

De dochter doet een powernap

Definite article possessives with kinship terms in Dutch

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While kinship relations in Dutch are usually introduced by a possessive determiner, Twitter users have recently been observed to use a definite article in that position. To learn more about the characteristics of this construction, we performed an exploratory investigation of the definite article possession construction with Dutch kinship terms on Twitter. We analysed 100 tweets for 24 kinship terms each, and annotated for the type of pre-nominal modifier used. Results show that the phenomenon is far from peripheral, as 13.2% of all selected tweets featured a definite article. The construction was most frequent with descending and horizontal relationship terms, and with improper kin terms (i.e. terms with a non-kin meaning at least as prominent as kinship use; Dahl & Koptsjevskaja-Tamm 2001: 202). These findings were explained by pointing to redundancy and the comical effect of distancing the construction creates.

Keywords: Dutch, possession, definite articles, Twitter, corpus linguistics

1. Introduction

Kinship terms, i.e. terms that refer to relatives and indicate how they are related, are a fundamental aspect of human language. Many aspects of this phenomenon are widely researched (for an overview see McConvell 2013). However, an aspect of kinship terms that has received relatively little attention is the cross-linguistic grammar of kinship terminology (though importantly see Dahl & Koptsjevskaja-Tamm 2001). The current paper contributes to this linguistic area by exploring a grammatical kinship construction in Dutch.

In modern Standard Dutch, kinship terms are usually introduced by a possessive determiner (Audring 2020a), as in (1).¹

- (1) *Mijn dochter is intens gelukkig momenteel.*
 my daughter is intense happy currently
 'My daughter is extremely happy right now.'

Following Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm's (2001:201–202) terminology,² every kinship relation consists of an anchor and a referent. In (1), the author is the anchor (expressed through the first person singular possessive *mijn* 'my') and *dochter* 'daughter' the referent. An anchor can be explicit, as in (1), or implicit, as in the sentence 'Where is daddy?' (Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001:203). Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm argue that in such proper name-like uses of kin terms, expression of the anchor is redundant, because the term has a unique referent in the context. Kinship terms without a determiner also occur in telegram-style tweets like (2), in which the anchor is implicit, but easily inferable from the context.

- (2) *Dochter heeft haar telefoon aan hem gegeven.*
 daughter has her phone to him given
 'Daughter has given her phone to him.'

Recently, however, a new construction has been observed to occur in Dutch. Although occurring in other genres too, it seems to be particularly prevalent on social media platform Twitter. Examples show not only an implicit anchor, but also the use of definite article *de* 'the' to premodify the kinship term, as in (3), (4) and (5).

- (3) *Terwijl de dochter even een powernap doet, kijk ik de eerste aflevering.*
 while the daughter for.a.bit a powernap does, watch I the first episode
 'While the daughter takes a power nap, I watch the first episode.'
- (4) *Vandaag met de peuter door de #corona teststraat.*
 today with the toddler through the TAG.CORONA testing.street
 'To the COVID-19 testing street today with the toddler.'
- (5) *De verkering riep net: hij moet dood!*
 the relationship shouted just: he must die
 'The relationship just shouted: he has to die!'

1. All example tweets come from our corpus (available at <https://doi.org/10.24416/UU01-AR6LLU>). The parameters and collection process of this corpus are explained in §3 below.

2. Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2001) mostly employ traditional kinship classification terminology, but add new distinctions, e.g. the one between proper and improper kin terms (see §2.2). Because that distinction is especially relevant for our investigation, we adopt their terminology throughout this paper.

While this construction is not ungrammatical, it is unusual, as exemplified by the fact that it does not appear in leading grammars of Dutch (e.g. Audring 2020a; Haeseryn et al. 2019). At least two kinship terms, *man* ‘husband’ and *vrouwtje* ‘wifey’, are known to be used in a similar construction with a definite article instead of a possessive determiner since at least the early 20th century (e.g. see van Veen 1929), as in (6).

