

Consanguinity and Possession in Varieties of Dutch

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Southern varieties of Dutch use the 1st person plural form of the possessive pronoun *ons* as a marker of consanguinity with proper names, as in *ons Emma* ‘Emma, our consanguineous family member’. This use of *ons* ‘our’ has some remarkable properties: It is incompatible with adjectival modification and contrastive stress. These properties are shared with a construction from Standard Dutch: complex prenominal *s*-possessors consisting of the 1st person singular form of the possessive pronoun and a kinship term as in *mijn vaders fiets* ‘my father’s bike’. We propose that both these constructions are constructional idioms (Booij 2002), a lexical template with a variable part. This offers a straightforward account of the properties of these constructions.*

1. Introduction.

Many Southern varieties of Dutch, like Brabant Dutch and Limburgian, display a remarkable phenomenon with respect to the expression of kinship relations.¹ Speakers of these varieties use the 1st person plural form of the possessive pronoun *ons* ‘our’ as a marker that signals kinship relations. More specifically, a combination of *ons* ‘our’ and a proper name signals that the bearer of the name is part of the speaker’s family.²

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¹ It is also found in Frisian.

² As we show below, *ons* ‘our’ might in some dialects signal a more restrictive relation than a family relation, while in other dialects it expresses a less restrictive relation.

A speaker who uses 1 conveys that Emma and Filip are part of their family.³

(1) *Proper names of family members*

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| a. ons Emma | Brabant Dutch |
| our Emma | |
| ‘Emma, our family member’ | |
| | |
| b. onze Filip | |
| our Filip | |
| ‘Filip our family member’ | |

One of the remarkable properties of the use of *ons* ‘our’ as a marker of family relations is that it is incompatible with (productive) adjectival modification of the following proper name, as shown in 2.⁴

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------|
| (2) ons (* <i>slimme</i>) Emma | Brabant Dutch |
| our smart Emma | |
| ‘Smart Emma, our family member’ | |

This property is shared with one of the possessive constructions in Standard Dutch. Standard Dutch has prenominal possessors that are marked by the possessive marker *-s*, as in 3a. In most cases, this type of possessor consists of a single head, as in 3a, and a phrasal possessor is excluded, as in 3b (see Weerman & de Wit 1999 Corver 2003, Kampen & Corver 2006, Broekhuis & den Dikken 2012, among many others). Broekhuis & den Dikken (2012:837–838) observe that there is an exception to this rule. Kinship terms introduced by a 1st person singular possessive pronoun readily occur as *-s* possessors, as in 3c.

³ If the possessive pronoun receives contrastive stress, 1b has a contrastive interpretation on which Filip is not necessarily a family member of the speaker. We come back to this interpretation below. With a neutral intonation, however, only the family member interpretation is possible.

⁴ As we show below, *ons* can also be used as a normal possessive pronoun in these varieties. In that case, it is compatible with adjectival modification (see section 2.2. below).

the same lines as the family relation marker *ons* ‘our’. In addition to accounting for a number of other properties, this straightforwardly explains why the combination ‘my’ + kinship term appears to be an exception to the rule that only head-like elements can be used as prenominal -s possessors in Dutch.

2. *Ons* ‘Our’ and Proper Names.

As discussed above, Southern varieties of Dutch, like Brabant Dutch and Limburgian, use *ons* ‘our’ with proper names to signal a family relation between the speaker and the bearer of the proper name. See, for instance, the examples in 1 above. This use of *ons* ‘our’ has a number of particular properties that we discuss in detail in the following sections.

2.1. Meaning Contribution.

We stated above that *ons* ‘our’ signals family membership. This is a slight oversimplification. There are indeed dialects that use *ons* ‘our’ only for family memberships, including for spouses and in-laws. This is, for example, the case for the Brabantic dialects spoken in the area west of Brussels. Other dialects might be more or less restrictive in this respect. The Northern Brabantic dialect spoken in the Dutch town of Vught is an example of a less restrictive dialect. Kroon (2015) shows that the younger speakers of this dialect do not only use *ons* ‘our’ with proper names of family members, but also with those of close friends.

