

Leipzig fourmille de typologues — Genitive objects in comparison*

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1. Genitive objects

This paper examines genitive objects in a range of familiar European languages, in particular German, English, Latin, French and Italian. Three initial examples are given in (1)-(3) (in each case, the genitive object is in boldface).

(1) French

*Claire fleurit le balcon **de géraniums**.*

'Claire plants the balcony with geraniums.'

(2) Latin (Lucilius 272)

*quarum et abundemus **rerum et quarum** indigeamus*

'of which things we have too many and of which we have too few'

(3) German

*Michael gedenkt **der gemeinsamen Jahre**.*

'Michael thinks of the years spent together.'

By *genitive object*, we mean an argument of the verb that is lexically specified as marked by a case or adposition (called "genitive") that has as an additional function that of the possessor in an adnominal possessive construction. We are not claiming that "genitive" is a universally available category, or that all these languages necessarily have "genitive markers" in the same sense of the word (cf. Haspelmath 2007). All we are saying is that it is possible to isolate comparable markers on the basis of the occurrence in one particular, semantically defined environment. Thus, we do not want to claim or imply that genitive markers are semantically uniform across languages. In fact, it seems quite clear that they are not, but for our current purposes this is irrelevant. All we are interested in here is the occurrence of such markers as verbal arguments. Genitive objects may be marked by a genitive adposition, as in French (*de*), Italian (*di*), and English (*of*), or they may be marked by a morphological case (the German Genitive, the Latin Genitive).

Of course, not all languages have genitive objects. Many languages cannot have them, because they do not use cases or adpositions in adnominal possessive constructions. Many languages do have genitive markers, but do not use them to mark verbal arguments. In fact, genitive objects seem to be quite rare in the world's languages, although they are commonly found in ancient Indo-European languages (Delbrück 1893:308-333).

In this paper, our modest aim is to compare genitive objects in Germanic (especially German and English) and Latin-Romance (especially Latin, French, and Italian), asking two main questions:

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(i) How far do the parallels between the genitive objects in these languages go?

(ii) Can we identify a semantic invariant of genitive objects, within languages and across languages?

It turns out that the parallels between the genitive objects in the five languages are quite striking, and we believe that it is possible to identify a semantic invariant that accounts for the bulk of the genitive objects in all of them. There are of course many lexical differences and idiosyncrasies, but behind these there is a regular pattern that is worth highlighting.

One final remark concerning the definition of "genitive object": In this paper we limit ourselves to verbal arguments whose genitive marking is strictly lexically determined by the governing verb. For example, the Latin verb *abundare* 'abound' requires a genitive object, and so does the German verb *gedenken*, see (2)-(3) above, regardless of the semantic class of the argument and the semantic-syntactic context. This means that we do not consider partitive genitives, which are widespread in Italian and especially in French, but which are determined by the semantics of the argument, not by the syntactic valence of the verb. We also do not consider cases like the Slavic genitive of negation, which has a relative in French (e.g. *Je n'ai pas de cheval*. 'I don't have a horse').¹

2. The semantic invariant of genitive objects: background theme

The central thesis of this paper is that in the languages considered, the genitive object can be seen as expressing a **background theme**, in a narrower or broader sense (cf. Michaelis 1993:335, who inspired this paper). *Theme* is here defined in the usual way as the role of an object that undergoes movement or is in a certain position. An argument is in the *background* if it is not construed as the primary figure (the subject) or the secondary figure (the direct object) (cf. Langacker 1991:ch. 8). "Background" is not meant here in the information-structural sense (contrasting with "focus"), but in a cognitive-semantic sense, contrasting with "figure".

The most straightforward case of a background theme can be seen in constructions which have been widely discussed in the context of the *locative alternation*. Consider the examples in (4)-(6).

(4) French

- a. *Robert a enfilé le fil de soie dans les perles.*
'lit. Robert strung the silk string into the beads.'
- b. *Robert a enfilé les perles d'un fil de soie.*
'Robert strung the beads on a silk string.'

(5) English

- a. *Grev cleared the dishes from the table.*
- b. *Grev cleared the table of the dishes.*

¹ A related semantically and syntactically determined alternation between genitive and accusative (relating to aspectuality and definiteness) is also found in older German, see Donhauser 1990 and Leiss 1990; the latter also cites Baldes 1882 and Kolvenbach 1973.

