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(Extra)Ordinary letters: A view from below on seventeenth-century Dutch

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Chapter 9. The genitive and alternative constructions

9.1. Deflection

Middle Dutch, the Dutch language as it was written and spoken between approximately 1100 and 1500 AD, had a case-system. Nouns and their accompanying pronouns and articles showed different endings or appeared in different forms depending on which function the noun phrase fulfilled in the sentence. For Middle Dutch, four cases are usually distinguished: the nominative, genitive, dative, and accusative (Van der Horst 2008: 573-581; Van der Wal & Van Bree 2008: 132-135). However, already in the Middle Dutch period, the case-system started to weaken: the different endings or forms of nouns, pronouns and articles started to erode and syntactic means, like prepositions and word order, became more and more important to signal the function of specific noun phrases – a phenomenon which is called 'deflection'. By the seventeenth century, a fully-fledged case-system was no longer used in spoken Dutch, but cases still occurred in written texts (Van der Horst 2008: 1074-1075). The fact that Latin was typically taken as a good example of what a language should look like can explain that the case-system was held on to in several grammars of and writings about the Dutch language (Van der Wal & Van Bree 2008: 195).

In this chapter, I want to examine the use of the case-system and alternative constructions in the seventeenth-century letters. I focused on the genitive, given its special status: the genitive seems to have been the first case that started to dwindle (Weerman & De Wit 1998: 36-37; 1999: 1178-1179), but at the same time it is the only case that is still used productively in present-day Dutch – albeit only occasionally and in formal contexts (Scott 2011: 126-127). Therefore I wondered which people still use the genitive case in the seventeenth-century letters and under what conditions. Are there stylistic, social or syntactic variables that influence the presence or absence of the genitive case? And which alternative constructions are used instead of the genitive? Are some constructions more popular than others with certain people or in certain contexts?

In what follows, I will deal with these questions, but only after describing the genitive case and the alternative constructions which occurred in the seventeenth century according to the literature and which thus may be of importance for the corpus of seventeenth-century letters in §9.2. In §9.3 I will examine whether there is any influence of stylistic variation on the use of the genitive and the alternative constructions: are particular constructions typical of certain contexts? Then, the relation between social factors (social class and gender) and the genitival constructions will be investigated in §9.4.

In §9.5 I will examine the possible influence of a language-internal factor: the length of the constituents in the genitival construction. The conclusions will be drawn in §9.6. From now on, I will use to term *genitival constructions* to refer to the entirety of the genitive and its alternative constructions.

Following Weerman & De Wit (1998: 22), the direct-partitive constructions – measure constructions such as in examples 1 and 2 – were not included in the data. In these constructions the genitival aspect could, but need not be expressed by an *s*-suffix on the second NP in the seventeenth century.[117] The *van*-construction was not an option for these constructions, which makes them different from the alternative constructions examined below.[118] Some other partitive constructions, as in examples 3 and 4, were also kept out of the data on the same grounds: they cannot occur with the alternative *van*-construction. The examples all stem from the seventeenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus:

1) *een vatie* *botter*
   a barrel butter
   'a barrel of butter'
2) *het* *vatyen* *suyckers*
   the barrel sugar-GEN
   'the barrel of sugar'
3) *wat* *jongs*
   something young-GEN
   'a baby'
4) *meer* *schryvens*
   more writing-GEN
   'more letters'

[117] Van der Horst 2008: 1078 notes that the *s*-suffix with these kinds of constructions seems to be waning in the seventeenth century, but Koelmans 2001: 136 notices that it seems to hold strong in partitive constructions in De Ruyter's language. However, De Ruyter's language seems to have been very different from the language use in the corpus and Van der Horst's remark might prove to be an understatement, for a quick search in the corpus for measure constructions (with the words *kast* 'crate', *vat* 'barrel', *sack* 'bag', *ton* 'barrel', *kinnetje* 'barrel', *(half) oxhooft* 'barrel', *pijp* 'barrel', *kelder* 'crate', *ancker* 'barrel', *stoop* 'jar', *pond* 'pound') shows that the *s*-suffix occurs only once (see example 2) out of 111 tokens (that is in 0.9% of the cases).

[118] In English, however, these direct-partitive constructions do occur with the preposition *of*, which closely resembles the Dutch preposition *van*. But in Dutch, the direct-partitive constructions can only be paraphrased using a preposition if this preposition is *met* 'with': *een vaatje met boter* 'a barrel of butter'.

9.2. The seventeenth-century situation

9.2.1. Different genitival constructions

The genitive
In Early-Modern Dutch (1500-1700 AD), the genitive case could be expressed by means of inflectional endings on nouns and their possible accompanying pronouns and articles. Depending on the gender and number of the noun, the ending on these accompanying words could be *–(e)r*, *–(e)s* or *–(e)n*. Depending on the category of the singular masculine and neuter nouns (weak or strong), the genitive could be expressed on the noun itself with an *–s* or an *–n* ending. An overview of the different possibilities, taken from Mooijaert & Van der Wal (2008: 56), is presented below in figure 9.1:

masculine	**definite article + adjective**	**strong noun**	**weak noun**
sg.	**des** goede**n**	gast**s**	mensche**n**
pl.	**der** goede**r**	gasten	menschen
	of the good guest(s)		*of the good person(s)*
neuter			
sg.	**des** goede**n**	hove**s**	herte**n**
pl.	**der** goede**(r)**	hoven	herten
	of the good court(s)		*of the good heart(s)*
feminine			
sg.	**der** goede**(r)**	daet	ziele**(n)**
pl.	**der** goede**(r)**	daden	zielen
	of the good deed(s)		*of the good soul(s)*

Figure 9.1: the genitive case in Early-Modern Dutch with different types of nouns

The genitive can occur pre-nominally as well as post-nominally. So not only *het verlangen* ***des herten*** 'the longing of the heart', but also ***des herten*** *verlangen* is possible.[119]

Weerman & De Wit claim that the genitive disappeared earlier than the dative and the accusative case in Dutch (1998: 36-37; 1999: 1178-1179). However, in present-day Dutch the genitive is still used occasionally, mainly occurring in formal titles (as in 5), in certain fixed expressions (as in 6), in

[119] There is a small syntactic difference between these two constructions: the definite article *het* is not present in the prenominal construction. This is because a prenominal genitive, like ***des herten***, already ensures that the following noun is interpreted as definite.

formal, archaic language (as in 7 and 8), or with a very specific meaning (as in 9) (e-ANS § 3.4.1. and §15.5.3.4.; Scott 2011):

5) *het Kabinet* ***der*** *Koningin*
'the Queen's office'
6) *de tand* ***des tijds***
'the ravages of time'
7) ***'s mans*** *computer* (***'s*** > ***des***)
'the man's computer'
8) *het boek* ***der*** *boeken*
'the book of all books / the Bible'
9) *Zo'n optreden is niet* ***des ministers***.
'Such a way of acting is not typical of a minister.'

As has been mentioned above, the genitive case was probably not used any longer in spoken Dutch in the seventeenth century, but it still occurred in writing (Van der Horst 2008: 1075-1076). Two examples from the corpus of private letters illustrate that the genitive was also used in seventeenth-century private letters.

10) *vaders* ***des*** *vaderlant****s*** *worden nu verraders* ***des*** *vaderlant****s***
'fathers of the country are now turning into traitors of the country'
11) *Tot een teecken mijn****er*** *gunst*
'As a token of my favour'

The van-*construction*
It is common knowledge that the *van*-construction occurred already early in the history of Dutch as an alternative construction. Weerman & De Wit's examination of medieval texts from the city of Bruges (in Flanders) confirms this again: the genitive was in competition with the *van*-construction long before the seventeenth century (1998: 20-21; 1999: 1158-1159). In this construction – a prepositional adjunct – the preposition *van* 'of' indicates that the element following it is a complement of the noun preceding it (Weerman & De Wit 1998: 23; 1999: 1160). This complement can either be a proper name (12) or a noun phrase (13). Examples from the seventeenth-century corpus of private letters are the following:

12) *die hus vroou* ***van*** *hendrick vroom*
'the wife of Hendrick Vroom'

13) *den toe stant* ***van*** *ons vaderlant*
‘the condition of our mother country’

This construction is very common in present-day Dutch, in written as well as in spoken language (e-ANS § 3.4.1.), and was also common in the seventeenth century.