The Brabantic varieties spoken in Brussels and the neighboring areas to the North and East are examples of more restrictive dialects. In these dialects, *ons* ‘our’ can only introduce blood relatives of the speaker. Relatives that are part of the family of the speaker through marriage (for example, spouses and in-laws) cannot be introduced by *ons* ‘our’. In order to appreciate this, consider the family tree in 5.

the remainder of this paper, we focus on dialects with consanguineous *ons* ‘our’. However, the account that we develop is flexible enough to also be applied to the less restrictive dialects, as we show in section 2.3 below.

2.2. Other Properties.

In addition to the semantics outlined above, consanguineous *ons* ‘our’ has a number of other unusual properties. First of all, consanguineous *ons* cannot receive contrastive stress, as shown in 8.⁵

(8) Brabant Dutch

*ONS Emma is veel slimmer, dan JULLIE Griet!
 our Emma is way smarter than your Griet
 ‘Emma, our consanguineous kin member, is way smarter than your Griet!’

This incompatibility between consanguineous *ons* ‘our’ and contrastive stress is not the result of a more general incompatibility between 1st person possessive pronouns and contrastive stress. In the relevant dialects, *ons* ‘our’ is not only used as a marker of consanguinity or family membership, but it can also be used as a regular 1st person possessive marker. On this use, it can carry contrastive stress, as in 9.

(9) ONS huis is groter dan JULLIE huis! Brabant Dutch
 our house is bigger than your.PL house
 ‘Our house is bigger than your house!’

Proper names are not only compatible with the consanguineous use of *ons* ‘our’, but also with its normal possessive use. It is possible to combine a proper name with *ons* ‘our’ carrying contrastive stress. In that case, *ons* ‘our’ can only be interpreted as the regular possessive, not as the consanguinity marker. We illustrate this with the example in 10. In this example, Emma is not necessarily a consanguineous kin member, but instead she can be a member of any group that can be marked as

⁵ We indicate contrastive stress through means of capitalization.

ours. So Emma in 10 could belong to our class, our softball team, our friends, our colleagues, etc.⁶

- (10) JOUW Emma komt, maar ONZE Emma niet. Brabant Dutch
 your Emma comes but our Emma not.
 ‘Your Emma will be coming, but our Emma won’t.’

In the introduction, we already discussed another property of the family/consanguinity marker *ons* ‘our’: its incompatibility with productive adjectival modification, as shown in 11 (see also 2).

⁶ The careful reader might have noticed that, in addition to contrastive stress, there is another difference between possessive *ons* ‘our’ in 10 and the use of *ons* ‘our’ as a consanguinity marker like in 1a, repeated here as i.

- (i) Ons Emma
 our Emma
 ‘Emma, our consanguineous kin member’

The form of *ons* is different in the two cases. In 10, *ons* ends in *-e*, *onze*, pronounced as a schwa. In i, this *-e* is absent. In Standard Dutch, the *-e* in *onze* is normally considered to be a marker that signals agreement with the noun that follows it (see, for example, Haeseryn 1997:§5.5.4, 5.5.5.1). On the basis of this, one might be inclined to think that the dialects under investigation feature separate agreement paradigms for the consanguineous use of *ons* ‘our’ and its regular possessive use. However, this is not the case. In the relevant dialects, feminine nouns that are neither proper names nor kinship terms, such as, for instance, *tafel* ‘table’, also display an alternation between *ons/onze*, as in ii.

- (ii) a. Ons tafel is kapot.
 ‘Our table is broken.’
 b. ONZE tafel is groter dan die van ULLE!
 our table is bigger than that of your.PL
 ‘Our table is bigger than yours!’

The alternation in ii is similar to the contrast between i and 10. It cannot, however, be due to a separate agreement pattern for consanguineous *ons*, since consanguinity is not a meaning component that can be attributed to a table. The factor that determines the choice between *ons/onze* with feminine nouns in the relevant dialects seems to be prosodic prominence. If *ons* is prosodically prominent, as is the case if it carries contrastive stress, it must be realized as *onze*. In other cases, it is realized as *ons*.

