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"Headline Talk": Comparison of genitive constructions in Dutch, French, English and German newspaper usage

In abbreviated style, e.g. on signs, in notes or telegrams, checklists, or any situation that calls for brevity and/or pithiness, the ordinary inflectional forms and locutions at a language's disposal are considerably reduced or altered in favor of compactness of expression. The precise circumstances as to when and where this abbreviated style is used appropriately vary a great deal from language to language and depend on sociolinguistic factors and the purpose and format of the intended communication. This paper will discuss a strategy used frequently and specifically by Dutch in headlines, which we compare with usage in other Germanic languages - especially English and German - and their Romance neighbor, French.

Let us examine two headlines taken from *De Volkskrant*:

Leiding Georgië eist bestraffing daders
bloedbad
Problemen Exxon leiden tot hogere prijs
ruwe olie

With the elements unexpressed above added back and italicized, the underlying version of these headlines might be, respectively:

*De leiding van Georgië eist de bestraffing
van de daders van een bloedbad.*

and

*De problemen van (bij?) Exxon leiden tot
een hogere prijs van ruwe olie*

In these examples, the omission of definite and indefinite articles that one might expect in headlines does indeed take place. This omission provides not only the economy of space desirable for layout purposes, but also a staccato, catchy rhythm that invites the reader to find out more about the topic it introduces.

If only the articles were omitted in the above examples, such headlines would not sound too different from those possible in an English paper, viz.:

Leiding van Georgië eist bestraffing van
daders van bloedbad.

and

Problemen van [bij] Exxon leiden tot
hogere prijs van ruwe olie

In addition, though, the preposition *van*, which expresses possession or noun-noun complementation (genitive function) in Dutch, has been left out in these headlines. The word order is not changed, producing a rather peculiar end effect that is decidedly not what non-native learners of Dutch are taught to expect. While the English equivalents might, as we have seen, also omit the articles, it is inadmissible to leave out the preposition *of*, since it expresses grammatical function—i.e., genitive:

Leadership of Georgia demands
punishment of perpetrators of bloodbath,

but not

*Leadership Georgia demands punishment
perpetrators bloodbath.

Likewise:

Problems of [better: *at*] Exxon lead to
higher price of crude oil,

but not

*Problems Exxon lead to higher price
crude oil.

Further examples from Dutch reveal, as with *van/bij Exxon* above, that aside from the genitivizing *van*, occasionally even other prepositions are omitted, e.g.:

Bush vraagt steun Gorbatsjov voor
oplossing Nicaragua

understood as

Bush vraagt steun (van) Gorbatsjov voor
(een) oplossing (*in/voor*) Nicaragua

and

Bezuiniging vergroot chaos ziekenhuizen
Italië

as

Bezuiniging vergroot (de) chaos (*in*) (de)
ziekenhuizen (van) Italië

or possibly:

Bezuiniging vergroot (de) chaos (*in*)
ziekenhuizen (*in*) Italië

A full analysis of these apparent "exceptions", and

many other examples one could find, would reveal that they represent in reality slightly different semantic relationships between the two nouns being juxtaposed. Thus, not all instances of this peculiar construction in Dutch can be said to represent a truncated *van*-construction but rather the omission of whatever preposition is appropriate (such as *in*, *bij* or *voor*). It is even possible to use *van* in some of the cases where another preposition would be more likely, thanks to the variety of meanings that *van* may have. An full analysis of such cases is not within the scope of this paper and thus will be ignored; for the purposes of the present discussion we shall examine cases of *van*-omission, this being by far the preposition most frequently left out in constructions such as these.

