A typological view of possessive constructions in Sign Language of the Netherlands

Cornelia Loos
University of Texas at Austin

1. Introduction[1]

All cultures, independent of the value they assign to material belongings, have linguistic means for expressing the relationship between a possessed item (concrete ones such as *cars* as well as abstract ones, like *honour*) and its possessor. Typological studies of the range of possessive constructions and their characteristics abound for spoken languages (cf. Nichols 1988; Heine 1997; Stassen 2005), yet to date, only one typological study on expressions of possession in sign language exists (Zeshan & Perniss 2008). Looking at language in its different manifestations, both spoken and signed, is vital to uncovering "the full range of possibilities of the structure of human language" (Perniss & Zeshan 2008: 1). At the same time, including sign languages in typological studies of possession allows linguists to discern possible influences of the oral-aural or the visuo-manual modality on possessive constructions.

The present paper seeks to expand the range of studies on possession in sign languages presented in Zeshan & Perniss (2008) by taking a preliminary look at the expression of possession in Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) and comparing it to possessive constructions in other sign languages. The comparison focuses both on strategies employed to express possessive notions as well as on whether an (in)alienability distinction is realised in any of the sign languages under analysis and if so, where the cut-off point between alienably and inalienably possessed items lies.

NGT is the primary means of communication for approximately 30,000 sign language users in the Netherlands. It is genetically related to French and Flemish Sign Language, as the first instructors of the deaf in the Netherlands were trained at the deaf school in Paris, and Belgian teachers of the deaf in turn studied under Dutch instructors several decades later. Dialects of NGT developed around the five major schools for the deaf in Haren, Amsterdam, Voorburg/Zoetermeer, Rotterdam and St. Michielsgestel. Despite ongoing attempts at standardising NGT since the late 1990s, some of the dialects are still in use today.

The term possession is saliently associated with notions of ownership and control. In prototypical cases of possession, the possessor is assumed to have the power to dispose of the possessed item, henceforth the possessum, as s/he wishes, as well as to terminate the possessive relationship (see, for example, Taylor 1989a and 1989b, cited in Heine 1997). In his seminal work on the topic, Heine (1997) characterises possession as a "vague" or "fuzzy" concept (1997: 1). At the center of this concept, we find prototypical possession, which is characterised by a specific human being serving as possessor to a specific inanimate and concrete possessum. According to Taylor (1989a and 1989b, cited in Heine 1997), the prototypical possessive relationship is time-stable and involves the

1 I would like to take the opportunity to thank my deaf consultants, without whom this study would not have been possible. I am deeply grateful to the two participants in the elicitation tasks employed here, as well as to Richard Cokart, Shane Gilchrist, and Peter Hagel, who patiently answered all my questions on NGT.

possessor taking responsibility for the possessum, while both are spatially close to each other. The "fuzzy" edges of relations that can be expressed via possessive predicates or attributive constructions may be described as general "intrinsic connections" between two entities (Hawkins 1981, cited in Heine 1997), such as the relation between a whole and its parts or the relationships of family members to each other.

A related distinction that will be examined in the present study is the one between alienable and inalienable possession. Heine (1997) proposes a rough semantic characterisation for inalienable possessums as "[i]tems that cannot normally be separated from their owners" (1997: 10), which leaves alienables to denote all other possessed items. He lists kinship terms, body parts, relational spatial concepts (e.g. the *front* or *bottom* of an entity), other part-whole relations, as well as psycho-physical states as prone to inalienability given their semantics (1997: 10). However, the (in)alienability distinction is not a strictly semantic but a grammatical one: The boundaries of the alienable and inalienable category may differ from language to language or even language-internally from construction to construction, and (in)alienability may not be distinguished grammatically at all in a language (see, for example, Nichols 1988: 561-562).

The paper is structured as follows. First, a short description of the methodology employed to collect the data for this study is provided, followed by a description of attributive possession in sign languages in general and NGT in particular. Predicative possession in NGT and other sign languages forms the focus of the second part of the paper, which concludes with some observations on how NGT fits typologically into the pattern of possessive constructions observed in sign languages.

2. Methodology

The data for this study were collected from three sources. The first consists of video recordings of conversations between two proficient signers of NGT who completed some of the exercises created by Zeshan & Perniss (2008) for their typological survey of possession and existential constructions in sign languages. These included talking about family relations with the help of a family tree and eliciting body parts and physical states in a doctor-patient game. Examples in the text that derive from these video recordings are marked [recordings]. Due to logistic difficulties, I did not have access to the subjects who participated in the elicitation tasks and consequently do not know whether they are native signers nor further details about their language background. From an acquaintance of one of the signers in the recording I learnt that he went to the deaf high school St. Michielsgestel in the south of the Netherlands for two years and then changed to a mainstream public school. His signing is judged to be influenced by NmG (*Nederlands met Gebaren*), a form of signed Dutch.

The online *VanDale Basiswoordenboek Nederlandse Gebarentaal* served as a second source of information on possessive constructions in NGT. Most of its entries contain examples of usage for a particular sign, which were partially analysed here. The dictionary was compiled in cooperation with the *Nederlands Gebarencentrum*, a lexicographic institute that promotes the standardisation of NGT, hence the example sentences presented here are expected to represent a consensus of the different varieties of NGT signed in the Netherlands. Data taken from the dictionary are marked as [VanDale] plus the respective entry from which the example is taken. Remaining questions on possessive constructions were discussed with a native[2] signer of NGT from

2 The signer's parents are both deaf and he thus acquired NGT from birth.

Amsterdam. Data marked [Amsterdam, p.c.] stem from this source.