The s*-construction*
The *van*-construction is not the only alternative construction for the genitive in the seventeenth century. There is also the prenominal *s*-construction. It is called prenominal because in this construction the marked possessor is always situated to the left of the noun phrase representing the possessum.[120] Koelmans (1975: 440) gives sixteenth- and seventeenth-century examples as in (14) and the seventeenth-century grammarian Christiaan van Heule (1633: 70-71) also mentions the construction in (15).

14) *iou man**s** saken*
‘your husband’s affairs’
15) *Pieter**s** bouk*
‘Peter’s book’

The *s*-construction is different from the genitive in that the suffix can only be attached to one word and not to other elements of the constituent. So example (14) is different from the genitive construction *de wegh alle**s** vleesch**es*** (‘the way of all flesh’) in which the genitive is marked on both the noun and the possessive pronoun.

As mentioned above, the *s*-construction can only occur prenominally. Constructions such as in example 16 from the corpus of private letters are not examples of *s*-constructions.

16) *de genaede god**s***
‘God’s mercy’

In these cases we are dealing with a genitive, which in the Middle Dutch case-system was signalled on male proper names by an *s*-suffix. I categorise examples such as (15) as instances of the *s*-construction, while in theory they

[120] The terms *possessor* and *possessum* are used to identify the two constituents involved in genitival constructions. The origin of the terms is obviously the prototypical relationship indicated by a genitival construction, possession, even though strictly speaking not all genitival constructions represent such a relationship. In example 17, for instance, the woman Debora cannot be said to *own* the man Jacob in the strict sense of the word.

could also be instances of a genitive. However, by the seventeenth century the *s*-suffix in genitival constructions does not only occur with male proper names, but also with female proper names, such as in example 17. What is more, by the seventeenth century, cases were usually not expressed any longer on proper names. This suggests that the prenominal *s*-construction should indeed be seen as different from the genitive. Only in examples such as 16, where we are dealing with a postnominal construction and with a male possessor, the old genitive for proper names is clearly recognisable.[121]

17) *weet dat debora**s** jacob noch nit tuis en is*
'know that Debora's Jacob is not yet home'

A last peculiarity of the *s*-construction is that it is sometimes hard to distinguish it from a compound.[122] In some circumstances, Dutch compounds can be formed by linking two words with the help of an inserted *s*. For instance, a compound of *bakker* 'baker' and *vrouw* 'woman/wife' is *bakker**s**vrouw*. But given the fact that in seventeenth-century letters the spacing can differ widely from what would be common in present-day Dutch and that words which today would be spelled as one word were often spelled as two (e.g. seventeenth-century *huys vrou* instead of present-day Dutch *huisvrouw* 'housewife'), examples 18 and 19 from the corpus of private letters are suspicious at first sight: are they genitival constructions or are they compounds?

18) *de konstapel**s** wijff en al de wijven [...] sijn alle kloeck ende gesont*
'The constable's wife and al the wives [...] are sturdy and healthy'
19) *maer alsoo de kapetaein**s** vrou niet kreegh*
'but since the captain's wife received nothing'

[121] Although the *s*-construction is usually referred to with the term *genitive* in seventeenth-century grammars and works on Dutch, it is clear that the writers of these works themselves felt that constructions such as in examples 14, 15 and 17 on the one hand and constructions such as in example 16 were somewhat different. Take for instance the grammarian Van Heule who notices that *David**s** Psalmen* 'David's Psalms' is the common word order and that the Latinised word order *Psalmen David**s*** would be just as strange as *Het bouk Pieter**s*** 'Peter's book' or *Het huys Ian**s*** 'John's house' (1633: 71).

[122] For an overview of the theory linking compounds to genitival constructions and of factors influencing the development of compounds, see Van Tiel, Rem & Neijt (2011).

However, in example 18 a compound is out of the question given that the noun *wijff* 'woman' is neutral while the article in front of the construction can only occur with masculine or feminine nouns and thus belongs to *konstapel* 'constable'. If *konstapels wijff* were a compound, the article should have matched the gender of the head of the compound, which in this case would be *wijff*. Example 19, however, could be interpreted as a compound given that the definite article *de* can occur with both *kappeteijn* 'captain' and *vrou* 'wife'. Furthermore, the compound *een kapiteinsvrouw* 'a captain's wife' is likely to exist, because the wife of a captain had a special status and very specific tasks (De Wit 2008: 161-163; Bruijn & Van Eijck van Heslinga 1985: 117; Bruijn 1998: 67). This creates more need for a specific word referring to this special status. The wife of a constable, on the other hand, did not enjoy such a special status to my knowledge and this makes it less plausible that a compound referring to a wife of a constable in general existed. I note here that the three occurrences of *de kapitein**s** vrouw* have not been taken into account in the data below because of the ambiguity of the construction.

The z'n-*construction*

Next to the *van*- and the *s*-constructions, there is a third construction for the genitive which occurred in the seventeenth century: the *z'n*-construction. Just like the *s*-construction, the *z'n*-construction is prenominal. The *z'n*-construction contains a possessive pronoun of the third person which indicates the relation between the complement and its noun (Van Heule 1633: 42; Weijnen 1965: 66; Koelmans 1975: passim). Examples 20-22 from the corpus of private letters illustrate this construction.

20) *wouter sijn bene blijve oock heel en gesont*
'Wouter his legs also stay whole and healthy'
'Wouter's legs also stay whole and healthy'
21) *Juffr. Lems haer vader*
'Miss Lems her father'
'Miss Lems' father'
22) *de Sack **Sijn** Swaerte*
'the bag his weight'
'the weight of the bag'

According to Koelmans, the *z'n*-construction occurs seldom from the seventeenth century onwards, but this opinion conflicts with Weijnen's descriptions of seventeenth-century Dutch that state that the *z'n*-construction occurs very frequently (Koelmans 1975: 435, 443; Weijnen 1965: 66; Weijnen 1971: 46). In any case, the *z'n*-construction starts to be condemned

in writings on the grammar of Dutch from the seventeenth century onwards, when Christiaan van Heule (?-1655) describes the construction as *afsienelick* 'loathsome' (Koelmans 1975: 443-445; Van Heule 1633: 42).

An –en *suffix, an* –e *suffix or no suffix at all?*
The above-mentioned alternative constructions were probably known to all speakers of seventeenth-century Dutch and they are commonly discussed in the literature about genitival constructions. However, there are three other seventeenth-century constructions linking a noun and a person that seem to be less typical. I have grouped them under the same heading, because it will become clear that it is impossible – and maybe not even desirable – to make a strict division between these three categories.

A first construction is the construction in which no inflection at all is present. Only the juxtaposition of the constituent referring to a possessor and another constituent referring to a possessum indicates that one is the complement of the other. Koelmans gives seventeenth-century examples, among which *onse Bely schult* 'our Bely's fault' and *angder luy gelt* 'other people's money' (1975: 442).

A second construction is one with an *e*-suffix. According to Van Haeringen, some Dutch dialects allow for constructions such as *Jann**e** pet* 'John's cap' and *Kez**e** moeder* 'Kees' mother' (1947: 251). A search in the database of the SAND (the *Syntactische Atlas van de Nederlandse Dialecten*, the 'Syntactic Atlas of the Dutch Dialects' DynaSAND Barbiers et al. 2006) indeed reveals that some informants render the phrase *Maries auto* 'Mary's car' as *Marieje auto* and that some informants (among whom some of the *Marieje*-informants) render the phrase *Piets auto* 'Peter's car' as *Piete auto*. All of these informants live in the South of the Netherlands.[123] Furthermore Weijnen mentions that in the *Westerkwartier* (a region in the province of Groningen) proper names ending in –*e* can occur as the first constituent of a genitival construction without any other suffixes or morphemes: *voai**e** houd* 'father's hat', *Fokk**e** Gertje* 'Fokke's (wife/daughter) Geertje' (1971: 119). While in theory these last two examples are examples of constructions with no inflection at all, it could be that no extra inflection is needed since the speakers feel that the appropriate suffix, namely –*e*, is already present. Whether this *e*-construction also appears in the seventeenth century is not clear from the literature.

The third construction has an *en*-suffix. Van Haeringen mentions that this construction can occur in dialects of the *Zaanstreek* (a region in

[123] Five of them live in an area between Dordrecht and Rotterdam (South Holland), four informants live in the province of North-Brabant and the last informant lives near Geleen in the province of Limburg.