In English, the only way 'of' or indeed any other preposition could be omitted is by forming noun-noun compounds (e.g. 'oil price') or attributive adjective-noun phrases ('Georgian leadership') and/or by using the true genitive (Exxon's problems). All of these options necessitate a change in word order:

Exxon's problems lead to higher *crude oil price* (or: *higher-priced crude oil*)
 Georgia's (or *Georgian*) leadership demands punishment for *bloodbath perpetrators*
 Bush requests *Gorbachev's* support in *Nicaraguan solution*

Like English, German also shows a marked preference for alternate constructions rather than the omission of function-carrying words. Since these function words are often definite or indefinite articles, omission of articles is comparatively rare in German, at least in the national newspapers examined (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*). If the grammatical functions cannot be expressed by a different means, such as compounding, they tend not to be elided in German. If the meaning is made clear by use of a preposition, articles may optionally be omitted, although this is in fact not done in the majority of cases. In either case, German agrees with English as concerns functional relationships expressed by prepositions: the prepositions simply are not omitted. Consider these examples:

Serbische Streitkräfte suchen zunehmend *die Konfrontation mit Einheiten der UN* (*Serbian military forces increasingly seek confrontation with UN units*)
 Tunnel *für* Norwegens Gas
 (*Tunnel for Norway's gas*)

Berlusconi sucht *die Unterstützung der Sozialpartner*
 (*Berlusconi seeks the support of social partners*)
 SPD steht geschlossen zu Scharpings Programm
 (*SPD takes a closed stance toward Scharping's program*)
 Kondom-Kurierdienst in Grenzsituationen
 (*Condom courier service in border situations*)

As stated, the German national newspapers consulted rarely omit definite or indefinite articles. The type used in the headlines is small enough in size to permit all the articles to be included, and they generally are. A reason for this may well be that, since German articles are highly inflected compared to English or Dutch, it is simply more practical to include all of the grammatical information in its normal format rather than to invent elaborate schemes to dispense with using the function-carrying articles. Because of their function, there is little propensity to omit them, and thus they most often are not, even if it is possible to do so without grammatical ambiguity.

English and Dutch, on the other hand, having lost most of their inflections,¹ are generally more dependent on word order and analytic (periphrastic) structures as a signal of function; articles carry little or no grammatical information and thus can easily be omitted. Nevertheless, the style chosen by the *New York Times* and many other American newspapers, generally avoids such omissions; they too, reduce the type size enough to include definite or indefinite articles in the majority of headlines.

In contrast to both English and German, however, we have seen that major Dutch newspapers prefer the highly idiosyncratic "headline style" illustrated above. Here are all of the headlines from page 1 of a recent *NRC Handelsblad*, for example:

Duisenberg kraakt beleid kabinet-Lubbers
 Benelux en Duitsland vormen beleid
 asielzoekers
 Vrolijke viering *van* verjaardag koningin
 Hirsch Ballin mikpunt *van* kritiek tijdens
 de verkiezingscampagne
 Voetbalclub Ajax haalt
 landskampioenschap binnen
 Een lintje voor 2.485 Nederlanders

In four out of six instances, the headline style is used (with a double dose in the first one listed: kabinet-Lubbers, itself an example, is then used as

the postposed limiting element to *beleid*). This phenomenon is exceedingly common in Dutch papers. A distinct headline style is clearly actively cultivated, whereas leading papers in the other two Germanic language areas seem to avoid such an extreme usage. Thus, the use of this style is a distinct departure by Dutch as opposed to English and German newspaper headline style.

Both English and German, in fact, often seem to use strategies that prevent such a style from being employed. For instance, they quite often avoid nominal forms altogether in order to obviate the necessity of compounding or using a genitive phrase (either with *of* or with the 's genitive). This is accomplished by expressing the potential noun as a verb, often in participle form. The *of*-phrase in the following :

Auction of rare violins Friday
could easily become, with a noun-noun compound:
Rare violin auction Friday
or could equally well appear, with no compounding
and use of the past participle:

Rare violins auctioned Friday
(the noun *auction* becomes a verb in the past
participle form; this is actually a truncated passive
construction with the auxiliary omitted).

