

# The Flemish External Possessor: On the edge of acceptability<sup>1</sup>



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**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

- Possessor and possessee form a single constituent.
- Occur in both Standard Dutch and dialects.
- Three possibilities:
  - Doubling pattern (1):
    - DP possessor
    - Possessive pronoun with matching  $\varphi$ -features
  - Genitive postnominal 's/se<sup>2</sup> possessor (2)
  - Prepositional possessor (3)

(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.'

(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.'

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

<sup>2</sup> *se* is an invariable possessive marker found in West-Flemish (Haegeman 2013).

- (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.'

### 1.2. The Flemish External Possessor (FEP)<sup>3</sup>

- Possessor and possessee do not form a constituent:  
cf. possibility of intervening adjunct with clausal scope
- Possessor DP is 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*  
'... because it was Carl's birthday yesterday.'

- Surface elements are similar to the doubling pattern:
  - DP possessor
  - Possessive pronoun with matching  $\phi$ -features
  - Possessor precedes possessee

### 1.3. Syntactic properties of the FEP

- Possessor DP is external to the pronoun-possessee complex
  - Intervening adjunct has clausal scope
- Possessor DP has "argument" status:
  - Obligatorily affected by the event expressed by the verb; test: ban on dead possessor (Hole, 2006):
    - FEP: possessor is alive in (7), dead in (9);
    - Doubling pattern: possessor is alive in (8), dead in (10).

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Haegeman (2011), Haegeman & Van Koppen (2012) and Haegeman & Danckaert (2013) for an extended description of the FEP.

't Moest lukken da...<sup>4</sup>  
*it had-to happen that*  
 'It so happened that ...'

context 1: grandmother = alive at time of utterance

- FEP: ✓

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

- Doubling pattern: ✓

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

context 2: grandmother = dead at time of utterance

- FEP: ✗

- (9) \* ... [mijn grootmoeder] toen just [haren auto] kapot was.  
*my grandmother then just her car broken was*  
 '... my grandmother's car was broken just then.'

- Doubling pattern: ✓

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

- Subject-related external possessor shares subject-properties with the subject possessee (e.g. agreement patterns):
  - possessor triggers Complementizer Agreement ((11) and (12)),
  - while possessee triggers V-agreement (see Haegeman & van Koppen 2012).

- (11) ...**omda-n/\*omdat** [André en Valère] gebeld **\*oat/oan**  
*because.PL/because [André and Valère] phoned had.\*SG/PL*  
 '... because André and Valère had called.'

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

(Haegeman 2011 (33))

<sup>4</sup> Note that the FEP has strong anti-MCP effects (Haegeman 2011).

#### 1.4. The external possessor in German

- German has two patterns which are similar to FEP (Lee-Schoenfeld 2006).
  - The possessor and possessee are separate constituents.
  - The possessor is an affected argument.
  
  - The two patterns:
    - A dative external possessor (13), which behaves similarly to FEP, but has a definite article instead of a possessive pronoun in the possessee.
    - A non-possessor dative (14), which does have the possessive pronoun (like FEP), but has a different syntactic behaviour (fewer restrictions on e.g. locality).

(13) Mein Bruder hat [der Mami] leider [das Auto] zu Schrott  
*my brother has the mom.DAT unfortunately the car to scrap*  
driven.  
*gefahren*  
'Unfortunately, my brother totaled mom's car.'

(Lee-Schoenfeld 2006: 104(2a))

(14) Mein Bruder hat [der Mami] leider [ihr Auto] zu Schrott  
*my brother has the mom.DAT unfortunately her car to scrap*  
driven  
*gefahren.*  
'Unfortunately, my brother totaled mom's car.'

(Lee-Schoenfeld 2006: 105(6a))

#### 1.5. The External Possessor in Flanders

➔ Norming test gathering acceptability judgment data:

- Aim: to have data on the acceptability of the FEP in different regions in Flanders.
- Practical issues in gathering acceptability data:
  - rare phenomenon;
  - limited to spoken, non-standard varieties.

## 2. Data gathering issues

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### 2.1. Preliminary informal survey of FEP (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

→ FEP seems to be associated with the dialect groups

## 2.2. Dialect and the FEP

- FEP does not occur in Standard Dutch: first attested example: West-Flemish (Haegeman & van Koppen 2012).
- FEP seemed accepted in spoken non-standard varieties (certain dialects and *tussentaal* (Haegeman & Danckaert 2013)).
  - Dialect groups:
    - = groups of dialects based on similar clusters of linguistic characteristics.
    - dialect = spoken within the same village
    - disappearing (Taeldeman 2001) → older speakers
    - four main dialectal areas in Flanders, from West to East (fig. 1):
      - West-Flanders
      - East-Flanders
      - Brabant
      - Limburg



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

- Regiolects:
  - = 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 (Decaluwe 2000-2001).
- Practical problem for the norming test: ascertain that people are accessing an informal register when providing acceptability judgments.

