The morpho-syntactic nature of the possessive -s in Late Middle and Early Modern English: from sermons to private correspondence.

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Workshop on Morpho-syntactic Categories and the Expression of Possession

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The evidence for morpho-syntactics

- **S-genitive types and their frequency**
- **Possessor types**
- **Genitive function**
- **The role of the s-genitive in the language system**
  - Variation with the of-genitive
  - Use varies according to genre (text type)
- **Typical use**
- **The possessive marker**
- **Use of the split genitive and group genitive**
- **Orthography and the his-genitive**

Notes on the evidence

The aim of this presentation is to show the types of evidence available for determining the morpho-syntactic nature of the possessive -s (the s-genitive) in the LME and EModE periods. The evidence varies with genre – in private letters the use of the possessive -s is most varied, while in certain sermons its use is almost fossilized (formulaic). In history writing it is somewhere in between.

The material was searched for all the s-genitive occurrences. These were categorized according to s-genitive type, possessor, possessive marker and whether the possessor NP was simple or complex (group or split genitive). This basic data was then further analyzed. Certain phrases were repeated to such an extent (and used in such a manner) that they were categorized as fixed expressions. The genitive function of the s-genitive was looked at to compare its use in this period with OE, ME and PDE. The role of the s-genitive in the language system was considered by comparing its use with the of-genitive. Based on the above information, the typical use of the s-genitive was characterized. Finally, the possessive marker (particularly the his-marker) and the use of group and split genitives were looked at in more detail.

The material

- **PPCME2, PPCEME, PCEEC**
- **Genre division**
  - Sermons
  - History writing
  - Private letters
- **Periods**
  - Period I (1420-1500)
  - Period II (1500-1570)
  - Period III (1570-1640)

Notes on the material

For material, I have used the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC), the *Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (PCEEC), the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English*, second edition (PPCME2) and the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern Englis*h (PPCEME). The CEEC and PCEEC corpora are described in the *Corpus Resource Database* (CoRD) (http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/CEEC/index.html) and the PPCEME2 and PPCEME corpora at the *Penn Parsed Corpora of Historical English Home Page* (http://www.ling.upenn.edu/hist-corpora/).

I chose the genres of letters, history writing and sermons to illustrate how the use of the s-genitive varies according to genre. In fact, it became apparent that *genre* (texts classified according to external criteria) does not properly account for the variation in the use of the s-genitive. In both sermons and history writing there are texts that have a markedly greater density of s-genitives and texts where s-genitives are infrequent. This difference is particularly apparent when the use of the s-genitive is compared with the of-genitive. It seems that *text type* (texts sharing similar linguistic features) might be a better indicator. This is something I am researching at the moment.

S-genitives in the material

	Word Count	Total	Normalized frequency (occurrences / 1,000 words)
Sermons	159,864	772	5.5
History	139,277	914	5.7
Letters	358,421	2338	6.5
Total	657,562	4024	6.1

S-genitive types

- **Specifying genitives**
  - the train's arrival
- **Classifying genitives**
  - a [king's daughter] = what kind of daughter
- **Gerundive nominalizations**
  - John's coming to London
- **Double genitives**
  - a friend of John's
- **Absolute genitives**
  - this car is John's
- **Elliptic genitives (Locative)**
  - John's car is new. So is Mike's.
  - at the Johnson's
- **Compounds**
  - hogshead

Fixed expressions

- **Should fixed expressions such as place names be treated separately?**
- **Productive use** – the linguistic factors affecting genitive use (such as topicality and genitive function) should function "normally"
- **Fixed Expressions** – fossilized and not affected by contemporary usage?
  - King's Bench
  - God's grace & the grace of god
  - St Augustine's rule & the rule of St. Augustine
  - the Lord's supper (& the supper of the Lord)
  - Lord's prayer
  - king's grace, king's highness, king's majesty
  - the year of the lord, the *x* year of King *Y*
  - St George's Day, the Feast of St. Dunstan
  - Paul's Chapterhouse, Gray's Inn

Notes on fixed expressions

Fixed expressions, such as place names, are somewhat problematic, particularly from a diachronic point of view. It is unclear to what extent they are affected by contemporary use. Theoretically, they are stored in some manner in the Lexicon. In a number of texts, certain fixed expressions have the s-less possessive marker (e.g., "Saynt Mary chyrche") which is not otherwise used in the texts. Also, in the analysis of the variation between s-genitives and of-genitives, the use of fixed expressions does not seem to be affected by linguistic factors such as topicality or genitive function, although this is difficult to verify. Additionally, certain expressions such as "the grace of God" show unusual patterning – some letters contain almost no use of the of-genitive (with animate possessors), with the exception of this expression. For these reasons, I feel fixed expressions should be analyzed separately.