German offers very similar examples to those in English, quite often in combination with compounding:

Iran wollte angeblich IRA für Dissidenten-
Morde anwerben
(Iran allegedly wanted to recruit IRA for
murders of dissidents)
US-Konjunktursignale bestätigen
Wachstumskurs
(U.S. economic indicators confirm growth
trend)
Ex-Treuhand-Mitarbeiter der
Bestechlichkeit angeklagt
(Ex-Treuhand employees accused of
corruption)

In these examples, we also note that if nominal forms are used, they tend to be compacted in both English and German by compounding. Accordingly, we now take a closer look at noun-noun compounds as one of the frequently used Germanic methods of concentrating language. Germanic languages in general make frequent use of nominal compounds with the limiting noun (i.e. the noun in the "genitive" function) preceding its base noun. This limiting noun often is no longer genitive in form

(although it can retain an *-s-* linking element, as in *loonsverhoging*) and in effect functions as an attributive adjective. As such, it is found in its natural Germanic position, that is, before the noun it describes.

Being a Germanic language, Dutch is able to use any of the same strategies used by English or German - nominal compounds, adjective + noun, etc. - and often enough does so, as seen in these examples:

Zuidafrikaanse steun bij ontwikkelen
nieuwe raket *ontkend*
Aids-specialisten beducht voor aantasting
zorg
Bond eist 3 procent *loonsverhoging* voor
personeel supermarkt
Kamer gaat akkoord met *OV-jaarkaart*
voor beursstudenten
Bonn treedt op tegen overdracht aan Irak
van *raket-technologie*
Swapo-leider waarschuwt strijders voor
VN-posten
Haags *anti-apartheidsbeleid* afhankelijk van
fiat regering

We have seen, however, that Dutch, while easily exploiting this option like any Germanic language, is also capable of expressing the noun-noun complementation in a rather non-Germanic fashion: the limiting noun is postposed rather than placed before the base noun, even though it is still construed as adjectival in function. Example: *Arrestatie Cubaanse dissidenten* tijdens bezoek *Gorbatsjov* (the limiting noun in each case is in italics). Such a word order can be explained by showing that the Dutch genitive phrase pattern, i.e. noun + *van* + noun, is simply not disrupted when the *van* is removed for the sake of brevity. The resulting postposition of the limiting noun, being a marked word order in Germanic languages, becomes in itself sufficient to signal the function of a genitive in headline or compact style.

From the preceding examples, however, we have seen that at the same time, Dutch retains the option of using the Germanic pattern and does make use of it, often mixed in the same sentence with the non-Germanic postposition method. In the examples, the peculiarly Dutch pattern of *ontwikkelen nieuwe raket*, *aantasting zorg*, *personeel supermarkt*, *eis gevangenen*, and *fiat regering* could all have been expressed by a compound noun built on the more "normal" pattern of *aids-specialisten*,

loonsverhoging, OV-jaarkaart, raket-technologie, Swapo-leider, VN-posten and *anti-apartheidsbeleid*. Thus the former could also have been expressed as *supermarktpersoneel, regeringsfiat*, etc., and the latter as *jaarkaart OV, leider Swapo, beleid anti-apartheid*, etc. The choice of which is used in a given context appears to depend largely on sentence rhythm and desired emphasis, focus being achieved by delaying the position of an element in the sentence. These and other possible factors are in themselves a fascinating topic that will be reserved for another discussion.

As stated earlier, the limiting noun is adjectival in nature. This is easily seen if it is placed before the noun in normal attributive position. The adjectival nature of the limiting noun becomes clear if we substitute an adjective for it, e.g., *de Swapo-leider* (limiting noun + base noun) and *de Afrikaanse leider* (adjective + noun) are essentially identical from a functional point of view. For the marked order of *het personeel supermarkt* (base noun + limiting noun), however, we cannot show an equivalent such as **het personeel stedelijk* or **de leider Afrikaans* (noun + adjective).² The limiting noun when postposed thus remains a noun in its underlying form and cannot be considered as precisely equivalent to an adjective, yet still seems to retain distinct adjectival qualities. How can we explain that this can be so, and to what might we attribute the peculiarly Dutch fondness for this word order?

A possible answer might come from French, the Romance neighbor of Dutch. French, with which Dutch has had long geographical, cultural and linguistic contact, may have exerted some influence on Dutch in this usage. The customary French adjective position is *after* the noun: *l'enseignement supérieur, la coalition mauve, les urnes bataves, le pouvoir libanais, les médias audiovisuels, l'insularité britannique, vaccin anti-sida, pèlerinage calédonien, l'éthique biomédicale, la commission sociale, balle tragique, les potes disparus*. But is there a French structure that corresponds to the postposed limiting noun of Dutch?