(6) German

- a. *Ascoli raubte Lausberg_{DAT} die Muße_{ACC}.*
'lit. Ascoli stole his leisure from Lausberg.'
- b. *Ascoli beraubte Lausberg_{ACC} der Muße_{GEN}.*
'Ascoli robbed Lausberg of his leisure.'

In such cases, there are two constructions that alternate (i.e. that occur with a single verb, as in (4), with a single verb stem, as in (6), or with a single verb meaning, as in (5)). In one construction (the (a) example), the theme is the secondary figure (and hence the direct object), while the recipient or source is in the background (and hence expressed as a prepositional phrase or dative argument). In the other construction (the (b) example), it is the recipient or source that is the direct object, while the theme is in the background. In such cases, the theme can be coded with a genitive marker.

We will call constructions of the (a) type **figure-theme constructions**, and constructions of the (b) type **background-theme constructions**. These two types of construction alternate not only in transitive clauses, but also in some intransitive clauses:

(7) French

- a. *Les mouches fourmillent dans le lac.* (figure-theme)
'Flies are swarming in the lake.'
- b. *Le lac fourmille de mouches.* (background-theme)
'The lake is swarming with flies.'

Background-theme constructions do not always code the theme with a genitive marker. In English, for example, the preposition *with* is often used, and Latin often uses its Ablative case:

(8) English (see also the translations of (1), (4b), (7b))

- a. *Tesnière supplied ideas to Fillmore.*
- b. *Tesnière supplied Fillmore with ideas.*

(9) Latin

- a. *Populus Ciceroni_{DAT} immortalitatem_{ACC} donavit.*
'The people gave immortality to Cicero.'
- b. *Populus Ciceronem_{ACC} immortalitate_{ABL} donavit.*
'The people endowed Cicero with immortality.'

However, we would like to suggest that genitive objects (almost) always express background themes. This claim may seem surprising in view of the wide variety of semantically diverse genitive objects in the five languages. We will see in the next section that it presupposes a broadening of our understanding of what a theme is.

In English, an important contrast among verbs that occur in the locative alternation is between (what we call here) **positive verbs** and **negative verbs**. The former (verbs of putting such as *supply*, *fill*, *load*, *spray*, *plant*) express a change of location resulting in the theme's presence, whereas the latter (verbs of removal such as *rob*, *clear*, *clean*) express a change of location resulting in the theme's absence. In English, only the latter have genitive theme objects in

the background-theme construction (see 5b). In French, however, this distinction is not morphosyntactically relevant: Background themes of positive verbs (cf. 4b) as well as background themes of negative verbs are coded with *de*:

(10) French

La révolution dépouilla les nobles de leurs titres.

'The revolution deprived the nobles of their titles.'

3. More on genitive objects with local verbs

In the class of intransitive local verbs, we have found only positive verbs, such as French *fourmiller* (see (7) above) and the equivalent German *wimmeln*:

(11) *Leipzig wimmelt von Typologen.*

'Leipzig is swarming with typologists.'

Note that *von*-objects in German also count as genitive objects, because the preposition *von* also codes adnominal possessors. German *wimmeln*, incidentally, does not occur in the figure-theme construction.

While the class of intransitive local verbs is quite small in the five languages, the corresponding transitive class is very rich in the Romance languages. A few French examples are given in (12) (from Kailuweit 2003, who cites Guillet & Leclère 1992).²

(12) a. *Claude a tapissé le mur de lin.*

'Claude papered the wall with linen.'

b. *Agnès a inséminé la vache de semence congelée.*

'Agnès inseminated the cow with frozen semen.'

c. *Gilbert a coiffé Stéphane d'un canotier.*

'lit. Gilbert donned Stéphane with a straw hat.'

In older Indo-European, it is mostly verbs of filling that can be used with a genitive theme, e.g. in Latin and older German (Middle High German *vüllen* 'fill', *settigen* 'saturate'). In addition to these, German has a few negative local verbs, such as *entheben* 'remove from', *entledigen* 'empty of'. In English, as we saw earlier, only negative verbs take an *of*-object. A selection of local verbs with genitive objects is given in Table 1.

² French also uses its genitive preposition *de* for the instrument with verbs of hitting:

(i) *Max frappa la table du poing.*

'Max hit the table with his fist.'