However, it is sometimes difficult to identify fixed expressions. For example, I assumed that "the Lord's supper" could only occur with the s-genitive, but then I found an instance of "the supper of the Lord". Nonetheless, I would characterise this as a fixed expression.

S-genitive types in the material

	Total	Spec	Class	Gerund	Double genitive	Ell	Abs	Cmp	Loc	Fixed
Sermons	772	697	5	12	2	9	2	11	3	31
History	914	630	21	4	11	9	1	5	70	163
Letters	2338	1448	42	61	89	158	9	9	131	391

S-genitive types (occurrences / 10,000 words)

	Total	Spec	Class	Gerund	Double genitive	Ell	Abs	Cmp	Loc	Fixed
Sermons	55	50	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	2
History	57	39	1	0	1	1	0	0	4	10
Letters	65	40	1	2	2	4	0	0	4	11

Notes on S-genitive types

Spec (=specifying), Class (=classifying), Gerund, Double genitive, Ell (elliptic), Abs (=absolute), Cmp (=compound), Loc (=locative), Fixed (=fixed expressions).

Specifying genitives are by far the most common type. Fixed expressions are also fairly common, especially place names and day names. Locatives occur in history writing (where they are place names) and in letters (where they are place names or people's places). On the whole, letters show the most variation in use.

Possessor types

	Proper nouns	King	God	Common nouns	Collective nouns	Inanimates	Animals	Total
Sermons	94	54	362	214	0	46	2	772
History	344	240	39	267	1	12	11	914
Letters	1189	145	65	833	20	76	10	2338

Possessor types (percentage of total in each genre)

	Proper nouns	King	God	Common nouns	Collective nouns	Inanimates	Animals	Total
Sermons	12%	7%	47%	28%	0%	6%	0%	100%
History	38%	26%	4%	29%	0%	1%	1%	100%
Letters	51%	6%	3%	36%	1%	3%	0%	100%

Notes on possessor types

Proper nouns include titles such as "the Duke of Norfolk". "King" as possessor was so frequent in the text that I have picked it out as a separate category. Likewise with God – I have also included "Christ" and "our Lord" in this category. Collective nouns include entities such as "the council".

In sermons, the possessor is most frequently "God" (or "Christ" or "our Lord"). Of the common nouns, many are the generic "man" (e.g., "man's law"). History writing, naturally, contains many instances of "king" as possessor. Letters have many proper nouns, which is as expected since they often deal with the doings of people (known to both writer and recipient). Overall, genre, naturally, has a clear impact on possessor type.

Examples of collective, animal and inanimate possessors

- **Collective possessors (only in Period III letters)**
    - the counsailes letters (Chamberlain, part I, p. 139; Letters 1602)
- **Animal possessors (almost all classifying genitives)**
    - a [dogges coller] (Stow, p. 576.39; History 1580)
- **Inanimate possessors**
    - a yeares rent (Hayward, p. 30.7; History 1612)
    - the maner sake (More, p. 54.112; History 1513)
    - the worldes ende (Fisher, p. 314.14; Sermons 1521)

Genitive function (of specifying genitives & gerunds)

- **Kinship**
  - the kinges doughter of Spain (More, p. 60.181; History 1513)
- **Part-whole**
  - Crysten mennes handes (Paston, part I, p. 446; Letters 1472)
- **Possession**
  - poore mennes goodes (More, p. 31.111; History 1513)
- **Social**
  - the Kings souldiers (Stow, p. 555.88; History 1580)
- **Attributive**
  - saynt Payles authoryte (Fisher, p. 314.11; Sermons 1521)
- **Associative**
  - Kyng Henryes marryage (Hayward, p. 4.18; History 1612)
- **Subjective**
  - Blackeman's retorne (Bacon, part I, p. 113; Letters 1574)
- **Subject gerund**
  - Christes comming (Latimer, p. 36P.243; Sermons 1549)