There is indeed. Contemporary French usage does admit the use of another noun in the postposed limiting position, as in *une affaire Carrefour, stages jeunes, Page Economique Automobile, lin nature, Collection Bourdon, la bombe Soudoplatov, le*

«tuyau Pelat», l'affaire Pechiney-Triangle, etc. These are not simple appositions (cf. *le général De Gaulle, le wagon-restaurant*), but rather instances of compounds. In each case one might easily imagine the presence of the preposition *de* (or occasionally other prepositions): *une affaire de Carrefour, stages de jeunes (=pour jeunes), Page Economique de l'Automobile, lin de nature, Collection de Bourdon, la bombe de Soudoplatov*. This use of *de* is the standard way of forming noun-noun compounds in French,³ e.g.: *maître d'hôtel, homme d'affaires, point de vue*, etc. The examples above without *de* are more marked in French, since nouns are being used in an adjectival function, assuming the natural position for adjectives by the simple omission of *de*.⁴

Thus, for striking brevity, both Dutch and French can produce a more marked construction by the identical means, i.e., simple omission of the *of*-element, thereby achieving the desired departure from the neutral expression. The fact that normal French adjective position is after the head noun makes the placement of the pseudoadjectival limiting noun not at all illogical. The added benefit of markedness calls the entire phrase to greater attention.

Other similarities between French *de* and Dutch *van* only contribute to the Dutch predilection for its special headline construction. The same preposition, *de*, is used in French for the possessive function *per se*: *la couleur de la maison, le nom du film, la totalité des passagers*, etc. Similarly, Dutch almost exclusively uses *van* in its possessive construction.⁵ Although the Germanic genitives *Gorbatsjovs bezoek* or *Smit-Kroes beleidsplan*, possibly even *Moskous partner*, are still entirely possible and acceptable,⁶ *het bezoek van Gorbatsjov, het beleidsplan van Smit-Kroes* and *de partner van Moskou* are more likely. The preference for this construction parallel to that of French, in the presence of the perfectly accepted inherited alternative, points at least to the possibility of French influence. The fact that in French some compounds omit their normal *de* element for special effect, leaving the limiting noun postposed, provides a direct basis of comparison between the two languages, since this marked construction is achieved by omission of the genitive preposition in both languages. French, then, may have enhanced

the appeal of this peculiar structure in the rather marked language of Dutch headlines.⁷

This is the case, as stated earlier, even though Dutch has at its disposal the same techniques used by its Germanic brethren. In fact, Dutch even seems to *prefer* nominalized forms so that the use of the more marked base noun + limiting noun structure can be used, often at the expense of a more natural-sounding verbal construction. Consider again the example of the *Volkscrant* headline: *Arrestatie Cubaanse dissidenten tijdens bezoek Gorbatsjov*. This headline, if it had been spoken in conversation, might well have appeared as "*Cubaanse dissidenten werden gearresteerd tijdens het bezoek van Gorbatsjov*." In this example, a perfectly acceptable Dutch headline might have omitted the auxiliary *werden* and used a normal compound in similar fashion to English or German, viz. *Cubaanse dissidenten gearresteerd tijdens Gorbatsjov-bezoek*; cf. the English version *Cuban dissidents arrested during Gorbachev visit* and German *Kubanische Dissidenten während Gorbatschow-Besuchs festgenommen*. However, in order to use the "headline style," with its marked word order, Dutch instead first avoids the "Germanic" noun-noun compound "*Gorbatsjov-bezoek*" and assumes the structure *bezoek van Gorbatsjov*. It then goes so far as to nominalize the verb (*gearresteerd* to *arrestatie*), which in turn necessitates the genitive construction (*arrestatie van Cubaanse dissidenten*). Both genitive phrases are then truncated by means of *van*-omission to the final headline form.