This is similar to the local verbs of putting in (12) in that the instrument moves (and is hence a kind of theme), while the patient (*la table*) is a sort of location. The construction in (i) alternates with a kind of figure-theme construction in which the instrument of hitting is the direct object (see Kailuweit 2003):

(ii) *Max frappa son bâton sur la table.*

'Max hit his stick on the table.'

Table 1. Local verbs with genitive objects

	intransitive	transitive	
	(positive)	positive	negative
German	<i>wimmeln von, strotzen von</i>	<i>füllen</i> (GEN old-fashioned)	<i>entheben, entledigen</i>
Latin	<i>scateo</i> (GEN/ ABL), <i>abundo</i>	<i>compleo, repleo, impleo</i> (GEN/ ABL)	
French	<i>fourmiller de, dégouliner de, résonner de, retentir de</i>	<i>remplir de, charger de, peindre de, peindre de, badigeonner de, barbouiller de, barioler de, enduire de, laquer de, ripoliner de, frotter de, frictionner de, placarder de, tapisser de, tendre de, injecter de, vaporiser de, arroser de, planter de, fleurir de, bourrer de, coincer de, fourrer de, boucher de, ensemercer de, parsemer de, semer de, saupoudrer de, joucher de, greffer de, coiffer de, infiltrer de, imprégner de, plaquer de</i>	<i>balayer de, purger de, purifier de</i>
Italian	<i>abbondare di</i>	<i>riempire di, circondare di, ungere de, aspergere di, caricare di, coprire di, affolare di, colmare di</i>	...
English			<i>clear of, clean of, drain of, empty of</i> (Levin's "clear verbs" (1993:124))

4. Extensions from the local domain

In addition to the local domain, three other semantic domains have verbal constructions that are evidently patterned on the local domain: the **possessive domain** (verbs of possession and change of possession), the **cognitive domain** (verbs of thinking, knowing and remembering), and the **emotional domain**. Such an extension of grammatical patterns from the local domain to more abstract semantic domains has long been observed by grammarians, and we believe that our localist interpretation of the phenomena needs no further justification here. Corresponding to the locatum role (L) in the local domain, we find the possessor role (P) in the possessive domain, the cognizer role (C) in the cognitive domain, and the emoter (E) role in the emotional domain. The other role is always called "theme" (T). Table 7 in the appendix gives an overview of all the different types of genitive objects that are discussed in this paper, highlighting the parallels between them.

The following subsections give examples from the three extended domains, first intransitive and then transitive. (In §5 and §6, we will also see examples of reflexive and subjectless verbs with genitive objects.) Within the two transitivity types, we first give positive and then negative examples. To show

the pervasive parallelism, we first give a related figure-theme construction before we give a background-theme construction with a genitive object.

4.1. The possessive domain

In intransitive figure-theme constructions, the theme is the subject and the possessor is an oblique argument:

- (13) a. French *Le métronome appartient à Lydie.*
 b. German *Das Metronom gehört Lydia_{DAT}.*
 'The metronome belongs to Lydia.'

The corresponding background-theme construction has a subject possessor and a genitive theme:

- (14) French *Lydie dispose d'un métronome.*
 'Lydie has a metronome.'

The above examples show positive possession verbs. Very similar behaviour is shown by negative possession verbs:

- (15) figure-theme
 a. German *Flavius_{DAT} fehlen neue Bücher_{NOM}.*
 b. Latin *Flavio_{DAT} absunt libri novi_{NOM}.*
 'Flavius lacks new books.'

- (16) background-theme
 a. German *Flavius_{NOM} entbehrt neuer Bücher_{GEN}.* (old-fashioned)
 b. Latin *Flavius_{NOM} indiget librorum novorum_{GEN}.*
 'Flavius lacks new books.'

In Italian, there is one verb (*mancare* 'lack') that shows both patterns:

- (17) a. (figure-theme) *I soldi mancano a Paolo.*
 'lit. The money is lacking to Paolo.'
 b. (background-theme) *Paolo manca di soldi.*
 'Paolo lacks money.'

A positive transitive verb showing an alternation is given in (18). Such examples are generally discussed as instances of the locative alternation.

