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*German as a foreign language*

## **Everyday Language in the Spotlight: The Decline of the Genitive Case**

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# Everyday Language in the Spotlight: The Decline of the Genitive Case<sup>1</sup>

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This paper examines the position of the genitive case in present-day German, focusing on the relationship between language users' perceptions of the genitive (as portrayed in lay linguistic work), their actual use of the genitive, and the long-term diachronic developments that the genitive is undergoing. Two aspects of the genitive – possession marking and its use as the case governed by some prepositions – are exemplified with data from everyday language. It is concluded that the situation, commonly perceived as a simple decline of the genitive, involves a more complex rearrangement of possession marking and case selection in German.

## 1. Introduction: Everyday language and language change

Everyday language, the language used and encountered in daily life, such as in domestic situations, at work, and in one's free time (see Heinemann 2000: 604), is a barometer of the 'ceaseless and remorseless' change (Trask 1996: 12) that is constantly in progress in all living languages. While the effects of language change are clearly visible when we compare two texts written, for instance, several centuries apart, they are less obvious in the language we use from day to day. Nonetheless, the language we use in everyday communication, whether written or spoken, formal or informal, is a snapshot of long-term linguistic developments in progress. These developments often only become apparent to a language user when she or he is confronted with two possibilities for saying the same thing; for example, a native German term and a synonymous loan word, or competing formal and colloquial constructions, or when a particular expression – especially one considered to be "new", colloquial or a borrowing – leads to uncertainty or even disapproval on the part of the language user; the manifestations of change in everyday language are often stigmatised (Trask 1996: 7-12). Awareness of such variation, and the situations in which the variants occur, is accordingly also relevant to teachers and learners of German as a foreign language.

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The basis of this investigation is the relationship between the long-term changes which a language undergoes and contemporary language users' necessarily short-term perceptions of the synchronic manifestations of these changes. More specifically, I examine, on the basis of its occurrence in everyday German, the synchronic manifestation of one particular change which attracts a great deal of attention, namely the development of the genitive case.

This paper is structured as follows: in Section 2 the historical development of the genitive case in the Germanic languages is described; then, in Section 3, perceptions of the state of the genitive in German are discussed and the roles it performs are listed. In Section 4, some aspects of the use of the genitive – and its relationship to its competing constructions – are examined on the basis of usage data. The paper concludes by relating perceptions of the genitive to its actual use (Section 5).

## 2. The genitive case: a comparative and historical outline

A comparison with the other Germanic languages shows that the decline of the genitive case is by no means peculiar to German; furthermore, a diachronic study of the German case system shows that the weakening of the genitive is not a recent development. These two matters are addressed in this section.

The German genitive case performs various roles. Prototypically, it marks a possessive relationship (in a broad sense) between two noun phrases (1a); it is also governed by a number of prepositions (1b), adjectives (1c) and verbs (1d):<sup>2</sup>

- (1) a. *Der Schreibtisch des Mädchens* stammt (wie fast alle Möbel) aus einem Kinderprogramm.
- b. [...] ein Spitzname, den er seinen Sitzungen in der Wirtschaft von Pinkus Müller während seines nie abgeschlossenen Studiums in Münster verdankte.
- c. Bez. für die zur Ausführung des Generalbasses gebrauchten Instrumente, die *des Akkordspiels* fähig sind.
- d. Ich *erinnere mich eines Abends*, den wir bei Victor Cherbuliez zubrachten, und wo wir mit Erneste Renan zusammentrafen.

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<sup>2</sup> The examples in (1) are from the corpus of the *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (henceforth DWDS), which can be accessed at [www.dwds.de](http://www.dwds.de) [last accessed 27.9.10].

Proto-Germanic, the common ancestor of the present-day Germanic languages, is assumed to have had six cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative and instrumental. The subsequent history of the Germanic languages is characterised by an ongoing simplification – and in some languages complete loss – of this inherited case system. Icelandic and Standard German are alone among the Germanic languages in retaining a four-case system (comprising nominative, genitive, dative and accusative).

English lost its case system during the Middle English period (c. 1100-1500) (Allen 2008: 1). In present-day English, possession is marked by the preposition *of* (e.g. *the house of my friend*), which previously competed with the now-lost genitive, and by the possessive *-s* construction (henceforth POSS-S, e.g. *my friend's house*), which had developed from the masculine and neuter genitive singular suffix *-s* by around 1400 (Allen 2008: 121). Unlike the genitive *-s* suffix, POSS-S does not vary according to gender (cf. *my brother's house*, *my sister's house*), and any modifying words in the noun phrase remain uninflected. Similarly, the Mainland Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish) have not preserved a case system: to mark possession, all now feature a POSS-S and draw from an inventory of prepositions; Norwegian and some Danish dialects also have a periphrastic possessive.