It should be noted that the fondness of Dutch speakers for this construction is extended to a far wider variety of linguistic situations than just in newspaper headlines, some of which do have analogs in other Germanic languages.⁸ In addition, no attempt has been made here to trace the history of this phenomenon in Dutch.⁹ A full analysis would necessitate such a historical perspective as well as a comparison of the semantic values of *van* in Dutch and *de* in French. Nonetheless, the use of this construction in Dutch remains, despite its occasional use in other languages, very frequent and not limited to the headlines we have examined here.

At the very least, then, we have seen that in the specific venue of their newspapers Dutch speakers have chosen to spice up headlines, even in the most sober and intellectually written of national

newspapers, and to serve them up regularly in a most striking and linguistically delicious manner unique to the Dutch.

NOTES

¹ Exceptions to this are, of course, remnants of the older case system in Dutch such as *ten behoeve van*, *op den duur*, *het teken des kruises* or genitive *der* used occasionally even in the contemporary language with feminine or plural nouns. Aside from the latter usage, which is still productive, most of these are now set phrases - i.e., lexicalized - and would not be changed even in a headline context. However, no examples of such literary or archaic case usage were found in headlines during the course of research for this paper.

² It can occur, however, in checklists, where the same noun is qualified by two or more adjectives, as in the lighthearted "Cijferlijst Mijnheer" in the 1986 *Bescheuragenda* of Van Kooten & De Bie. Here housewives are provided with a report card form for use in rating their husbands' domestic performance:

Rapportcijfers van...

Liefde geestelijk, liefde lichamelijk
(adjectives, postposed)

Zetten koffie, zetten thee, zetten vuilniszakken, vlijt algemeen (three postposed adjectival nouns followed by a postposed adjective).

The postposed limiting noun method is frequently used in such a context: "*Kleur haar, kleur ogen, kleur neus, kleur gelaat... | Nummer paspoort, nummer rijbewijs, nummer spaarbankboekje, nummer geheime bankrekening, maat schoenen binnenland, maat schoenen buitenland ... | Bezorging ochtendblad, bezorging avondblad | Beeldbreedte televisie | Voeding damesreisscheerapparaat* (all further examples from the *Bescheuragenda*). This usage is reminiscent of the style found in indexes, minus the commas.

This "notetaking" style is further illustrated by these examples taken from the Internet. News stories summarized by a native Dutch speaker had the following examples (among a great many others): *Van der Valk gearresteerd op strand Curaçao* and *DASA verlaagt prijs vliegtuigrompen Fokker*.

³ The compound-forming function may also be accomplished in French by the preposition *à* when the limiting noun expresses the purpose of the head

noun: *une machine à écrire, une boîte à lettres, un sac à main.*

4. Two nouns in direct proximity are, of course, not excluded in French, even in older stages of the language. Grevisse states (in *Le bon usage*, Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1964) in his discussion of noun + noun compounding: "Le complément du nom s'exprimait parfois, au moyen âge, par simple juxtaposition du cas régime, sans préposition: ce mode de composition, si fécond dans les langues germaniques, est assez rare en français: *Fête-Dieu, chiendent, Val-Saint-Lambert, timbre-poste.*" (94) (The *cas régime* is the amalgamated survivor in Old French of various Latin oblique cases, here obviously in the genitive function). Although this usage dates back to medieval stages of the language, it never became regularized in French. Instead, as the use of *de* effectively paraphrased the disappearing genitive case, so *de* also became the major way of forming noun-noun compounds used inter alia to perform the function of that case. Thus, because of its marked nature in contemporary French, *de*-omission effectively uses a pattern from its past in an entirely new function. This usage appears to be on the rise in advertising, in contemporary slang and other venues, although this is merely an empirical observation and deserves further research.

5. German and Icelandic, although (alone among modern Germanic languages) they have preserved the inherited case system, none the less tend to postpose genitive phrases, although the other order is also possible. Icelandic, having kept the case system more completely, usually needs no article to show clearly which case is being used, whereas German normally shows case by article and determiner endings. Thus articles are generally not omitted in German headlines, whereas they normally are left out in Icelandic. Examples for Icelandic from *Morgunblaðið*: *Liðsflutningar Serba til N-Bosnia; Umboðsmaður um kvörtun veitingamanna; Endurskoðaða Parf gjaldtöku vegna löggæslu; Útboð ríkisvæðla.* This inherited Germanic usage is possibly also an impetus for Dutch retention of postposed elements in a limiting or genitive function even if *van* is omitted.