- (18) French
 a. (figure-theme) *Annegret fournit des idées à Wolfgang.*
 'Annegret supplies ideas to Wolfgang.'
 b. (background-theme) *Annegret fournit Wolfgang d'idées.*
 'Annegret supplies Wolfgang with ideas.'

An example of a negative transitive possessive verb was given above in (6). English has a large number of such "verbs of possessional deprivation (*cheat* verbs) (Levin 1993:129-130)". Levin lists 49 verbs in the (non-alternating) class of verbs like *cheat*, *deprive*, *drain*, *rid*, *rob*, *strip*. A selection of possessive verbs with genitive objects is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Possessive verbs with genitive objects

	intransitive		transitive	
	positive	negative	positive	negative
German	<i>walten</i>	<i>ermangeln,</i> <i>bedürfen,</i> <i>entbehren,</i> <i>entraten</i> ³	<i>würdigen</i>	<i>entbinden (GEN/von),</i> <i>entheben, entledigen,</i> <i>berauben</i>
Latin		<i>indigeo, egeo,</i>		<i>privo, purgo, exuo</i>
French	<i>disposer de,</i> <i>abuser de</i>	<i>manquer de</i> (<i>avoir besoin de</i>)	<i>accoutrer de,</i> <i>honorer de,</i> <i>abreuver de,</i> <i>accabler de,</i> <i>accompagner de,</i> <i>abrutir de</i>	<i>absoudre de, délier de,</i> <i>accoucher de, priver de,</i> <i>proscrire de</i>
Italian	<i>disporre di,</i> <i>abusare di</i>	<i>mancare di,</i> <i>abbisognare di</i>	<i>degnare di,</i> <i>regalare di,</i> <i>sommergere di</i>	<i>spogliare di, rapinare</i> <i>di, privare di, scaricare</i> <i>di, sgombrare di/da,</i> <i>liberare di/da, (assolvere</i> <i>da)</i>
English				<i>cheat of, deprive of,</i> <i>drain of, rid of, rob of,</i> <i>strip of...</i>

4.2. The cognitive domain

In the cognitive domain, there are fewer verbs with genitive objects, but we find an interesting parallel with the local and the possessive domain: The cognizer can occur in the dative case (in the figure-theme construction), or it can occur as the subject or direct object (in the background-theme construction):

(19) figure-theme

- a. German *Flavius*_{DAT} *kommt die Mutter*_{NOM} *in den Sinn.*
- b. Latin *Flavio*_{DAT} *in mentem venit mater*_{NOM}
'Flavius thinks of his mother.' (lit. 'Mother comes to Flavius into mind.')

(20) background-theme

- a. German *Flavius*_{NOM} *gedenkt der Mutter*_{GEN}. (old-fashioned)
- b. Latin *Flavius*_{NOM} *meminit matris*_{GEN}. ('Flavius remembers his mother.')
- c. English *Flavius thinks of his mother.*

There are also occasional corresponding negative verbs:

³ The verbs of lacking are semantically close to another group of verbs in German and Latin which denote 'desiring', 'seeking', 'waiting' and similar concepts (e.g. German *warten* 'wait', *harren* 'wait', Latin *cupio* 'desire'). This is an old pattern inherited from the proto-language (Delbrück 1893:324-327), which may or may not be subsumable under the possessive category. Interestingly, there do not seem to exist parallels in the Romance languages.

(21) background-theme

- a. German *Flavius*_{NOM} *vergisst* *der Mutter*_{GEN} (old-fashioned)
 b. Latin *Flavius*_{NOM} *obliviscitur* *matris*_{GEN}
 'Flavius forgets his mother.'

(The corresponding figure-theme construction is found in German: *Dem Jungen*_{DAT} *entfällt* *das Gedicht*_{NOM} 'The boy forgets the poem', lit. 'The poem falls away to the boy.')