The Dutch case system had broken down by the end of the Middle Ages (van der Wal & van Bree 2008: 191). The role of possession marking was assumed by the preposition *van* (cognate to German *von*), a periphrastic possessive construction (e.g. *de man zijn boek*, cf. German *dem Mann sein Buch*),<sup>3</sup> and POSS-S. Prescriptivist attempts to resurrect the case system were hindered by the roughly concurrent loss (particularly in the north) of the distinction between masculine and feminine gender (van der Wal & van Bree 2008: 242). Nonetheless, despite the lack of a case system, a remnant of the genitive case remains to this day as a modestly productive means of marking (mainly) possession (although it is rare compared to its successor/competitor *van*) (Scott, to appear), e.g. *de cultuur der volwassenen* ‘the culture the.GEN (i.e. ‘of the’) grown-ups’.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest period of German as a distinct language, Old High German (OHG; 750-1050), began with a five-case system (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative and instrumental); by the end of the period, the instrumental case had succumbed to

<sup>3</sup> This construction is known by several names; the term *periphrastic possessive* is used here.

<sup>4</sup> Example from spoken Dutch; found in the *Corpus Gesproken Nederlands* (fn001412.23).

competition, principally from the preposition *mit* (Keller & Mulagk 1995: 204). During the transition from OHG to Middle High German (MHG; 1050-1350), vowel reduction (to schwa) in inflectional suffixes which had previously been distinguished by their vowels led to the loss of several distinct genitive suffixes (Behaghel 1923: 479). Thus, the genitive case has been in decline throughout the existence of German. Competition from *von* began during MHG (Behaghel 1924: 62). Behaghel (1923: 481) names the 15<sup>th</sup> century as ‘die Zeit, in der der Gen.[itiv] unterging’. The genitive also came to face competition from the periphrastic possessive construction with the possessor occurring in the genitive case or the dative case, e.g. respectively *des Mannes sein Pferd* or *dem Mann sein Pferd* (see Davies & Langer 2006: 157-169); furthermore, as the case governed by a number of prepositions, the genitive faced competition from the dative. In present-day German the genitive is characterised by – and is known for – the competition it faces from other constructions in all its roles (even if, as will be argued in Section 4, the situation is more complex than a straightforward decline of the genitive). This forms the starting point of Section 3.

### 3. The German genitive

#### 3.1 Perceptions of the genitive case in everyday German

The German genitive case has become something of a “poster child” of linguistic uncertainty and perceived language decline. It features in book titles such as *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod* (Sick 2004) and *Im Zweifel für den Genitiv* (Duden 2008) and, although neither of these works concentrates solely on the genitive (Sick 2004 contains eight pages on the genitive, and discusses only its use with prepositions and the inflection of demonstratives),<sup>5</sup> their titles indicate the genitive’s symbolic status (cf. also Davies & Langer 2006: 158; Debus 1999: 45). As shown by the chronologically arranged quotations in (2), concern for the genitive, and disapproval of its competitors, is not a recent phenomenon. In older lay linguistic work, attention focused particularly on the competition with the periphrastic possessive (2b, 2e) and the competition with the preposition *von* (2a, 2c, 2e) (see, for more detail, Davies & Langer 2006: 159-169, 200-211).

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<sup>5</sup> Sick (2006) addresses the periphrastic possessive.

- (2) a. Der Genitiv wird im Deutschen durch “des” und “der” ausgedrückt, und von bezeichnet den Ablativ – merkt es euch, meine Guten, ein für alle Mal; wenn ihr nämlich deutsch, nicht aber Deutschfranzosenjargon schreiben wollt. (Schopenhauer 1851: 575)
- b. Fehlerhaft ist der Gebrauch der Volkssprache in manchen Provinzen, dem vorangestellten Genitiv des Besitzers noch das mit dem regierenden Substantiv verbundene Possessivpronomen (sein, ihr &c.) beizufügen, oder auch statt jenes Genitivs den Dativ in Verbindung mit diesem Pronomen zu setzen. Man sage also nicht: das ist meines Vaters (oder meinem Vater) sein Haus, meiner Schwester ihr Buch &c. (Heyse 1900: 446)
- c. Die Umschreibung des possessiven Genitivs und vollends des objektiven Genitivs durch die Präposition von ist im allgemeinen nicht zu billigen. (Heyse 1900: 448)
- d. im Munde oder unter der Feder der Deutschen ist der meistmißhandelte Beugefall der Genetiv (Engel 1914: 73)
- e. Im Alltag sagt man manchmal: *das Haus von meinem Vater* (noch schlimmer: *meinem Vater sein Haus*). Aber das ist ein erbärmlicher Schnitzer. Es muß heißen: *das Haus meines Vaters* oder *meines Vaters Haus*. (Reiners 1943: 31)
- f. Rettet den Genitiv! (Reiners 1943: 31)