Notes on genitive function

The specifying s-genitive occurs with the possessive, subjective and objective functions in this period. The objective function (e.g., "god's worship") is extremely rare. The s-genitive also occurs with the appositive function (e.g., "the king's majesty") – I have categorized these as fixed expressions.

Basically, in terms of genitive function, the use of the LME and EModE s-genitive is the same as in PDE (except that in PDE the use of inanimate possessors is more productive – here I have only looked at the genitive function with human possessors). With the exception of these functions, the of-genitive has replaced the OE/ME inflectional genitive.

Specifying genitives & variation with the of-genitive

- **Specifying genitives are the most frequent type of s-genitive**
- **Most specifying genitives can be replaced by the of-genitive**
    the king's daughter
    the daughter of the king
- **Historically the of-genitive replaced the s-genitive in many linguistic contexts**
- **The study of genitive variation gives an indication of the synchronic role of the s-genitive within the language**
- **There are a number of problems with the diachronic study**
    - Quality and availability of material
    - Negative evidence – lack of native speaker intuition
    - Where to draw the line in what can be replaced by the other construction

Notes on genitive variation

I have made a study on the variation between the s-genitive and the of-genitive in LME and EModE sermons, history writing and private letters, which I have submitted for publication (the decision on publication has not been made yet). Here I will briefly show the basic finding of the study, which is that there does not seem to be significant change over time. However, the differences between genres are significant. This suggests that in terms of the role of the s-genitive in the language system (its overall function) the same analysis can be applied to the entire period. Additionally, it seems that mostly the s-genitive in this period had the same role in the language as it does in PDE – although this statement needs to be verified by further study.

The figures and charts below include all the specifying s-genitive and of-genitive occurrences that can be seen as interchangeable. Subject gerunds are included. Inanimate, animal and collective possessors, fixed expressions, and certain special uses of the s-genitive are excluded.

To enable a better comparison of the genres and maintain the balance diachronically, the selection of occurrences is based on quota sampling, i.e., the first 300 tokens were selected from each genre within each period. Thus each genre and period has, in total, 900 tokens. (The numbers 1500 and 1200 in the total row are a coincidence).

Genitive constructions in the three periods

Collection	Word count	S-genitive		Of-genitive		Total genitives	Normalized frequency of total genitive constructions
		N	%	N	%	N	
Period I	141,672	498	55 %	402	45 %	900	6.4
Period II	137,644	542	60 %	358	40 %	900	6.5
Period III	121,215	460	51 %	440	49 %	900	7.4
Total	400,531	1500	56 %	1200	44 %	2700	6.7

Genitive constructions in the genres

Collection	Word count	S-genitive		Of-genitive		Total genitives	Normalized frequency of total genitive constructions
		N	%	N	%	N	
Letters	200,583	743	83%	157	17%	900	4.5
History	114,557	424	47 %	476	53 %	900	7.9
Sermons	85,391	333	37 %	567	63 %	900	10.5