In summary, the data for the present study contain some regional variation (Amsterdam vs. St. Michielsgestel vs. the variety represented in *VanDale* vs. the variety used by the second consultant in the recordings) as well as a certain degree of influence from contact with spoken Dutch via NmG. Both factors may account for some of the variation that is presented below.

3. Attributive possession

Attributive possession encompasses all linguistic constructions in which a possessive relationship between two (abstract or concrete) entities is expressed within a noun phrase. According to Heine (1997: 26), the possessive relationship is presupposed in attributive constructions, while it is established in predicative possession. Compare Heine's examples in (1a) and (1b): In the attributive construction (1a), the fact that whoever utters this phrase owns a credit card is presupposed, while in (1b), the possessive relation between the speaker and a credit card is asserted.

(1) a. my credit card [Heine 1997: 26]
b. I have a credit card.

The possessor in an attributive possessive construction can be expressed either as a lexical noun or as a pronoun. We will look at both types of construction in turn, starting with pronominal possessors.

3.1 Pronoun possessors

In many sign languages, attributive possession is indicated via dependent-marking on the pronominal possessor. In other words, personal and possessive pronouns are formally distinguished in these languages: Where personal pronouns commonly involve the index finger pointing at the (present) referent or the location in space associated with a particular absent referent, possessive pronouns employ a different handshape for pointing, while maintaining the same location and movement as their personal pronoun counterparts. In their typological survey of possessive and existential constructions in sign languages, Perniss & Zeshan (2008) find that of the 26 sign languages analysed for their project, only five do not employ formationally distinct possessive pronouns. The three handshapes that are most frequently assigned to possessive pronouns in sign languages are the  -handshape, used for example in American, Austrian, and Flemish Sign Language, the  -handshape, which is found, among others, in Jordanian Sign Language, and the  -handshape, which is employed in French, Mexican, Turkish, Brazilian, and Greek Sign Language (2008: 17). Both the flat hand and the fist handshape are unmarked handshapes in many of the world's sign languages and its use in possessive pronouns is thus not surprising (for a discussion of markedness of handshapes in ASL see Sandler & Lillo-Martin 2006, for NGT see Harder & Schermer 1986). The -handshape is slightly more marked among sign languages, and its use in possessive constructions across several sign languages can partly be explained by historical ties between French, Mexican, and Brazilian Sign Language (Zeshan 2011). Greek Sign Language is furthermore said to have developed under influence from American and French Sign Language (Ethnologue) and may have adopted the possessive pronoun handshape from the latter. It is not clear whether Turkish Sign Language inherited or borrowed the -handshape for possessive pronouns or whether it developed this form independently.

NGT falls in line with typological expectations in having a possessive pronoun that exhibits one of the more frequently used possessive handshapes, namely a flat hand (). Unlike in American, Flemish, and Austrian Sign Language, however, the -handshape seems to be employed only with a first-person possessor, where the flat hand taps against the chest once, and can in all contexts be replaced by an index point. In fact, the elicitation data did not contain any clear instances of the possessive pronoun in attributive constructions. The *VanDale* online dictionary contains various uses of the first person possessive pronoun (glossed as POSS1) with prototypical instances of possession with an animate possessor and an inanimate concrete possessum (2a) as well as with an animate concrete possessum (2b), interpersonal relations (2c) and kinship terms (2d):

(2) a. INDEX3 POSS1 DREAM-HOUSE [VanDale DROOM]
'That is my dream house.'

b. POSS1 DOG LAST YEAR DIE [VanDale HOND]
'My dog died last year.'

pol-q [VanDale VRIEND]
c. POSS1 FRIEND ALREADY INSIDE
'Is my friend already inside?'

[VanDale NICHT]

d. INDEX1 HAVE TWO NIECE: ONE INDEX3a DAUGHTER POSS1 SISTER INDEX3a OTHER INDEX3b POSS1 UNCLE DAUGHTER INDEX3b
'I have two nieces: One is my sister's daughter, the other is my uncle's daughter.'

e. POSS1 LEG HURT [Amsterdam, p.c.]
'My leg hurts.'

The consultant from Amsterdam adds that POSS1 can furthermore be used with abstract possessums such as NAME or IDEA, as well as with body parts such as LEG (2e).

Whenever the possessor is not the speaker, a personal pronoun (INDEX) is chosen, independently of the typicality of the possessive relation, and the possessive relationship is not marked overtly. As the examples in (3) illustrate, a prototypically possessed item such as a car occurs with a non-first person index pronoun (3a), as do the less typical abstract possessums (3b) and kinship terms (3c), which in many languages of the world are grouped with inalienable possessums (Heine 1997: 10). In other words, the choice of possessive vs. index pronoun in attributive constructions is not influenced by (in)alienability considerations.

