Abstract

This paper analyses constructions such as ‘an angel of a child’ in different Germanic and Romance languages. The construction consists of two NPs linked by the preposition of in English and similar ‘neutral’ prepositions in the other languages considered. It conveys expressive meaning and is, therefore, referred to as ‘Expressive Binominal NP’ (EBNP).

The paper raises the question which of the two NPs is to be considered the head of the construction. Both NPs qualify to a certain extent. The comparison with similar constructions in Oceanic and other non-Indo-European languages is illuminating here. The construction has two functions: a referential function and an expressive function. It is argued that the double-headedness of the construction is motivated by its double function: the first NP is the expressive head of the construction, whereas the second NP is the referential head.

Keywords: attribute, blending, expressivity, Germanic languages, head, markedness, metaphor, Noun Phrase, of, Romance languages

1. Introduction

Present-day English, Dutch and German, and Romance languages have an interesting construction in common. In (1), some instantiations of the construction are presented:
(1) a. English: a bear of a man
    b. Dutch: een boom van een kerel ‘a tree of a man’
    c. French: un diable d’homme ‘a devil of a man’

In the Germanic and Romance languages, the construction has three obligatory slots, namely two noun phrase slots and a slot for a preposition that relates the two noun phrases. This preposition is invariably the semantically most ‘neutral’ preposition available in the language, namely of (English), van (Dutch), de (French), etc. There are strong constraints on the determiner of the second NP and less strong conditions on that of the first determiner (an unmarked definite article like the in English is not allowed).

For ease of reference, I will use the shorthand EBNP for ‘Expressive Binominal NP’ for the construction, combining the functional (expressivity) and formal (two NPs) characteristics of the construction in the name. I will refer to the first determiner as Det1, to the first noun as N1, to the preposition as P, to the second determiner as Det2 and to the second noun as N2. Besides these main constituents, the construction is optionally expandable by adjectival and PP modifiers (see section 2.4).

The analytical goal of this paper is to determine the formal properties of the EBNP in the Germanic and Romance languages; in particular, I will go into the properties that are common to all these languages and point out language-specific differences with regard to constraints on the way the syntactic slots can be filled. The main theoretical objective of this paper is to decide whether the EBNP construction can be considered a motivated construction.

1.1. Expressivity in language

Language users show their involvement in what they say by using certain words, morphemes, constructions or intonation patterns. The expressive function (Ausdruck) is one of the three semiotic functions that Bühler (1934) distinguished with regard to natural language, the other two being the representational (Darstellung) and directive (Appell) functions. Bühler considered the representational (conceptual) function to be central to natural language, in line with an old and still prevailing tradition in linguistics. Since the 1970s, research on the directive function has been stimulated by speech act theory. Only in recent years has interest in the expressive function developed a certain momentum (cf. the overview in Besnier (1990) and

the special issue of the Journal of Pragmatics, edited by Caffi and Janney (1994)). The literature on expressive syntax is still rather scarce, but see the papers by Michaelis and Lambrecht (1996a, 1996b) on exclamative sentence types. The present paper, which is part of a longer project on the expressive function of language (cf. Foolen 1997), intends to contribute to the research topic of expressive syntax by concentrating on the EBNP, a construction on the subclausal level.

The intuition that the EBNP has an expressive value is a linguistic intuition that is shared by at least some of the linguists that have written on the construction (cf. the subtitle of Leys (1997): ‘Emotionality as constructional meaning’). Supporting evidence for this intuition can be found in the fact that the construction attracts nouns meaning things like ‘scoundrel’, ‘hell’, etc., and in the impression that it typically occurs in text types where emotional involvement is to be expected: informal dialogue, written reviews of books and films, reports of sports events, etc. For the purpose of this study, expressivity is understood in the sense of ‘having emotional content’.

1.2. Motivation

Taylor (this volume) discusses the notion of ‘motivation’ in grammar (see in particular his section 1.4). According to Taylor, “a linguistic structure is not motivated to the extent that it is related to other structures in the language.” These relations constitute the ‘ecology’ of the structure. The structure occupies a ‘niche’ which is made available by the rest of the language.

1. At the Hamburg Conference on Motivation in Grammar, I presented a general paper on expressive syntax. For the present volume, I decided to restrict the scope of the paper to one construction. I presented parts of the present paper at the International Pragmatics Conference in Budapest (July 2000), the Linguistics Colloquium of Rice University, Houston (March 2001), and in a lecture for the Department of Germanic Languages at UCLA, Los Angeles (May 2001). I thank the audiences for their stimulating discussion, in particular Jan-Ola Östman (Helsinki), Bob Kirsner (UCLA), Suzanne Kemmer, Michel Achard and Sebastian Ross-Hagebaum (Rice). Special thanks to Knud Lambrecht (Austin), Frederike van der Leek (Amsterdam) and Pieter Seuren (Nijmegen) for their constructive suggestions and support. All remaining weaknesses of the paper are mine.
With respect to the EBNP construction, there has been a lot of uncertainty in the literature as to its proper analysis and, thus, to its ‘ecology’. In particular, the question whether N1 or N2 is the ‘head’ of the construction is a bone of contention. If N1 is the head, then the construction is related primarily to an NP schema with a PP postmodifier. If N2 is the head, then the construction can be related to an NP type with an adjectival premodifier. A third option would be, to consider both N1 and N2 as heads because the head features are distributed among them. In that case the construction would have a ‘hybrid’ status, being motivated by the two different NP schemas just mentioned. It seems that something of the latter type indeed holds for the EBNP construction. If that is the case, then this might explain why linguists could not come to an agreement about which noun should be considered the head of the construction.