- (6) *‘Hoe staan de zaken?’*
‘Best, merci’, antwoordde Daan koeltjes.
‘En met het vrouwtje? (...)’
 “How are things?” “Fine, thanks”, answered Daan coolly. “And with the misses?”
 (van Veen 1929, p. 73)

Still, the construction seems to have taken on a new life recently, as shown by metalinguistic commentary appearing about its use (see Leufkens & Van der Meulen (2018); Van der Meulen & Leufkens (2018), or the tweet in (7) below).

- (7) *Jongens, columnisten, echt! Het helpt niet om ‘#devriendin’ te schrijven als je ‘mijn vriendin’ bedoelt. Of ‘#deman’ voor ‘mijn man’. Het is alleen héél erg hinderlijk. Verzin iets anders, of beter nog: bedenk een echt onderwerp.*
 ‘Guys, columnists, really! It does not help to write ‘#thegirlfriend’ if you mean ‘my girlfriend’. Or ‘#thehusband’ for ‘my husband’. It is just very annoying. Think of something else, or even better: think of a real subject.’

Such remarks imply that this construction has become more salient recently. However, not much is yet clear about its frequency and characteristics; e.g. limitations to which kinship terms can take it. In the current paper, we explore the Dutch definite article kinship construction by investigating its frequency in a corpus of systematically collected tweets, analysing its occurrence per term, and studying its user characteristics.

After providing background on similar grammatical phenomena in § 2, we discuss kinship terms in Dutch and the methodology and data used in our exploratory investigation in § 3. The results are presented in § 4, and interpreted and discussed in § 5. Section 6 summarizes our main conclusions.

2. Background

2.1 Similarities to other constructions in Dutch

In Standard Dutch, kinship terms are usually accompanied by an explicit possessor, which can be a pre-nominal (e.g. *mijn vader* ‘my father’) or a post-nominal modifier (e.g. *de broer van de buurman* ‘the brother of my neighbour’). The con-

struction under investigation diverges from this in two ways. First, the possessor (or anchor) is implicit, even though there are multiple potential candidates for anchorship, leading to potential ambiguity. For example, in (3), it is not clear from the sentence whose daughter is referred to. Second, a definite article is used while there is no uniquely identifiable referent. Normally, a definite article requires the presence of such a unique referent to be felicitous (Audring 2020b), but in (3) there may be multiple daughters that could serve as referents – the context does not make this clear. Despite the differences between this construction and the common expression in Standard Dutch, there are parallels with other grammatical phenomena in Dutch.

First, the construction is strongly reminiscent of *external possession* (Payne & Barshi 1999), a grammatical phenomenon involving the expression of a possessor as an argument of the verb in a constituent separate from the possessed item. The possessee is typically (but not necessarily, Scholten 2018: 10) premodified by a definite article, as in (8):

- (8) *Zij tikte hem op de vingers* (Scholten 2018: 5)
 she tapped him on the fingers
 ‘She rapped him on the knuckles.’ Lit. ‘She tapped him on the fingers.’

External possession in Standard Dutch is found in idioms, like (8), but also as a regular possessive construction in non-standard varieties of Dutch (Scholten 2018). An interesting parallel with the construction under investigation is that external possession typically occurs with possessed items relatively high on the inalienability hierarchy, such as body parts and kinship terms (Payne & Barshi 1999: 14). Broekhuis & Den Dikken (2020) show that there are other contexts in Dutch in which a definite determiner is used for the expression of inalienable possession. However, a difference between external possession and the construction investigated here is that the Twitter users construction seems limited to kin terms; we have not seen it used with body parts. This is all the more remarkable since in languages closely related to Dutch, e.g. German, external possession is restricted to body parts (e.g. Lee-Schoenfeld 2016). Moreover, with external possession, the possessor is still explicitly expressed in the utterance, just not in the same phrase as the possessee noun. In the construction studied here, the possessor can be left out of the tweet entirely.

The fact that the identity of the possessor is usually inferable from context helps explain why it can sometimes be left implicit. For example, in (3), it is clear that the author writes about their own daughter. This implicit but contextually present referent is also found in *topic drop*. Although in Dutch subjects are expressed obligatorily, if the subject referent is contextually identifiable, as in (9),

the subject argument ‘Jan’ can be omitted in the answer sentence. That is because the referent is identifiable from the context, just like the anchor in tweets like (3).