Genitive variation 1420 - 1640
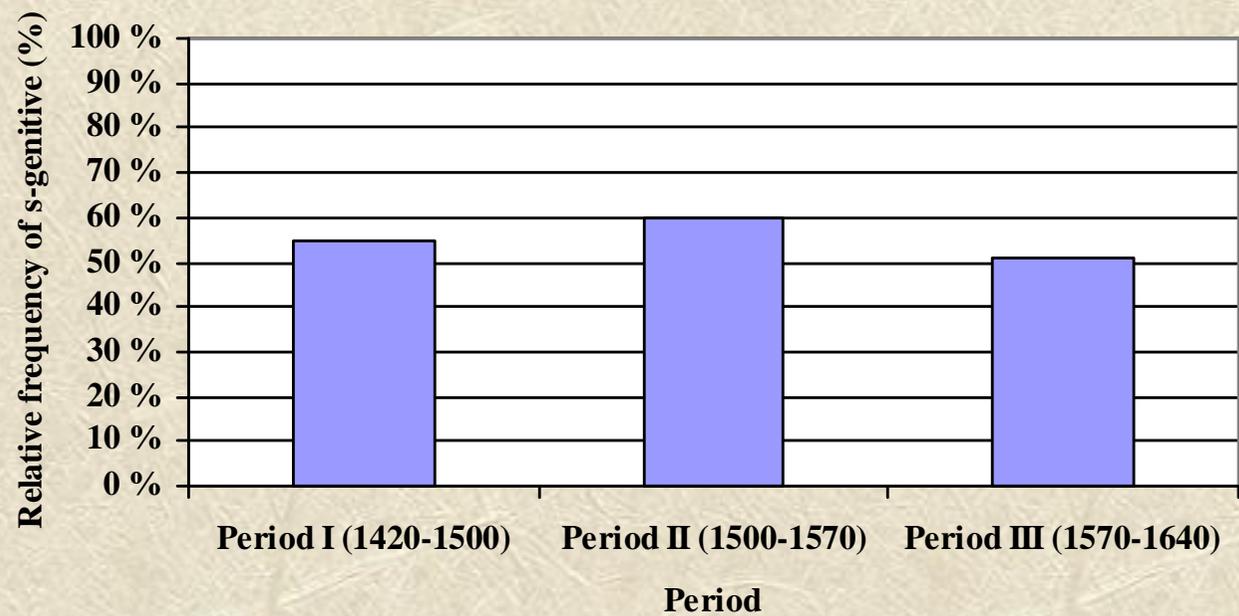
Genitive variation in letters, history writing and sermons
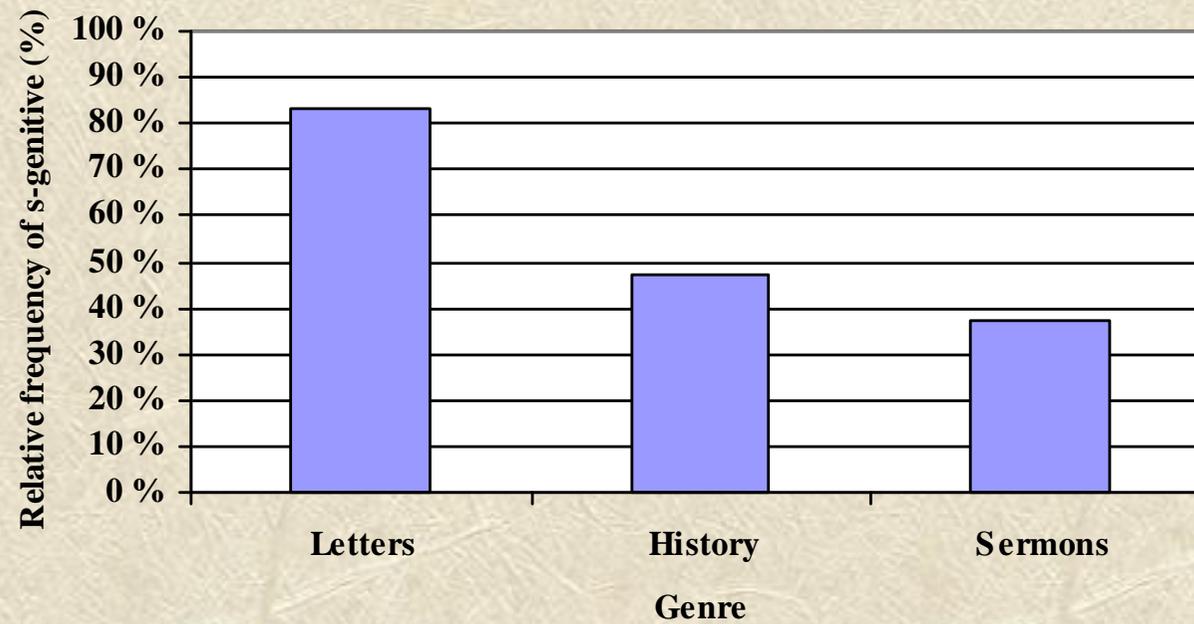
Genre or text type