Today, attention is generally focused on the perceived encroachment of the dative on the territory of the genitive. This is exemplified by the title of Sick (2004) and statements such as the following:

- (3) a. [w]ie eine Seuche greift er [der Dativ] auf Kosten des Genitivs um sich. (*Duden Newsletter* 30.4.04)
- b. Für Formulierungen wie *deines Vaters Haus* oder *das Haus deines Vaters* heißt es umgangssprachlich oft auch *deinem Vater sein Haus*. Diese Ausdrucksweise ist nicht richtig. (Duden 1997: 104)
- c. Immer seltener hört man “laut eines Berichts” und immer häufiger dafür “laut einem Bericht”. (Sick 2004: 16)
- d. In den meisten Dialekten kommt er [der Genitiv] überhaupt nicht mehr vor, dort ist er dem Dativ seine fette Beute geworden. (Sick 2006)

Ironically, the same works that highlight the competition faced by the genitive also strive to temper its use in some situations. Constructions containing a string of genitives are described as an ‘Unsitte’ by Stemmler (1994: 45; quoted in Davies & Langer 2006: 51), while Engel (1914: 73) states:

‘Gefährlich wird der echte Genetiv, wo er in Massen auftritt, ähnlich den Wander-raupenzügen, Glied an Glied angehängt. In einer rechtsgerichtlichen Entscheidung (Strafsachen Band 3, Nr. 20), also aus der Feder eines der höchsten Richter im Reich, heißt es: *Die Zulässigkeit der Berücksichtigung der Unkenntnis der Tatsache der Existenz einer solchen Verordnung ist vom Gesetz nirgends versagt.*’

A frequent object of criticism, which can involve genitive strings, is the so-called *Nominalstil*, in which a noun carries the main syntactic content and a semantically weak verb indicates only tense and mood, and in which the genitive (or its competitor *von*) is an integral part. Duden (1997) presents a sentence containing two genitives as an example to avoid; an equivalent sentence containing no genitives is the recommended version:

So lautet z.B. der Satz *Zur Wiederholung der Aufführung dieses Stückes ist von unserer Seite keine Veranlassung gegeben* einfacher und lebendiger etwa so: *Wir sehen uns nicht veranlasst, das Stück noch einmal aufzuführen.* (Duden 1997: 187)

Finally the use of the genitive as the case governed by prepositions with which it would not be expected to occur (4a) is generally proscribed (4b, 4c) in works which are otherwise concerned about the weakening of the genitive:

- (4) a. Immer wieder tauchen Fälle auf, in denen hinter Präpositionen, die den Dativ erfordern, plötzlich ein Genitiv zu finden ist: “gemäß des Protokolls”, “entsprechend Ihrer Anweisungen”, “entgegen des guten Vorsatzes”, “nahe des Industriegebiets”. (Sick 2004: 16)
- b. Dass der so gewählt klingende Genitiv in Verbindung mit bestimmten Präpositionen trotzdem oftmals fehl am Platze ist, zeigen wir Ihnen im ersten Teil dieser Ausgabe (*Duden Newsletter* 30.4.04)
- c. Einige wenige Präpositionen beharren nämlich starrköpfig auf dem Dativ und Formulierungen wie *entgegen ihrer Wünsche, samt allen Inventars* oder *gemäß internationalen Rechts* klingen zwar elegant, sind aber falsch. (Duden 2008: 64)

This phenomenon is investigated in detail by Di Meola (2004), who reports numerous examples found in journalistic texts, such as *außer des Elfmetertores* (genitive instead of dative) and *gegen des Projektes* (genitive instead of accusative).

The situation is thus more complex than a universal (and straightforward) decline of the genitive: in some roles it clearly faces strong competition while in others it is prospering (Glück & Sauer 1997: 49ff.; see also Debus 1999: 46). The genitive is never the exclusive construction for performing a particular function and it often faces competition from more than one construction in a particular function. In order to study the genitive and assess its position in relation to its competitors, each role of the genitive must be addressed individually. This is the topic of the following sub-section.

### 3.2 The roles of the genitive in present-day German

The genitive case ‘wird im modernen Deutsch in der Umgangssprache kaum noch verwendet’ (Hentschel & Weydt 2003: 171). It remains in only a handful of dialects, such as the Swiss dialect of Bosco Gurin (Russ 2002: 88). The situation in the dialects is rarely a matter of a simple loss of the genitive, however; rather, many have undergone a general simplification of the case system, such as the merging of the accusative and dative cases, or the complete loss of the dative (Koš 1983: 1245; Schönfeld 1990: 110). In Standard German, the genitive faces competition in all the roles it performs, as shown in Table 1.