In the transitive domain, again we find the theme both as the figure (the direct object) and in the background (as the genitive object):

(22) figure-theme

- a. French *Martinet rappelle la solution à Lazard.*
 'Martinet reminds Lazard of the solution.'
 b. English *Firth explains the solution to Lyons.*

(23) background-theme

- a. French *Campbell avertit Nichols d'une erreur.*
 'Campbell makes Nichols aware of an error.'
 b. English *Chomsky informs the public of the new developments.*

The transitive cognitive verbs with a genitive object are all "positive". The only negative example that we have found that comes close to a genitive-object construction is English *talk somebody out of something*, which semantically is roughly the opposite of *convince somebody of something*, but has *out of* rather than the simple genitive *of*. A selection of cognitive verbs with genitive objects is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Cognitive verbs with genitive objects

	intransitive		transitive	
	positive	negative	positive	negative
German	<i>gedenken,</i> <i>innewerden,</i> <i>zürnen</i> (GEN old-fashioned), <i>staunen</i> (GEN old-fashioned)	<i>vergessen</i> (GEN old-fashioned)	<i>überzeugen von,</i> <i>informieren von</i>	
Latin	<i>memini</i>		<i>admoneo</i>	
French	<i>préjuger de</i>		<i>avertir de,</i> <i>prévenir de</i>	
Italian	<i>pensare di,</i> <i>sospettare di,</i> <i>diffidare di</i>		<i>convincere di,</i> <i>avvisare di,</i> <i>informare di</i>	
English	<i>think of</i>		<i>remind of, inform of, convince of, warn of, persuade of</i>	(talk out of)

In the European languages, a special productive subcategory of transitive cognitive verbs taking a genitive object is formed by legal terms:

(24)	Latin	German	French	Italian	English
	<i>accuso</i>	<i>zeihen, bezichtigen</i>	<i>accuser</i>	<i>accusare</i>	<i>accuse</i>
	<i>insimulo</i>	<i>anklagen</i>	<i>inculper</i>	<i>imputare</i>	
		<i>beschuldigen</i>	<i>incriminer</i>	<i>addebitare</i>	
		<i>verdächtigen</i>	<i>soupçonner</i>	<i>sospettare</i>	<i>suspect</i>
	<i>convinco</i>	<i>überführen</i>	<i>convaincre</i>	<i>convincere</i>	<i>convict</i>
	<i>absolvo</i>		<i>absoudre</i>	<i>assolvere</i>	<i>absolve</i>
	<i>damno</i>			<i>rimproverare</i>	
	<i>arcesso</i>				

In this lexical domain, too, an alternative figure-theme construction is sometimes found:

- (25) German
 (figure-theme) *Peter hat Paul_{DAT} Schlamperei_{ACC} vorgeworfen.*
 (background-theme) *Peter beschuldigt Paul_{ACC} der Schlamperei_{GEN}.*
 'Peter accuses Paul of sloppiness.'

4.3. The emotional domain

In the emotional domain, most of the examples are reflexive or subjectless and will be discussed below. However, there is an interesting alternation of a single (intransitive) verb etymon in Spanish and Portuguese:

- (26) Spanish: figure-theme
Los viajes gustan a Bernard.
 'Travels are pleasing to Bernard.'
- (27) Portuguese: background-theme
Bernard gosta das viagens.
 'Bernard likes travels.'

The only examples of genitive-object verbs in the five languages that we focus on here come from French, which has a number of verbs such as *piaffer de* 'be nervous about', *rafoller de* 'be crazy about'.

5. Reflexive verbs with genitive objects

In Latin, German, and the Romance languages (but not in English), there are many reflexive verbs taking genitive objects. By *reflexive verb*, we mean verbs with reflexive forms but with a noncompositional meaning. (Note that in Latin, the passive counts as "reflexive" in this context.) They are either reflexive deponents, i.e. verbs that only occur reflexively (e.g. German *sich schämen* 'be ashamed', French *se réjouir* 'be glad'), or idiomatic reflexive verbs, i.e. reflexive verbs whose meaning is not predictable from the meaning of the basic form and the reflexivity meaning (e.g. French *se servir* 'make use of', not compositionally 'serve oneself'). We will look at the various extended domains in turn, beginning with the possessive domain, because we have not found any reflexive verbs with genitive objects in the most basic domain, the local domain.

5.1. The possessive domain

A typical possessive reflexive verb with a genitive-object theme is given in (28).

- (28) Latin *Roma_{NOM} potitur Graeciae_{GEN}*
 German *Rom_{NOM} bemächtigt sich Griechenlands_{GEN}*
 French *Rome s'empare de Grèce.*
 Italian *Roma s'impadronisce della Grecia.*
 'Rome acquires Greece.'