- (9) *Waar is Jan? (Die) heb ik weggestuurd.* (Broekhuis & Corver 2020)
 where is Jan (that) have I sent.away
 ‘Where is Jan? I have sent him away.’

Another relevant phenomenon attested in Standard Dutch is *weak definites*. Normally, a definite article is used when the referent of a noun is uniquely identifiable (Audring 2020b). Weak definites are articles that are felicitous, even though there is no such uniquely identifiable referent. For example, in ‘I read the newspaper every day’, the definite article is felicitously used, even though the noun could refer to multiple newspapers (Aguilar-Guevara et al. 2014: 3). The construction under investigation appears to involve a non-uniquely referring definite article as well: e.g. in (3), the author refers to ‘the daughter’, but it is not clear from either the tweet or its context that there is a unique daughter.³

In comparing the twitter construction to three similar constructions in Dutch, we have discussed some of its key syntactic characteristics: the use of an apparently non-uniquely referring definite article instead of a possessive determiner, and the implicitness of the anchor referent. In the next section, we discuss the compilation and investigation of our data.

3. Data and method

3.1 Dutch kinship terms

In Table 1, we provide a non-exhaustive overview of Dutch kinship terms,⁴ classified according to Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm’s (2001) taxonomy. While more recent and elaborate taxonomies of kinship terminology exist (e.g. Read 2013), we

3. An anonymous reviewer points out that both with weak definites and the kinship construction, the condition of unique identifiability can be met, if we assume that reference is not made to a unique object referent but to a more abstract type. This matter falls outside the scope of this paper, but we refer the interested reader to Le Bruyn (2014) for a thorough analysis of the semantics of definite articles in inalienable possessive constructions.

4. An exhaustive list does to our knowledge not exist, and would probably be impossible to compile anyway, since many non-kin terms can be used as such in the right context (see the discussion of improper kin terms below). However, we believe Table 1 provides at least the core of the Dutch kinship vocabulary. This list started with the well-known Dutch kinship terms, e.g. *vader* ‘father’, and was complemented with other terms that were used on Twitter and in daily life.

opted for this classification because of its suitability for the study of kinship grammar. First, we distinguish between different categories according to the directionality of the term in relation to the anchor. Ascending kinship terms involve family members from a generation that precedes the anchor, horizontal terms are from the same generation and may involve either family members or romantic partnerships, and descending kinship terms involve younger generations (Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001: 22).

Table 1. Overview of Dutch kinship terms with improper kin terms underlined and corpus terms **boldfaced**