- (11) a. *ons* (**slimme*) Emma Brabant Dutch
 ‘our smart Emma’
- b. *onze* (**doortastende*) Guido
 ‘our forceful Guido’

The unacceptability of the adjective in 11 has its source in the presence of consanguineous *ons* ‘our’. It is not due to an incompatibility between normal productive adjectival modification and proper names. This is shown by the observation that the same adjectives can modify the same names in 12, without giving rise to unacceptability.

- (12) a. *die* *slimme* Emma Brabant Dutch
 ‘that smart Emma’
- b. *die* *doortastende* Guido
 ‘that forceful Guido’

We propose an analysis of consanguineous *ons* that straightforwardly accounts for these properties.

2.3. Analysis: Consanguineous *Ons* as a Constructional Idiom.

As pointed out above, *ons* ‘our’ also functions as the regular 1st person plural possessive pronoun. In case the regular 1st person plural possessive *ons* ‘our’ combines syntactically with a common noun such as *huis* ‘house’, the resulting phrase *ons huis* ‘our house’ means something like ‘the house that is in a possessive relation with a group that includes the speaker’. The possessive pronoun thus introduces a possessive relation. The semantic nature of this possessive relation is rather flexible. *Ons huis* ‘our house’ might be the house that we designed, built, or painted, the house that we own, live in, etc. Depending on the context, different interpretations of the possessive relation are possible. In order to account for this flexibility, Barker (1995) proposes that the possessive relation denotes an underspecified relation R whose exact nature is filled in by the context of the utterance it appears in. Using this relation R, the interpretation of the regular possessive phrase *ons huis* ‘our house’ formally corresponds to 13, in which the iota operator encodes definiteness (that is, an exhaustively identified specific individual).

(13) $\iota x.\text{house}(x) \wedge R(x, \llbracket 1\text{PL} \rrbracket)$

By contrast, when *ons* ‘our’ is used as a consanguineous marker with a proper name, it is not the case that the individual denoted by the proper name is in some possessive relation that needs to be filled in by the context. Rather, this relation strictly represents the consanguineous relation between the individual denoted by the proper name and the plural entity denoted by *ons* ‘our’. So, *ons Emma* in 1a above, repeated here in 14a, refers to the unique individual called Emma, who is in a consanguinity relation with a plural entity that includes the speaker, as shown in 14b.

(14) a. *ons Emma* Brabant Dutch
 our Emma
 ‘Emma, my consanguineous kin member’
 b. $\iota x.[\text{Emma}(x) \wedge \text{consanguineous_kin}(x, \llbracket 1\text{PL} \rrbracket)]$

This means that the difference between the regular possessive *ons* ‘our’ and consanguineous *ons* ‘our’ is that the possessive relation is underspecified in the former, but specified as consanguinity in the latter. This additional meaning of consanguinity is noncompositional. *Ons* ‘our’ does not by itself entail consanguinity, as shown by its regular possessive use. The same holds, of course, for proper names: Uttering the proper name *Emma* by itself does not entail the existence of a consanguineous relation. Put differently, the consanguinity of the phrase in 14 is a semantic property of the whole construction that is not traceable to any of its parts.

Semantic noncompositionality is the hallmark of idiomatic expressions. In this case, however, one is not dealing with what is traditionally called an idiom, that is, expressions such as English *kick the bucket*, of which all parts are fixed. In the case of consanguineous *ons* ‘our’, the proper name that occurs after *ons* ‘our’ is not fixed. Instead, it can be any first name. Booij (2002:302) refers to such a syntactic expression with noncompositional meaning of which only a part is fixed as a *constructional idiom*, following work by Langacker (1987), Jackendoff (1995, 1997, 2001, 2002) and work done in construction grammar (Fillmore et al. 1988, Goldberg 1995, among others).

(18) Brabant Dutch

*ONS Emma is veel slimmer, dan JULLIE Griet!
 our Emma is way smarter than your Griet
 ‘Emma, our consanguineous kin member, is way smarter than your
 Griet!’

This property also follows straightforwardly from our proposal that consanguineous *ons* ‘our’ is part of a constructional idiom. In order for an element to receive contrastive stress it needs to have an independent meaning. Otherwise it is impossible to contrast its meaning with the meaning of something else. On our proposal, the consanguineous *ons* ‘our’ is part of the lexical template in 15 above. This template is stored in the lexicon with its associated meaning. Crucially, this meaning is a property of the whole template rather than of its parts. This means that the *ons*-part of the constructional idiom does not carry any meaning of its own at any level of representation.⁹ As a result, it is impossible to put contrastive stress on *ons* ‘our’: It cannot be contrasted since it has no meaning of its own.

