

The Flemish External Possessor: On the edge of acceptability¹²



Liisa Buelens
Ghent University
Liisa.Buelens@UGent.be



Tijs D'Hulster
Ghent University
Tijs.Dhulster@UGent.be

1. Pattern: The Flemish External Possessor
2. Data gathering issues
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Discussion of results
6. Conclusion
7. References

GOAL : to discuss a norming test gauging the acceptability of a syntactic pattern in certain dialects in Flanders.

1. Pattern: The Flemish External Possessor

1.1. Expression of nominal possession in Dutch and Flemish

- Three possibilities:
 - Doubling pattern:

(1) 't Moest lukken dat **[Emma eur velo]** toen just kapot was.
it had-to happen that Emma her bike then just broken was
'It so happened that Emma's bicycle was broken just then.'

- DP possessor;
- Possessive pronoun with matching ϕ -features;
- Possessee.

¹ This research was possible due to funding by grants from BOF (BOF-01J13911) for Liisa Buelens and from FWO (3GOA4912W) for Tijs D'Hulster.

² Thanks go to Dora Alexopoulou who helped us with setting up and analysing the norming test. Thanks also to Ciro Greco for guiding us further through the results.

- Genitive postnominal 's/se³ possessor:

(2) 't Moest lukken dat [Emma se velo]toen just kapot was.
it had-to happen that Emma 's bike then just broken was
'It so happened that Emma's bicycle was broken just then.'

- Prepositional possessor:

(3) 't Moest lukken dat [de velo van Emma] toen just kapot was.
it had-to happen that the bike of Emma then just broken was
'It so happened that Emma's bicycle was broken just then.'

➤ Possessor and possessee form a single constituent.

➤ Both in Standard Dutch and Flemish dialects.

1.2. The Flemish External Possessor (FEP)⁴

➤ Restricted to non-standard (spoken) Dutch in Flanders.

➤ External Possession: "a semantic possessor-possesum relation is expressed by coding the possessor as a core grammatical relation of the verb and in a constituent separate from that which contains the possessum." (Payne & Barshi 1999:3).

➤ Possessor and possessee do not form a constituent:
cf. possibility of intervening adjunct with clausal scope.

➤ Possessor DP can be related to subject (4), object (5) or predicate (6) possessee:

(4) 't Moest lukken dat [Emma]toen just [eur velo] kapot was.
it had-to happen that Emma then just her bike.SUBJ broken was
'It so happened that Emma's bicycle was broken just then.'

(5) Peter ga [Jan] e ki [zen handjes] wassen.
Peter goes Jan once his hands.OBJ wash
'Peter will just wash John's hands now.'

(6) ...omdat het [Karel] gisteren [zen verjaardag] was.
because it Karel yesterday his birthday.PRED was

³ *se* is an invariable possessive marker found in West-Flemish (Haegeman 2013).

⁴ Cf. Haegeman (2011), Haegeman & Van Koppen (2012) and Haegeman & Danckaert (2013) for an extended description of the FEP.

- '... because it was Carl's birthday yesterday.'
- Note: Surface elements similar to the doubling pattern:
 - DP possessor;
 - Possessive pronoun with matching ϕ -features internal to possessee NP;
 - Possessor precedes possessee.
 - Possessor DP has "argument" status:
 - Obligatorily affected by the event expressed by the verb; test: ban on dead possessor (Hole, 2006):
 - FEP⁵: only possible when the possessor is alive (7) – (9);
 - Doubling pattern: possible when the possessor is alive (8) or dead (10).

Context 1: grandmother = alive at time of event

- FEP: ✓

- (7) ... da [mijn grootmoeder] toen just [haren auto] kapot was.
that my grandmother then just her car broken was
'... that my grandmother's car was broken just then.'

- Doubling pattern: ✓

- (8) ... da [mijngrootmoeder haren auto] toen just kapot was
that my grandmother her car then just broken was
'... that my grandmother's car was broken just then.'

Context 2: grandmother = dead at time of event

- FEP: ✗

- (9) * ... da [mijngrootmoeder] toen just [haren auto] kapot was.
that my grandmother then just her car broken was
'... that my grandmother's car was broken just then.'

- Doubling pattern: ✓

- (10) ... da [mijn grootmoeder haren auto] toen just kapot was.
that my grandmother her car then just broken was
'... that my grandmother's car was broken just then.'

- Subject-related external possessor shares subject-properties with the subject possessee (e.g. agreement patterns):
 - regular pattern: subject triggers complementizer and V-agreement (11);

⁵ Note that the FEP has strong anti-MCP effects (Haegeman 2011).