(3) a. top [VanDale PROBLEEM]
INDEX2 CAR PROBLEM INDEX3 INDEX1pl SOLVE
'We can solve the problem with your car.'
b. INDEX1 INDEX3 E-MAILADRES ASK [VanDaleE-MAILADRES]
'I ask him for his e-mail address.'

c. INDEX3 PARENTS LIVE-STILL THE-TWO [VanDale OUDERS]
'His parents are still alive.'

Perniss & Zeshan (2008) note that in most sign languages that have a paradigm of possessive pronouns, the latter is more limited than the paradigm of personal pronouns in the language and thus behaviourally more marked. They mention the unavailability of dual or plural forms in the possessive paradigm, yet NGT forms a more radical instance of markedness in the realm of possessive pronouns: Not only does the language lack plural forms but it also does not have non-first person forms. Wherever POSS1 does occur in the data, the first-person possessive precedes the possessum.

As noted earlier, dependent marking on the first-person possessor is not obligatory in NGT; the elicitation data contain multiple examples of attributive possessive constructions with an index pronoun possessor. As (4) illustrates, the index pronoun may be used with concrete specific possessums (4a)[3] as well as with kinship terms (4b) and body parts (4c).

(4) a. _____top [VanDale CAMERA]
INDEX1 NEW CAMERA INDEX1 VACATION GO INDEX1 PRETTY PICTURE-TAKE
'While I was on vacation I took brilliant pictures with my new camera.'

b. INDEX1 MOTHER INDEX3 54 [recordings AGE2 01:24]
'My mother is 54 years old.'

c. INDEX1 INDEX1 HAIR DYE[4] [VanDale HAAR]
'I have my hair dyed.'

Similar to Japanese, Catalan, and Austrian Sign Language (Morgan 2008, Quer & GRIN 2008, and Schalber & Hunger 2008), the pronominal possessor in NGT has a strong tendency to precede the possessum: The elicitation data contained 52 instances of possessor + possessum NPs, compared to ten possessum + possessor combinations. In seven cases, the possessor both precedes and follows the possessum. According to the consultant from Amsterdam, these three variants do not differ in meaning.

Looking at a potential (in)alienability distinction in the distribution of personal vs. possessive pronouns, we may assume that zero marking of the possessive relation is more likely to occur with potentially inalienable possessums, as family members, body parts or physical states are typically not controlled by the possessor (in the sense that s/he can usually not terminate the possessive relationship) and may therefore not be marked by a language in the same way that prototypical ownership is. Since zero marking (the INDEX pronoun) occurs with specific concrete items such as CAMERA, however, it is

3 There is a possibility that (4a) INDEX1 NEW CAMERA constitutes a predicative possessive structure ('I have a new camera') rather than an attributive one. Since the omission of a possessive predicate seems to be conditioned by sufficient context clues and (4a), as an example sentence from the *Van Dale*, lacks contextual embedding, an attributive interpretation is more likely here.

4 In this example, the second INDEX agrees with the possessum such that it does not point at the signer's chest but at her head, closer to the possessum hair.

unlikely that the distribution of the personal pronoun in attributive possessive constructions distinguishes an alienable vs. inalienable category. The broad range of possessums compatible with POSS1 furthermore suggests that overt dependent-marking in the possessive NP is not restricted to an alienable set of possessums, hence we do not seem to find an alienability distinction affecting possessive marking in attributive constructions in NGT. This finding mirrors Nichols' (1988: 577) observation that an (in)alienability distinction is predominantly realised via head-marking in the (spoken) languages of the world, and is all but absent in languages that express possession via dependent-marking[5].

Before moving on to describing the behaviour of nominal possessors in NGT, it should be noted that, at least for some types of possessums, the possessor is understood from context and need not be expressed overtly, as illustrated in (5). An interesting direction for further study might be to investigate whether the omission of the possessor depends only on contextual set-up or also on the nature of the possessum, and whether possessor-dropping is more frequent in constructions that contain typically inalienable possessums such as kinship terms.

[VanDale MAN echtgenoot]

(5) HUSBAND WE-TWO 25 YEAR MARRY
'My husband and I have been married for 25 years.'

3.2 Nominal possessors

Many of the sign languages analysed in Zeshan & Perniss' (2008) survey employ two strategies for attributive possessive constructions relating a nominal possessor to a nominal possessum: 1. juxtaposition and 2. insertion of a possessive marker between possessor and possessum (see, for example, the chapters on Japanese, Catalan, Austrian, and Jordanian Sign Language). This possessive marker is often formationally similar or identical to the possessive or index pronoun in the respective sign language. Here, alienability seems to play a role in the choice of construction in that the former strategy is most commonly found with abstract possessums or part-whole relations, both with animate and inanimate possessors. A possessive or indexical pronoun tends to mark alienable possession and, at least in Austrian, American and Jordanian Sign Language (for ASL see Chen Pichler & Hochgesang 2008), is barred from marking part-whole relations[6].

NGT likewise employs juxtaposition, as the examples in (6) illustrate. The possessor predominantly precedes the possessum in these constructions, although the reverse order is attested (see 6d). Juxtaposition can be used for human possessums (6a),

5 While Nichols (1988) describes a strong typological trend for marking (in)alienability via head-marking, we do find an example of alienability distinguished via dependent marking in Jordanian Sign Language (Hendriks 2008), where the possessive pronoun (signed with an -handshape) is used with alienable possessums while inalienable possessums such as body parts and names are signed with personal pronoun possessor. Kinship terms seem to mark the boundary between alienables and inalienables, as they occur with either possessive or index pronouns.