North Holland) and in Barneveld (a town in the province of Gelderland): *Jann**en** zuster* 'John's sister', *moeder**en** muts* 'mother's bonnet' (1947: 252). That this construction must have existed already in the seventeenth century is suggested by Van Heule's remark:

> *Men bevint dat deze namen als* Ian, Pieter, Frederic, Koenraet, *etc. ooc in het twede geval hebben* Iannen, Pieteren, Fredericken, Koenraden, *etc. Doch het en schijnt geen aen-nemelicke gewoonte.* (1633: 42)
>
> 'One finds that these names, such as *Ian, Pieter, Frederic, Koenraet,* etc. in the second case [i.e. the genitive] also have *Iannen, Pieteren, Fredericken, Koenraden,* etc. Although it does not seem to be an adoptable habit.'

For this construction as well, for some cases it is unclear where the boundary lies with the suffixless construction. When describing the unmarked genitival construction, Koelmans (1975: 441-442) and Weijnen (1971: 118-119) give a fair share of examples of constructions in which the first constituent is a plural and has the plural suffix *–en*: e.g. *boven allen mensch**en** moghenthede* 'surpassing the abilities of all people', *die sculdenaer**en** handen* 'the hands of the debtors'. And then there are the proper names (mostly last names) already ending in *–en*, such as in the examples *huibrecht pieters**en** huisvrouwe* 'Huibrecht Pieters(en)'s wife' and *ijan toebeiassen brief* 'John Tobias(sen)'s letter'. It is possible that in these cases as well no extra suffix was added to the first constituent, given the fact that it already contained the suffix *–en*, which could be interpreted as a marker for a genitival relationship.

The *e*-construction and the *en*-construction are thus both difficult to distinguish from the suffixless construction, but the *e*- and the *en*-constructions themselves may also be difficult to distinguish from each other. This is because of the *n*-apocope (see chapter 8 §8.7) which occurred in Dutch following a weakly articulated vowel (Van Bree 1987: 80-81, De Wulf & Taeldeman 2001: passim, Van de Velde & Van Hout 2003: passim). The *n* at the end of the *en*-suffix would likely not have been pronounced in spoken Dutch, which makes it questionable whether there is actually any difference between the written *e*- and *en*-suffixes.

Given that these constructions only occur 12 times in total (out of 1220 occurrences of genitival constructions) in the private letters of the seventeenth-century corpus, they will not be taken into account in the examinations below. Therefore I will devote a few small paragraphs to the occurrences found in the corpus here.

The genitival construction with the *en*-suffix occurs 10 times in the private letters of the corpus (see example 23), while the construction with the *e*-suffix and the construction without a suffix each occur only once (examples 24 and 25 respectively). Whether the *e*- and *en*-suffixes are truly genitival suffixes in these examples is unclear, for in most cases they could also be interpreted as a fixed element of a name (e.g. *mattijss**en** schijp* 'Mattijssen's ship') or as part of a diminutive suffix of a name (e.g. *Jacomijn**tge** broer* 'Jacomijntge's brother'). Only in the cases of *mester ijacop block**en** soon* 'Master IJacop Block's son' and *de kappeteijns vrou **en** brieuen* 'the letters of the captain's wife' does the *en*-suffix seem to carry nothing more than the function of a genitival suffix.

23) *als dat vader hier uit lant is met Leendert matijss**en** schijp*
'That father has left the country with Leendert Mattijssen's ship'
24) *voors weet vader als dat wij van Jacomijntg**e** broer Jan Verstaen hebbe dat…*
'Further, father, know that we have understood from Jacomijntge's brother John that…'
25) *en sijmen neef wijf is doot*
'And cousin Simon's wife is dead'

While the data of the SAND (*Syntactische Atlas van de Nederlandse Dialecten* 'Syntactic atlas of the Dutch dialects' Barbiers et al. 2005-2008; DynaSAND Barbiers et al. 2006) only show the *e*- and *en*-suffixes in dialects of South Holland, Brabant and Limburg, these suffixes also occur in other regions in the corpus of private letters: three *en*-suffixes stem from Amsterdam and six *en*-suffixes and the occurrence with the *e*-suffix stem from Zeeland. The remaining occurrence of the *en*-suffix stems from South Holland.

The total number of occurrences of these types of genitival constructions in the private autograph letters is too small to show whether there is any variation in the use caused by social variables such as class, age and gender. In table 9.1, I have presented the few occurrences of these genitival constructions in the corpus. The only two conclusions that can be drawn from this table is that these genitival constructions seem to be used by both men and women belonging to different age categories and that they certainly occur in letters written by members of the upper-middle class. Van Heule's rejection of the *e*- or *en*-suffixes may thus not have found any hearing, even among people who can be assumed to have a lot of writing experience.

	Gender	*Age*	*Social Class*
***en*-suffix**	male	<30	UMC
	male	<30	unknown
	male	30-50	UMC
	female	30-50	UMC
***e*-suffix**	male	<30	unknown
no suffix	female	30-50	UMC

Table 9.1: Social features of the writers of autograph letters who use the *en*-suffix, the *e*-suffix or no suffix at all in genitival constructions in private letters from the seventeenth-century corpus.

9.2.2 The overall picture in the corpus

For the seventeenth century, the literature claims that the genitive was likely not used any longer in spoken language, but that it still occurred abundantly in written and printed texts (Van der Horst 2008: 1075-1076). What does the situation look like in the sub-corpus of private letters (545 letters written by 408 different writers, see table 2.12 in §2.3.4 for the overview of the corpus), of which the language use may well be different from the language in printed texts due to influences of the letter writers' spoken Dutch? Table 9.2 below shows the frequencies of the different genitival constructions which occur in all the private letters of the seventeenth-century corpus.

	N	*%*
***van*-construction**	656	54%
genitive	329	27%
***s*-suffix**	144	12%
***z'n*-construction**	79	6%
***en*-suffix**	10	0.8%
***e*-suffix**	1	0.1%
no suffix	1	0.1%
Total	**1220**	**100%**

Table 9.2: The frequencies of the different genitival constructions in the private letters of the seventeenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus

The overview table shows that the most frequent genitival construction used in the private seventeenth-century letters is the *van*-construction, occurring in slightly more than half of the cases (54%). In second place is the genitive, occurring in 27% of the cases. The *s*-suffix and the *z'n*-construction occur less often, in 12% and in 6% of the cases respectively. Lastly, the frequencies of the *en*-suffixes, the *e*-suffixes and the genitival constructions without any suffix are negligible.

For a construction which is believed to be absent from seventeenth-century spoken Dutch, the genitive does seem to occur quite often in a text type expected to be leaning closely to language of immediacy. Although the *van*-construction occurs most often, the genitive still easily surpasses the *s*-suffix and the *z'n*-construction in frequency. Does this mean that the genitive was still alive in spontaneous Dutch of the Golden Age? Not necessarily, for private letters are usually built up according to a fixed structure, with epistolary formulae and fixed expressions occurring at the beginning and the end of the letter and room for more spontaneous writing and thus language of immediacy in between. Does each genitival construction occur as often in each context?

9.3. Context

9.3.1. Five different contexts

Five different contexts were identified in the seventeenth-century private letters from the *Letters as Loot* corpus: addresses, religious formulae, non-religious formulae, dates, and neutral contexts. In what follows I will briefly describe each context's particularities and give some examples. More examples will also be given in the discussion of the results for each context.

Seventeenth-century addresses do not differ very much from addresses of present-day letters, apart from the fact that they were not written on envelopes. Seventeenth-century addresses were usually written on a blank page or in a large blank space in the letter; the letter was then folded in such a way that the address was on the outer part of the folded letter and the letter itself was safely tucked away inside the folded paper (as can be seen in the images of Appendix B). An address contains the name of the addressee and his/her address. When the addressee is wandering, the address may also contain other information which is necessary to deliver the letter successfully, such as the name of the ship on which the addressee sailed or the addressee's job in a colony abroad. In some cases, the address also contains the name and address of a go-between. Addresses often end with the formula wishing for the well-being of the bearer of the letter: *met vriend die god geleide* 'with a friend whom God may protect'.

With the term 'religious formulae' I refer to any kind of formula which has anything to do with religion, including parts of dates that contain religious elements. These formulae are – like all formulae – repeated over and over again by writers and can be expected to leave little or no room for spontaneous language use. I distinguished religious formulae from other formulae, because it can be expected that the religious context may have a

strong influence in itself on the language use in fixed phrasings. Examples 26 and 27 from the corpus are good illustrations of such religious formulae.