6. Other Germanic languages, particularly Danish, make liberal use of the (preposed) genitive as the most economical means of expressing noun-noun relationships, even for improper nouns. Examples from *Politiken Weekly*: *Skolernes ledere er oprørt*

over nye timeregler; Forslag om fire års fængsel for usikker sex; Telefonnettets lydmur brudt; Fondsbørsens aktieindeks. These appear alongside frequent compounds: *Ytringsfriheden for retten; Gyser-rapport om Færø-ø-penge; Stadig strid om EU porto; Milliard-ordre til dansk cement-gigant.* Swedish papers seem to prefer compounding and use of prepositions and verbal phrases rather than extensive use of the genitive, although genitives are possible in the language. Examples: *Läkemedelsaktier lockar; Frågan om uppehållstillstånd hinder för uppgörelse om trupptillbakadragande; 1.400 kr skiljer olika bolags bätforsäkring.*

7. One could make a case for influence from Germanic (via Dutch) on French as well. The use of nouns as adjectival elements, while not unknown (cf. note 4 above), is not standard in Romance languages, yet French has extensively developed this usage in the truncated compounds. In addition, one might add here that French adjectives are occasionally used *before* the noun for extra emphasis or emotional content, as in *C'était un excellent dîner!* and the like. This marked position may have been influenced by standard attributive adjective position in the Germanic languages, possibly via contact with Dutch and German.

8. Although German does not appear to employ it in headlines, a construction analogous to the Dutch elision of *van* does exist. It seems primarily limited to brief notes, telegrams or catchwords/slogans, names of companies or departments and the like. Examples here are taken from the textbook *Telefonieren, Schriftliche Mitteilungen*. Instances of *von*-omission or adjectival limiting element in post-noun position are underlined:

"Bausteine Deutsch" (title of program component)

(From "to-do" list:) *Termine: - Abgabe Lohnsteuerjahresausgleich; - Sprechzeit Finanzamt*

(Reported phone conversations:) *Abteilung Viehfutterveredelung; Firma Eurofleisch*

(The text of a handwritten *Gesprächsnotiz* on preprinted form) *Betrifft: Kooperation mit Grünland-Institut, Wendenau*

- Mein Brief vom 31.7.81 an GI (Anlage)
- Reaktion Fleischmann: Möglichkeiten der Zusammenarbeit erkunden (...)

-Anfrage Fleischmann: Bereitschaft unserer Firma, ihre Kenntnisse und technischen Möglichkeiten der Anti-Atomkraft-

Bewegung und dem GI zur Verfügung zu stellen?

(Note that the two examples of this usage underlined have the function of catchy titles. The actual text sections, while still in a notetaking or checklist sort of register, still make use of genitive endings, compounding, etc. A similar specimen in Dutch would be laden with examples of *van*-omission similar to those seen in the Dutch headline examples given in this paper.)

⁹ In the case of proper names used as limiting nouns, at least, the postposed usage appears to be longstanding. According to Tacx, "Combinaties als: *Indië-vlucht, Marshall-plan, Dalton-systeem*, worden door velen beschouwd als germanismen. Nederlands is de combinatie met achtergeplaatste eigennaam: *Het plan-Marshall, de vlucht naar Indië, het systeem-Dalton*. Zodra een woord niet meer als eigennaam wordt gevoeld, is er geen bezwaar. Analogie doet dan de rest. Goed is dus: *Shell-station, Dalton-systeem, K.L.M.-vliegtuigen, Europa-hal*." We have seen an example of this in *het kabinet-Lubbers*, which to Dutch speakers sounds decidedly strange if cast into the "more Germanic" pattern of "Lubbers-kabinet" (cf. English "Lubbers cabinet" and German "Lubbers-Kabinett"). Once again, the Dutch preference parallels French usage: *l'affaire Dreyfus, la bombe Soudoplatov*.

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