

ON THE GRAMMATICAL STATUS OF THE S-
GENITIVE IN SWEDISH
SOME REMARKS ON MURIEL NORDE'S "THE HISTORY
OF THE GENITIVE IN SWEDISH"

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1. The s-genitive (e.g. *king's* victory) is a morpheme found in Germanic languages, among others in English, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian. Its grammatical status has long been a matter of controversy, at least since 1891 when Otto Jespersen published his *Studier over engelske kasus*. In this study he rejected the classification of the s-genitive as an inflectional ending, arguing for its connection to a whole phrase rather than a word. Morphologically, the s-genitive derives from an inflectional ending. The genitive is generally discussed as a case of nouns, however, a closer look at the syntax of the s-genitive as contrasted with the syntax of morphological genitive reveals that the two have quite distinct features. The most striking difference is that the morphological genitive operates on the word level and the s-genitive on the phrase level. The latter is usually attached to the last element of the attributive noun phrase (*an idle man's* doings, *the queen of England's* power, *the man I saw yesterday's* hat) be it a noun, a prepositional phrase or even a relative clause (in colloquial speech). In other words, the -s is no longer an inflectional ending marking nouns for genitive but a phrase marker. In the main noun phrase the genitive occupies the position of a determiner. This feature of the s-genitive in Swedish is also emphasized in the latest grammar of the Swedish language published by the Swedish Academy (*Svenska Akademiens Grammatik* 1999). When it comes to function as well as meaning, case is considered to be a feature of a noun phrase rather than a noun (Band II, p.112).

2. The historical development of the s-genitive in Swedish is analysed among others in a doctoral dissertation presented at the Scandinavian department of the University of Amsterdam in 1997 (Muriel Norde "The History of the Genitive in Swedish. A case study in degrammaticalization"). The study depicts the history of the s-genitive in Swedish with examples and evidence from other Germanic languages, mainly English, as well.

The author's aim was to describe the spread of the s-genitive from masculine and neuter singular (i/j)-a-stems to other declensions. The development is usually described as a shift of paradigm helped by the confusion caused by vowel reduction and loss of final *r* in the inflectional endings of other declensions. The author, however, hypothesizes the contrary: that the *-s* had first been reanalysed as a **phrase marker** and only as such it spread to other declensions. The histories of the Swedish language usually mention the spread of the **ending** (e.g. Wessén 1968:136) which later became a phrase marker. According to Norde, only the first instances of secondary *-s* can be regarded as examples of one ending substituting the other. The later shift (that began in the Old Swedish period) involves a morpheme that is more loosely attached to the stem and is no longer a cumulative suffix (i.e. it has ceased to signal the number as well as gender).

Norde calls this morpheme a **degrammaticalized** form. Understanding grammaticalization as a 'subset of linguistic changes through which a lexical item in certain uses becomes a grammatical item, or through which a grammatical item becomes more grammatical' (Hopper & Traugott 1993:2), Norde defines degrammaticalization as its reverse, the process of more grammatical elements becoming less grammatical. Analysing her sources, the author finds evidence for her hypothesis. It seems that it was indeed a phrase-marking *-s* that had spread from (i/j)-a stems to other declensions either substituting the former endings or 'completing' them (in the instances of adding *-s* to forms already inflected for genitive, e.g. *broPers*, or for accusative).

3. Initially an inflexional ending, the *-s* has detached itself from the noun (*kungen av Danmarks slott* rather than *kungens av Danmark slott*) and become less grammatical. The prerequisite for this detachment was the gradual loss of concordial case (when both the head and the dependents are marked for case, e.g. *Priggiæ markæ* (GEN), *Prim markum* (DAT), *Pre markr* (ACC)). The dependents ceased to be marked for case (or, in the case of feminine nouns, only the dependents retained the marking). While other endings were gradually lost, the *-s* has prevailed as a phrase marker – always attached to the last element of the noun phrase.

It should be noted here, however, that Swedish has proved more resistant to the phrase-marking *-s* in the instances of the so-called group genitive than English. According to *Svenska Akademiens grammatik* as well as other grammars of modern Swedish, the *-s* morpheme is not necessarily attached to the last element of the phrase. In formal, written language the construction '*kungens av Danmark slott*' would still be preferred over '*kungen av Danmarks slott*' (Thorell 1973:49; Svenska Akademiens grammatik, Band II, p.113).

4. Some critical remarks to Norde's study may be directed against her use of terminology. Norde's term for the s-genitive as a phrase marker is a **clitic** and by that she means a suffix that may be attached to any part of the phrase. In linguistics, clitics are forms that are analysable as separate elements from the point of view of syntax (i.e. they are words), but are pronounced as part of an adjacent word. Obviously, the s-genitive is not a separate word syntactically and cannot be termed a clitic in accordance with this definition. In treating a form as a clitic or not the phonological features are prevalent (i.e. the form is not independent phonologically and cannot have its own stress). The reasons for choosing this particular term (which seems to be adopted by other authors as well) were not given. The term **internal inflection** poses another problem. Used by the author in the sense of the inflection of both the noun and the suffixed definite article for case, number and gender, inter-

nal inflection is rather associated with inflection by means of ablaut (e.g. sing – sang – sung).

5. The study is well-documented, with an impressive bibliography, listing around 270 references. Worth noting here is the fact that most of the references date back to the 1920s and 1930s and many are even older. The research in the historical linguistics in Sweden has been in retreat for many years and the present study may be a mark of new interest in this field of the Scandinavian studies. It also paves way for new research. After Delsing (1991, cf. Norde 1997:227), Norde claims that the s-genitive has been reanalysed as a determiner. Both this concept and the concept of degrammaticalization are worth further studies.

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