We have shown above that our constructional idiom approach accounts for three properties of the combination of consanguineous *ons* ‘our’ and proper names: its noncompositional meaning, its incompatibility with productive adjectival modification, and the impossibility to contrastively stress *ons* ‘our’ in its consanguineous use. We now turn to another construction in the same dialects that combines *ons* with a kinship term. We show that this construction needs to be analyzed along the same lines as combinations of consanguineous *ons* ‘our’ and proper names.

3. Consanguineous *Ons* and Kinship Terms.

In the previous section, we examined combinations of *ons* ‘our’ in some Southern Dutch dialects. In the same dialects, it is also possible to combine kinship terms with *ons* ‘our’, as in 19.

⁹ Of course, the historical origin of consanguineous *ons* ‘our’ is the normal possessive *ons* ‘our’, which is associated with its own meaning. However, as soon as it was reanalyzed as consanguineous *ons*, this meaning was transferred to the meaning of the constructional idiom. This meaning includes not only the meaning of possessive *ons*, but also the consanguinity aspect.

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------|
| (19) a. ons vader
‘our father’ | b. ons moeder/mama
‘our mother/mom’ | Brabant Dutch |
| c. ons mami
‘our grandmother’ | d. onzen bompa
‘our grandfather’ | |
| e. ons zus/dochter
‘our sister/daughter’ | f. ons broer
‘our brother’ | |

Like the cases in which *ons* ‘our’ combines with a proper name, these expressions convey a consanguinity relation with the speaker. At first glance, one might not be inclined to analyze these cases along the same lines as *ons* ‘our’ + proper name. After all, the lexical meaning of the kinship terms already entails the existence of a consanguinity relation. Somebody is a father/sister/brother/son/etc. only by virtue of the existence of a consanguinity relation with somebody else. The consanguinity meaning component can thus be traced back to the kinship term. It is therefore not as clearly noncompositional as the combination *ons* + proper name. An analysis as a constructional idiom is therefore not self-evident.

Nevertheless, we argue that the combination *ons* + kinship term of the type in 19 should be analyzed as an instance of a constructional idiom similar to the one in 15 above. The reason for this is that it shares two properties with the combination consanguineous *ons* + proper name, despite the fact that the consanguinity meaning looks compositional in 19. These two properties are the impossibility to productively modify the kinship term with an adjective, as illustrated in 20a,b, and the impossibility to contrastively stress *ons* ‘our’, as in 20c.

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| (20) a. ons (*oude) vader
‘our old father’ | Brabant Dutch |
| b. ons (*goede) moeder
‘our good mother’ | |

- c. *ONS mama is veel slimmer, dan JULLIE mama!¹⁰
 our mommy is way smarter than your mommy
 ‘Our mommy is way smarter than yours!’

As noted above, *ons* ‘our’ in its normal (nonconsanguineous) use can readily receive contrastive stress. In addition, kinship terms can generally be modified by adjectives if they are introduced by a possessive pronoun, as shown in 21.

- (21) mijn oude/lieve/goede/mooie vader
 my old/nice/good/beautiful father
 ‘my old/nice/good/beautiful father’

The incompatibility of contrastive stress and productive adjectival modification would therefore remain a mystery if *ons* ‘our’ and the kinship terms in 19 were to combine in the syntactic component of the grammar. This incompatibility would, however, follow automatically if a constructional idiom were involved. As discussed above, contrastive stress is impossible on words that are an integral part of a constructional idiom, since these words are not individually associated with a meaning that can be contrasted. Moreover, as also discussed above, since constructional idioms are stored in the lexicon as a whole, their parts form together a single atomic unit in the syntactic component. It is therefore impossible to syntactically add an adjective inside the constructional idiom. This explains the unacceptability of 20a,b.

Since it offers an explanation for the data in 20 that would otherwise remain unaccounted for, we conclude that the combinations of *ons* and a kinship term in 19 are instances of a constructional idiom. To be more precise, we propose that the items in 19 are instances of the constructional idiom in 22.