Role	Genitive	Competitor	
<b>Possession</b>	<i>das Buch meines Vaters,</i> <i>meines Vaters Buch</i>	<i>von</i>	<i>das Buch von meinem Vater</i>
		periphrastic possessive	<i>meinem Vater sein Buch</i>
		POSS-S	<i>Vaters Buch,</i> <i>?mein Vaters Buch</i>
<b>Governed by prepositions</b>	<i>wegen des Regens</i>	dative	<i>wegen dem Regen</i>
	<i>aufgrund ihrer Wünsche</i>	<i>von</i>	<i>aufgrund von ihren Wünschen</i>
	BUT: <i>außer des Elfmetertores, gegen des Projektes</i>		
<b>Governed by verbs</b>	<i>ich erinnere mich meines Urlaubs</i>	preposition	<i>ich erinnere mich an meinen Urlaub</i>
	<i>es braucht keines Beweises mehr</i> <sup>6</sup>	accusative	<i>es braucht keinen Beweis mehr</i>
<b>Governed by adjectives</b>	<i>einer Sache fähig</i>	preposition	<i>zu einer Sache fähig</i>

Table 1. The roles of the genitive and its competitors in modern German.

The synchronic manifestation of the changes affecting the genitive case (and, more broadly, the Standard German case system as a whole) is, as exemplified in Table 1, the existence of one or more competing constructions in each role performed by the genitive and a corresponding uncertainty among language users, teachers and learners as to which variant they should use. This uncertainty is addressed, for example, by the text on the back cover of Duden (1997): “SOS im sprachlichen Alltag! Heißt es ‚wegen des Regens‘ oder ‚wegen dem Regen‘?” From a diachronic perspective, such uncertainty in

<sup>6</sup> Example from [www.dwds.de](http://www.dwds.de) [last accessed 27.9.10]



the use of a case is evidence of that the case is declining (Behaghel 1923: 480); this emphasises the link between the present-day situation and the historical developments outlined in Section 2.

#### 4. The German genitive in use

The remainder of this paper concentrates on investigating some uses of the genitive case – and its relationship to some of its competitors – in present-day everyday German, namely in possession marking (4.2) and as the case governed by some prepositions (4.3). First, in 4.1, the data sources on which the description is based and the methodology adopted for finding and analysing the data are described.

##### 4.1 Data and methodology

The everyday language that is the focus of this investigation is the Standard German used in contemporary informal and (fairly) formal communication on the social networking site *Twitter*.<sup>7</sup> The cross-section of users, and the messages ('tweets') they post, is broad; for example, private users writing informally about an event they are currently experiencing (these were classed as INFORMAL tweets for the purposes of this study), as well as media organisations posting news updates, and businesses advertising a product (these latter categories were classed as FORMAL tweets). As such, *Twitter* provides a representative cross-section of the kinds of language produced and encountered in everyday life (see the list in Heinemann 2000: 604).

The data that form the basis of this section (except 4.2.2) were extracted from *Twitter* via its search page during February 2010.<sup>8</sup> Searches were performed for the genitive masculine and neuter singular definite article *des*, its competitors *von dem* and *vom* (i.e. the contraction of *von dem*), and a selection of prepositions known to appear with both the genitive and the dative and, in some instances, also with the preposition *von*, namely *angesichts*, *aufgrund*, *infolge*, *inmitten*, *innerhalb*, *mittels*, *trotz*, *während*, *wegen* and *zugunsten*. The intention was to provide an overview (as a pilot study to more detailed research) of the relative occurrence of the genitive and its competitors in everyday German.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://twitter.com/> [last accessed 27.9.10]

<sup>8</sup> <http://search.twitter.com/advanced> [last accessed 27.9.10]

The searches for the genitive and its competitors in use with nouns to mark possession were restricted to two hours' worth of tweets in view of the large number of hits generated by these searches. The searches for the prepositions (with the exception of *trotz*, *während* and *wegen*) produced comparatively few hits; these were restricted to tweets produced in the preceding five days. Following the removal of false positives, the data were counted and analysed: the findings, and explanations of the findings, are presented in 4.2 and 4.3. Examples are presented in their original orthography and with the relevant words marked in bold type.

## 4.2 Possession

Evidence from everyday language shows the genitive to be in a strong position as a marker of possession (in a broad sense). The choice between the genitive and a periphrastic possessive construction has attracted a great deal of attention (e.g. Heyse 1900: 446; Sick 2006; Davies & Langer 2006: 157-169 focus on the prescriptions regarding its use) and is therefore not dealt with here. Instead, two other less studied competitors are investigated: the preposition *von* and POSS-S.

