum constructions in the corpora. The prenominal construction with a common noun possessor is restricted to the *se* marking in Afrikaans, whereas Dutch also has *z'n/d'r/-s*. As for proper/kinship names, half of them are postnominal in Dutch, whereas they are virtually absent in Afrikaans.

Table 2

	adult Afrikaans	child Afrikaans	child Dutch common nouns	child Dutch proper names
post <i>van</i> DP	17 7%	4 6%	108 90%	95 49%
pre DP <i>se</i> + <i>z'n/d'r/-s</i> (Dutch)	233 93%	61 94%	12 10%	100 51%

Once possessive *se* is generalized over all common nouns, it can become the preferred way to express a possessor-possessum relation, as it did in Afrikaans.

The rich possessive paradigm in Dutch seems to be the Achilles' heel and it prevents the overall generalization in standard Dutch. Nevertheless, several examples of possessive *se* by young adults can be found on the internet. Note the plural noun in (37e).

- (37) a. Mijn moeder-*se* telefoon.
 My mother's telephone.
 b. Check mijne-*se* site ook.
 Check my site also.

- Wat was hem-*se*/jullie-*se* probleem?
 What was his/your_{plural} problem?
- c. Elkaar-*se* mailbox.
 Each other's mailbox.
 - d. Dank voor ieder-*se* medewerking.
 Thanks for everybody's cooperation.
 - e. Al mijn kinderen-*se* eigendommen.
 All my children's belongings.

The examples in (38) are without the possessum noun.

- (38) a. Samen met mijn mama-*se* (~~broer~~).
 Together with my mummy's (brother).
 b. Zijn bak bleef leeg en de hulle-*se* niet.
 His bin remained empty and theirs not.
 c. (Ik) vind het net zoals jou jammer dat wij elkaar-*se* niet zijn.
 (I) find it just like you a pity that we aren't each other's.

Note *elkaar-se* in (38c). It looks like it has become a nominalization, with the interpretation of *geliefden* ('lovers'), rather than an attributively used possessor followed by an empty noun.

10. Conclusion

The prenominal *se* possessive in child Dutch is not so much a clumsy way to deal with the parental input, but rather an attempt of the child to find a system in the range of variation.

Several language-specific properties may contribute to the appearance of possessive *se* in child Dutch. The unstressed weak possessive pronoun *z'n*, also used with feminine possessors by the child, is often pronounced as *se*. The Saxon *-s* may be extended to *se* when children hypercorrectly apply attributive *-e* with adjectives on attributive prenominal possessors.

This raises the question whether possessive *se* will win in the end, witness its spreading among young adults, cf. (37)-(38). Since the existing Dutch corpora in CHILDES are from the early nineties, the publication of new longitudinal corpora from children >4 years might be revealing.

References

- Besten, Hans den. 2004. "The origins of the Afrikaans pre-nominal possessive system(s)." manuscript University of Amsterdam.
- Brill, E.J. 1938. *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde te Leiden*. http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/jaa003193801_01/downloads.php.
- Corver, Norbert. 1990. "The syntax of left branch extractions." PhD diss., Tilburg University.
- Corver, Norbert & Marjo van Koppen. 2010. "Ellipsis in Dutch possessive noun phrases: a micro-comparative approach." *The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 13: 99–140.
- Donaldson, Bruce. 1993. *A Grammar of Afrikaans*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Kampen, Jacqueline van. 2007. "Relative agreement in Dutch". *Linguistics in the Netherlands 2007* ed. by Marjo van Koppen & Bettelou Los, 112-125. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kampen, Jacqueline van & Norbert Corver. 2006. "Diversity of possessor marking in Dutch child language and Dutch dialects." *Variation in Sprachtheorie und Spracherwerb* ed. by Maurice Vliegen, 385-398. Berlin: Lang.
- Kampen, Jacqueline van & Frank Wijnen. 2000. "Grammaticale ontwikkeling." *Kindertaalverwerving. Een Handboek voor het Nederlands* ed. by Steven Gillis & Annemarie Schaerlaekens, 225-285. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.
- MacWhinney, Brian. 2015. *The CHILDES Project: Tools for Analyzing Talk*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Southwood, Frenette & Roeland van Hout. 2009. "Linguistic characteristics of specific language impairment in Afrikaans." *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics PLUS* 37: 103-142.
- Weerman, Fred, Jannetje Bisschop & Laura Punt. 2006. "L1 and L2 Acquisition of Dutch Adjectival Flexion." *ACLCL Working Papers* 1: 5-36.