- FEP: possessor triggers complementizer agreement; possessee triggers V-agreement (12) (Haegeman & van Koppen 2012).

(11) ...**da-n/*dat** [André en Valère] gebeld **oan/*oat**
*that.PL/that.SG [André and Valère] phoned had.PL/*SG*
'... that André and Valère had called.'

(12) ...**da-n/*dat** [André en Valère] toen just [underen computer]
that.PL/that.SG [André and Valère] then just their computer.SUBJ
kapot ***waren/was**
*broken *were.PL/was.SG*
'...because André and Valère's computer broke down just then.'

(Haegeman 2011 (33))

1.3. Geographical distribution of FEP in Flemish

- Preliminary informal survey (Haegeman & Danckaert 2013):
14 out of 24 Flemish speakers accepted the pattern:

- West-Flemish: 6 out of 9;
- East-Flemish: 6 out of 10;
- Brabant: 1 out of 4;
- 1 speaker from Antwerp rejected the pattern;
- 1 bilingual speaker of West-Flemish and French accepted the pattern.

} Flemish
}
} Brabant

→ FEP seems to be associated with the dialect groups.

- Present norming test aims to expand the informal survey by Haegeman & Danckaert (2013).

2. Data gathering issues

2.1. FEP is a non-standard, infrequent phenomenon

- FEP does not occur in Standard Dutch; first attested example in West-Flemish (Haegeman & van Koppen 2012) → problematic for written corpora, which are predominantly standard Dutch.
- Infrequent use makes analysis of (non-transcribed) corpus of spoken dialect unfeasible.

2.2. Dialect and the FEP

- FEP accepted in spoken non-standard varieties (certain dialects and *tussentaal* (Haegeman & Danckaert 2013)).
 - Dialect:

- spoken within the same village;
 - disappearing (Taeldeman 2001).
- Dialect group = group of dialects based on similar clusters of linguistic characteristics.
 - Four main dialect groups in Flanders, from West to East (Fig. 1):
 - West-Flanders;
 - East-Flanders;
 - Brabant;
 - Limburg.



Fig. 1: Dialect Families in Flanders (Devos, 2006, p. 36)

- Regiolect = variety of language spoken amongst people from the same dialect group but not from the same dialect.
 - *Tussentaal*:
 - = variety of language in Flanders, between the dialect and the standard language (*verkavelingsvlaams*, literally ‘suburban Flemish’).
 - origins:
 - parents using a “poor form” of standard Dutch instead of the less prestigious local dialect;
 - not mastering standard Dutch -> a hybrid language (De Caluwe, 2012: 260).
 - not a separate, coherent variety (De Caluwe 2012: 260);
 - native tongue of many youngsters (De Caluwe 2012: 260);
 - used in numerous informal situations (school, work, ...) (De Caluwe 2012: 260).
- Speakers often have access to all or some of the above varieties and use them according to context (De Caluwe 2000-2001).
 - Practical problem for the norming test: ascertain that people are accessing an informal register when providing acceptability judgments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Norming test

Aim: expand the informal survey conducted by Haegeman & Danckaert (2013).

- More informants;
- Formal methodology.

- Compare FEP with the internal possessors (doubling pattern, genitive postnominal 's/se possessor and prepositional possessor (1-3)).
- Compare FEP in Antwerp and West-Flanders.

3.2. Solving the data gathering issues

- Geographical variation (dialect groups):
 - West-Flemish: Bruges;
 - Brabantian: Antwerp;
 - cities: access to more speakers.

- Regional language: how to avoid prescriptive (standard Dutch) reactions to the linguistic data?
 - Explicit instructions to make judgments according to dialect intuitions;
 - Dialect/regiolect/*tussentaal* = spoken language:
 - spoken instead of written stimuli;
 - stimuli recorded by native speaker of relevant dialect.

- Participants:
 - Our aim: dialect speakers
 - eligible if raised in or close to the relevant cities (Bruges or Antwerp);
 - 50+ years (usually settled, more fixed surroundings, less dialect loss (Taeldeman 2001));
 - raised by parents who themselves spoke that dialect → as little influence from other dialects as possible.
 - Number of informants:
 - West-Flanders: 44 informants;
 - Antwerp: 27 informants.
 - Informants participated on a voluntary basis, without offer of reward.

3.3. The design and outline

- A norming test of the acceptability judgments using magnitude estimation.
 - Pros:
 - Allows the informant optimal flexibility in assigning scores to the sentences.
 - More detailed judgments.
 - No presumed categories of acceptability (instead, the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable is left to the informant (Bard, Robertson, & Sorace 1996; Featherston 2009)).
 - Cons:
 - Method can be confusing for informants.
 - Informants do not necessarily base judgments on the modulus (Sprouse 2008).
 - Lack of a meaningful zero point for unacceptability can influence results (Featherston 2009).

