Maximality and situation-sensitivity: The evolution of French possessives

Alexandra Simonenko¹ & Anne Carlier²
¹Research Foundation Flanders & Ghent University, ²Université Lille 3
alexandra.simonenko@ugent.be, anne.carlier@univ-lille3.fr

This paper explores the evolution of the semantics of possessive morphemes in French in light of the emergence of the ban on their cooccurrence with other determiners, such as le/lal/les, as well as un/une series and demonstratives. Medieval texts feature constructions involving co-occurrence of possessive pronouns with other determiner types, as illustrated in (1) for la.

(1) la tue aname el ciel seit absoluthe!
DET your soul in.the heaven be.SBJ absolved
‘...that your soul may be absolved in heaven!’

Such co-occurrences are strictly ungrammatical in Modern French. We propose that possessive pronouns acquired a maximal quantification component: while at the earlier stages of French the possessive pronoun denoted an intersective modifier, in Modern French it denotes a function which picks out the maximal member from the denotation of the nominal predicate related by a possessive relation to the possessor. We suggest that the emerging co-occurrence ban amounts to an instance of No Vacuous Quantification principle (NVQ, Partee et al. 1990, Kratzer 1995, Kennedy 1997, Potts 2002 a.o.). Assuming a formulation of NVQ from Heim and Kratzer (1998: 126) which states that each variable binder must bind at least one variable, we propose that the NVQ arises with two maximality-based determiners (e.g. definite + possessive) due to the saturation of a situation argument of the nominal predicate by the first determiner. We thus make a claim that maximality is intrinsically associated with introducing a restricted quantification domain. We also discuss the fact that both le/lal/les and possessive pronouns are compatible with the universal quantifier tout “all” in Old as well as in Modern French and that although tout and le/lal/les make similar contributions to truth conditions, they contrast with respect to a) tolerance to exceptions (Kleiber 2011) and b) sensitivity to situations (Pearce 1976). We use these facts, as well as data from other Romance languages, to strengthen the claim that maximal quantification, characterized by tolerance to exceptions, necessarily involves domain restriction.