Text	Relative s-genitive frequency (%)	Normalized frequency
Period II History		
Fabyan	39%	8.7
More	73%	8.6
Period III History		
Hayward	25%	7.6
Stow	53%	7.0
Period II Sermons		
Fisher	11%	8.0
Latimer	62%	12.4
Period III Sermons		
Hooker	15%	12.8
Smith	53%	8.4

Notes on genre or text type

The previous table shows the texts used in the corpus analysis for history writing and sermons in periods II and III and the s-genitive frequency relative to the of-genitive. When the original Helsinki Corpus was compiled, the decision was made to chose texts showing a wide range of characteristics for each genre where possible, for the Early Modern period. As can be seen in this table, these texts also differ significantly in terms of genitive variation. Particularly in sermons the reason for this variation is apparent – the texts with more relative s-genitive use are clearly more colloquial in tone.

This raises a number of problems. First, it questions the validity of the findings in the charts shown above. Second, it shows that great care must be taken in the selection of the material for diachronic continuity – this is a problem since there is only so much material in convenient form for quantificational analysis (electronic, tagged and parsed). Third, selection of material has a direct impact on the analysis of the s-genitive, both in terms of use and morpho-syntactic nature. Fourth, this raises the question of what is language change – and what material can be used to show language change. Overall, I would say that for present-day linguistic theory, private letters are the best source, since they are quite close to informal, authentic and idiomatic language. However, having a range of genres is useful for comparison, and to better characterize the use of the s-genitive in different environments. More research is needed.

Typical use of the s-genitive

- **Sermons**
  - **Short possessor, often *God* or *man***
  - **No group or split genitives in this material**
  - **Often non-referential, as in**
    - man's law
- **History writing**
  - **Usually short possessor, often *King***
  - **Group and split genitives with titles; complex possessors in one text**
  - **Referential within text (more or less narrative)**
- **Letters**
  - **Usually short possessor, often name of a person**
  - **Group and split genitives with titles**
  - **Referential outside of text (similar to informal speech in that frequent reference is made to people known to both sender and recipient without needing to be introduced first in text)**

Morpho-syntactic variation: inflection-like and/or clitic-like?

- **Types of evidence**
  - Split genitive and group genitive

    <u>Kyng Harry the v ys</u> sone (Gregory, p. 165.881; History 1475)

  - S-less genitive (0-inflection?) – problematic

    <u>the Erle of Sowthefolke</u> brothyr (Gregory, p. 164.855; History 1475)

    <u>Doctore Aleyn</u> danger (Paston, part I, p. 441; Letters, 1471)

    <u>þe Duke of Norffolk</u> concelle (Paston, part I, p. 442; Letters, 1471)

  - More variety in group genitive possessors in period III letters

    <u>his mother in lawes</u> daughter (Chamberlain, part I, p.139; Letters, 1602)

  - Longer simple possessors in period III private letters

Two types of possessive 's constructions?

- **Inflection-like genitive (determiner, adjective or pronoun?)**
  - short (almost always 1-3 words long), animate, human possessor in a wide range of possessive relations
  - possessive marker is "-s" with a range of orthographic variants
  - possessive marker can also be "-0"
  - possessive marker always attaches to head noun
  - hypothesis: functional continuity from OE prenominal genitive
- **Clitic-like determiner**
  - evidence: the group genitive
  - possessive marker same as in the inflection-like genitive
  - arose in the late 14C
  - rarely used (2% - 87/4024 occurrences)
  - possessor is almost always a title ending in a proper noun (and always a fixed phrase)
  - occurs almost exclusively in kinship and ownership relations

Notes on morpho-syntactic variation

From the diachronic point of view, it seems to make sense to divide the possessive -s construction into two types. The affixal, inflection-like construction is by far the most common, and seems to show continuity in use back to the OE prenominal inflectional genitive, which often had a human possessor in a possessive or subjective relation. The reanalysis and loss of the case system in the ME period did, of course, impact on its morpho-syntactic nature, but does not seem to have affected its primary function.