- OnExp:
 - Experimental software developed by Göttingen University;
 - Freely available for academic research;
 - Online (goal: high number of participants).

- Norming test itself (fig. 2):
 - Informants presented with audio stimuli to rate, both for modulus and stimuli.
 - Preceded by an identical sentence-based practice stage (and a line-based practice stage).
 - Informants presented with 32 sentences to compare to the modulus sentence.

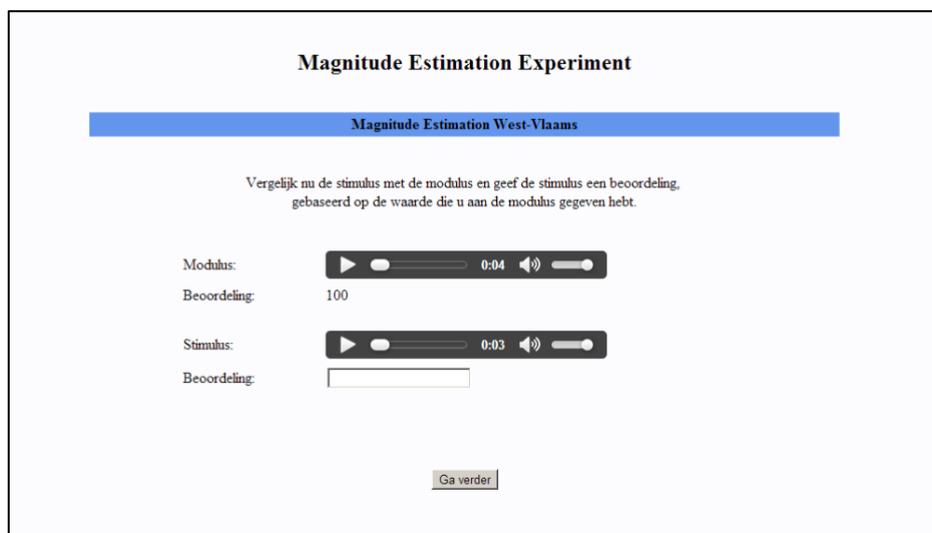


Fig. 2: screenshot OnExp

3.4. The language data

- Two versions of the norming test (West-Flanders – Antwerp), differing in:
 - Vocabulary items in fillers;⁶
 - Accent.

- Stimuli: four conditions:

Condition	Description	Order of Elements			
Subject-related FEP (13)	Adjunct intervenes between possessor and possessee complex.	Poss ^{or}	Adv	Poss. Pr.	Poss ^{ee}
Doubling (14)	Adjunct does not intervene between possessor and possessee complex.	Poss ^{or}	Poss. Pr.	Poss ^{ee}	Adv
Genitive (15)	Possessive element is not a possessive pronoun, possessor precedes possessee.	Poss ^{or}	’s	Poss ^{ee}	Adv
Prepositional (16)	Possessive element is not a possessive pronoun, and possessor does not precede possessee.	Poss ^{ee}	PP	Poss ^{or}	Adv

Table 1: the four conditions of the norming test

- (13) 't Is een ramp dat [Pieter] toen just [zen moeder] zo kwaad was.
it's a disaster that Pieter then just his mother so angry was
'It's a disaster that Peter's mother was so angry just then.'
- (14) 't Is een ramp dat [Pieter zen moeder] toen just zo kwaad was.
it's a disaster that Pieter his mother then just so angry was
'It's a disaster that Peter's mother was so angry just then.'
- (15) 't Is een ramp dat [Pieter se moeder] toen just zo kwaad was.
it's a disaster that Pieter 's mother then just so angry was
'It's a disaster that Peter's mother was so angry just then.'
- (16) 't Is een ramp dat [de moeder van Pieter] toen just zo kwaad was.
it's a disaster that the mother of Pieter then just so angry was
'It's a disaster that Peter's mother was so angry just then.'

- Fillers:
 - 24 fillers;
 - Ranging predicted acceptabilities (completely acceptable – completely unacceptable);
 - Goals of fillers:

⁶ No statistically significant lexical confounding factor was found.

- determine validity of informant's answer (e.g. to detect inverted scales);
- mask the conditions of the test (to prevent influenced responses).

3.5. Hypotheses (based on the data from Haegeman & Danckaert (2013))

- FEP is an acceptable pattern for some speakers.
- FEP is mostly accepted in West-Flemish and mostly rejected in Antwerp.
- There is at least some speaker variation in the acceptance of FEP in West-Flemish and the rejection of FEP in Antwerp.