### 4.2.1 Genitive vs. *von*

Competition between the genitive and *von* in possession marking was a target for the criticism of previous generations of prescriptivists (e.g. Schopenhauer 1851, Reiners 1943, as quoted above); it appears to be overlooked in present-day work (as noted by Davies & Langer 2006: 156), in which the focus is firmly on the competition between the genitive and the periphrastic possessive. Nonetheless, *von* seems a more potent competitor than the periphrastic possessive, not least because the latter is restricted to animate possessors, and to informal registers and the dialects, while *von* can replace the genitive with all possessors, in all registers, and in the dialects.

All potentially interchangeable constructions containing the masculine/neuter singular genitive definite article *des* or the preposition + definite article combination *von dem* (including the contraction *vom*) occurring in the data were counted; that is to say, instances where either one would have been possible, for example:

- (5) *das Buch des Mannes* v. *das Buch von dem/vom Mann*

Examples of genitives and *von* in potentially interchangeable contexts in the data include the following (all of which occurred in informal language):

- (6) a. das erspart mir den aufbau *eines betts* und *eines kleiderschranks*  
 b. zaehle jetzt 2 neue blaue flecken zu den bereits vorhandenen 3 *des badewannenunfalls*
- (7) a. ich vergess den namen *von dem vogel* immer... egal  
 b. Wohoooo der erste Tag *vom Praktikum* ist geschafft

However, the genitive and *von* are not always completely interchangeable (8a):

- (8) a. Die Stimme gefällt mir *von dem Zahntechniker*  
 b. \*Die Stimme gefällt mir *des Zahntechnikers*; Die Stimme *des Zahntechnikers* gefällt mir

The occurrences of the genitive and *von* were classified according to whether they originated in formal or informal registers (on this categorization, see 4.1). The genitive was stronger than *von* in both registers; the use of *von* was fairly constant regardless of register (Figure 1):

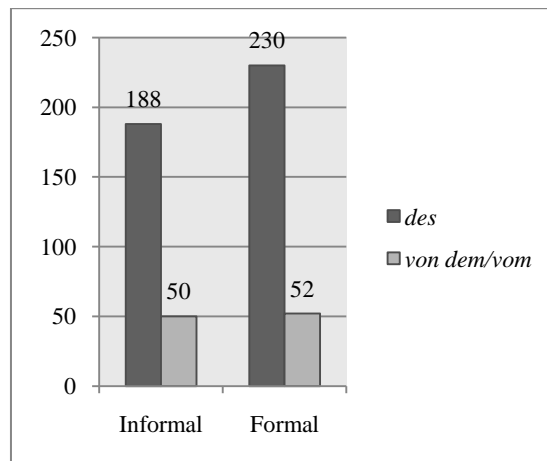


Figure 1. The number of tokens of the genitive and *von* in informal and formal registers (with definite article).

Searches were also performed for the indefinite *eines* and its competitor *von einem* during the same two-hour period. Again, the genitive dominates. This is shown in Figure 2.

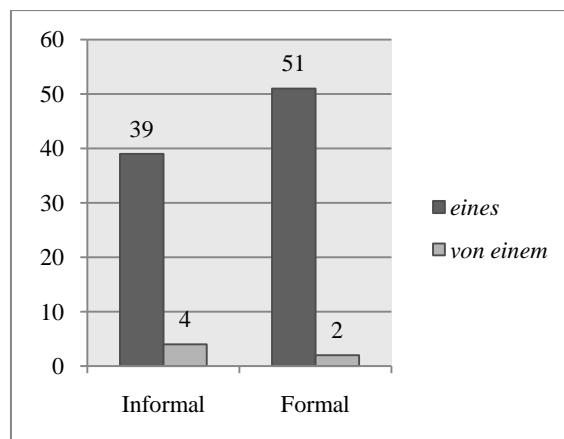


Figure 2. The number of tokens of the genitive and *von* in informal and formal registers (with indefinite article).

Although possession marking with the genitive is generally said to be decline in colloquial language (e.g. Debus 1999: 46), this is not the situation in the data. This might partly be attributed to the length restrictions in *Twitter* (tweets are restricted to 140 characters), i.e. *des X-s* is shorter than *von dem X*, and *eines X-s* is shorter than *von einem X*; however, the contracted *vom X* is more economical than *des X-s*.