6 In Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS), the cut-off point for the (in)alienability distinction is found within the class of part-whole relations: While constructions with body-part possessums can contain a possessive marker inserted between possessor and possessum, only juxtaposition is possible for part-whole relations with inanimate possessors (Schalber & Hunger 2008: 175).

abstract ones (6b), as well as for kinship terms (6c, 6d) and part-whole relations with animate (6e) and inanimate possessors (6f). Juxtaposing nominal possessors and possessums in NGT then does not seem to be restricted to alienable or inalienable possession.

[VanDale COACH]

(6) a. DUTCH NATIONAL-TEAM COACH INDEX3 EVERYBODY ALWAYS CRITICISE3
'The coach of the Dutch national (soccer) team is always criticised by everybody.'

q

b. THIS MEETING GOAL WHAT [VanDale DOEL]
'What is the goal of this meeting?'

c. BEST FRIEND FATHER [recording FAMILY TREE]
'the father of (your) best friend'

d. SON UNCLE DEAD [recording FAMILY TREE]
'(Your) uncle's son is dead.'

[VanDale ANGST/ANGSTIG]

e. PHOTO CL:rectangular INDEX3 WOMAN FACE FEAR
'On the photo you can see the fear on the face of the woman.'

f. HEARING-AID BATTERY LOW [VanDale BATTERIJ]
'The battery of the hearing aid is low.'

Concerning the insertion of a possessive marker between possessor and possessum, the data are less clear. Only in the data elicited in relation to kinship did instances of such insertion of an index pronoun occur, as exemplified below.

(7) a. BEST FRIEND INDEX3 MOTHER [recording FAMILY TREE]
'the mother of (your) best friend'

b. BEST FRIEND INDEX3 PARENTS [recording FAMILY TREE]
'the parents of (your) best friend'

[recording FAMILY TREE]

c. OLDEST UNCLE INDEX3, SPOUSE DEAD
'(My) oldest uncle's wife is dead.'

d. AUNT INDEX3, HUSBAND DEAD [recording FAMILY TREE]
'(My) aunt's husband is dead.'

However, sentences (7c) and (7d) exhibit signs of the possessors forming part of a different constituent than the possessum (indicated here with a comma). The pronominal possessor is accompanied by a headnod followed by a small pause, then for the possessums SPOUSE and HUSBAND, the chin is lifted again. Non-manual marking such

as headnods or pauses frequently mark phrasal boundaries in NGT (Crasborn 2009: 359), hence it is likely that, at least in (7c) and (7d), the index pronoun merely anchors the possessor in space. The possessive construction would then exhibit a topic comment structure and (7c) could be translated as 'As for my oldest uncle, (his) wife is dead'[7]. Morgan (2008) argues that Japanese Sign Language employs topicalisation of the possessor as one strategy for marking attributive possession, and an intriguing direction for future research would be to investigate how systematically NGT topicalises a nominal possessor to express an attributive possessive relationship. With the data at hand we can only suggest that topicalisation might be at work in addition to a potential structure that involves an index pronoun intervening between the possessor and the possessum. The latter would mirror a structure used in Dutch (see (8)), with which NGT is in constant contact.

(8) *Anne d'r moeder* [Quer & GRIN 2008: 38]
'Anne her mother'

Given that this structure was only elicited in the context of kinship possessums, we cannot draw conclusions about its use or frequency with more and less alienable possessums. Observations on American, Jordanian and Austrian Sign Language suggest that part-whole relations might form the cut-off point for the insertion of a possessive or pronominal element in some sign languages, and further data needs to be elicited in order to see whether NGT follows this pattern or not. From the point of view of iconicity, we would expect alienable possessums to be more easily separated from their possessors by an intervening sign, while inalienable possessums are just that - inseparable from their possessors by another sign and hence preferably juxtaposed.

In this section, we have focused on nominal possessors, which precede their possessums. The data elicited for this study also contains a construction that fronts the possessum and is used mostly when the possessor is itself complex. This construction is judged by my native consultant to constitute a form of signed Dutch (*Nederlands met Gebaren*), is marked as thus in the *VanDale* dictionary and was predominantly used by the consultant who is said to frequently use a form of NmG. In Dutch, the possessum precedes the possessor and is connected to it via the preposition *van*. In NmG, *van* is expressed via a sign that is formationally identical to POSS1 and is accompanied by the mouthing 'van' or 'fff' as illustrated in (9). While this construction is attested frequently in the data on family relations, we will not consider it further as it is judged to not constitute a part of NGT. However, in the following discussion of predicative possession, a formally similar construction will be introduced.

(9) a. SECOND SIBLING VAN INDEX2 FATHER INDEX2 [recording AGE2]
'fff'
'your father's second sibling'

b. SIBLING VAN INDEX2 FATHER SPOUSE [recording AGE2]
'fff'

7 While topics in NGT are often non-manually marked by raised brows and a forward head position, such prosdic marking is not obligatory (Crasborn *et al.* 2009: 359) and seems to be absent in the present data.