26) *heet soude mij van haarten leedt weesen dat weet godt almactig die een kenner* ***aller*** *harten is*
'it would pain me very much [if you were not well], which God Almighty knows who knows all hearts.'
27) *ijn ijaer* ***onses heren*** *1671*
'in the year of our Lord 1671'

Under the header 'non-religious formulae' I have gathered non-religious epistolary formulae and short fixed expressions, such as *brenger deeses [briefs]* 'the bearer of this [letter]'. Epistolary formulae are formulae which are typical of letters and which usually appear at the beginning or at the end of a letter, e.g. (28) from the corpus.[124] They are the letter's framework as it were. The letter writer has learnt to use these formulae and he/she is probably writing them down more or less mechanically. There is not much room for language of immediacy in this context.

28) *soo laat ick ul weten als dat ick ick ul schrijven* ***van*** *den 4 october gekregen hebben*
'I let you know that I have received your letter from the 4th of October.'

The last but one context that was distinguished is the context of dates. While in present-day written Dutch, dates are rendered in such a way that no genitival construction is needed (either completely expressed in numbers or with the month in full, such as *10/04/2012* or *10 april 2012*), in seventeenth-century Dutch some dates do contain a genitival construction. It concerns dates of the type: *den 22 dees**er** (maand)* translated as 'the 22nd of this (month)'.

Finally, there are also neutral contexts, which can best be defined by what they are not. For this investigation, I will consider to be neutral those parts of a letter that are not part of the address, of a formula or of a date. Neutral contexts are parts of the letter in which the letter writer can be expected to use more ore less spontaneous language, language of immediacy, when describing his/her fortunes.

[124] For more information about epistolary formulae in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters of the *Letters as Loot* corpus, see Rutten & Van der Wal 2012, Rutten & Van der Wal forthcoming, and Van der Wal & Rutten forthcoming.

For every context in each private letter from the seventeenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus, the number of occurrences of each genitival construction was counted and this resulted in the following table and figure.

	Genitive	*s-suffix*	*van*	*z'n*	*N*
Neutral	3%	12%	72%	12%	577
Address	5%	2%	93%	0%	96
Formulae	33%	0%	67%	0%	92
Religious formulae	60%	18%	21%	2%	415
Date	93%	0%	7%	0%	28
N Total					1208

Table 9.3: The frequency of the different genitival constructions across context in the private letters of the seventeenth-century corpus

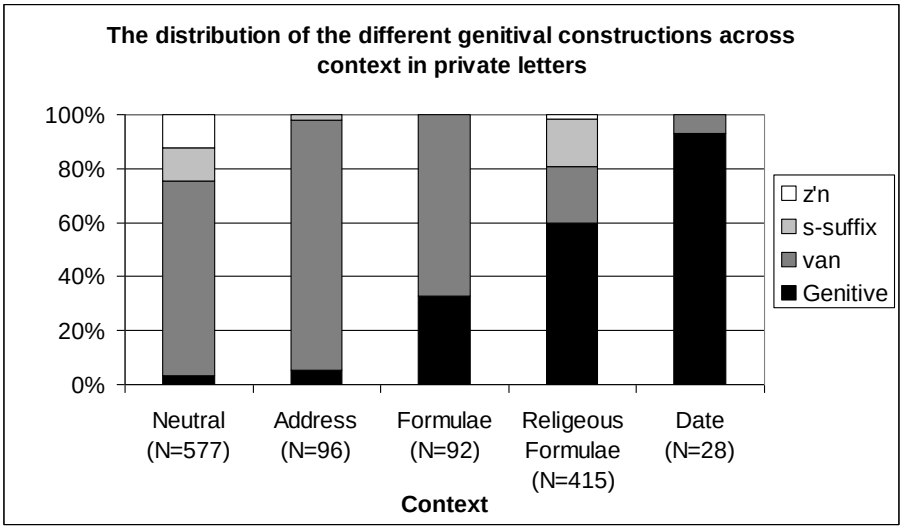

Figure 9.2

The data undeniably show that context is a major factor in the distribution of the different genitival constructions, and in particular for the genitive and the *van*-construction. The frequency of the genitive in different contexts ranges from a meagre 3% in neutral contexts to an impressive 93% in dates. The

frequency of the *van*-construction varies from 7% to 93%. Furthermore, both the *s*-construction and the *z'n*-construction seem to be restricted to particular contexts. The *s*-construction does not occur in formulae or dates, and the *z'n*-construction is used in neutral contexts and only very occasionally in religious formulae. In what follows, I will compare the different contexts and examine what they reveal about the status of the different genitival constructions.

9.3.2. Context and genitival constructions

Neutral contexts

In neutral contexts, that is in the parts of the seventeenth-century letters which are not governed by fixed formulae, the letter writer's language use is likely to resemble his/her spontaneous language use most closely. In this part of the letter, the genitive occurs the least often of all the genitival constructions, namely in only 3% of the cases. This confirms the assumption that the genitive was not or hardly used in spoken Dutch by the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the *van*-construction is quite popular, occurring in more than 70% of the cases. This popularity in neutral contexts and the fact that seventeenth-century writings about Dutch do not seem to treat the construction as something special, lends the *van*-construction a default status. The *z'n*-construction and the *s*-construction both occur in 12% of the cases, which suggests that these constructions were not default constructions, but not quite shunned either.

Address

The distribution of genitival constructions in address-contexts differs from that in neutral contexts: unlike in neutral contexts, the *z'n*-construction does not occur and the *s*-suffix occurs only in 2% of the cases. The *van*-suffix is now responsible for a share of more than 90%. This suggests that the *z'n*-construction and the *s*-construction are not considered to be appropriate in addresses or – from a different perspective – that the *van*-construction is extremely well fit to be used in address contexts and therefore pushes the other constructions out. This can be understood in no fewer than four different ways. Firstly, it is possible that the function of an address requires a specific genitival construction because of the way it structures the information. Most of the genitival structures in addresses are used to specify the addressee, mostly when the addressee is a woman: e.g. *Aan de huijs vrou van pieter swart* 'to the wife of Pieter Swart'. It is possible that the prenominal genitival constructions, *Aan Pieter Swarts huijsvrou* or *Aan Pieter Swart zijn huijs vrou*, are felt to be less appropriate given that the

most important person for the address (namely the addressee) comes second in place.

The second option more or less resembles the previous one. The *van*-construction is a postnominal construction: the possessor is mentioned after the possessum. In the most frequently occurring genitival construction in addresses, *de huysvrou van (full name and – if appropriate – title of the husband)*, the possessor is usually longer than the possessum. It could be that longer constituents are preferred to follow shorter constituents in a construction. I will come back to this short-before-long principle in more details in §9.5.

A third explanation is yet another variation on the first explanation: the order in which the information is presented is important. The function of an address is to get the letter to its destination. To reach this goal, it is very likely that people who do not know the addressee of the letter will handle the letter and pass it through to get it to its destination. Given that prenominal genitival constructions such as *Jan**s** vrouw* and *Jan **z'n** vrouw* ('John's wife') seem to be more appropriate for contexts in which the possessor is known to the interactants involved, it might be quite odd to use these constructions in the context of an address. However, it deserves to be noted that knowing the possessor seems to be less of a prerogative for using the prenominal genitival constructions if the possessor is not only identified by his/her first name, but also by his/her last name, such as in *Jan de Wit**s** vrouw* 'John White's wife'.

The unsuitability of Dutch prenominal genitival constructions for contexts in which the possessor is not known to the interactants involved is a hypothesis. It is based on my personal intuitions about the genitive in Dutch and on the intuitions of other Dutch-speakers among colleagues, friends and family members. To my knowledge, the relationship between the choice of genitival construction and the participants' familiarity with the possessor has not been examined yet for Dutch. However, the relationship between the topicality of the possessor and the type of genitival construction has been examined by Rosenbach (2002) for English. She found that topical possessors – possessors that are definite and/or that have been mentioned before in the context and thus are assumed to be known to the participants in the interaction – occur more often with an English s-genitive (in which they occur in first position, e.g. *the girl's bike*) than with an *of*-construction (in which they occur in second position, e.g. *the bike of the girl*) (Rosenbach 2002: 138-154). This might be true for Dutch as well, but research is called for.