Note that even though the verbs are all deponents, the reflexive element can be understood as having the possessor role, while the genitive object has the theme role. These sentences mean 'Rome (agent) makes itself the possessor of Greece (theme)'. Since the reflexive element occupies the direct-object slot, the theme must remain in the background and can only be in the genitive. Except for Latin, these languages also have a corresponding reflexive figure-theme construction, because the reflexive element can also have the dative-object slot: e.g. German *Rom nimmt sich_{DAT} Griechenland_{ACC}* 'Rome takes Greece (for herself)'. However, this construction is completely compositional and not particularly idiomatic.

In addition to positive examples like (29), we also find negative possessive verbs:

- (29) German *Der Graf entäußerte sich seines Vermögens.*
 'The earl got rid of his possessions.'
- (30) French *Le millionnaire s'est dessaisi de tout ce qu'il possédait.*
 'The millionaire gave up everything that he owned.'

Table 4. Reflexive possessive verbs with genitive objects

	positive	negative
German	<i>sich bemächtigen, sich annehmen, sich befeißigen, sich bedienen</i>	<i>sich begeben, sich entäußern, sich enthalten</i>
Latin	<i>potiri</i>	
French	<i>s'emparer de, se charger de, se servir de, s'acointer de</i>	<i>se dessaisir de, s'abstenir de, s'acquitter de</i>
Italian	<i>impadronirsi di, servirsi di, ingegnarsi di, studiarsi di, interessarsi di</i>	<i>spogliarsi di</i>

5.2. The cognitive domain

German and the Romance languages have a number of reflexive cognitive verbs taking a genitive object:

- (31) a. German *Plank erinnert sich Girards.* (old-fashioned)
 b. French *Plank se souvient de Girard.*
 c. Italian *Plank si ricorda di Girard.*
 'Plank remembers Girard.'

There are also a few negative cases. The Latin verb *oblivisci* 'forget', a deponent, was already mentioned above (see (21)). French has *se dédire de* 'recant, take back'. In Spanish, 'forget' is *olvidarse de*.

Table 5. Reflexive cognitive verbs with genitive objects

	positive	negative
German	<i>sich erinnern (GEN/an), sich entsinnen, sich vergewissern, sich rühmen</i>	
Latin	<i>reminiscor</i>	<i>obliviscor</i>
French	<i>se souvenir de, s'apercevoir de, s'assurer de, se vanter de, se prévaloir de 'sich brüsten, sich etwas einbilden'</i>	<i>se dédire de</i>
Italian	<i>ricordarsi di, accorgersi di, assicurarsi di, accertarsi di</i>	<i>dimenticarsi di, rammentarsi di</i>

5.3. The emotional domain

In the emotional domain, there are more reflexive verbs taking genitive objects than non-reflexive verbs. Some examples:

(32) French *Hagège se réjouit de la mer.*
'Hagège is glad about the sea.'

(33) German *Brugmanns Vorlesung erfreut sich großen Zuspruchs.*
'Brugmann's lecture has (lit. enjoys) a lot of success.'

Table 6. Reflexive emotional verbs with genitive objects⁴

German	<i>sich freuen (GEN/über), sich erfreuen, sich schämen (GEN/für), sich erbarmen (GEN/über), sich fürchten (GEN old-fashioned)</i>
Latin	<i>misereor, vereor</i>
French	<i>se réjouir de, se repentir de, s'accommoder de, se dépiter de, se préoccuper de</i>
Italian	<i>vergognarsi di, pentirsi di, impietosirsi di, preoccuparsi di, stupirsi di, meravigliarsi di, sorprendersi di, offendersi di, godersi di</i>

6. Subjectless verbs with genitive objects

Especially the older languages also have subjectless (or "impersonal") verbs taking a dative or accusative possessor/cognizer/emoter and a genitive theme. Why the theme cannot become the subject with these verbs is not clear, but it is interesting that it again shows up in the genitive, as in the intransitive, transitive, and reflexive cases, and that we find examples in the possessive domain, the cognitive domain, and the emotional domain.

In the possessive domain, an example from German is *brauchen* 'need' (there is no explicit possessor in this example):

⁴ The positive/negative distinction is not relevant to verbs of the emotional domain.

- (34) *Es braucht keines Beweises*_{GEN} (old-fashioned)
'No proof is needed.' (lit. 'It needs of no proof.')

