

Prepositional genitives in Romance and the issue of parallel development

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The fact that the Romance languages, since their earliest attestations, appear to be, from the point of view of a syntactic typology, much closer to one another than to their documented common Latin ancestor is often cited as a most striking case of parallel development. As such, it poses a serious challenge to non-directional theories of syntactic change (cf. the recent discussion in Roberts 2007). In this paper I will tackle the issue of parallel development by focusing on the observed sequence of morpho-syntactic changes affecting the realization of arguments of nominal heads from Latin to Romance. I will present data from a corpus search over Latin texts dating to the Classical (I cent. BCE - I cent. CE) and to the Late (IV cent. CE) stage, and from Old French texts (XI-XIII cent. CE).

Prepositional genitives in the Western Romance varieties are attested since the earliest documents. They share the most fundamental syntactic characteristics (cf. Giorgi and Longobardi 1991, Androutsopoulou and Español-Echevarría 2003) and the preposition *di/de* introducing them can be formally traced back to a common Latin origin, the ablative preposition *dē*. However, the genitival function of the prepositional tour with *dē* does not appear to be grammaticalized in any documented stage of the Latin language. The question therefore is whether it is nonetheless possible to detect a commonly inherited feature accounting for such apparent parallel development.

The inflectional realization of genitive was the only way of encoding real arguments within the Classical Latin DP. This situation persists significantly also in the Late Latin texts which have been included in my survey: the prepositional tour with *dē* + ablative does not significantly increase in frequency with respect to the Classical stage and is still overwhelmingly found with its typical directional use. Partitive or pseudo-partitive occurrences appear at a comparable rate as that of earlier - especially pre-Classical- texts (cf. Molinelli 1996, Vincent 1999). The expression of real arguments with *dē* + ablative is extremely rare, and this conclusion seems to hold also for later attestations (cf. Bonnet 1890: 607 f. on the few examples found in Gregory of Tours, where the original ablative value of the preposition is nonetheless still clear).

In the *Vie de Saint Alexis*, one of the most archaic documents of Old French, the distribution of the prepositional tour introduced by *de* attests its full grammaticalization as a means of expressing arguments of nominal heads. However, prepositional genitives occur alongside inflectional realizations of genitives by means of the *cas-régime absolu* (Foulet 1928), i.e. the oblique case of the extant bi-casual declension, which is lost only by the Middle French period. In the *Vie de Saint Alexis* the number of occurrences of prepositional genitives only slightly exceeds that of inflectional genitives. The Old French situation, thus, clearly shows that the grammaticalization of prepositional genitives cannot be mechanically linked to the loss of the inflectional realization.

I will argue that Old French genitives expressed by the *cas-régime absolu* are, in fact, a continuation of Latin from a syntactic point of view: I will propose that they represent the result of a further reanalysis of the Latin construction and that prepositional realizations share the same structural source. The kernel of the change under analysis is traced back to the Late Latin stage: despite the retention of the original inflectional system, Late Latin shows an extremely clear-cut shift in the distribution of genitive arguments. While in Classical Latin genitives occur indifferently in pre- or post-nominal position, in the Late Latin texts included in my sample genitives invariably follow their head noun, with only a few exceptions, which can be straightforwardly accounted for as idiomatic expressions. This major shift, whose ultimate causes are admittedly unclear, but do not seem to be reducible to concurrent morpho-syntactic changes, results in the generation of an ambiguous input for acquisition. Following de Wit (1997) (cf. Gianollo 2007 for Latin), I will assume that a postnominal genitive can have two structural sources: either it is a genitive licensed in the head noun's extended functional projection (a 'functional genitive') or it involves the generation of additional structure, and is linked to the DP by means of a general process of predication (a 'free genitive').

In Classical Latin, the difference between these two syntactic mechanisms of argument realization is detectable, despite the common inflectional means of expression. Pre-nominal genitives are 'functional'. They obey much stricter structural requirements, occurring in two fixed positions which are crosslinguistically well assessed, respectively before and after hierarchically ordered adjectives (cf. Longobardi 2001), and always respecting the thematic hierarchy: in case of realization of two

arguments of the same head noun, the subjective genitive always precedes the objective one. On the contrary, post-nominal genitives are ‘free’, as demonstrated mainly by the possibility of not respecting the thematic hierarchy and by their looser linear distribution.

In Late Latin, ambiguity is due to the fact that the post-nominal genitive could in principle be analyzed as a ‘functional’ genitive, crossed over by noun raising (as e.g. in Modern Greek), or as a ‘free’ genitive. I will assume that the first option is preferred during acquisition due a principle of structural economy which guides the learner to assume the least possible amount of structure, hence to opt, in this specific case, for establishing a licensing mechanism within the head noun’s extended functional projection. The former post-nominal free genitive is thus reanalyzed, in absence of negative evidence, as a functional genitive raised over by the head noun. This genitive construction may have been plausibly inherited by Proto-Romance and may represent the direct source of the Old French configuration with the *cas-régime absolu*. During the Old French period, however, a further reanalysis takes place: as part of the general process of deflexion, the head noun’s extended projection loses its ability to license nominal arguments. As a consequence, the postulation of additional structure comes to be required. I will assume that this additional structure takes the form of a KP-phrase, in the spirit of Bayer, Bader, and Meng (2001): both inflectional endings and prepositions -or at least functional prepositions, with a particularly impoverished set of lexical features, such as *de-* can act as exponents of ‘Kase’. According to this analysis, the *cas-régime absolu* and the prepositional genitives would have the same underlying structure and would coexist until the bi-casual declension eventually disappears. Once a substantial structural parallelism between ‘free’ inflectional genitives and prepositional phrases is established on theoretical bases, the ultimate source of the prepositional tour can be traced back to the crucial shift occurring in Late Latin, which unequivocally transmits to the ‘daughter’ languages genitives in the post-nominal position.

References

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