The fourth and final explanation has to do with the fact that the address of the letter is the only part of the letter which is certainly meant to be seen by people other than the addressee or people from his/her immediate

environment. For the image of the sender of the letter and of the addressee, it would therefore be desirable to use linguistic elements in the address which have a high status. This would then suggest that the *z'n*-construction and the *s*-construction are not evaluated as elements of elevated style by seventeenth-century people and are therefore not used in addresses.

The first two options seem to be the more plausible ones. It is outside the scope of this chapter to examine in detail the influence of the different factors mentioned above on the choice of genitival construction. However, more evidence for one of the more plausible explanations may turn up in the course of this chapter, when the influence of the length of constituents on the choice of genitival construction will be examined.

Non-religious formulae

What immediately catches the eye in the distribution of the genitival constructions in formulaic contexts is the fact that the *z'n*-construction and the *s*-construction are absent. This, however, is likely due to the fact that the genitival constructions in formulaic contexts only seldom involve animate possessors or proper names – which seem to be a prerequisite for the *z'n*- and the *s*-construction – and not to the formulaic context itself.[125] In neutral contexts too, all genitival constructions which involve inanimate possessors (187 occurrences in total) only occur with the genitive or the *van*-construction.

The true difference between the formulaic contexts and neutral contexts should then be found in the share of the genitive. While in neutral contexts the genitival constructions with inanimate possessors are genitives in only 3% of the cases, the genitive occurs in 33% of the cases in formulae. However, there seems to be a strict division between different types of formulae. On the one hand, there is the popular formula *ick heb u schrijven* ***van*** *den 8 sept wel ontfangen* 'I have received your writing of [date] in good order', occurring 42 times in the corpus of private letters. This formula always occurs with the *van*-construction. On the other hand there is the formula of the type *per brenger* ***deses (briefs)*** 'with the carrier of this letter' or *de orsack* ***deses (briefs)*** 'the reason of this letter', occurring 24 times in the corpus of private letters. It almost always occurs with the genitive (in 22 of the 24 cases).

[125] Van Bergen 2011: 56-57 shows that in present-day Dutch too inanimate possessors almost never occur with the *z'n*- or *s*-construction. This seems to have been the case already in the seventeenth century. Inanimate possessors *can* take a prenominal genitival construction in seventeenth-century writings, but they do so very rarely. Only one example of such a construction with an inanimate possessor was found in a (business) letter from the corpus: *de sack* ***sijn*** *swaerte* 'the weight of the bag'.

Religious formulae
In genitival constructions in religious formulae (examples 26, 27 and 29 to 31 from the corpus), the possessor can be an animate noun (very often *god* 'God', *de heer* 'the Lord' or *de almachtige* 'the Almighty') and the *z'n*-construction and the *s*-construction should be able to occur. However, the *z'n*-construction seems to be less popular in religious formulae than it is in neutral contexts: it occurs in only 2% of the genitival constructions in religious formulae while it occurs in 12% of the genitival constructions in neutral contexts. The *s*-construction on the other hand, seems to be slightly more popular in religious contexts than in neutral contexts, occurring in 18% of the cases versus in 12% of the cases respectively. The most conspicuous difference with the distribution of the different genitival constructions in neutral contexts, however, must be the high presence of the genitive in religious contexts. It occurs in no less than 60% of the cases in religious contexts and thus greatly exceeds its presence in neutral contexts.

29) *docht wij moeten ons trosten met godt den heer die een beschermer* ***der*** *wedeue is ende een vader* ***der*** *weesen*
However we have to find comfort in God the Lord who is a protector of the widows and a father to the orphans.
30) *doch verhoope met Godt****s*** *hulpe UL gesontheijt met onse kindertjes*
though with God's help I wish you are healthy and our children too
31) *dat weet godt almachtijch die een kender* ***van*** *alle harten is*
God almighty, who is a knower of all hearts, knows this

Dates
Of all the dates that contain a genitival construction (30), there are two dates containing an animate possessor. In these two cases, this possessor is God. Therefore, these two dates were categorised as instances of religious formulae. Since there are no animate possessors present in the 28 remaining cases, it is not strange that the *z'n*-construction and the *s*-construction do not occur in dates. It has been explained above that the two prenominal constructions almost only occur with animate possessors. What is surprising about the results for dates, however, is that the genitive occurs in no less than 93% of the cases. Again it is the demonstrative pronoun *dese* – that has been shown above to occur very often with the genitive in formulae – which provides the most occurrences of the genitive (25 occurrences out of 28).

32) *tschip de coninck dauid arriuerden hier op 5* ***deser***
The ship 'the King David' arrived here on the 5th of this month

9.3.3. Conclusions

What can be concluded about the status of the different genitival constructions in the seventeenth century from the overview of their distribution across different contexts? For the *z'n*-construction, occurring exclusively with animate possessors in the corpus, I can conclude that it is less popular in religious formulae than in neutral contexts. This suggests that this construction was felt to be less appropriate in an elevated style of writing. This hypothesis fits with the idea that the *z'n*-construction starts to be decried in writings on the grammar of Dutch from the seventeenth century onwards, when Christiaen van Heule describes the construction as *afsienelick* 'loathsome' (Koelmans 1975: 443-445; Van Heule 1633: 42). The letter writers in the corpus might not have agreed with Van Heule completely, however, since they do use the construction in neutral contexts, but they clearly had their reserves in using it in religious contexts. Maybe it was felt to be too common for such contexts. In any case, in present-day Dutch the *z'n*-construction is also reserved for spontaneous language use, which is more or less in line with how it was used in the seventeenth century already.

The *s*-construction differs from the *z'n*-construction in its presence in formulaic contexts. While the *z'n*-construction is less popular in religious formulae than it is in neutral contexts, the *s*-construction occurs as often in both contexts, if not even slightly more often in religious formulae than in neutral contexts (in 17% of the cases versus in 12% of the cases respectively). This indicates that the *s*-construction was probably not felt to be a construction more fit for spontaneous language use in the language of immediacy than for elevated styles.

The *van*-construction seems to be the neutral genitival construction in the seventeenth-century private letters. It is the most popular construction in neutral contexts and no positive or negative comments on it can be found in the normative literature of the time. Given the fact that it seems to be neutral, its abundance in the context of addresses should probably not be ascribed to an evaluation of this construction as prototypical of a certain style. It is more likely that the semantic implications of the *van*-construction or the order in which it presents different semantic roles or constituents of different length have promoted its popularity in addresses.

This leaves us with the spectacular data for the inflectional genitive. It occurs almost never in parts of the letter which probably lean more closely to language of immediacy, while it is very popular in formulaic contexts. This suggests that the genitive was hardly used in spontaneous language any

longer by the second half of the seventeenth century. When it does occur, it occurs most often in formulae or other fossilised expressions. This puts the results from the overview of the different constructions in table 9.2 into a different perspective. Although this overview suggested that the genitive was still alive and kicking with a share of more than 25%, the examination of the influence of context has shown that the genitive was likely only alive in written Dutch, and then in particular in fossilised expressions or in contexts which typically also come with archaic linguistic elements.[126]

It may be worthwhile to examine whether the distribution of these different genitival constructions was also influenced by social variables, such as gender and social class of the letter writer. After all, it is known that stylistic variation can be strongly linked to social variation, as has been shown by Trudgill (2000: 86-87) for example.

9.4. Social variation

In order to examine the influence of the variables social class and gender, all the genitival constructions occurring in the private autograph letters of the seventeenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus (260 letters written by 202 different writers, see table 2.12 in §2.3.4 for the overview of the corpus) were taken into account.

9.4.1. All contexts

Social class
If all the genitival constructions in the private autograph letters are examined irrespective of the contexts in which they occur, the following distribution across social class is the result.

	Genitive	***s-suffix***	***van***	***z'n***	**N**
LC	*44%*	*13%*	*31%*	*13%*	16
LMC	*30%*	*10%*	*57%*	*3%*	125
UMC	*26%*	*9%*	*61%*	*4%*	388
UC	*20%*	*10%*	*54%*	*16%*	106

Table 9.4: The distribution of the genitival constructions across social class in all contexts in all private autograph letters of the *Letters as Loot* corpus.

[126] Similar results were found for the distribution of the German genitive and dative-*e* in nineteenth-century private letters (Elspaβ 2005: 348-354, 368-370; Elspaβ 2012: 60-62).