In the cognitive domain, an example from older French is *souvenir* 'remember':

- (35) *Souvient au roi de sa mère.*
'The king remembers his mother.' (lit. 'It remembers to-the king of his mother.')

In the emotional domain, Latin has a couple of verbs such as *pudet* 'be ashamed', *taedet* 'be disgusted', *miseret* 'have pity', *paenitet* 'regret', *piget* 'be angry', e.g.

- (36) *...ut me non solum pigeat stultitiae meae, sed etiam pudeat* (C. dom. 29)
'that I am not only annoyed by, but also ashamed of my stupidity'

Also in older German and other Germanic languages, this type was well represented. The following examples from Middle Dutch are given by van den Berg (1986), who also discusses the gradual loss of this construction in the history of Dutch.

- | | | |
|---------|---|-------------------------------|
| (37) a. | <i>Hem</i> _{DAT} <i>vernooit des</i> _{GEN} | 'That annoys him.' |
| b. | <i>Mi</i> _{DAT} <i>wondert des</i> _{GEN} | 'That surprises me.' |
| c. | <i>Mi</i> _{DAT} <i>lust des</i> _{GEN} | 'I feel a desire for that.' |
| d. | <i>Mi</i> _{DAT} <i>dromet des</i> _{GEN} | 'I dream of that.' |
| e. | <i>Hem</i> _{DAT} <i>vergheet des</i> _{GEN} | 'He forgets that.' |
| f. | <i>Mi</i> _{DAT} <i>jamerde sijns</i> _{GEN} | 'I felt pity for him.' |
| g. | <i>Hem</i> _{DAT} <i>ontfarmte sijns kints</i> _{GEN} | 'He felt pity for his child.' |
| f. | <i>Hem</i> _{DAT} <i>berieu der mesdaet</i> _{GEN} | 'He regretted his misdeed.' |

7. Historical considerations

A detailed discussion of the diachronic questions concerning the origins and developments of genitive objects is beyond the scope of this article. It is clear that the similarities between the languages are primarily due not to universal tendencies, but to historical relatedness: due to common inheritance from Proto-Indo-European in the case of Latin and older Germanic (including German) (Delbrück 1893), and common inheritance from Proto-Romance in the case of French and Italian; but also due to contact-induced syntactic change, mostly through educated written usage: Latin has clearly been influenced by Greek (Leumann et al. 1965-1977), German has probably been influenced by Latin, and English has probably been influenced by French. It is also likely that French, Italian and English have been influenced by Latin, as speakers (and writers) equated the genitive preposition *de/di/of* with the Latin morphological genitive.

Almost all the Indo-European languages have shown a more or less strong tendency to lose their morphological genitive objects: We witness them disappear in Latin-Romance, Greek, Indo-Aryan, and most Germanic

languages (also modern German, which is clinging to some genitive objects only in rather formal styles).⁵ Only Slavic and Baltic languages have preserved them to this day. In the modern Romance languages, genitive objects are alive and well, using the preposition *de/di*. In fact, genitive objects are far more frequent in Romance than in Latin, where they had apparently already been lost to some extent (assuming that the oldest Greek and Sanskrit texts, which have a lot more genitive objects, reflect the situation in Proto-Indo-European).

As we saw earlier, the genitive is not the only way in which a theme in the background can be expressed. In Latin, the ablative is often an alternative (e.g. *scatere* 'swarm' and *privare* 'deprive' can take a genitive or an ablative object). In English, the background theme is typically expressed by *with* in the local domain, when the verb is not negative. In German, the genitive object is becoming (or has become) obsolete with many verbs, and it is being replaced by prepositions such as *mit* 'with', *an* 'at, on', *über* 'over'. (In some cases, it is also replaced by *von* 'off, of', but in this case it remains a genitive object according to our definition.)

8. Conclusions

We argued in this paper that genitive objects in a number of modern European languages, which have a seemingly diverse range of functions, can be seen as expressing a single, relatively abstract notion: that of a theme (an entity that moves or is in a certain position) which is a background element (i.e. not a primary or secondary figure). This is most easily visible in verbs expressing spatial configurations and changes of state, but parallel constructions are also found in three other domains: the possessive domain, the cognitive domain and the emotional domain. The more conservative languages Latin and German (using the Genitive case inherited from Proto-Indo-European), and the more innovative languages French, Italian and English (using a preposition with an originally ablative function) behave in surprisingly similar ways.