¹⁰ Note that a contrastive reading with 1st person plural possessive pronouns without a consanguineous interpretation is possible in a context of (clearly nonconsanguineous) role play among children, where contrastively used *ONZE mama* ‘our mother’ would be fine.

possessor with the 1st person singular possessive pronoun cannot be productively modified by an adjective, as shown in 4 above and repeated here in 23.¹¹

- (23) Mijn (*oude) vader-s fiets Standard Dutch
 my old father-POSS bike
 ‘my old father’s bike’

Above, we have argued that such an incompatibility with adjectival modification indicates that a noun is part of a constructional idiom. Example 23 therefore suggests that *mijn vaders* ‘my father’s’ is also an instance of a constructional idiom. If this reasoning is on the right track, *mijn* ‘my’ should in this particular case also be incompatible with contrastive stress, even though *mijn* ‘my’ readily receives contrastive stress in other contexts. This is indeed the case, as shown in 24.

- (24) Standard Dutch

*MIJN vader-s fiets is sneller dan die van JOUW vader.
 my father-POSS bike is faster than that of your father

We therefore conclude that we are indeed dealing with a constructional idiom. Below we show that this conclusion also offers an interesting account for a peculiar observation, namely, that the combination *mijn* + kinship term is the only multiword expression that can carry the possessive *-s* suffix. In order to appreciate this in more detail, we first show that as a general rule, pronominal *-s* possessors in Standard Dutch must consist of a single word, that is, they must be a single syntactic head.

¹¹ Some speakers, including one of the reviewers, report that, although it is still considerably degraded, 23 is not as bad as i, in which the possessive pronoun has been replaced with the definite article.

- (i) *de oude vader-s fiets
 the old father-POSS bike

Other speakers reported that they find i and 23 equally bad. We currently have no explication for this variation.

Prenominal *-s* possessors are not the only way to express adnominal possession in Dutch, but it is the only construction that displays a head restriction. Dutch has two other adnominal possessive constructions. The first of these also involves a prenominal possessor. The possessor is, however, not marked by the *-s* suffix. Instead, it is doubled by a possessive pronoun, as in 28a. This strategy is also known as POSSESSOR DOUBLING (see Grohmann & Haegeman 2003, Georgi & Salzmann 2011, Schoorlemmer 2012 for a discussion of similar cases in Norwegian and German). The second of these additional strategies is to express the possessor postnominally through means of a *van*-PP, as in 28b.

- (28) a. Jan z'n fiets possessor doubling
 Jan his bike
 'Jan's bike'
- b. de fiets van Jan prepositional
 the bike of Jan
 'Jan's bike'

Unlike prenominal *-s* possessors, the possessor in possessor doubling constructions and *van*-PPs does not need to be a head, but can also be an XP, as shown in 29.

- (29) a. [de nieuwe leraar] z'n fiets Standard Dutch
 the new teacher his bike
 'the new teacher's bike'
- b. de fiets van [de nieuwe leraar]
 the bike of the new teacher
 'the new teacher's bike'

Broekhuis & den Dikken (2012:837–838) note that there seems to be a curious exception to the head restriction on prenominal *-s* possessors. Kinship terms introduced by a 1st person singular possessive pronoun readily occur as *-s* possessors in Standard Dutch, as in 30.¹³

¹³ German displays a similar head restriction on prenominal *-s* possessors as Dutch. Fuß (2011:38) shows that in some cases, German also exceptionally displays complex XP-possessors. Although he does not observe it himself, all

- (30) mijn vader-s fiets Standard Dutch
 my father-POSS bike
 ‘my father’s bike’

Example 30 seems to involve a phrase as prenominal *-s* possessor. Although it was not discussed by Broekhuis & den Dikken (2012), the obvious question that arises is whether exceptions to the head restriction are limited to kinship terms accompanied by a 1st person singular possessive pronoun or whether other combinations can also constitute a complex *-s* possessor.

The data in 31, 32 and below show that only the combination 1st person singular possessive pronoun + kinship term can be a complex *-s* possessor. It is not possible to combine a nonkinship term, such as *kapper* ‘hairdresser’ with a 1st person singular possessive pronoun, as shown in (31).