#### 4.2.2 Genitive vs. POSS-S

Prototypically, German POSS-S is restricted to proper names and kinship terms (e.g. *Julias Buch*, *Vaters Buch*); as such, it is not a strong competitor of the genitive. However, a seemingly recent extension of POSS-S overlaps with the genitive to some extent; the phenomenon appears to go unmentioned in works addressing the status of the genitive. The extension involves the marker *-s* being attached to a noun of any gender, while an article modifying that noun remains uninflected; compare the genitive *meines Vaters Haus/das Haus meines Vaters* with the POSS-S *mein Vaters Haus*. This has also occurred in English, Mainland Scandinavian and, to a lesser extent, Dutch. Its occurrence in German is therefore not wholly unexpected. The phenomenon appears to be restricted to informal online communication such as chat forums (although no examples were found in the *Twitter* data). These are situations in which genitives are less expected (but cf. the findings of 4.2.1); thus this development is not (currently) a strong competitor of the genitive (this is also true of the periphrastic possessive in standard German). The examples in (9) and (10) were found in web searches carried out during autumn 2009. All were produced by native speakers of German:

- (9) a. Von da an wusste ich, dass *mein Lehrers Team* hinter uns ist :-)

- b. Das Packerl zu *meinem Papas Geburtstag* ist seit 16 Tagen verschollen
- c. Bei *meiner Toughters Computer* steht während der Internetverbindung immer Router nicht gefunden
- d. Der freund von *meiner freundins mutter* hat was dran gemacht.

As with other aspects of the use of the genitive, these constructions are associated with uncertainty among language users, as two encountered metalinguistic comments suggest:

- (10) a. [in response to an earlier post] Was genau meinst Du mit “in *mein Chefs Büro*”? Evtl “im Büro meines Chefs”?
- b. ...das is doch nicht die aus *meinem bruders klasse* oder?? is das grammatikalisch korrekt? ... aus *meinem bruders klasse*...klingt komisch.. habs aber grad nicht besser...egal ihr wisst was ich meine...

The restriction that applies to the possessors that can be used with prototypical German POSS-S applies also to the extended POSS-S constructions exemplified in (9) and (10): all feature nouns denoting either family members or someone close to the person who produced the construction. All the examples found featured a possessive pronoun; no examples of the type *der Lehrers Team* were found. It may therefore be the case that *mein(e) X* (e.g. *mein Vater*, *meine Lehrerin*) is felt to be a unit resembling a proper name (i.e. the words that can be used with prototypical POSS-S), to which POSS-S can be attached. Accordingly, the determiner remains uninflected for the marking of possession: compare POSS-S *mein Lehrers Team* with its genitive equivalent *meines Lehrers Team*. Notice, however, that the *mein(e) X* phrase is not impenetrable to the syntax: if required, as in (9b-d and 10b), the determiner may be inflected for case. Notice that the extended German POSS-S is very restricted compared to its English cognate. The nouns involved are the same ones involved in the prototypical POSS-S. No examples involving inanimate possessors, which are possible in English, occur in German.

#### 4.3 Use with prepositions

The competition faced by the genitive from the dative as the case governed by certain prepositions is often mentioned in the literature (albeit rarely on the basis of usage data) and an aspect of this competition is addressed in 4.3.1; the three-way competition between the genitive, dative and *von* is discussed in 4.3.2.

### 4.3.1 Genitive vs. dative

The preposition *wegen* (< MHG *von ... wegen*) is often singled out as the prime example of the use of the dative with traditionally genitive prepositions (see, for instance, Davies & Langer 2006: 197-211 and 265-266), and the choice of genitive or dative is a major cause of uncertainty (Neubauer 2009: 165). While the use of *wegen* with the dative is regarded as incorrect in Standard German, it is widespread in dialects (many of which have no genitive case) and colloquial language and is increasingly widespread in written language (Debus 1999: 45; Paul 1992: 1027); its use with the dative in written language is not a recent development, as the following example from Goethe shows: ‘wegen diesem und so manchem andern wunderbaren Beistand’ (quoted in Paul 1992: 1027). While *wegen* is governed increasingly by the dative, the preposition *trotz* is moving in the opposite direction. Having developed from the noun *Trotz* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it originally governed the dative but has appeared with the genitive since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century (Paul 1992: 907). Figure 3 shows that, with *trotz*, the dative was marginally more common than the genitive in the data studied here.

The aim of this section is to assess the state of the competition between the genitive and dative with a selection of prepositions known to occur with both cases. Two structures were searched for: those in which the preposition was followed by an article or adjective and a masculine or neuter noun (i.e. constructions in which the genitive case can be explicitly marked both on the article or adjective, and on the noun) (11, Figure 3), and those in which the preposition is followed directly by a masculine or neuter noun (i.e. constructions in which the genitive case could only be marked on the noun) (12, Figure 4).

- (11) a. ***mittels* + genitive:** Die französische Regierung sucht *mittels eines Wettbewerbs* Entsprechungen für Anglizismen  
 b. ***mittels* + dative:** Die Suche in Eclipse *mittels dem Suchdialog* findet nichts mehr  
 c. ***aufgrund* + genitive:** Twitteroff *aufgrund baldigen Feierabends*  
 d. ***aufgrund* + dative:** geh jetzt aufgrund *akutem Schneefall* zu Fuß
- (12) a. ***wegen* + genitive:** Ermittlungen *wegen Menschenhandels*  
 b. ***wegen* + dative:** Morgen Schulfrei *wegen Streik* :)  
 c. ***trotz* + genitive:** Und Feierabend. Dreh in Köln heute *trotz Schneefalls* gut geschafft  
 d. ***trotz* + dative:** das wird *trotz schnee* super!