Direction	Male referent	Female referent	Neutral referent
Ascending	<i>Vader</i> 'father', <i>papa</i> 'daddy', <i>pap, pa</i> 'dad', <i>grootvader</i> 'grandfather', <i>opa</i> 'grandpa', (<i>bet</i>) <i>overgrootvader</i> '(great) great-grandfather', <i>oom</i> 'uncle', <i>ouwe</i> 'old man'	<i>Moeder</i> 'mother', <i>mama</i> 'mommy', <i>mam, ma</i> 'mom', <i>grootmoeder</i> 'grandmother', <i>oma</i> 'grandma', (<i>bet</i>) <i>overgrootmoeder</i> '(great) great- grandmother', <i>tante</i> 'aunt'	<i>Ouder(s)</i> 'parent(s)', <i>grootouder(s)</i> 'grandparent(s)', (<i>bet</i>) <i>overgrootouder(s)</i> '(great) great- grandparent(s)', <i>X-</i> <i>jarige</i> 'X-year-old'
Horizontal	<i>Broer</i> 'brother', <i>neef</i> 'cousin', <i>neefje</i> 'nephew' <i>Man</i> 'man', <i>echtgenoot</i> 'husband', <i>mannelijke</i> 'male', <i>vent</i> 'bloke', <i>hubbie</i> 'husband', <i>vriend</i> 'friend', <i>vriendje</i> 'boyfriend', <i>levensgezel</i> 'life companion', <i>huisgenoot</i> 'roommate'	<i>Zus</i> 'sister', <i>nicht, nichtje</i> 'niece' <i>Vrouw</i> 'woman', <i>echtgenote</i> 'wife', <i>vrouwelijke</i> 'wifely', <i>vriendin</i> 'friend', <i>vriendinnetje</i> 'girlfriend', <i>levensgezellin</i> 'life companion', <i>huisgenote</i> 'roommate', <i>dinnetje</i> 'friend'	<i>X-jarige</i> <i>Eega</i> 'spouse', <i>verloofde</i> 'fiancé', <i>geliefde</i> 'lover', <i>partner</i> 'partner', <i>lief</i> 'love', <i>verkering</i> 'relationship'
Descending	<i>Zoon</i> 'son', <i>jongen</i> 'boy', <i>neef, neefje, kleinzoon</i> 'grandson', <i>bonuszoon</i> 'bonus son'	<i>Dochter</i> 'daughter', <i>meisje</i> 'girl', <i>nicht, nichtje,</i> <i>kleindochter</i> 'granddaughter', <i>bonusdochter</i> 'bonus daughter'	<i>Kind</i> 'child', <i>baby</i> 'baby', <i>peuter, kleuter</i> 'toddler', <i>puber</i> 'adolescent', <i>X-jarige</i> , (<i>achter</i>) <i>kleinkind</i> '(great-)grandchild', <i>gup</i> 'guppy'

* Only ages 1 to 10 were included in the analysis (see Appendix).

A second parameter in the categorisation is the referent's gender: we distinguish between male, female, and non-specified/gender-neutral referents. Finally,

we distinguish between proper and improper kinship terms. Proper kinship terms are nouns that have the kinship relation as their primary meaning, such as ‘daughter’, while improper ones have a non-kin meaning that is at least as prominent as the kinship use (Dahl & Koptsjevkaja-Tamm 2001: 202). The non-kin meaning may for instance involve age (e.g. ‘3-year-old’), age category (e.g. ‘toddler’), or gender (e.g. ‘girl’). Terms for romantic partners are proper kin terms if the relationship meaning is the primary one, regardless of the legal relationship status, e.g. *echtgenoot* ‘husband’ and *verkering* ‘dating partner’. Romantic partner terms are improper if they have a primary non-relationship use, e.g. if they are terms of endearment like *lief* ‘love’, or if they have a non-romantic use, e.g. *vriend*. Next, we will discuss which of these terms we have investigated and how.

3.2 Current study

For our analysis, we investigated a selection of the abovementioned kinship terms, boldfaced in Table 1. We included terms from all different categories described in §3.1: proper (e.g. *vader* ‘father’) and improper (e.g. *kleuter* ‘toddler’); ascending (e.g. *papa* ‘father’), horizontal (e.g. *echtgenoot* ‘husband’) and descending (e.g. *zoon* ‘son’); and terms with male (e.g. *hubbie* ‘husband’), female (e.g. *kleindochter* ‘granddaughter’) and neutral (e.g. *verkering* ‘relationship’) referents. Specifically for the improper kinship terms, tweets were included only if they referred to their kin meaning.

However, as some of the terms yielded very few examples of the construction under investigation, we left these out of our subsequent analyses. An example is *mannetje* ‘little man’. While this term can be used as a term of endearment for either a small boy or a male lover, it was used by far the most often as a derogatory term (e.g. *jij vies mannetje* ‘you dirty little man’). *Vrouwtje* ‘little woman’ and *vent* ‘bloke’ were excluded for similar reasons. The current research is a work in progress, meaning that more terms from Table 1 will be included in the corpus in the future.

For each boldfaced term in Table 1, we performed manual searches on Twitter (using the search term “[*kinship term*]” *lang:nl*) and selected the first 100 positive hits. A tweet was considered a positive hit when (1) it was plausible that the sender was the anchor (i.e. a first person singular possessive determiner should be used), (2) the modifier preceded the noun phrase (e.g. *mijn vriendin* ‘my friend’, not *vriendin van mij* ‘friend of mine’), and (3) the modifier was either a possessive determiner, a zero form, or a definite article. When a term was used twice in one tweet, only the first occurrence was annotated. Other, more term-specific choices we made in our data collection can be found in the Appendix.