4. Results

4.1. The results: screened for bad informants

- Informants who might have inverted the scale.
- Informants who did not grasp how magnitude estimation works.
- 8 informants were removed → 38 informants from Bruges and 25 informants from Antwerp.

4.2. DP-internal possession vs. FEP

- External Possessor scores are on average significantly less acceptable than the doubling possessor, both in Antwerp and in Bruges (Kruskal-Wallis rank test, $p < 0.001$).

Condition	Antwerp	Bruges
External Possessor (FEP)	- 0.32	- 0.00
Doubling Possessor	+0.74	+0.86
Genitive Possessor	+0.58	+0.76
Prepositional Possessor	+0.88	+1.02

Table 2: Averages of judgment acceptability scored (z-transformed)

- These differences are illustrated in Fig. 3 (for Antwerp) and Fig. 4 (for Bruges).

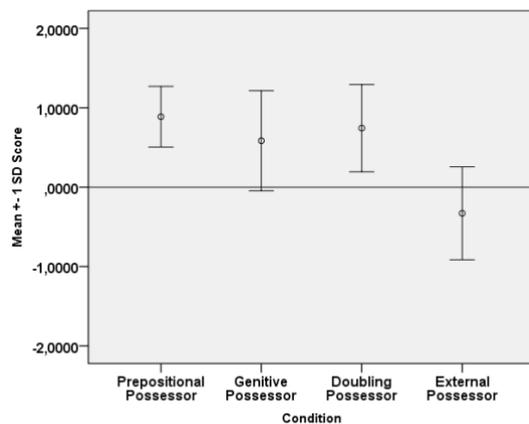


Fig.3: Average ratings for possessors in Antwerp

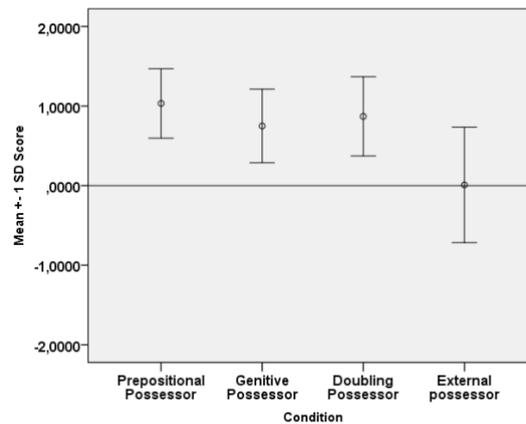


Fig. 4: Average ratings for possessors in West-Flanders

- Table 2, Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 indicate that:
 - on average, the internal possessors are scored similarly in Antwerp and Bruges;
 - the external possessor is judged, on average, to be less acceptable in Antwerp than in Bruges.

4.3. FEP in Antwerp vs FEP in Bruges

- FEP judged to be less acceptable in Antwerp than in Bruges.
- Table 3 shows the results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests comparing the judgments in Antwerp and Bruges.

Condition	Antwerp	Bruges	Sig. (Kruskal-Wallis rank test)
External Possessor (FEP)	- 0.32	- 0.00	0.002
Doubling Possessor	+0.74	+0.86	0.359
Genitive Possessor	+0.58	+0.76	0.193
Prepositional Possessor	+0.88	+1.02	0.188

Table 3: Differences in judgments between Antwerp and Bruges

4.4. Spread

- Averages do not reflect individual speaker variation within one region.
- Larger variation displayed by the FEP in contrast with the internal possessor (in Bruges) → individual speaker variation is probably large.
- Instead of averages: distribution of the data.

Condition	Antwerp	Bruges
External Possessor (FEP)		
Doubling Possessor		
Genitive Possessor		
Prepositional Possessor		

- Distribution of three types of internal possessor is similar, both in Antwerp and Bruges.
- FEP has a different distribution than the internal possession patterns.
- FEP has a different distribution in Antwerp and in Bruges:
 - Antwerp speakers:
 - FEP is predominantly given negative z-scores, indicating unacceptability;
 - 3 (out of 25) informants accept the pattern.⁷
 - West-Flemish speakers:
 - 12 (out of 38) informants accept the pattern;

⁷ The acceptability cut-off point was put at a z-transformed score of 0.25 rather than 0. This was done as acceptable fillers were on average scored 0.9 and as fillers (with maximum 1 violation) were on average scored -0.5. The value of 0.25 is in the middle of these two. 0.25 is also roughly one standard deviation of the lowest acceptable sentence downwardly removed from the average of that filler.

- half the informants rated it better than average; half rated it worse than average.
- Distribution of FEP clearly shows that averages conceal bigger idiolectal differences.