The clitic-like construction seems to be an extension of the basic form, enabled (or forced) by the changes in the language system. The evidence for its existence is the group genitive. It arose in the late 14C. In my material the use of the group genitive is rare, and only used with fixed phrases such as titles, which are similar to proper nouns and have high topicality. Additionally, it is only used with prototypical genitive functions such as kinship and ownership. Thus its use seems limited to the most prototypical of possessive 's use – high topicality possessor in a prototypical possessive relation. This suggests that there are certain processing difficulties with this construction, possibly to do with its morpho-syntactics.

Possessive marker

	Total	S-marker	S-less	ys/is/his/her	Group	Split
Sermons I	492	475	14	1	1	1
Sermons II	169	168	1			
Sermons III	111	109	2			
History I	573	395	92	58	16	37
History II	223	215	1		3	4
History III	118	112	1		4	1
Letters I	458	390	21	34	17	5
Letters II	395	395				
Letters III	1485	1351	32	58	46	3

Notes on the possessive marker

The possessive marker is mostly the overt "-s", which appears in a number of orthographic forms (see below).

The s-less marker mostly disappears from the evidence by the later 15C. In the 15C it mostly appears with proper nouns and kinship terms ending in "-r", especially father and brother. It is also common with "lady" and "Mary". A number of letter writers continue to use it in the 16C.

The separated marker is "ys" or "is" in the 15C. In this period it seems to be an orthographic variant that can be written together or separate from the noun it attaches to. There is no obvious regularity in its use, and the impression is that it was used for a number of reasons – sometimes for clarity, for example with foreign names, sometimes for emphasis, sometimes maybe for a pause and to get more ink. In the 16C it was "his", in my material.

The group and split genitives could appear with all the markers (overt "-s", s-less and separate). The use of the split genitive mostly disappears after the 15C.

The numbers on the possessive marker should be treated with caution, since there is uncertainty with how some texts in the corpora were transcribed. And due to varying editorial conventions.

Long possessors (group and split genitives)

⌗ **S-genitive rarely used with long possessors, except with titles**

as for the matter of <u>my Lord of Canterbery ys</u> cortte

(Cely, p. 141; William Maryon, 1482)

sent by <u>John the Abottys</u> man <u>of Seynt Benet</u>.

(Paston, part I, p. 584 (John III Paston, 1472?)

⌗ **However, long & complex possessors are possible both in PDE and in LME**

has allayed <u>people's</u> fears <u>who've been used for those</u>

<u>residential home agreements</u>

(quoted in Denison et al 2008: 6)

evyn strayght unto <u>a marchaunte</u> ys place <u>i-namyd Phylyppe</u>

<u>Malpas of London</u>

(Gregory, p.191.1463; History 1475)