### 3. Methodology

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#### 3.1. Norming test

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

- More informants
- Formal methodology
- Compare FEP with the internal possessors
- 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?
  - dialect/regiolect/*tussentaal* = spoken language
  - audio stimuli from the region the informant comes from
- A note on language attitudes in Antwerp:
  - do not always identify their regional variety as dialect (illustrated by some informants indicating that they thought the audio stimuli were not regionally flavoured).
    - informal speech on television and radio often Brabantially flavoured
    - influences from Brabant dialects even in West-Flemish *tussentaal* (De Caluwe 2012)
- 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 → informants had no incentive to be untruthful about biographical information.

### 3.3. Magnitude Estimation

#### ➤ What?

- Informant is presented with reference sentence (= modulus) of medium acceptability.
- Informant gives modulus a numerical value.
- Informant compares the stimuli sentences to the modulus by assigning them a numerical value in relation to the numerical value given to the modulus.
- Example:
  - modulus = 25
  - stimulus: twice as acceptable as modulus = 50
  - stimulus: half as acceptable as modulus = 12,5

#### ➤ Pros:

- Allows the informant 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)).
- Added statistical strength (Bard, Robertson, & Sorace 1996).

#### ➤ Cons:

- Method can be confusing for informants.
- Added statistical strength not necessarily present (Sprouse 2007).
- Informants do not necessarily base judgments on the modulus (Sprouse 2008).
- Lack of a meaningful zero point for unacceptability can influence results (Featherstone 2009).

### 3.4. The design and outline

#### ➤ OnExp:

- experimental software developed by Göttingen University
- freely available for academic research
- online (goal: high number of participants)

- Acceptability 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

### 3.5. The language data

- Two versions of the norming test (West-Flanders – Antwerp)
  - vocabulary items
  - accent
- Stimuli: four conditions

Condition	Description	Elements
Subject-related FEP (15)	Adjunct intervenes between possessor and possessee complex	Poss <sup>or</sup> – Adv – Poss. Pr. - Poss <sup>ee</sup>
Doubling (16)	Adjunct does not intervene between possessor and possessee complex	Poss <sup>or</sup> – Poss. Pr. – Poss <sup>ee</sup> – Adv
Genitive (17)	Possessive element is not a possessive pronoun, possessor precedes possessee	Poss <sup>or</sup> – 's – Poss <sup>ee</sup> – Adv
Prepositional (18)	Possessive element is not a possessive pronoun, and possessor does not precede possessee	Poss <sup>ee</sup> – PP – Poss <sup>or</sup> – Adv

Table 1: the four conditions of the norming test



- (15) '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.'
- (16) '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.'
- (17) 't is een ramp dat [Pieter se moeder] toen just zo kwaad was.  
*it's a disaster that Emma 's mother then just so angry was*  
 'It's a disaster that Peter's mother was so angry just then.'
- (18) '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:
  - determine validity of informant's answer (e.g. to detect inverted scales);
  - mask the conditions of the test (to prevent influenced responses).

### 3.6. 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

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### 4.1. The results: screened for bad informants

- informants who might have inverted the scale
- informants who did not seem to have grasped how magnitude estimation works
  - the results of eight informants were removed, resulting in 38 informants from Bruges and 25 informants from Antwerp

## 4.2. DP-internal possession vs. FEP

Condition	Antwerp	Bruges
External Possessor	- 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)

- External Possessor scores are on average significantly less acceptable than the three internal possessors, both in Antwerp and in Bruges (Kruskal-Wallis rank test,  $p > 0.003$  after Bonferroni correction).