An issue that we have not addressed here is why genitive objects should have the function of background theme. What is the relation between the adnominal possessive function and background themes? This is a difficult question that we cannot answer here. Delbrück (1893) makes an attempt to link genitive objects to the partitive function of the genitive, but we do not find this attempt convincing; we do not see strong similarities between partitives and background themes. We should also not forget that the phenomenon we are studying here seems to be very rare in the world's languages, so we should perhaps not expect an explanation based on universal semantic similarities. On the other hand, the parallels between the various languages are so striking that they can hardly be accidental and the differences are sufficiently strong to preclude a simple explanation in terms of

⁵ In modern German, quite a few verbs occur with a genitive object only or primarily in certain fixed expressions, e.g. *jemanden keines Blickes würdigen* 'not look at someone' (lit. 'not honor someone of any glance'), *sich großer Beliebtheit erfreuen* 'be very popular' (lit. 'enjoy of great popularity'), *der Aufklärung harren* 'be in need of clarification' (lit. 'wait of clarification').

syntactic borrowing.⁶ We are thus left with a big open question, a challenge for future research.

Appendix: Table 7. An overview of verbal constructions with genitive objects

		intransitive	transitive	reflexive	subjectless
local	positive	<i>L fourmille de T</i> (‘L swarms with T’) (figure-theme:) <i>T fourmille dans L</i> (‘T swarms in L’)	<i>A insémine L de T</i> (‘A inseminates L with T’) (figure-theme:) <i>A insémine T dans L</i> (‘A inseminates T in L’)		<i>es wimmelt in L von T</i> (‘it swarms in L with T’)
	negative		<i>A emptyies L of T</i> (figure-theme:) <i>A emptyies T from L</i>		
possessive	positive	<i>P dispose de T</i> (‘P has T’) (figure-theme:) <i>T appartient à P</i> (‘T belongs to P’)	<i>A fournit P de T</i> (‘A supplies P with T’) (figure-theme:) <i>A fournit T à P</i> (‘A supplies T to P’)	<i>A/P s’empare de T</i> (‘A/P acquires T’) (figure-theme:) <i>A/P takes T for herself</i>	
	negative	<i>P manca di T</i> (‘P lacks T’) (figure-theme:) <i>T manca a P</i> (‘T is lacking to P’)	<i>A robs P of T</i> (figure-theme:) <i>A steals T from P</i>	<i>A/P s’abstient de T</i> (‘A/P abstains from T’) (figure-theme:) <i>A/P versagt sich_{dat} ^{det} T_{acc}</i> (‘A/P abstains from T’)	<i>es fehlt P T</i> (‘P lacks T’)

cognitive	positive	<i>C thinks of T</i> (figure-theme:) <i>T comes into C’s mind</i>	<i>A reminds C of T</i> (figure-theme:) <i>A rappelle T à C</i> (‘A remembers T to C’)	<i>A/C si ricorda di T</i> (‘A/C remembers T’) (figure-theme:) <i>A/C se rappelle T</i> (‘A/C remembers T’)	<i>souvient à C de T</i> (‘C remembers T’)
	negative	<i>C vergisst T_{gen}</i> (‘C forgets T’) (figure-theme:) <i>T entfällt C_{acc}</i> (‘T falls out of C’s mind’)	<i>(A talks C out of T)</i> (figure-theme:) <i>A redet C_{acc} T_{acc} aus</i>	<i>A/C obliviscitur T_{gen}</i> (‘A/C forgets T’)	<i>vergeet C T_{gen}</i> (‘C forgets T’)
emotional		<i>E gusta de T</i> (‘E likes T’) (figure-theme:) <i>T gusta a E</i> (‘T pleases E’)		<i>A/E erbarmt sich T_{gen}</i> (‘A/E has pity for T’)	<i>puDET E_{acc} T_{gen}</i> (‘E is ashamed of T’)

⁶ A reviewer asks whether this is clear, given the strong influence of the various European languages on each other (cf. §7). The main problem for a simple borrowing story is that Latin had very few genitive objects, while the Romance languages have a large number of them. Thus, at least Romance and Latin genitive objects must be independent of each other to a large extent.

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