'the sibling of your father's spouse'

4. Predicative possession

In addition to being expressed within a phrase, a possessive relation can be indicated with the help of a possessive predicate that takes possessor and possessum as its respective subject and object. As Heine (1997) comments, many languages have at least two constructions which foreground either the possessor or the possessum. Strategies that highlight the possessor in making it the clausal subject or topic are commonly referred to as 'have' constructions, taking their name from the English verb *have* whose subject is a possessor. Constructions that foreground the possessum as the subject or topic, as for example *the chocolate* in *This chocolate belongs to me* are termed 'belong'-constructions, again named after the behaviour of the corresponding English verb (1997: 29). Belong-constructions are often associated with prototypical possession involving true ownership and/or control over the possessum (1997: 31-32). In the following sections, we will first discuss *have*-constructions and then briefly look at predicative juxtaposition and *belong*-constructions in NGT.

4.1 *Have*-constructions in sign languages

The overwhelming majority of *have*-constructions in the sign languages surveyed in Zeshan & Perniss (2008) may also be used to express existence (and/or location) and thus instantiate Heine's (1997) existence schema. Heine observes that possession is a relatively abstract notion, which is frequently expressed with the help of more concrete schemata involving basic human experiences such as "what one does [...], or what exists" (1997: 45). He identifies eight major event schemata on which predicative possessive constructions in spoken languages are based, and one of them hinges on an association between existence and possession via the notion "Y exists with reference to X", where Y is the possessum and X functions as the possessor (1997: 57-58). The existence schema is so productive in Zeshan & Perniss' survey that most sign languages analysed have a predicate that expresses possession and existence. Consequently, constructions containing these EXIST/HAVE signs do not distinguish between alienable and inalienable possession. Given that *have*-constructions are overall less restricted to cases of 'true' possession than their *belong* counterparts, the lack of an (in)alienability distinction is expected, but it is certainly promoted by HAVE/EXIST doubling as an existential predicate and thus allowing an existential reading for less typical possessive relations.

Several of the sign languages discussed in Zeshan & Perniss have a secondary possessive predicate whose usage is more restricted to prototypical possession: Catalan Sign Language has a predicate HAVE signed with an  -handshape which cannot be used with inalienable possessums such as kinship terms, body parts, psychological-physical states and part-whole relations (Quer & GRIN 2008); Austrian Sign Language has a sign OWN which involves a grabbing motion and can only be used with inanimate large immovable possessums (Schalber & Hunger 2008); and Japanese Sign Language exhibits a sign HOLD which is also executed with a grabbing movement and implies a high degree of control on the part of the possessor, hence only true ownership or physical possession can be expressed via HOLD (Morgan 2008). In the next section we will discuss which *have*-type possessive predicate(s) NGT employs and how they pattern with respect to *have*-constructions in the sign languages described here.

4.2 *Have*-constructions in NGT

The predicate most frequently employed to express possession in NGT is glossed HEBBEN 'have' and is frequently accompanied by mouthing the Dutch translation equivalent 'heb'. As Figure 1a shows, the citation form of the sign involves a palm-up flat hand moving down in neutral space.

a. [VanDale HEBBEN] b. [recording DOCPAT2]

Figure 1: Variants of HEBBEN

An interesting variant of the sign is illustrated in Figure 1b, attested in the elicitation data during the doctor and patient game. Here, the sign exhibits a downward movement of the palm-up hand as the standard variant does, yet in addition, the fingers close in a grabbing movement, reminiscent of possessive predicates in Japanese and Austrian Sign Language. This variant may derive from another event schema argued by Heine to underlie possessive constructions: the action schema (1997: 47). Based on the possessor taking hold of the possessum via a seizing or grabbing action, this schema is frequently attested among the world's spoken and signed languages. Note that possessive verbs which imitate a seizing or grabbing action in the above-mentioned sign languages denote more prototypical notions of (alienable) possession. In the present study, the grabbing variant of HEBBEN was employed with physical states like FEVER and kinship terms, which constitute less prototypically alienable possessums, but further research is necessary to determine whether there is a correlation between the typicality of a possessum and the form of HEBBEN.

In the elicitation data, only two predicative possessive constructions were attested, one employing HEBBEN and one using simple juxtaposition of possessor and possessee. HEBBEN may either precede the possessum or follow it without noticeable differences in meaning. Regional variation may be a factor in deciding the placement of HEBBEN in the data presented here. HEBBEN was used with kinship terms (10a) as well as with physical states (10b) and specific illnesses (10c, where # indicates that the following sign is fingerspelled).

(10) a. INDEX2 SPOUSE HAVE INDEX2 — pol-q — [recording FAMILYTREE3]
'Do you have a wife?'

b. INDEX1 HEAD PAIN HAVE INDEX1 — neg — [recording DOCPAT2]
'I don't have a headache.'

c. INDEX2 HAVE #MEASLES [recording DOCPAT2]
'You have the measles.'

While the examples in (10) contain possessums that are often grouped in the inalienable category, my Amsterdam consultant confirmed that HEBBEN spans the whole range of possible possessive relations. In (11a), it occurs with a concrete inanimate possessum, in (11b) with an animate possessor and possessum, in (11c) it takes an abstract possessum, and in (11d) it can be used to mark part-whole relationships with inanimate possessors.