The data show that the share of the genitive diminishes as the rank of the letter writers becomes higher. At the same time the *z'n*-construction seems to be more popular in the lower class and in the upper class than in the middle classes. The *s*-construction shows no particular variation. The variation present in the distribution of the *van*-construction is whimsical: it is likely caused indirectly by fluctuations in the share of other genitival constructions, since the *van*-construction seems to be rather neutral.

These results are rather unexpected. Why would the genitive – which has proved to be typical of contexts in which an elevated style is required – be used more often by lower-class letter writers? It is just this group of letter writers that would be expected to use more linguistic elements typical of spoken Dutch. And at the same time it is odd that the *z'n*-construction is used more often by letter writers from the upper class. The construction has proved to be unfit for religious contexts and thus unfit for elevated styles. Why would letter writers who are usually found to be very well aware of differences between spoken and written Dutch and who usually use more elements typical of written language than other people use a construction which seems to lean more closely to language of immediacy? Before trying to solve these mysteries, let us first examine what the distribution of the constructions across gender looks like.

Gender

If all the genitival constructions in the private autograph letters are examined irrespective of the contexts in which they occur, the following distribution across gender is the result.

	Genitive	***s-suffix***	***van***	***z'n***	**N**
Men	*25%*	*9%*	*62%*	*4%*	513
Women	*30%*	*12%*	*44%*	*13%*	189

Table 9.5: The distribution of the genitival constructions across gender in all contexts in all private autograph letters.

Men and women do not seem to differ in their use of *s*-suffix, they both use it in about 10% of the cases. On the other hand, women use the *z'n*-construction more often than men do. They use it in 13% of the cases, while in letters written by men the *z'n*-construction occurs in no more than 4% of the cases. This result is not counterintuitive: since women are usually less practised in writing (letters) and less well educated than men, it is likely that they are more prone to use linguistic elements more typical of spoken, and thus of spontaneous, Dutch. The *z'n*-construction might just be such an element, since it does not seem to be appropriate for religious contexts.

An unexpected result for the distribution of the different genitival constructions across gender lies in the distribution of the genitive. Women use the genitive slightly more often than men do: women use it in 30% of the cases while men use it in 25% of the cases. The direction of this difference is remarkable given that the genitive has proved to be a linguistic element typical of elevated style (occurring up to 60% in religious contexts) and atypical of spontaneous language use. In previous chapters we have often witnessed how just such elements are used more often by men than by women, probably given the fact that men are usually more practised in reading and writing and better educated. These results do not fit in with this frequently witnessed pattern.

Influence of contexts

Before looking for an explanation within the scope of social variation, it is wise to check whether the distribution of the different contexts across different social groups could not have influenced the data, given the different counterintuitive results. Table 9.6 below shows the distribution of the genitival constructions across context per social class:

	neutral	***address***	***formulae***	***religious formulae***	***date***	**N**
LC	*38%*	*0%*	*0%*	*63%*	*0%*	**16**
LMC	*50%*	*9%*	*6%*	*34%*	*2%*	**125**
UMC	*54%*	*9%*	*10%*	*25%*	*3%*	**388**
UC	*64%*	*4%*	*8%*	*15%*	*8%*	**106**

Table 9.6: The distribution of the genitival constructions across contexts per social class in the private autograph letters of the *Letters as Loot* corpus.

The table shows some striking differences that can certainly explain the strange distribution of the genitive and the *z'n*-construction across social class. It is clear that genitival constructions in religious formulae occur more often in the lower social classes than in the upper social classes. The percentages drop from 63% in the lower class to a mere 15% in the upper class. This does not come as a surprise: it has already been noted in the literature that less-experienced writers make more use of formulaic language. Elspaß claims that inexperienced writers resort to formulaic language more quickly than experienced writers. Using formulaic language allows them to write a message without having to hesitate too much about the wording (Elspaß 2005: 192). Rutten and Van der Wal have confirmed this hypothesis by showing that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letter writers in the *Letters as Loot* corpus use more formulae when they are less experienced

writers, i.e. members of the lower classes or women (2012: 189-194).[127] Since the genitive occurs quite frequently in religious formulae in general (in 60% of the cases, see figure 9.1), this can explain why the genitive occurs more often in lower-class letters than in upper-class letters if all contexts are taken into account.

Furthermore it is clear that the genitival constructions in upper-class letters occur most often in neutral contexts, namely in 64% of the cases. This follows from Rutten and Van der Wal's conclusions too (2012: 189-194). While lower-class writers use more formulae than upper-class writers, upper-class writers produce letters containing more neutral contexts than lower-class writers. Since the neutral context is also the context in which the *z'n*-construction occurs most frequent (see figure 9.2 and table 9.3), this may explain the high frequency of the *z'n*-construction in the upper class. The strange frequencies of the genitive in the lower social class and of the *z'n*-construction in the upper social class can thus be attributed to the fact that lower-class writers and upper-class writers construct their letters very differently. The link between social class and the distribution of different types of genitival constructions is thus indirect.

For gender, the distribution of the genitival constructions across context also shows clear-cut differences:

	neutral	***address***	***formulae***	***religious formulae***	***date***	**N**
Men	*55%*	*10%*	*9%*	*22%*	*4%*	**513**
Women	*51%*	*3%*	*5%*	*40%*	*1%*	**189**

Table 9.7: The distribution of the genitival constructions across contexts for men and women.

The fact that genitival constructions occurred more often in religious formulae with female writers than with male writers may have positively influenced the share of the genitive written by women. The difference in the use of the *z'n*-construction between male and female writers does not seem

[127] For the seventeenth-century letter writers in the corpus, Rutten & Van der Wal 2012 could only prove that women used formulae more frequently than men did. The small amount of letters for the lower class and upper class prevented them from examining the distribution of formulae across social class (Rutten & Van der Wal 2012: 189). For the eighteenth-century letter writers, however, they did prove that social class was an influential factor on the distribution of formulae (Rutten & Van der Wal 2012: 192). There is no reason to doubt that this was also true for the seventeenth-century letter writers, and the data in table 6 only confirm this.

to be related to a difference in frequency of the neutral context: the genitival constructions occur as often in neutral contexts with men and women (in 55% and in 51% of the cases respectively).

In any case, it has become clear that in order to get a clearer view on the social variation itself, the variable context will need to be held constant in the investigation. That is why I will only take into account genitival constructions in neutral contexts in what follows.

9.4.2. In neutral contexts exclusively

Social class

Table 9.8 below shows the distribution of the different genitival constructions in neutral contexts across the social classes. Unfortunately, the letters from the lower class only contain 6 genitival constructions in neutral contexts, which means that the percentages for the lower class are not very representative. They will therefore be left aside in the discussion.

The percentages for the genitive and the *s*-construction do not seem to differ much for the lower-middle-, the upper-middle- and the upper-class writers. The strange distribution of the genitive witnessed in table 9.4 has disappeared. The *z'n*-construction, on the other hand, remains more popular among the writers from the upper class than among writers from the middle classes. It occurs in 22% of the cases in letters from upper-class writers, while it occurs in only 6% of the cases in letters of middle-class writers.

	Genitive	***s-suffix***	***van***	***z'n***	**N**
LC	*0%*	*0%*	*67%*	*33%*	6
LMC	*2%*	*13%*	*79%*	*6%*	62
UMC	*3%*	*8%*	*83%*	*6%*	210
UC	*6%*	*7%*	*65%*	*22%*	68

Table 9.8: The distribution of the different genitival constructions in neutral contexts across social class in the private autograph letters of the corpus.

The fact that the *z'n*-construction occurs less often in religious formulaic contexts has raised the impression that this construction was already felt to be quite colloquial in the seventeenth century. It is thus striking that the upper-class writers use this seemingly informal construction so often, while they are letter writers who are typically well practised in reading and writing and therefore likely to know the differences between spoken Dutch and written Dutch. In the discussion below, this unexpected result will be explained.

One might have expected to see clear social variation in the distribution of the genitive, but the share of the genitive does not seem to

vary considerably across the different social classes. The upper classes use it only marginally more often than the lower-middle-class writers do. Variation may be hard to track down, simply because of the fact that the genitive occurs only very rarely in neutral contexts in the seventeenth century. However, a close examination of the occurrences of the genitive reveals that the presence of the genitive may be linked to another factor: a writer's familiarity with (religious) books and texts.

