The Genitive Case

3.1 Introduction

This section builds upon the overview of morphological case marking and language change given in the previous chapter, and focuses on the genitive case. The cross-linguistic characteristics of the genitive are sketched in Section 3.2, showing that the roles performed by the genitive case in the Germanic languages are much the same as those found throughout the languages of the world. In Section 3.3 the use and development of the genitive across the Germanic languages is addressed. It is noted that, as far as empirically based diachronic investigations are concerned, attention has been focused on English and Swedish. The present investigation is an attempt at providing an equivalent portrayal of the developments in Dutch and German. Finally, in Section 3.4 the constructions referred to throughout this investigation—namely the genitive and the non-genitive “competitors”—are identified, defined and exemplified.

3.2 A Typology of the Genitive

The term GENITIVE comes from Latin: cāsus genetīvus or genitīvus ‘case denoting origin, belonging’ (Bußmann 2002: 246; Duden 2011a: 700). The sense of the Latin name is reflected throughout the genitive’s various uses to varying extents. A factor characterising the genitive case cross-linguistically is its semantic generality; Wellander (1956: 159) observes a “Farblosigkeit” [‘colourlessness’] of the (Germanic) genitive. In essence, the genitive denotes a “thing-to-thing relation” (De Groot 1956: 189). This generality can lead to problems in classification (Palmer 1961: 290), or at least to divergences between different scholars’ classifications of the roles performed by the genitive. Latin grammars typically list upward of thirty types of genitive, but differ from each other in the exact arrangement and classification (De Groot 1956: 192, 194; Bondzio 1967: 3), while the number of genitive types in German can vary greatly depending on the scholar, with Helbig (1973: 210–213) listing 25 adnominal and eight adverbal genitive types, Bondzio (1967) listing seven adnominal genitive types and Duden (2005: 833–839) nine adnominal genitive types; Ballweg (1998), in contrast, attempts to provide a single, unified—if abstract—interpretation of the
adnominal genitive. The classifications of the German genitive are returned to in Section 3.4, where the simplified classification (albeit more complex than that of Ballweg [1998]) adopted for the present investigation is set out. Semantic emptiness is often noted in definitions and explanations of the genitive although, often, the possessive sense—typologically, the most widespread role of the genitive (Bußmann 2002: 246)—is mentioned:

This case is used to signal the fact that one noun is subordinate to the other, i.e. one noun is the head and the other noun is the modifier which adds some further specification to the head.

Katamba 1993: 240

Case whose basic role is to mark nouns or noun phrases which are dependents of another noun.

Matthews 1997: 144

Morphologischer Kasus, der primär zur Kennzeichnung des → Attributs eines Substantivs dient

Morphological case which primarily serves to indicate the attribute of a noun

Bußmann 2002: 246, MY TRANSLATION

A distinctive case form typically marking a noun phrase which serves a possessive role within a larger noun phrase. [...] The genitive is unusual among case forms in that it does not normally express an argument or adjunct of a verb; nevertheless, in languages with well-developed case systems, it is usually integrated morphologically into the case system.

Trask 1993: 118

Possessive relations are usually induced from the context or the lexical semantics of the corresponding nominals [references omitted]. Thus, (1) [Russian kniga Lizy “book.nom.sg Liza.gen.sg’] could mean “the book that Liza owns” or “the book that “Liza wrote” or “the book that Liza photographed” etc., depending on the context [...].

Lander 2009: 581

A genitive case occurs in many different language families, such as Altaic, Caucasian, Dravidian, Indo-European, Semitic and Uralic (Blake 2001: 151). Cross-linguistically, the genitive is generally an ADNOMINAL case—denoting a rela-