(11) a. INDEX3 HAVE NEW CAR [VanDale AUTO]
'He has a new car.'

b. DOG FLEA HAVE [Amsterdam, p.c.]
'The dog has fleas.'

pol-q
c. IDEA HEB [Amsterdam, p.c.]
'Do (you) have an idea?'

d. CAR FOUR DOOR HAVE [Amsterdam, p.c.]
'The car has 4 doors.'

It thus seems as if the sign HEBBEN is an instance of the EXIST/HAVE-type verbs described for most of the sign languages in Zeshan & Perniss (2008). This observation is surprising given that NGT has an existential predicate AANWEZIG 'present' which may be used in possessive contexts, albeit less frequently than HEBBEN. AANWEZIG is illustrated in Figure 2. According to my consultant, AANWEZIG in its possessive use is more restricted than HEBBEN in terms of possible possessums that can co-occur with it. It tends not to occur with animate possessums such as FRIEND or BROTHER and is rare with abstract

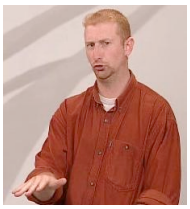


Figure 2: [VanDale AANWEZIG]

possessums like NAME or IDEA. A possible context of usage for 'IDEA AANWEZIG' would be a discussion that is leading nowhere, in which one participant asks the other if they have any idea at all. This example illustrates that AANWEZIG does not lose its existential 'ring' even when used possessively as we might paraphrase the participant's desperate question as "Is there any idea present in the room?". In less emphatic contexts, HEBBEN would be the possessive predicate chosen for IDEA (Amsterdam, p.c.). AANWEZIG predominantly occurs with inanimate and/or concrete possessums, as the examples in (12) illustrate.

(12) a. EXIST CIGARETTE [Amsterdam, p.c.]
'Do (you) have cigarettes?'

b. EXIST FLEA
'Does (the dog) have fleas?'

c. CAR FOUR DOOR EXIST
'The car has four doors.'

Hence we may summarise that both HEBBEN and AANWEZIG may be used in *have*-constructions in NGT, and since both seem to have existential meaning components, neither instantiates an (in)alienability distinction in the language. AANWEZIG shows an interesting distribution in dispreferring human and abstract possessums, yet since it occurs in part-whole relations, which tend to form part of the inalienable category in sign languages that make an (in)alienability distinction, as well as with prototypically possessed items such as CIGARETTE, AANWEZIG is unlikely to make an (in)alienability distinction.

4.3 Juxtaposition and *belong*-constructions in NGT and other sign languages

In addition to marking predicative possessive constructions via a possessive predicate, various sign languages allow clausal juxtaposition of possessor and possessum under certain conditions. In Catalan Sign Language, kinship terms and body parts may be juxtaposed with their (human) possessor (Quer & GRIN 2008), in Austrian Sign Language this option exists whenever the possessive relation is clear from context (Schalber & Hunger 2008), in Jordanian Sign Language a possessive predicate can be dropped if the possessum is modified (Hendriks 2008), and in ASL inanimate possessums can be juxtaposed, as can kinship terms when they are modified by a numeral (Chen Pichler & Hochgesang 2008).

In NGT, juxtaposition occurs with kinship terms when the possessive context is clear, as in the sentence (13a), which was elicited during the family tree game. Abstract concepts also frequently occur without a possessive predicate (13b), as do body parts (13c).

(13) a. BROTHER INDEX2 [pol-q] [recording FAMILYTREE2]
'Do you have a brother?'

b. TONIGHT DO WHAT INDEX2 IDEA INDEX2 [VanDale IDEE]
'Do you have an idea what we could do tonight?'

[VanDale LICHAAM]
c. INDEX1 LUCKY STRONG HEALTHY BODY INDEX1
'Luckily I have a strong and healthy body.'

The native signer from Amsterdam that was consulted for this study mentioned that modification via a numeral is not a necessary condition for dropping the possessive predicate with kinship terms. He further noted that, given the right context, juxtaposition is possible with concrete inanimate possessums such as CAR (for example, a legitimate reply to the question 'Could somebody give me a ride?' in NGT may be INDEX1 CAR 'I have a car' accompanied by a headnod). Since he considered juxtaposition ungrammatical for the possessum MONEY, however, we cannot conclude that this strategy can be

employed with all alienable possessums in NGT[8]. The language thus patterns with the other sign languages described for which predicative juxtaposition is attested, but it seems to be rather more permissive concerning the types of possessums, which allow juxtaposition. Possibly it resembles Austrian Sign Language most closely in allowing predicate dropping whenever context signals the possessive relationship.

In addition to *have*-constructions and juxtaposition, several sign languages exhibit a *belong*-construction that places the possessum in subject position. Often, the *belong*-predicate seems to derive from an attributive possessive marker or pronoun found in the respective sign language as well as in its main spoken contact language. In Catalan Sign Language (LSC), for example, the signs DE 'of' and BELONG serve as possessive linkers between possessum and possessor in both attributive and predicative constructions and are only distinguished formally by the movement parameter: DE has a simple tapping movement and BELONG a repeated one (Quer & GRIN 2008). Both Catalan and Spanish employ the preposition *de* 'of' in attributive possession, hence LSC exhibits innovation via generalisation of this construction to the predicative domain. Flemish Sign Language (VGT) exhibits a similar construction using the linker VAN 'of' which is accompanied by mouthing the Dutch word *van* 'of' along with the sign. In VGT, VAN is used both attributively and predicatively just as it is in Dutch, the major spoken contact language of VGT. Example (14) contrasts the respective possessive structures in VGT (14a) and Dutch (14b): The two only differ in Dutch employing the copula *is* in addition to *van* to link possessum and possessor. It can thus be argued that VGT has not innovated the predicative use of VAN but has borrowed it from Dutch.