Orthography: the Cely letters
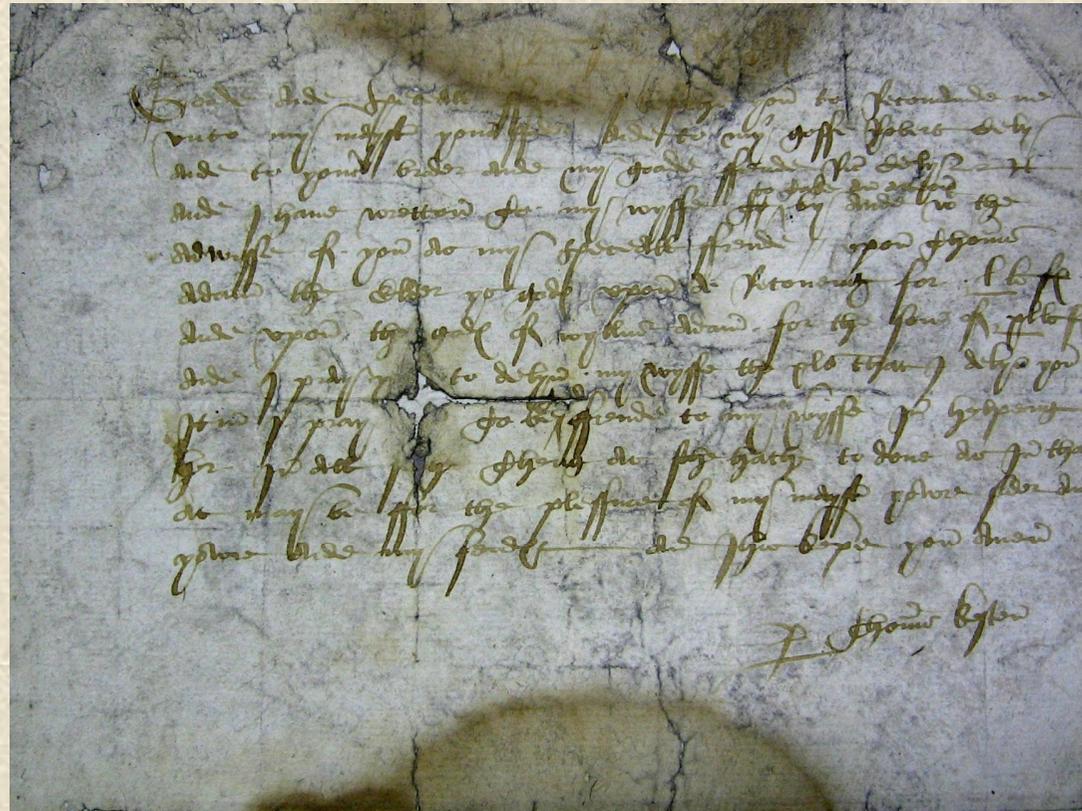
Thomas Kesten to George Cely, 1476 (The National Archives)

Pictures © Samuli Kaislaniemi (University of Helsinki)

Notes on orthography

The following slides on orthography show three forms of the possessive -s marker (word final -s) in a number of the Cely letters. The third slide shows examples of the separated possessive marker. The impression is that writing it together or separate was optional.

I have included these images on the orthography to give an indication of how the possessive -s appeared in writing. I intend to look at the orthography in more detail.

Possessive 's markers (word-final "-s")

be god*es* grace (John Weston to George Cely, 1481)
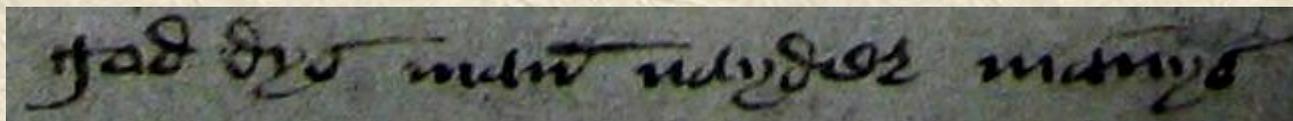
god dy*s* man nayder man*ys* (William Maryon to George Cely, 1476)
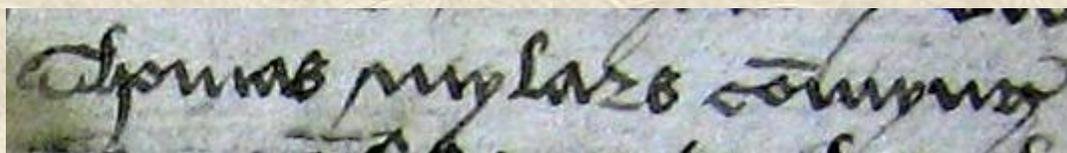
thomas mylar*s* comyng (Richard Cely, Jr to George Cely, 1476)

Possessive 's markers: George Cely
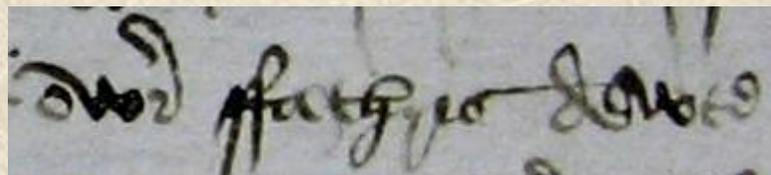
owr ffathy<u>rs</u> dewte (George Cely to Richard Cely, Jr., 1476)
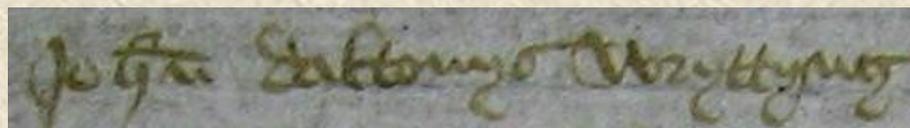
John dalton<u>ys</u> wryttyng (George Cely to Richard Cely, Sr., 1478)