Next, we annotated every term for modifier used (i.e. possessive, zero or article), direction of relation (i.e. ascending, horizontal or descending), type of kinship term (i.e. proper or improper) and referent gender (i.e. male, female and unspecified). We also annotated the date of creation of the tweet and, where possible, the gender of the sender. In accordance with previous research (Ciot et al. 2013; Zamal et al. 2012), the sender's gender was assessed with gender-name associations and the user's profile picture. If the gender could be confidently assessed from both these cues, it was annotated as M(ale) or F(emale). In the other cases (e.g. users with a non-photographic profile picture and/or a username consisting of emoticons), the sender's gender was annotated with a question mark. The complete dataset is available online (<https://doi.org/10.24416/UU01-AR6LLU>).

4. Results

Our dataset contains 2400 tweets in total (100 tweets for 24 kinship terms each). Below, we first discuss some general results, before we go into specific kinship terms and sender characteristics.

4.1 General results

Table 2 presents the absolute and relative number of times the three types of modifiers were used for all 2400 tweets. Most kinship terms were modified by a possessive determiner (63.2%). A zero form was used in almost a quarter of cases (23.6%). There may be different reasons for omitting the premodifier, such as character limits per tweet, and the use of parental terms in a proper-name like way (for example *Waar is mama?* 'Where is mommy?', see Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001:204). However, investigating this form lies outside the scope of the current paper.

The definite article was used in 316 tweets (13.2%). This shows that the use of a definite article with kinship terms is far from a peripheral phenomenon. We focus on these tweets in the rest of our paper.

Table 2. The absolute and relative number of tweets in which the three modifiers were used

Modifier type	Absolute number of times used	Relative number of times used
Possessive determiner	1517	63.2%
Zero form	567	23.6%
Definite article	316	13.2%

4.2 Results per kinship term

Table 3 presents data per kinship term, from which we can observe a tripartite distinction. First, for 9 of the 24 terms, the possessive determiner is used in more than 75% of the tweets. Second, for 6 other terms, possessive determiners and zero forms are distributed quite evenly. For both these groups, almost no definite articles were used. This leaves us with a group of 9 terms, for which a definite article was used as a modifier in more than 10 tweets (i.e. *gup* ‘guppy’, *puber* ‘adolescent’, *peuter* ‘toddler’, *kleuter* ‘toddler’, *X-jarige* ‘X-year-old’, *echtgenoot* ‘husband’, *echtgenote* ‘wife’, *verloofde* ‘fiancé’, *verkering* ‘relationship’). Of these 9 terms, *peuter*, *kleuter* ‘toddler’ and *X-jarige* ‘X-year-old’ (which are all improper family terms) stand out; these are premodified more often by a definite article than by a possessive determiner: in the case of *kleuter* ‘toddler’ and *X-jarige* ‘X-year-old’, the definite article is used in more than half of the tweets.

Table 3. Total number of times each modifier was used per kinship term

Kinship term	Kinship term type	Referent gender	Direction	Possessive determiner	Zero form (Ø)	Definite article
<i>Vader</i> ‘father’	Proper	Male	Ascending	95	5	0
<i>Moeder</i> ‘mother’	Proper	Female	Ascending	95	4	1
<i>Papa</i> ‘daddy’	Proper	Male	Ascending	43	56	1
<i>Mama</i> ‘mommy’	Proper	Female	Ascending	46	51	3
<i>Ouders</i> ‘parents’	Proper	Unspecified	Ascending	91	9	0
<i>Opa</i> ‘grandfather’	Proper	Male	Ascending	76	24	0
<i>Oma</i> ‘grandmother’	Proper	Female	Ascending	80	20	0
<i>Zoon</i> ‘son’	Proper	Male	Descending	75	22	3
<i>Dochter</i> ‘daughter’	Proper	Female	Descending	80	17	3
<i>Kleinzoon</i> ‘grandson’	Proper	Male	Descending	57	35	8