Of the writers of autograph letters, only 9 people still use the genitive in neutral contexts. At least 3 of these people must have had an intense relationship with (religious) books and texts (Everhard Lijcochsten, Antonius Scherius, and Hieronymus Sweerts) and the only two letter writers who use the genitive more than once belong to this select company. Everhard Lijcochsten and Antonius Scherius were both pastors in Hoorn, and Hieronymus Sweerts was a poet, printer and bookseller in Amsterdam. One other letter writer had likely come into contact with (religious) books and writings indirectly: Guillaume Beddelo. Guillaume had close contacts with a pastor in Surinam with whom he stayed and from whom he seems to have received some education. A third of the group of letter writers who still use a genitive in neutral contexts thus probably had a close relationship with (religious) books and writings. That these three individuals still use the genitive in neutral contexts can be readily explained, since the genitive was still used abundantly in biblical texts and in many other printed works in the seventeenth century. Intense contact with these printed works may have induced these few letter writers to use the genitive without too many reserves, even in neutral contexts in which other letter writers would normally not make use of it. The other letter writers who use the genitive in neutral contexts do not seem to have a profession which would make (religious) books and writings indispensable for them, but it is possible that they were fervent readers in their spare time. However, there is no easy way to verify this.

Gender

In previous chapters we have often witnessed how linguistic elements popular with the upper classes were usually also popular with men and how typical lower-class features were used more often by women. Can we find the same pattern for genitival constructions? Table 9.9 below shows the distribution of the different genitival constructions across gender.

	Genitive	*s-suffix*	*van*	*z'n*	N
Men	*5%*	*8%*	*81%*	*6%*	280
Women	*1%*	*15%*	*60%*	*24%*	96

Table 9.9: The distribution of the different genitival constructions in neutral contexts across gender.

With respect to the share of the genitive and the share of the *s*-construction, women and men do not seem to differ spectacularly. The *z'n*-construction, however, is used considerably more often by female letter writers than by male letter writers, just as it already was in table 9.4. Women use the construction in almost 25% of the cases, while men use it in only 6% of the cases. This result is contrary to what we would expect based on previous chapters. A linguistic element that is popular in the upper class seems to be more popular here with female writers than with male letter writers.

Discussion

The social variables class and gender seem to have little impact on the distribution of most of the genitival constructions in the seventeenth-century corpus. The genitive occurs so rarely in neutral contexts in seventeenth-century letters that it is no wonder that the variation displayed is only limited. The *s*-construction too only displays a very limited degree of variation: it seems to be used slightly more often by lower-middle-class writers and by women in general, but to award it the status of a variant typical of spoken or spontaneous language would be too rash, certainly given the fact that it appears to be perfectly appropriate for religious formulaic contexts. Only the *z'n*- and the *van*-construction show considerable variation. However, changes in the share of the latter construction are likely only the consequence of changes in the frequency of the other genitival constructions, since the *van*-construction seems to be quite neutral.

The *z'n*-construction is used more often by upper-class writers than by writers of the upper- and lower-middle classes and at the same time it is used more often by women than by men. At first sight, this is a very strange result. On the one hand, the *z'n*-construction's popularity in the upper class suggests it is a construction used more often in written Dutch; but on the other hand the *z'n*-construction is used more often by women, who are generally less practised writers than men and are often found to use linguistic features typical of spoken Dutch. However, when the distribution of the genitival constructions in neutral contexts across social class is split up for men and women, it becomes clear that the *z'n*-construction is actually only more popular in the upper class with female letter writers. Furthermore, it is even just one particular writer in the group of female upper-class letter writers who is responsible for most of the variation: Kathelijne Mattheus

Haexwant. If her language use would not be taken into account, women would still generally use the *z'n*-construction more often than men (18% vs. 6%), but the variation between the social classes would become much smaller (6% and 6% for the lower-middle class and upper-middle class respectively vs. 13% for the upper-class). The variation linked to gender seems to be stronger than the variation linked to social class. Kathelijne Mattheus Haexwant's large influence cannot, however, explain away all influence of social class. The fact that members of the upper social class use the *z'n*-construction more often than members of the middle classes might also have to do with linguistic insecurity on the part of the latter: it has been shown repeatedly that social aspirers are more sensitive to prestige and stigma than people who already belong to the upper class (Nevalainen 1996: 73; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 135; Labov 1972: 286 in Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 152).

What can thus be concluded with respect to the influence of social variables on the distribution of the different genitival constructions? The only clear variation could be found for the *z'n*-construction, which is used more often by women than by men and which seems to be particularly popular with upper-class women. This pattern fits well with the results found for the *z'n*-construction with respect to context: it is used less often in religious formulae, a context which would typically require a more elevated style. The *z'n*-construction was thus probably felt to be more of an element of informal and colloquial language use in the seventeenth century and this can also explain why women use it more often than men do. However, at the same time, the *z'n*-construction does not seem to be considered as inappropriate for written language in the seventeenth century as it is today, for it is used by letter writers of all social classes. The strong disapproval of Christiaan van Heule (1633: 42) was clearly not shared by the letter writers in the corpus.

Even though the social variables class and gender could not be shown to influence the distribution of the genitive to a very great extent, this does not mean that every letter writer was as likely to use the genitive in neutral contexts in his or her letters. A letter writer's familiarity with printed (religious) books and texts seems to influence the presence of the genitive in seventeenth-century letters. People who can be expected to be very much involved with the reading, writing and maybe even the distribution of (religious) printed texts – such as pastors and book printers – seem more likely to use the genitive in neutral contexts in their private letters.

9.5. The length of the constituents

It is clear from the results above that the social variables do not have a very strong impact on the distribution of the different genitival constructions in the seventeenth-century private letters. Apparently, the variable context carries more weight. It is also likely that there are other variables as well that influence the distribution of the genitival constructions more strongly than the social variables do. Van Bergen (2011: 43-76) examines the influence of several variables on genitival constructions in present-day Dutch which have not been discussed or which have not been treated extensively so far in this chapter: animacy of the possessor, definiteness of the possessor, the semantic relation between possessor and possessum, the presence of a sibilant at the end of the possessor, the length of the constituents, and regional variation. Examining all these variables would go beyond the scope of this chapter, but there is one variable I would like to examine seeing its importance for the context of address: the length of the constituents involved.

Weerman & De Wit state that the occurrence of the *s*-construction in Dutch is limited by the complexity of the possessor-constituent. Complex, and thus longer, possessor constituents are less likely to occur with the *s*-construction (1998: 28; 1999: 1167). In her dissertation, Van Bergen mentions how research by Szmrecsanyi & Hinrichs (2008) and Rosenbach (2002) has shown that constituent length influences the choice of genitival construction in English (2011: 53). Van Bergen herself shows how in present-day Dutch as well the occurrence of the *z'n*-construction is influenced by the length of the possessum: the longer the possessum constituent, the less often the *z'n*-construction occurs (2011: 60-61).

For the corpus it is impossible to examine the influence of the length of the possessum on the choice of genitival construction, given that the length of the possessums in the corpus shows little variability: 90% of the possessums consist of only one word. However, the length of the possessor constituents does show considerable variation, which makes it possible to examine its influence. In order to examine whether the length of the possessor-constituent influenced the choice of genitival construction in seventeenth-century Dutch, I examined the distribution of the genitival constructions in the private letters of the corpus depending on the length of the description of the possessor in words. Only genitival constructions in neutral contexts were taken into account. Given that the *s*- and *z'n*-constructions do not occur with inanimate possessors in the corpus, I have left the occurrences with inanimate possessors out of the examination. Table 9.10 and figure 9.3 below show the results.

	Genitive	*s-suffix*	*van*	*z'n*	**N**
1	0%	38%	29%	34%	56
2	6%	17%	63%	15%	233
3	0%	13%	67%	20%	61
> 3	0%	5%	83%	12%	41

Table 9.10: The distribution of the different genitival constructions across the length of the description of the animate possessor (in words) in neutral contexts in the private letters of the *Letters as Loot* corpus.