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

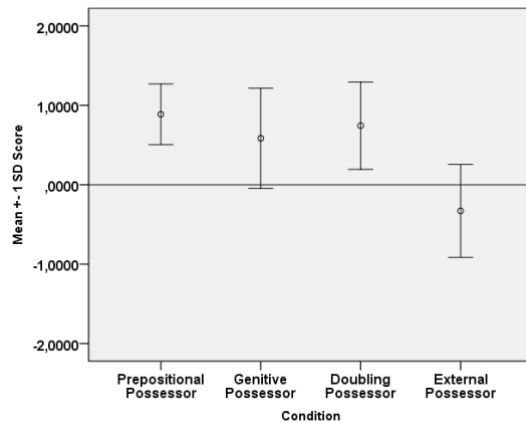


Fig.3: Average ratings for possessors in Antwerp

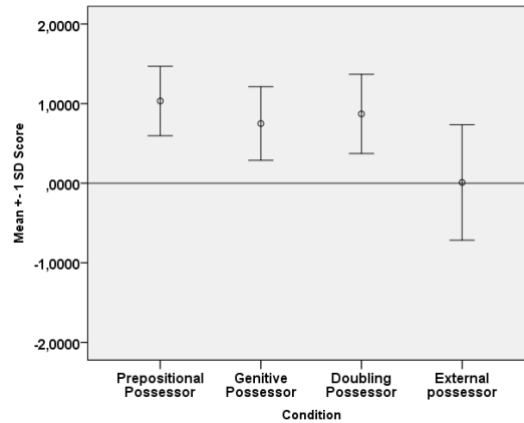


Fig. 4: Average ratings for possessors in West-Flanders

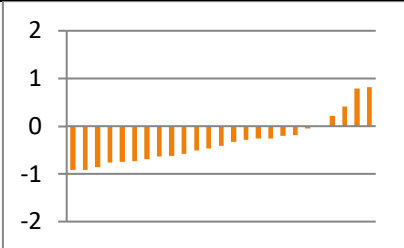
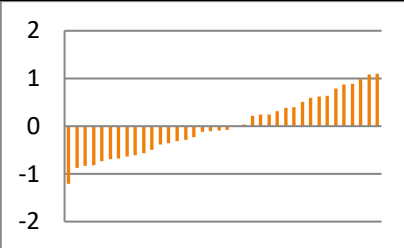
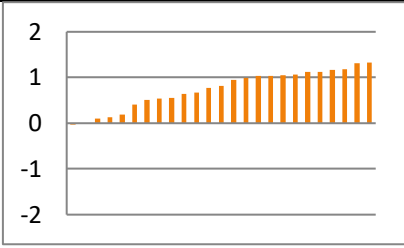
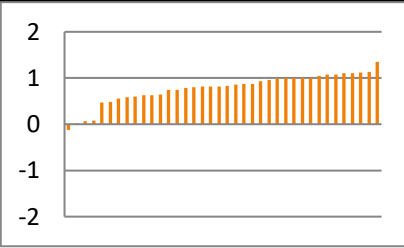
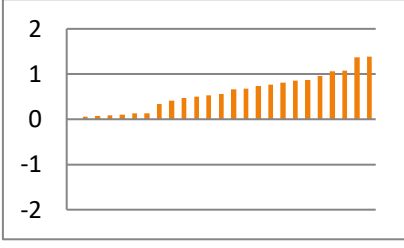
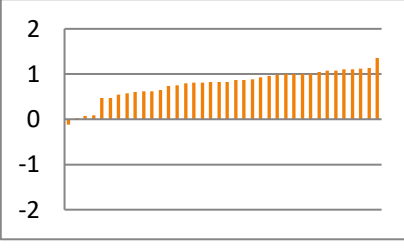
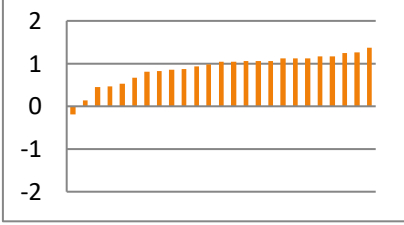
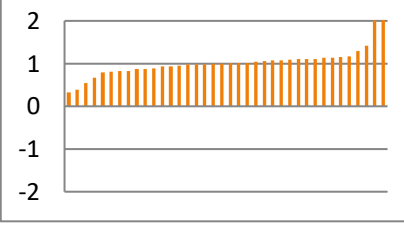
- Table 2 and figures 3 and 4 indicate that:
  - on average, the internal possessors are scored similarly in Antwerp and Bruges
  - the external possessor is judged, on average, to be less acceptable in Antwerp than in Bruges.
- Table 3 shows the results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests comparing the judgments in Antwerp and Bruges.

Condition	Antwerp	Bruges	Sig. (Kruskal-Wallis rank test)
External Possessor	- 0.32	- 0.00	<b>0.002</b>
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

### 4.3. 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 at the averages: distribution of the data.

Condition	Antwerp	Bruges
External Possessor		
Doubling Possessor		
Genitive Possessor		
Prepositional Possessor		

- Distribution of three types of internal possessor is similar, both in Antwerp and Bruges.
- External possessor has a clearly different distribution from the internal possession patterns.

- External possessor 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.<sup>5 6</sup>
  - West-Flemish speakers:
    - 12 (out of 38) informants accept the pattern;
    - 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

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### 5.1. FEP

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

### 5.2. West-Flanders vs. Antwerp

- percentages of informants who accept the pattern:
  - West-Flemish: ca. 32% (12/38)
  - Antwerp: ca. 12% (3/25)
  -
- FEP-pattern is not only acceptable in West-Flanders, but also seems to occur in Antwerp

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Note that because the FEP was judged twice, the chances of random anomalies in the scoring are less likely than with the filler sentences, which were only judged once.

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

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

- 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.

### 5.4. Geographical and idiolectal variation

- The results of the FEP norming test show that:
  - people from West-Flanders seem more likely to accept the FEP than people from Antwerp → a certain regional variation;
  - there is no uniformity to be found 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

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- 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 restricted to non-standard Flemish → it does not appear in standard language;
  - 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 is present in a person's grammar → flexible view on grammar.

## 7. References

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