Table 3. (continued)

Kinship term	Kinship term type	Referent gender	Direction	Possessive determiner	Zero form (Ø)	Definite article
<i>Kleindochter</i> 'granddaughter'	Proper	Female	Descending	65	30	5
<i>Gup</i> 'guppy'	Improper	Unspecified	Descending	38	46	16
<i>Puber</i> 'adolescent'	Improper	Unspecified	Descending	32	34	34
<i>Peuter</i> 'toddler'	Improper	Unspecified	Descending	27	24	49
<i>Kleuter</i> 'toddler'	Improper	Unspecified	Descending	30	12	58
<i>X-jarige</i> 'X-year-old'	Improper	Unspecified	Descending	39	4	57
<i>Vriend</i> 'friend' (male)	Improper	Male	Horizontal	86	14	0
<i>Vriendin</i> 'friend' (female)	Improper	Female	Horizontal	76	23	1
<i>Vriendinnetje</i> 'girlfriend'	Improper	Female	Horizontal	69	29	2
<i>Echtgenoot</i> 'husband'	Proper	Male	Horizontal	49	31	20
<i>Echtgenote</i> 'wife'	Proper	Female	Horizontal	73	16	11
<i>Verloofde</i> 'fiancé'	Improper	Female	Horizontal	79	6	15
<i>Hubbie</i> 'husband'	Proper	Male	Horizontal	49	49	2
<i>Verkering</i> 'relationship'	Proper	Unspecified	Horizontal	67	6	27

The final group of 9 kinship terms shows several other noteworthy patterns. First, the group only contains horizontal and descending terms. Ascending kin terms are almost never modified by a definite article; for these, the standard possessive determiner is most often used. Second, they can all be classified as improper fam-

ily terms and/or romantic relations. For the other terms in Table 3, these patterns are reversed; the majority of the proper ascending kinship terms (namely *vader* ‘father’, *moeder* ‘mother’, *ouders* ‘parents’, *opa* ‘grandfather’, *oma* ‘grandmother’) are premodified most by a possessive determiner.

4.3 Senders

Finally, we looked at who sent the tweets. Figure 1 presents how many times a definite article was used by each gender for the 9 kinship terms featuring the most definite articles. It is important to note that for *gup* ‘guppy’ and *verloofde* ‘fiancé’, the definite article was often used by the same female user (see Appendix), which could be a probable explanation for the results of these specific terms in Figure 1.

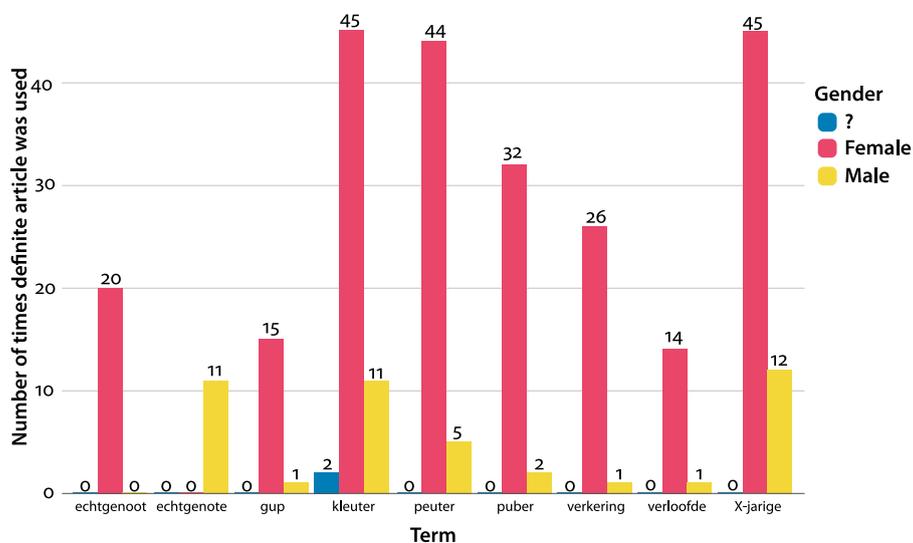


Figure 1. Total number of times each modifier was used per kinship term per gender

In Figure 1, we observe that, for *echtgenoot* ‘husband’, all tweets with a definite article were sent by women, while for *echtgenote* ‘wife’ the opposite is true. This pattern can be expected based on the dominance of hetero marriages, but is not completely self-evident as there are also same-sex marriages in Dutch-speaking countries.