Separated possessive -s markers
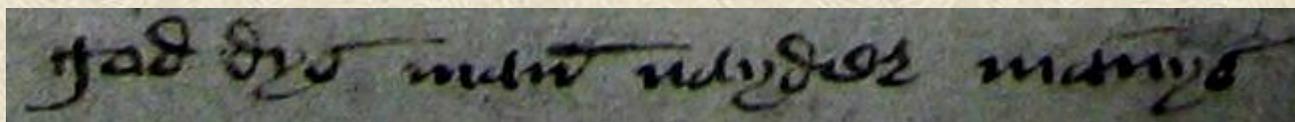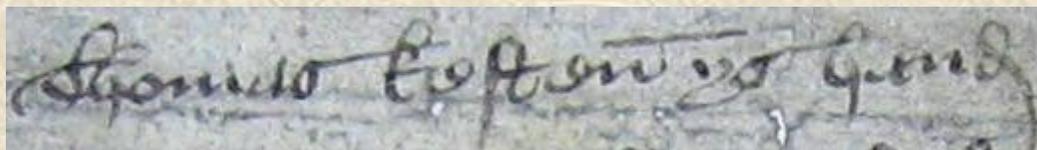
Thomas kesten <u>ys</u> hand (William Maryon to George Cely, 1476)
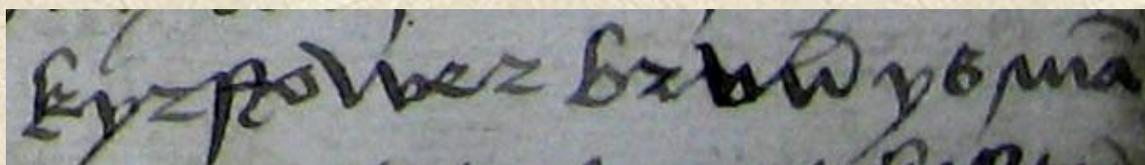
kyrstower brvn <u>ys</u> m*an* (Richard Cely, Jr. to George Cely, 1476)
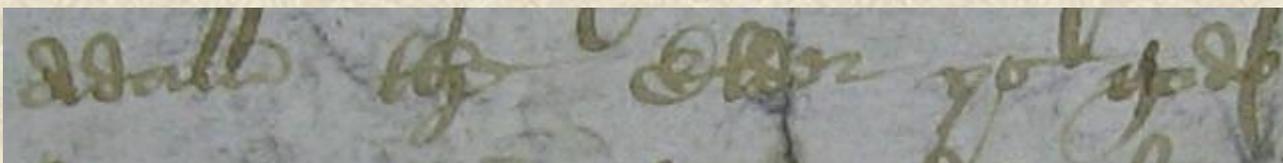
Adam the Elder <u>ys</u> god*es* (Thomas Kesten to George Cely, 1476)

His-genitive

- **Orthographic variant in LME**

  old Henley ys wyddowe

  Henley moder

  of old Henleys wyddows

  > All in same letter, and near each other (Cely, p.214; 1484)

- **Later a stylistic marker, and with proper nouns**

  God his lawes (Bacon, part I, p. 232; 1576)

  Sir Thomas his weakenes (Chamberlain, part I, p. 84; 1599)

- **Example of agreement (1 in this material)**

  Rebecca hir father (Bacon, part I, p. 149; 1575)

Conclusion

- **S-genitive types**
  - By LME all the s-genitive types extant today were in use
- **Genitive variation**
  - The role of the s-genitive mostly stable from LME onwards (?)
  - Variation in use according to text type
- **Inflection, affix or clitic?**
  - The evidence is mixed
  - Two types?
    - Inflection-like genitive
    - Clitic-like determiner
- **His-genitive was an orthographic variant in LME**

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