Gradual degrammaticalization: a Lexical Sharing approach to the evolution of the English possessive

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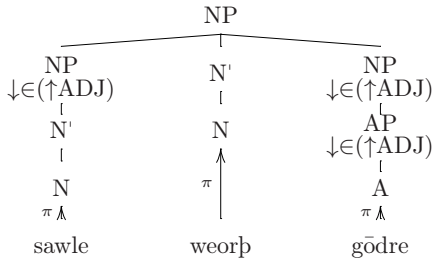
The history of the English possessive marker involves a complex and gradual process of degrammaticalization, from simple affix in Old English (OE) to something that appears, at least, to be much more clitic-like in Present-Day English (PDE). In this paper I build on the synchronic analysis of the PDE possessive *'s* marker advanced by Lowe (2015) to develop a diachronic account of the degrammaticalization. The analysis makes use of a carefully constrained and architecturally integrated version of Lexical Sharing (LS; Wescoat 2002), in which Wescoat's 'l-structure' is associated with the s(yntactic)-string (Dalrymple and Mycock 2011), and Wescoat's λ projection is associated with the inverse of the π projection from string to c-structure. The diachronic data makes it possible to distinguish three distinct types of affix: simple affixes (with no LS); affixes displaying 'unified' LS (LS but a unified lexical entry, see below); and affixes displaying 'partitioned' LS (LS with a partitioned lexical entry).

I build on Allen's (2008, 2013) detailed and comprehensive account of the OE and Middle English (ME) data, but I propose radically different formal analyses, both synchronic and diachronic. I propose that LS provides an insightful account of both the synchronic situation in ME, and of the diachronic changes between OE and PDE. At the same time, the development of the possessive construction between ME and PDE has significant consequences for the theory of LS within LFG: it becomes possible to distinguish two different types of LS, one in which the form concerned is 'split' only at c-structure, presenting a unified lexical entry, and another in which the form concerned is split at both c- and f-structure, and presents a partitioned lexical entry. The latter type is notably closer to a full split, i.e. full degrammaticalization of the affix to a clitic (a separate lexical item). The degrammaticalization of the English possessive marker can then be analysed as a development across four different states, broadly divisible into four different time periods (ex. 9).

The English possessive marker began life as an affix, appearing in Old English (OE: 7th–11th century A.D.) as a genitive case morpheme. OE was a relatively inflectional language compared with PDE (more similar to Modern High German), distinguishing up to five different cases in the declensional system. The ancestor of PDE *'s*, OE *-es*, was just one of a number of genitive case morphemes suffixed to nouns and adjectives, distributed largely according to declensional class, and showing a high degree of lexical idiosyncrasy. The genitive forms of all nouns were lexically specified; adjectives uniformly adopted one of two declensional patterns depending on syntactic context. Pronouns, including the demonstrative *se*, which was in the process of developing into the PDE definite article *the*, also make case distinctions. All declinable words in a noun phrase must be fully declined in the appropriate case, with agreement between modifers and the nouns they modify. In (1), both elements of the discontinuous noun phrase *sawle gōdre* 'of a good soul' appear in the genitive singular. Genitive case marking in Old English, and the genitive morpheme *-es* in particular, display all the characteristics of inflectional affixation, and there is no reason to assume any other possibility at this stage of the language.

(1) *sawl-e* *weorþ* *gōd-re*
soul-GEN.SG worth good-GEN.SG
'the worth of a good soul.'