Figure 3 shows that the constructions exemplified in (11), i.e. those in which the genitive is explicitly marked twice, generally support the genitive; the dative is only more frequent than the genitive with *trotz* and *wegen*.

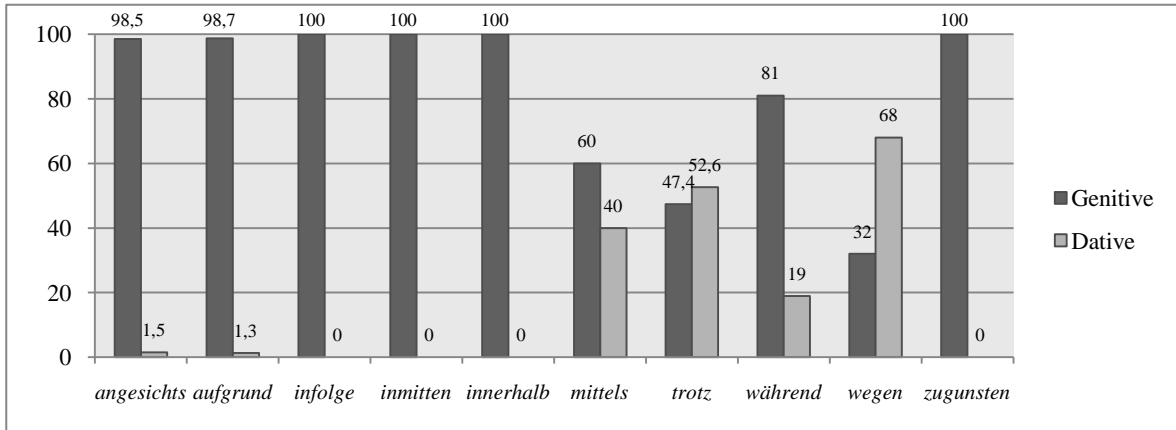


Figure 3. Extent of use of the genitive and dative with some prepositions (preposition + article/adjective + masculine/neuter noun).<sup>9</sup>

In the absence of an article or adjective, however, there is a clear preference for the *s*-less variant (which is not felt by at least some native speakers to be a dative as such); this is illustrated in Figure 4. Such usage is generally favoured by prescriptivists old and new (e.g. Duden 1997: 385; Heyse 1900: 454; Sick 2004: 16).

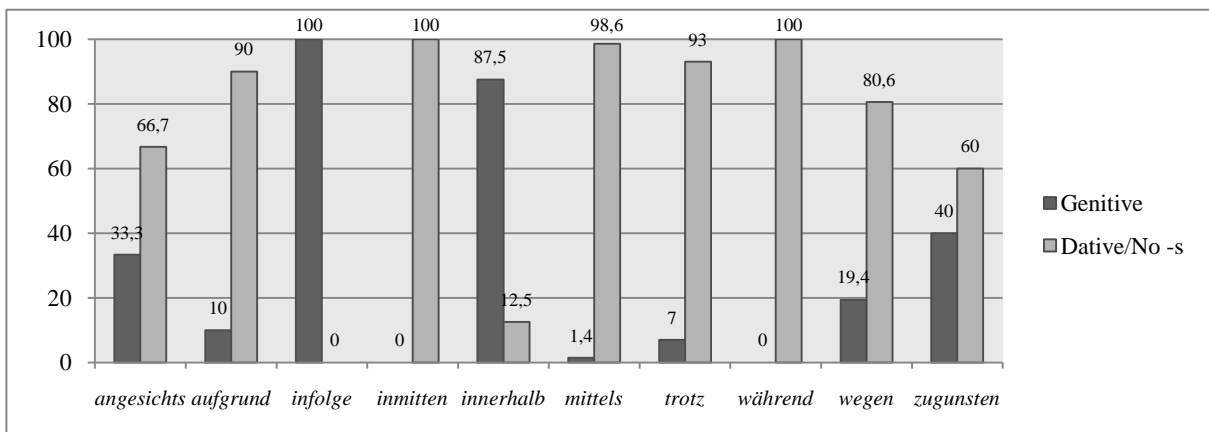


Figure 4. Extent of use of the genitive and dative with some prepositions (preposition + masculine/neuter noun).

<sup>9</sup> In Figures 3 and 4, because of the often vast differences in level of use of the various prepositions, the numbers given refer to the proportion of total tokens of each preposition so as to make the figures more readable. Thus, for example, in Figure 3, 32% of the examples with *wegen* in the structures investigated involved the genitive case while 68% involved the dative case.