For the other 6 terms, we can see that mostly women use definite articles to modify kinship terms. This result is striking as the majority of Twitter users is male (Statista 2022). In our results, then, women are substantially overrepresented. It should be noted, however, that of the 2400 tweets, 67.96% were written

by women. We do not have enough data to determine whether women use more kinship terms, are more likely to choose a definite article over a possessive determiner, or both. Disentangling these effects requires further statistical analysis that falls outside the scope of this paper.

5. Discussion

The results presented in §4 can be understood in various ways. First, the fact that the construction is possible at all can be understood by the notion of communicative redundancy. After all, in these tweets, we made sure that there was no question about who the anchor is (namely the sender), so that expressing it overtly is redundant. The sender can choose to leave the anchor implicit and express definiteness only (definite article), or leave out the premodifier altogether (zero form), without risking ambiguity. Redundancy as an explanation for this construction confirms the results of an informal inquiry amongst its users (Leufkens & Van der Meulen 2018). When asked for their motivation to use a definite article, senders gave two main reasons:

1. A possessive determiner in this context feels ‘too possessive’, because with kinship terms it is already clear that it is about (inalienable) possession;
2. A definite article creates distance, which has a comical effect because kinship relations concern the most intimate relationships.

Apparently, users are to some extent aware of the redundancy of overt expression of the anchor. Expressing it anyway is experienced as too emphatic, which is the reason to leave it out. Additionally, this creates a desired pragmatic distancing effect. The existence of this effect has been shown for English by Hunt & Acton (2022). In their study, participants believe that speakers who use ‘the spouse’ instead of ‘my spouse’ have a more distant relationship to their partners compared to speakers who use a possessive determiner in the same context.

Second, some interesting patterns emerged when looking at the 9 kinship terms for which the definite article was used in more than 10 tweets. First, we saw that this group included descending and horizontal kinship terms only. Dahl and Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2001: 213), too, find examples of asymmetrical behaviour of ascending and descending/horizontal terms. In their analysis, the more features a kin term has in common with the so-called ‘parental prototype’ (i.e. a term describing a first ascending consanguineal relation), the lesser marked its expression will be, which means, e.g., that more grammatical marking can be omitted than with a term that is further away from the prototype. This explains why in a language like Dutch parental terms can often function as a proper name (‘Where

is daddy?’, see §1), while non-parental ones cannot. In a way, our results align well with this idea, because we, too, find an asymmetry between ascending and descending/horizontal relations. However, in terms of omissibility of grammatical marking, we find the opposite: while ascending kin terms typically take the standard possessive determiner, with children and romantic partners there is the option of omitting the anchor. Hence, the concept of prototypicality or markedness cannot explain our findings here.

Perhaps the reason why descending and horizontal kinship relations are more prone to be introduced by a definite article lies in the nature of the relation. Both romantic partnerships and relations with children come into existence by choice, while people unintentionally have siblings, parents, and grandparents. The idea that someone would own a child or partner is therefore possibly more uncomfortable than the idea of possessing a mother or grandfather. This could explain why the redundancy of a possessive determiner is felt more heavily with descending and romantic horizontal kinship than with ascending and blood-related family terms. In addition, an anonymous reviewer notes that they feel that the use of a definite article has an ironic and therefore somewhat disrespectful effect. This, too, could explain why the construction is not used for ascending kin terms, e.g. *de opa* ‘the grandpa’ would be perceived as impolite.