By Early Middle English (EME: c. 1100–1300 A.D.) the case system of OE was largely lost. A possessor phrase is usually marked only once, on the head of the possessor (or part of the head, e.g. with coordinated phrases), and this head is constrained to immediately precede the possessum:

(2) *þe* *Laferrd* *Cristess* *are*
The Lord Christ.GEN mercy
'The Lord Christ's mercy.' (Allen 2013: 13)

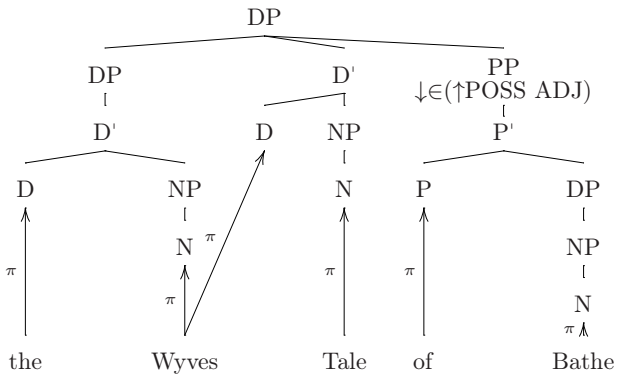
(3) *wif* *&* *weres* *gederunge*
wife & man.GEN union
'The union of man and wife.' (Ibid.)

These pattern persist into Late Middle English/Early Modern English (LME/EModE: c. 1300–1600 A.D.), and through into PDE. Another pattern found in EME and LME/EModE (but not PDE) is shown in (4, from LME); again the head of the possessor is absolutely constrained to appear directly before the possessum, and the requirement for adjacency forces a postmodifier of the possessor to appear *following* the possessum.

(4) *The Wyves Tale of Bathe*
'The Wife of Bath's Story.' (Ch. CT D)

These facts are sufficient to demonstrate that the possessive marker at this stage of the language was neither a true 'edge-inflection' nor a simple affix. Its status can be insightfully captured by assuming that possession was reanalysed as involving LS. Essentially, possessive forms of nouns were reanalysed as being associated with two terminal nodes in the c-structure, N and D, as shown in (5).

(5)



(6)

wyves:	N D
	(↑PRED) = 'wife'
	(POSS↑)

This accounts for the once only marking; the strict requirement of adjacency between head of possessor and possessum can be accounted for by assuming that, although the word concerned is associated with two nodes in the c-structure, it still presents a unified lexical entry, i.e. all the f-descriptions specified in the lexical entry are associated with the main category of the word (here the N). The second f-description in the lexical entry in (6) specifies that the noun phrase functions as a possessor; this f-description only works if *wyves* is the head of the possessor. It is also notable that this occurs at the period when examples of noun phrases containing both a possessive and a determiner largely cease to be found (Allen 2008: though Allen is careful not to attribute the increasing complementarity of possessive and determiner in this period to any adoption of definiteness marking on the part of possessor phrases).

In LME/EModE the further development of the phrasal possessive provides evidence for the next step in the degrammaticalization of the possessive. Here, we effectively have true 'edge inflection': possessive marking appears on the right edge of the possessor phrase, even if that element is not the head (7). The functional constraints required to ensure that such forms are used only in possessive constructions, and the fact that there is no predictable functional relation between the rightmost word in the possessor phrase and the head, require that we analyse possessive forms of nouns in these constructions as having partitioned lexical entries: the f-descriptions in the lexical entry of a possessive form such as LME *loves* are split, such that some are associated with the N node in the c-structure (and so relate to the f-structure projected from the N) and others are associated with the D node (8).

(7) *The grete god of Loves name*
'The great God of Love's name.' (Ch. HF 1489)

(8)

loves:	N D
N	(↑PRED) = 'love'
D	(POSS↑)

In PDE a further change has occurred, so that many instances of the possessive can be analysed by means of a clitic (as argued in Lowe 2015). The four stage development over the four periods is schematized in (9). It is important to note that, as Allen (2013) shows, different constructions continue to exist alongside one another during each period, such that we cannot talk about a simple switch from one construction to another. Rather, multiple possibilities are available in the grammar at any one time.

(9)

	Affix	LS affix (unifd.)	LS affix (partd.)	Clitic
OE	✓			
EME	✓	✓		
LME/EModE	(✓)	✓	✓	(✓)
PDE		(✓)	✓	✓

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