### 4.3.2 Genitive vs. dative vs. von

With some prepositions the competition involves not only the genitive and dative, but also *von*. This is exemplified in (13). Figure 5 shows that, in among such prepositions within the data sample, the cases outnumber *von* in this role.<sup>10</sup>

- (13) a. **aufgrund** + **genitive**: Ich fühlte mich gestern ein kleines bisschen postapokalyptisch, als *aufgrund des Frostes* überall das Salz ausverkauft war
- b. **aufgrund** + **dative**: Neue Bahnausrede “Der Zug verspaetet sich *aufgrund zoegerlichem Ein- und Aussteigen...*”
- c. **aufgrund** + **von**: *aufgrund von einer vielzahl an geburtstagen* haben wir in den letzten tagen ca. 20kg zugenommen

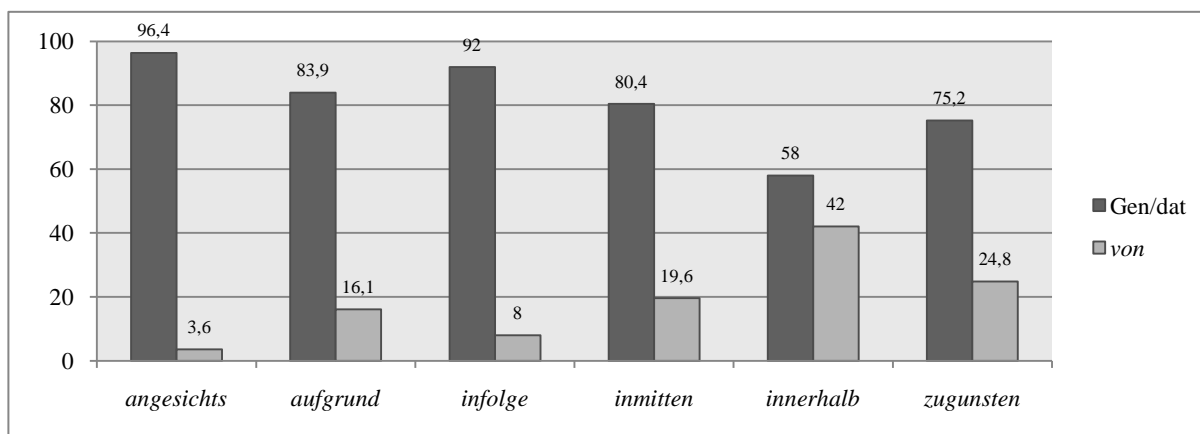


Figure 5. Extent of use of the genitive, dative and *von* with some prepositions.

## 5. Conclusions

This investigation has addressed one particular synchronic manifestation of language change found in present-day German – namely the uncertainty surrounding the genitive case – and has compared language users’ perceptions of this manifestation with the situation as found both in usage data from everyday language and in observations of the change from a long term historical perspective.

The general perception of the genitive in modern German is that it is a case in decline. This tallies with the evidence of historical studies, which show the genitive to have been losing ground throughout the history of the German language, and with the evidence of

<sup>10</sup> The genitive and dative figures are combined here and also include feminine singulars (in which genitive and dative are indistinguishable), which were also counted for *von*. The relative use of the genitive and dative with these prepositions is shown in Figures 3 and 4.



the contemporary data, which show the genitive to be facing competition in every role it performs. Nonetheless, the situation in the data was found to be more nuanced than the general perception. Although felt to be weaker than its competitors, the genitive actually dominates its competitors in most of its roles. Furthermore, the nature of the competition was found to be more complex than the usual assumption that the dative is usurping the genitive. Certainly, a great deal of competition between the two cases was observed, but the genitive also faces competition from *von* and POSS-S in possession marking, while both the genitive and dative compete with *von* when used with some prepositions. The over-use of the genitive with some prepositions affects the accusative as well as the dative. The situation in the dialects also shows that the situation is more complex than simple competition between the two cases: in many dialects the dative itself is absent or has merged with another case. Historically, uncertainty surrounding the use of a particular case has tended to indicate that the case is declining. However, the fact that the uncertainty surrounding the genitive overlaps both with other cases and with other constructions suggests that the perceived decline of the genitive in present-day German is actually the symptom of a more general reorganisation. The findings of this paper have some relevance to the teaching and learning of German as a foreign language. The data showed that sometimes a stigmatised variant is more likely to be encountered than a variant considered “correct” usage and therefore taught to learners (e.g. *wegen* + dative vs. *wegen* + genitive). Awareness of competing variants (e.g. genitive and *von*, genitive and dative) is relevant not only to native speakers in everyday communication, but also to teachers and learners.

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