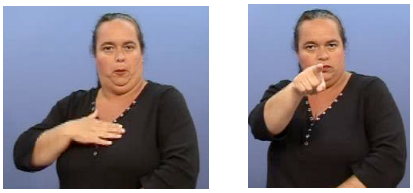
[de Weerdt & Vermeerbergen 2008: 207]

(14) a. HOUSE OF TEACHER
'This house is the teacher's.' or 'This house belongs to the teacher.'

b. Dat boek is van Jan. [Hendriks 2008: 63]
'That book belongs to John.' / 'That book is John's.'

For our data, we have already shown that the attributive VAN-construction is associated with signed Dutch (NmG) and would thus not form part of the inventory of possessive constructions of NGT. However, the predicative use of VAN is attested in *VanDale*, which differentiates NGT and NmG. There, we find it co-occurring with a second-person pronoun in the example *Is die fiets van jouw* 'Is this bike yours?' The illustration in Figure 3 shows that the possessive predicate VAN is formationally similar to the first-person possessive pronoun in NGT, differing only in the mouth gesture accompanying VAN (closed mouth, corners of the mouth stretched and pointing downward). The first-person form of VAN differs from the non-first-person form in exhibiting a repeated tapping movement as well as the mouth gesture 'mmm'.

8 One possible explanation for why the possessive predicate may be omitted with CAR but not MONEY is that the former is typically associated with only a few actions, namely having and buying, while the latter is more versatile: money can be found, lost, spent, or earnt. Cars are thus possibly more typically associated with 'having' than money, hence the omission of the default predicate with CAR but not with MONEY. Thanks to Pamela Perniss for pointing out this potential analysis.

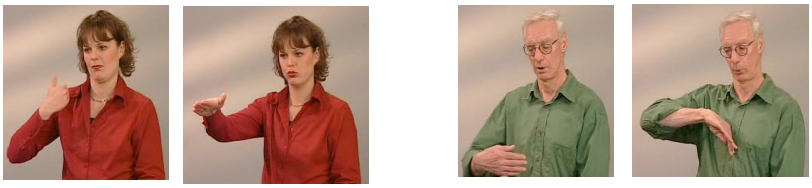


VAN INDEX2

Figure 3: [VanDale VAN-JOUW]

Formational similarities between a belong-type sign and a possessive pronoun are not uncommon among the sign languages surveyed in Zeshan & Perniss (2008). In Austrian, Jordanian, and Ugandan Sign language, the *belong*-construction employs a predicate that resembles a pronoun used in attributive possession (see the respective chapters in Zeshan & Perniss (2008)).

In addition to the VAN-construction, a second *belong*-predicate has been observed in NGT, glossed as VAN-JOUW 'of you' and VAN-MIJ 'of me' in Figure 4. It differs from all the belong-predicates discussed in Zeshan & Perniss (2008) in showing possessor agreement. Thus, while the handshape and mouth gesture 'pu' are identical in Figure 4a and Figure 4b, the orientation of the fingers at the final location of the sign points towards the second-person possessor in Figure 4a, while the radial side of the hand contacts the chest of the first-person possessor in Figure 4b. Further research is necessary to determine whether Figure 4a can be used for second and third-person pronominal predicates and how frequently this predicate is used in comparison with the VAN-construction.



a. [VanDale VAN-JOUW] b. [VanDale VAN-MIJ]

Figure 4: *belong*-predicate in NGT

In summary, we have seen that predicative juxtaposition is comparatively common in NGT and seems to be determined mostly by contextual set-up. NGT furthermore has two *belong*-predicates, one which resembles the possessive pronoun in attributive constructions formally and a second one which shows possessor agreement.

5. Conclusion

The present study set out to provide a preliminary survey of possessive constructions in NGT and how the latter pattern with respect to possessive expressions in other sign languages. It was demonstrated that NGT behaves in accordance with typological observations for sign languages in having a possessive pronoun, as do 80 per cent of the sign languages studied in Zeshan & Perniss (2008). The possessive 'paradigm' in NGT is behaviourally highly marked, however, in not distinguishing number and having only a first-person form. The distribution of the possessive pronoun is not linked to an (in)alienability distinction, which is expected from Nichols' (1988) finding that alienability is rarely distinguished via dependent-marking.

Concerning nominal possessors, we could not confirm a trend towards marking alienability via the insertion of a possessive marker between possessor and possessum in NGT. While in Austrian, American, and Jordanian sign language such a tendency seems to exist and mark part-whole relations as inalienable (the possessive marker cannot occur there), we lack sufficient data to test these claims for NGT. Juxtaposition seems to be the most commonly used strategy for attributive possession with a nominal possessor here, possibly accompanied by topicalisation of the possessor.