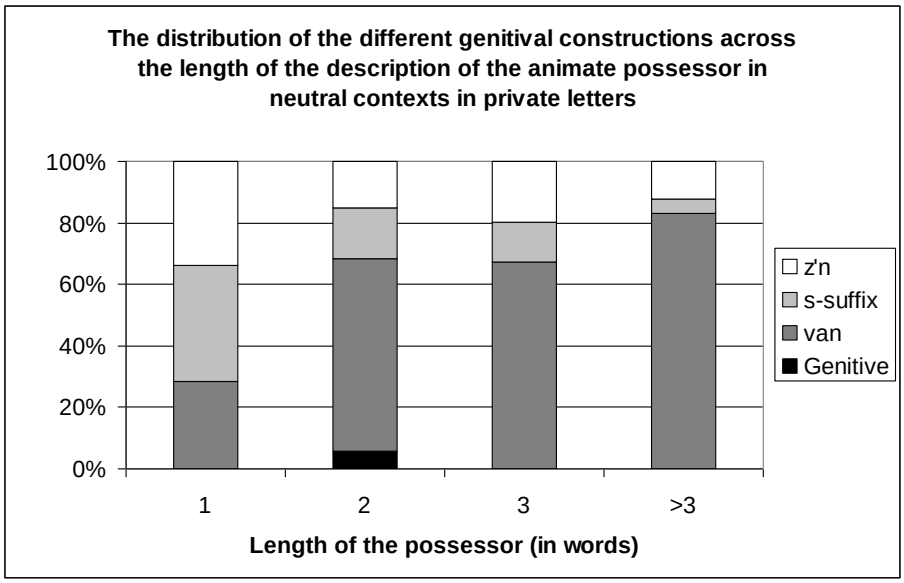

Figure 9.3

It is immediately clear from the table and the figure that the length of the description of the possessor indeed influences the occurrence of the *s*-construction in the way Weerman & De Wit described. The longer the description of the possessor, the lower the share of the *s*-construction. It drops from 38% with possessors of only one word, over 16% and 13% with possessors of two and three words of length respectively, to only 5% with possessors whose description counts more than 3 words. The share of the *z'n*-construction also shows a drop, but most clearly between descriptions of the possessor of only one word and descriptions of two words: the share of the *z'n*-construction drops from 34% to 15%.

Since the constructions which decrease are both prenominal genitival constructions (which put the possessor in front of the possessum), while the increasing *van*-construction is a postnominal genitival construction (putting the possessum in front of the possessor), the relative position of

possessor and possession seems to be the dependent variable here. And maybe it is not just the length of the possessor that is a factor of influence, but rather the relative length of the possessor and the possessum. I know that the length of the possessum barely ever exceeds one word if the article is left aside (a way of measuring the length of the possessum suggested by Van Bergen (2011: 60)), so as soon as the possessor constituent counts more than one word, the possessor is probably longer than the possessum. The fact that the difference in distribution of the genitival constructions in figure 9.3 was most outspoken between length 1 and 2 of the possessor seems to confirm the idea that the relative length of the possessor and the possessum is a factor. In order to conclusively show that this is indeed true, figure 9.4 was created. In figure 9.4, the distribution of the different genitival constructions is shown for constructions in which the possessum is longer than the possessor (11 cases), for constructions in which the possessum is shorter than the possessor (314 cases), and for constructions in which the possessor and possessum are of equal length (66 cases).[128]

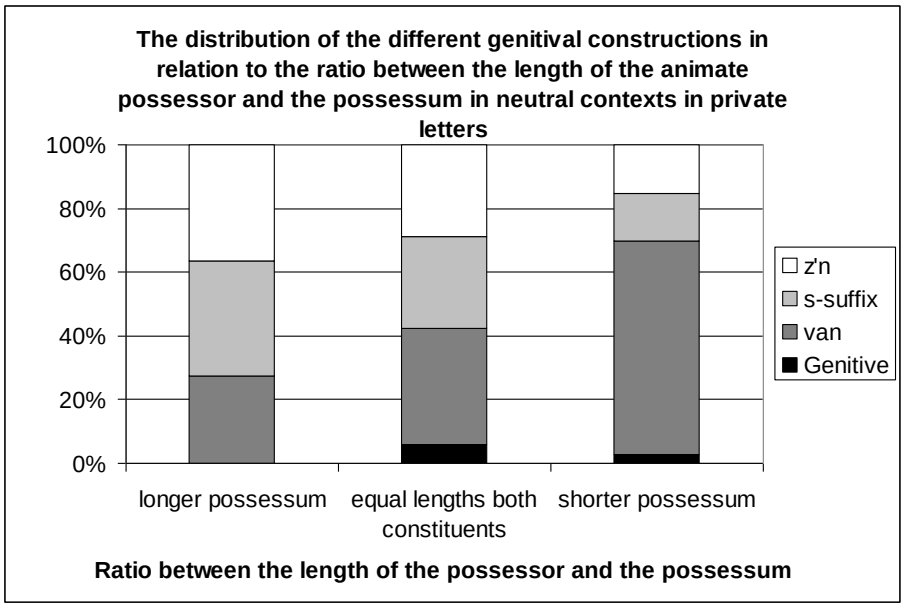

Figure 9.4

Figure 9.4 shows that the general short-before-long principle (Behaghel 1909, Hawkins 1994, Wasow 2002 all in Van Bergen 2011: 52-53) applies to seventeenth-century Dutch genitival constructions. The longer the

[128] Again in neutral contexts in private letters.

possessor is compared to the possessum, the bigger the chances are of finding a *van*-construction, in which the shorter possessum precedes the longer possessor. This means that the short-before-long principle can also be the explanation (or one of the explanations) for the fact that the *van*-construction in addresses is extremely frequent. For in addresses the possessor is usually longer than the possessum (see §9.3).

9.6. Conclusions

At the beginning of this chapter it was shown how often the genitive occurred in seventeenth-century Dutch private letters. Although the *van*-construction was definitely most popular, occurring in about half of the cases, the genitive occupied an important second place, occurring in 27% of the cases. For a linguistic feature thought to be as good as extinct in the spoken Dutch of the time, the genitive seemed to occur quite often in a text type which is expected to lean closely to the language of immediacy. However, this finding was nuanced immediately, since the genitive almost only occurred in contexts which require an elevated style or in fossilised expressions. In formulae, religious formulae and dates, the genitive played an important part. But in neutral contexts, in those parts of a letter in which a letter writer is expected to write more spontaneously, the genitive hardly ever occurred. This showed that the genitive indeed must have been used hardly or never in spoken Dutch of the seventeenth century, but that it was still very much part of the written language of the time. In fact, the few letter writers who still used the genitive in neutral contexts, seemed to be influenced by the style of printed (religious) works, since some of these writers had a profession which required them to read and study a lot of books and printed texts.

When looking at social variation, the genitive turned out to be used most often by writers from the lower classes, which was rather unexpected given the conclusion that the genitive must have been rare in spoken Dutch and more typical for elevated styles. Usually, the language use of the writers of the lower classes is linked more closely to spoken Dutch than the language use of writers from the upper classes. However, the strange distribution of the genitive across social class turned out to be caused by the unbalanced distribution of the different contexts. Letters from the lower classes were shown to contain more religious formulae than letters from the upper classes, while these latter letters contained significantly more genitival constructions in neutral contexts. Since the genitive occurred more often in religious formulae than in neutral contexts, the letters of the lower classes contained more genitives than the letters of the upper classes.

When looking at genitival constructions in neutral contexts only, social class did not seem to be a very important variable with regards to the choice of genitival constructions and neither did gender. Only for the *z'n*-construction there was influence of gender: women used this construction more often than men did. Together with the fact that the *z'n*-construction did not seem to be fit for use in religious formulae, this does suggest that the construction was felt to be more appropriate for spoken Dutch than for written Dutch. However, since the *z'n*-construction was used by all different social classes in the seventeenth century, I may conclude that it had not yet reached the status it has today, namely that of an element that has to be avoided in written texts.

Although gender and social class did not have a major effect on the use of the different genitival constructions, next to context there was at least one other non-social variable that did: the length of the constituents involved. It was clear that the relation between the length of the possessor and the length of the possessum influenced the occurrence of prenominal and postnominal genitival constructions. If the possessor was longer than the possessum, the chances were larger to find the possessor placed after the possessum in a postnominal *van*-construction than when the possessor was shorter than the possessum. In the latter case, prenominal genitival constructions (the *s*-construction and the *z'n*-construction) occurred more often than the *van*-construction. This means that the general short-before-long principle (Behaghel 1909, Hawkins 1994, Wasow 2002 in Van Bergen 2011: 52-53) applies to genitival constructions in seventeenth-century Dutch.