Conclusions and Closing Remarks

8.1 Introduction

The purpose of this final chapter is to tie up loose ends, to set out the main conclusions stemming from the research described here and to evaluate the contribution they make to our knowledge of the development of the genitive case—in Dutch and German, and typologically within the Germanic languages—and to our knowledge of the relationship between deflection and codification. Additionally, possible directions for future research are suggested: some relate to the findings and the methodology of the present investigation; others represent desiderata for further study of topics which could only be addressed cursorily here without taking the investigation too far off topic, or which follow on from the outcomes of the work reported here.

8.2 The Findings of the Investigation

In both Dutch and German, the genitive case and the nature of the competition it faces have been studied closely for well over a century. Some of the findings of the present investigation simply confirm existing findings and conclusions; nevertheless, the conclusions here have been reached for the first time on the basis of a large and diverse empirical basis. Furthermore, several of the findings stemming from the dataset studied here actually contradict earlier assessments or offer a new slant on previous assumptions. It has been possible to go beyond existing work to shed new light on developments that had been insufficiently studied previously, and to identify usages which had previously gone unnoticed by linguistic research. First, in Section 8.2.1, empirical matters are dealt with; then, in Section 8.2.2, some suggestions are made as to further applications of the findings beyond the field in which the research was carried out. In Section 8.2.3 the findings are viewed in light of their contribution to diachronic construction grammar and to diachronic sociolinguistics.

8.2.1 Empirical Matters

Given the breadth and depth of empirically founded diachronic and synchronic research into the genitive case in English and Mainland Scandinavian, a research desideratum was to provide something similar for Dutch and German
in order to allow a typological comparison of the development of the genitive across the Germanic languages. The present work has filled some gaps in the research into the genitive in Dutch and German, both with regard to diachronic developments and to the synchronic situation in both languages. It was possible to add to knowledge—seemingly for the first time on the basis of quantified data—of the German possessive -s construction and a nascent change currently affecting that construction, and of the modern Dutch construction preserving a fragment of the old genitive case. The latter construction had been mentioned in grammars and research literature since the early 20th century without a detailed analysis of its characteristics and without recognition of the agreement relationship still holding within the genitive noun phrase.

To fulfil its aim of investigating the nature of the relationship between deflection and codification—the stage of standardisation in which the characteristics of the standard language are set out—this investigation focused on two languages in which codification began before deflection had fully eradicated morphological case marking, namely Dutch and German. The case focused on was the genitive because, throughout the history of both Dutch and German, that was the case that had most strongly felt the effects of deflection in the shape of competition from synonymous constructions, and pragmatic and structural restrictions on its use. A typological comparison among the Germanic languages indicates a correlation between standardisation and the survival of case morphology. Furthermore, the genitive case is not present in the speech of young children, being learned later; it is not part of the core grammar of German (Weerman & de Wit 1999: 1187). Such factors make the German case system—and, in particular, the genitive case—unsuited to the study of Universal Grammar principles (Weiß 2004: 663–664). The same can be said of the early modern Dutch case system and, especially so, of the adnominal genitive fragment that survives in modern Dutch. However, given this investigation's aim of assessing the interaction between codification and deflection, the standardised languages were a legitimate object of study.

The path taken by the genitive and its competitors in the pre-codification periods was studied mainly on the basis of existing research (with some primary research conducted into written German from about a century before the appearance of the first German grammar). These sources showed that the genitive case in Dutch and German had developed in a very similar way to its counterparts in English and Mainland Scandinavian; for instance, the roles of the genitive weakened in a similar order in all the languages, and the competing constructions were similar (if not wholly identical) in nature in all the languages. The principal difference between Dutch and German on the one hand, and English and Mainland Scandinavian on the other, is that