Maximality and situation-sensitivity: The evolution of French possessives

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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*/*la*/*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*/*la*/*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*/*la*/*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.

References: • Kennedy, C. 1997. Antecedent-contained deletion and the syntax of quantification. *Linguistic Inquiry* 28(4). 662–688. • Kleiber, G. 2011. La quantification universelle en trio: *tous les, chaque* et *tout*. *Studii de lingvistică* 1. 139–157 • Kratzer, A. 1995. Stage-level and individual-level predicates as inherent generics. In G. N. Carlson & F. J. Pelletier (eds.), *The Generic Book*, 125–175. Chicago: Chicago University Press. • Partee, B., A. G. ter Meulen & R. Wall. 1990. *Mathematical methods in linguistics*. Dodrecht: Kluwer • Potts, C. 2002. No vacuous quantification constraints in syntax. *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Meeting of the North East Linguistic Society*.