Looking at predicative possession in NGT, we found the strong tendency in sign languages to conflate possession and existence in one predicate confirmed. NGT has two predicates that encompass existential meaning to different degrees, with HEBBEN foregrounding possession and AANWEZIG highlighting existence. Since in contrast to some other sign languages, NGT does not have a predicate which expresses prototypical possession, no alienability distinctions are found among *have*-constructions in this language. It is conceivable that AANWEZIG marks temporary rather than permanent possession, which is reserved for HEBBEN, yet further research is necessary to examine this hypothesis.

Lastly, we noted that NGT has two *belong*-predicates. One resembles the possessive pronoun in attributive constructions formally, the second agrees with the possessor, which, to my knowledge, has not been attested for any of the other sign languages analysed in Zeshan & Perniss (2008) and may well constitute a typological anomaly.

Several directions for future research have been suggested throughout this paper, yet many more may be added to these. An interesting topic for analysis might be to explore whether and how spatial modifications may be employed to indicate possession in NGT. In some sign languages, the possessum may be signed at the location of the possessor to indicate the possessive relationship; it would be interesting to see whether NGT allows such modification. Most importantly, however, we need to investigate how sign languages fit into the broader typology of spoken and signed languages with respect to the expression of possession. While developing a typology of sign languages is important in its own right, for example to assess the degree of genetic relatedness or areal contact between two given sign languages, integrating the findings of sign typology into the broader typology of languages provides access to the whole range of linguistic structures. Not only does a typology of signed and spoken languages paint a more holistic picture of human language, but it also allows linguists to identify influences of modality on linguistic expressions of possession.

References

Chen Pichler, D., & Hochgesang, J. 2008. An overview of possessives and existentials in American Sign Language. In Zeshan & Perniss eds. *Possessive and existential constructions in sign languages*. Sign Language Typology Series No. 2. Nijmegen: Ishara Press.

Crasborn, O., Kooij, E. van der, Ros, J., & Helen de Hoop. 2009. Topic agreement in NGT (Sign Language of the Netherlands). *The Linguistic Review* 26. 355-370.

Harder, R. & Schermer, T. 1986. A first phonological analysis of handshapes in the Sign Language of the Netherlands. In B. T. Tervoort ed. *Signs of Life. Proceedings of the 2nd European congress on sign language research*, 47-51. Amsterdam: The Dutch Foundation for the Deaf and Hearing-impaired Child.

Hawkins, R. 1981. Towards an account of the possessive constructions: NP's N and the N

of NP. *Journal of Linguistics* 17. 247-269.
Heine, B. 1997. *Possession: Cognitive Sources, Forces, and Grammaticalization.* (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 83). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hendriks, B. 2008. I have therefore I exist: Possession in Jordanian Sign Language. In Zeshan & Perniss eds. *Possessive and existential constructions in sign languages*. Sign Language Typology Series No. 2. Nijmegen: Ishara Press.
Lewis, M. P. ed. 2009. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Sixteenth edition. Dallas, Tex.: SIL International. Online version: http://www.ethnologue.com/. Retrieved 24 July 12.
Netherlands. *European Union of the Deaf*. http://eud.eu/Netherlands-i-193.html. Retrieved 9 July 2012.
Nichols, J. 1988. On alienable and inalienable possession. In *In Honor of Mary Haas*, ed. Shipley, 557-609. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
Morgan, M. W. 2008. Expressing possession and existence in Japanese Sign Language. In Zeshan & Perniss eds. *Possessive and existential constructions in sign languages*. Sign Language Typology Series No. 2. Nijmegen: Ishara Press.
Perniss, P. & Zeshan, U. 2008. Possessive and existential constructions: Introduction and overview. In Zeshan & Perniss eds. *Possessive and existential constructions in sign languages*. Sign Language Typology Series No. 2. Nijmegen: Ishara Press.
Quer, J. & GRIN. 2008. Structures of possession and existence in Catalan Sign Language. In Zeshan & Perniss eds. *Possessive and existential constructions in sign languages*. Sign Language Typology Series No. 2. Nijmegen: Ishara Press.
Sandler, W. & Lillo-Martin, D. 2006. *Sign Language and Linguistic Universals*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Schalber, K. & Hunger, B. 2008. Possession in Austrian Sign Language - with existentials on the side. In Zeshan & Perniss eds. *Possessive and existential constructions in sign languages*. Sign Language Typology Series No. 2. Nijmegen: Ishara Press.
Stassen, L. M. H. 2005. Predicative possession. In *The World Atlas of Language Structures*, ed. by M. Haspelmath, M. Dryer, D. Gil & B. Comrie, 474-7. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Taylor, J. R. 1989a. Possessive genitives in English. *Linguistics* 27 (4/6).66-86.
Taylor, J. R.1989b. *Linguistic Categorization: Prototypes in Linguistic Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Van Dale Basiswoordenboek NGT. 2011. Nederlands Gebarencentrum. https://veiligbetalen.gebarencentrum.nl/viewer_v2/default.aspx?idrelease=81. Retrieved 30 April 12.
Zeshan, U. & Perniss, P. 2008. *Possessive and Existential Constructions in Sign Languages*. Nijmegen: Ishara Press.
Zeshan, U. 2011. Sign Languages. In *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online,* ed. by M. Dryer & M. Haspelmath. Munich: Max Planck Digital Library, supplement 9. Available online at http://wals.info/supplement/9. Retrieved 09 May 12.