- (31) *mijn kapper-s fiets Standard Dutch
 my hairdresser-POSS bike
 ‘my hairdresser’s bike’

It is also impossible to combine kinship terms with possessive pronouns other than 1st person singular. This is shown in 32a. A 2nd person singular possessive pronoun is only marginally acceptable. A 3rd person singular possessive pronoun leads to an even worse degradation. Finally, plural possessive pronouns lead to sharp unacceptability. Examples 32b,c show that there are no restrictions of a similar sort on the possessor doubling and prepositional strategies to express adnominal possession.

- (32) a. ?jouw/ *?zijn/ *jullie vader-s fiets -s suffix
 your.SG/ his/ your.PL father-POSS bike

his examples are of the type in 30: They involve a kinship term introduced by a 1st person singular possessive pronoun (see also Scott 2014:285–293, who confirms, via corpus research, that only the 1st person singular possessive pronoun can occur in this construction). We take this to show that (some varieties of) German may display a similar pattern as Standard Dutch.

Since these two observations demonstrate that one is dealing with a constructional idiom, we propose that the combination *mijn* + kinship term is an instance of the constructional idiom, as shown in 34.

- (34) Syntax: [_{DP} *mijn* Y] where Y = any kinship term
 Meaning: ux.[Y(x, [[1SG]])]
 ‘the unique individual who is in the relation with the
 speaker that is expressed by the kinship term’

In the case of 33a, the variable part Y of the constructional idiom is filled in by the kinship term *moeder* ‘mother’ prior to insertion into the syntax. Consequently, the two-word combination *mijn moeder* will enter the syntax as an atomic unit, that is, a head. It can therefore freely combine with the possessive *-s* suffix without violating the head restriction. In this way, there are no real violations to the syntactic head restriction on prenominal possessors in Dutch. The only case that looks like one is a multiword expression that is formed in the lexicon, not in syntax. In this way, the apparent exception to the head restriction, and the bans on contrastive stress and adjectival modification receive a unified account.

Note that the meaning of the constructional idiom in 34 is fully compositional. It is the same as if *mijn* ‘my’ and the kinship term were combined in the syntax. It is therefore, just like the *ons* ‘our’ + kinship term combinations discussed above, another illustration that noncompositional meaning is not a necessary property of a constructional idiom.

5. Conclusion.

In this paper, we took a closer look at rather exceptional uses of possessive pronouns in varieties of Dutch. First, we examined the use of the combination *ons* + proper name in Brabant Dutch (and other dialectal varieties of Dutch). We also investigated the use of the combination *mijn* + kinship term as a prenominal *s*-possessor in Standard Dutch. The first case is exceptional because the possessive pronoun *ons* ‘our’ conveys a consanguinity relation in addition to its 1st person plural features. The second case was unusual in that the *-s* possessor appears to be a phrase, while phrasal *-s* possessors are banned in all other contexts.

We proposed that both of these cases were instances of constructional idioms. This proposal successfully accounts for the ban on productive adjectival modification and contrastive stress that charac-

terizes these constructions. In addition, it offers an explanation for the noncompositional meaning component of consanguinity in the case of the *ons* + proper name construction. As for the prenominal *-s* possessors consisting of *mijn* ‘my’ and a kinship term, this proposal explains why this is the only case in which something that looks phrasal acts as a prenominal *-s* possessor: Although it is a multiword expression, it is syntactically atomic.

We also discovered that the same dialects that feature the *ons* + proper name construction also have the combination *ons* + kinship term that features the same ban on modification and contrastive stress as the other two constructions. We therefore concluded that this construction is also a constructional idiom.

Central to the discussion in this paper was the notion of constructional idiom, a multiword lexical expression with a variable part. We have argued that noncompositional meaning is not a necessary property of constructional idioms. We have also proposed that a ban on modification of otherwise modifiable elements and a ban on contrastive stress for elements that are generally compatible with this kind of stress indicate that one is dealing with a constructional idiom. These bans can thus be used as diagnostics for a constructional idiom. A wider use of these diagnostics and other tests would help to determine the exact boundary between the lexical and the syntactic component of the grammar, an issue that deserves more detailed research.

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