5. Discussion of results

5.1. FEP

- FEP-pattern is an accepted pattern.
- All three internal possessor patterns are graded as acceptable.
- On average, FEP is degraded both in Antwerp and in Bruges; but idiolectal variation is considerable:
 - Speakers who rejected and accepted the pattern were found in both regions;
 - More speakers from Bruges accepted the pattern than speakers from Antwerp.

5.2. The norming test vs. the informal survey (Haegeman & Danckaert 2013)

	Haegeman & Danckaert (2013)		Buelens & D'Hulster (in prep.)	
West Flemish	6/9	(67%)	12/38	(32%)
Antwerp & Brabant	1/5	(20%)	3/25	(12%)

The lower rate of acceptability found in this study could be due to:

- The more formal setting of the norming test, which masks the pattern of interests and leaves less opportunity for careful examination and deliberation;
- The always artificial and arguably rather arbitrary cut-off point of acceptability.

5.3. Geographical and idiolectal variation

- People from West-Flanders seem more likely to accept the FEP than people from Antwerp → a certain regional variation;
- There is no uniformity within the geographical regions: some people in Antwerp accept, some people in West-Flanders reject the pattern → idiolectal aspects are independently active factors in syntax, both within and across dialects.

6. Conclusion

- FEP is indeed part of the grammar of some speakers:
 - Contrast between the West-Flemish and Antwerp regions → it is unlikely that differences in acceptability judgments between speakers are caused by processing difficulties.

- Distribution of FEP:
 - FEP is more frequently accepted in West-Flanders;
 - FEP also occurs in other Flemish regions (only Antwerp tested).

- Speaker variation:
 - FEP is not uniformly accepted or rejected by all speakers;
 - Idiolectal variation seems to influence the acceptability judgments of “rarer” syntactic phenomena;
 - Speaker variation indicates that even within one dialect, idiolectal variation can be found with respect to certain syntactic phenomena.

7. References

- Bard, E., Robertson, D., & Sorace, A. (1996). Magnitude Estimation of Linguistic Acceptability. *Language*, 72, 32-68.
- De Caluwe, J. (2000-2001). Belgisch Nederlands versus Nederlands Nederlands. *Het Taallandschap in Vlaanderen*, 49-58.
- De Caluwe, J. (2012). Dutch in Belgium. Facing multilingualism in a context of regional monolingualism and Standard Language Ideology. In U. V. and O. M. Matthias Hüning (Ed.), *Standard languages and multilingualism in European history* (pp. 259-282).
- Devos, M. (2006). Genese en structuur van het Vlaamse dialectlandschap. In J. Decaluwe & M. Devos (Eds.), *Structuren in talige variatie in Vlaanderen* (pp. 35-61). Gent: Academia Press.
- Featherston, S. (2009). A scale for measuring well-formedness: Why syntax needs boiling and freezing points. In S. Featherston & S. Winkler (Eds.), *The fruits of empirical linguistics, vol. 1: Process* (pp. 47-73). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Haegeman, L. (2011). Adding positions: External possessors in (West) Flemish. In *CASTL - State of the Sequence 2*. Tromsø.
- Haegeman, L. (2013). Two Prenominal Possessors in West Flemish. In K. Börjars, D. Denison & A. Scott (Eds.), *Morphosyntactic Categories and the Expression of Possession* (Vol. 199, pp. 219-251). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Haegeman, L. & Danckaert, L. (2013). Multiple subjects in Flemish: the external possessor. In C. Rhys, P. Iosad & A. Henry (Eds.), *Minority languages, microvariation, minimalism and meaning: proceedings of the Irish Network in Formal Linguistics*. (pp. 2-23). Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Haegeman, L., & van Koppen, M. (2012). Complementizer agreement and the relation between C° and T°. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 43, 441-454.
- Hole, D. (2006). Extra argumentality—affectees, landmarks, and voice. *Linguistics*, 2, 383-424.
- Lee-Schoenfeld, V. (2006). German possessor datives: raised and affected. *The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics*, 9(2), 101-142.
- Payne, D. & Barshi, I. (1999). External Possession. What, Where, How and Why. In: D. Payne & I. Barshi (eds.), *External Possession* (pp. 3-29). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Sprouse, J. (2008). Magnitude Estimation and the Non-Linearity of Acceptability Judgements. In: N. Abner & J. Bishop (eds.), *27th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics* (pp. 397-403). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- Taeldeman, J. (2001). De regenboog van de Vlaamse dialecten. In *Het Taallandschap in Vlaanderen* (pp. 1-14). Gent: Academia Press.