Another observation we made in §4 is that the definite article is used primarily with improper kinship terms. The use of improper terms is to be expected with nouns referring to children, as these can disambiguate between multiple children. For example, if a sender has two daughters, using ‘the daughter’ would be ambiguous, while ‘the toddler’ would result in successful identification. Since it is comparatively less likely that people have two mothers, using disambiguating improper terms for ascending kin relations will presumably be less frequent. Indeed, Dahl & Koptsjevskaja-Tamm (2001:202) note that descending terms are much more likely to be improper terms than ascending terms. Furthermore, improper nouns seem to contribute to the aforementioned comical distancing effect of the construction: e.g. referring to one’s child with *gup* (‘guppy’) creates a funny clash between the love for one’s child and the presumably somewhat colder feelings one might have for a baby fish.

However, while disambiguation and distancing explain a preference for improper over proper kin terms, we still have to account for the use of a definite article over a possessive determiner with improper terms. Perhaps leaving out the anchor further strengthens the desired distancing effect: by omitting any reference to the ego, only the more impersonal grammatical marking remains. Alternatively, or simultaneously, there might be a frequency effect at play. Proper kinship terms may be found with a possessive determiner so often that this has become entrenched. With words like *gup* ‘guppy’ and *peuter* ‘toddler’, there is no automatic

association with a possessive determiner, which leaves more room for selecting a different premodifier or leaving it out altogether.

In order to better understand the various factors at play, we need to study more examples of the construction. First, we hope to extend our explorative study in the future by including more kin terms from Table 1. It would be interesting to see how far the notion of ‘kinship’ reaches and expand the set of nouns: possibly, terms for pets, friends, colleagues, and other important participants in people’s lives can also be used in the construction. Furthermore, we would like to investigate whether the construction is used in other domains, e.g. on other computer-mediated channels such as fora and chat applications, and perhaps even in spoken language. A third direction for future research would be to look for similar constructions in other languages, both related and unrelated ones, and test whether they have the same characteristics as the Dutch one.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we performed an exploratory investigation of the definite article possession construction with Dutch kinship terms on Twitter. Analysing 2400 tweets (100 tweets for 24 kinship terms), annotated for the type of modifier used (a possessive determiner, a zero form or a definite article), results show that 13.2% of all selected tweets featured a definite article. The construction was most frequent with descending and horizontal relationship terms, and with improper terms.

We have accounted for the grammaticality of the construction by pointing to the role of redundancy: since the identity of the anchor is clear from the context, overt expression is redundant. Users of the construction seem to recognize this redundancy; they report that using a possessive determiner would feel ‘overly possessive’. This feeling seems to be the strongest with terms for children and partners, possibly because those are relatives by choice. Moreover, use of the construction can be explained by the effect of distancing it creates, which presumably works comedically because of the contrast with the intimacy of the relations concerned. This comical distancing effect could explain the relatively frequent occurrence of the phenomenon with descending and horizontal relationship nouns, as well as the relatively high frequency of improper kin terms.

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Abbreviations

TAG hashtag

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Appendix. Term-specific choices made during data collection and analysis

Term	Choice
<i>Echtgenote</i> 'wife'	<i>d'echtgenote</i> annotated as definite article.
<i>Gup</i> 'guppy'	Many tweets from the same user.
<i>Oma</i> 'grandmother'	Only included when used in isolation, excluding hits with <i>oma en opa</i> 'grandmother and grandfather'.
<i>Op</i> 'grandfather'	
<i>Puber</i> 'adolescent'	Only when it referred to humans, not animals.
<i>X-jarige</i> 'X-year-old'	Specified for ages 1 to 10 (search term example: " <i>1-jarige</i> " <i>lang:nl</i>) to exclude noise (e.g. "50-year-old"). For each age, the first 10 positive hits were included.
<i>Verloofde</i> 'fiancee'	One user consistently uses capital 'V' (i.e. <i>de Verloofde</i>), and wrote 10/15 tweets with a definite article.
<i>Vriend</i> 'friend' (male)	Excluded when clearly about friendship, recognized by the adjectives <i>beste</i> 'best' or <i>goede</i> 'good'. Included when relationship's nature was unclear.
<i>Vriendin</i> 'friend' (female)	

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