As Taylor points out, there is a second, and more commonly accepted, view on what motivation in grammar means. In this perspective, a construction is motivated if its formal properties can be related in a non-arbitrary way to the semantics or function of the construction. If we call motivation as discussed above ‘structural motivation’, then we could call this second type of motivation ‘iconic motivation’. In my view, this second type of motivation is relevant to the EBNP construction as well: the double-headedness of the construction can be considered to be motivated by the two functions which the construction simultaneously fulfills. More specifically, the head status of N2 has to do with the representational function of the NP, whereas N1 is the head in relation to the expressive function of the construction.

13. Data

When native speakers of English are presented with a few instances of the EBNP construction, they usually have no difficulty in providing additional examples. Typically, they use a restricted set of examples that seems to be wholly or partly stored in their mental lexicon.\(^2\)

1. I thank Michael Barlow (Rice University), who did a corpus search on the (English) Sunday Times, using the frame ‘a N of a N’ as search string. I present only a few examples, starting with the letter ‘b’ after the first determiner ‘a’.

3. Note that in the English translation the proper noun gets a determiner. The logic behind the occurrence of Det2 is not yet clear to me, cf: that idiot of a brother, but: your idiot of brother; in German: dieser Idiot von Bruder.

\(^2\) I thank Patricia Zukow-Goldring (English), Amalia Mendes (Portuguese), Andrei Filtchenko (Russian), Svitlana Zhabotynska and Jewgenija Sokolinskaja (Russian), Esther Pasual (Catalan), and others for providing me with useful and entertaining examples.
Other Romance languages:
Italian: *una bestia di avvocato* 'a beast of a lawyer'
Spanish: *el imbécil de tu hermano* 'this idiot of your brother'
Catalan: *Aquest cony de cotxe no funciona.*
This bush [colloquial, swearword for female sex organ] of car doesn’t work.
‘This damn car doesn’t work’.
Portuguese: *uma joia de universidade* 'a jewel of a university'
Romanian: *idiota* 'that idiot of Maria's
When asked to translate expressions such as the ones above into their native language, speakers of Russian and Finnish usually claim that a literal translation in their own language is not possible. Instead, they offer examples like the following as equivalents with the same expressive value:

(8) Russian:
   a. *medved', a ne chelovek*
      bear, but not man
      'a bear of a man'\(^6\)
   b. *angel, a ne zhenschina*
      angel, but not woman
      'angel of a woman'

(9) Finnish:
   a. *pojan nulikka*
      boy-GEN rascal
      'a rascal of a boy'
   b. *piru mieheksi*
      devil man-TRA (translative case)
      'a devil of a man'

Thus, Russian and Finnish do not seem to have the EBNP construction in the form of an NP-P-NP-structure, but use other constructions to express involvement of the speaker with regard to the referent of the NP.\(^7\)

With regard to diachrony, there seems to be no study on the history of the construction. I only found the following global sketch in Leys (1997). The Romance languages inherited the construction from Latin, which used the genitive, cf. *monstrum mulieris*, monster of a woman-GEN, ‘a monster of a woman’. The construction was then taken over by the Germanic languages. According to Leys, the indefinite article in the Det2 position in the Germanic languages was, apparently, an innovation after the introduction of the construction in the Germanic languages.

For the Scandinavian languages, Leys (1997: 33) reports that Swedish has *en idiot till vakmästare* ‘an idiot of a guard’, in which the preposition *till* ‘to’ is used,\(^8\) and he adds that Old High German similarly used the ‘goal’ preposition zu, e.g. *ein helt ze manne, ein wunder zeinem weib.* Later, this preposition was replaced by von under the influence of French de. So it seems that a similar construction was already present in the earlier history of the Germanic languages and that it was ‘remodeled’, in particular with regard to the preposition, under the influence of Romance languages.

2. Analyzing the EBNP construction

2.1. Reference grammars

The main reference grammars of English, German and Dutch show some awareness of the existence of the EBNP construction, but their treatment is, on the whole, not very convincing.

Quirk et al. (1985: 1284) discuss the construction in section 17.47 ‘Apposition with *of*-phrases’, together with other NPs containing appositive postmodifiers, like *the city of Rome*. The main focus of Quirk et al. is on the question which NP is the head of the construction. The EBNP con-

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6. Russian also has another way of rendering the same expressive meaning by compounding the two nouns as in *medved-chelovek* ‘bear-man’, which may also be reversed as *chelovek-medved*.
7. Turkish seems to behave like Russian and Finnish in putting two nouns in juxtaposition: *Nuri serseri-si*, Nuri vagabond-3sg, ‘that vagabond of Nuri’ (Ineke van der Craats, p.c.).
8. In Danish, the exclamation *helvedes til vejr* ‘hell of weather’, literally ‘hell to weather’ occurs, but the construction is very rare. (Lene Schøsler, p.c.)
struction represents, in their view, “a special case of prepositional apposition [...]. This structure [...] is not a regular prepositional postmodification, since N2 is notionally the head, as can be seen in the paraphrases: [...] an angel of a child – an angelic child”. Any mentioning of a special constructional meaning is absent.

The German reference grammar *Duden* (1995: 249) does not regard the EBNP as a separate construction. It restricts itself to a morphological remark, saying that if the first noun is in the nominative and if in the appositive prepositional postmodifier the indefinite article is left out (a possibility in German, see 2.4), then this second noun can take over the nominative case of the first noun, instead of having the dative case, as would be the unmarked case after von: *ein armer Teufel von Philologe*, ‘a poor devil of a philologist’, instead of *Philologen, ein Lump von Angestellter*, ‘a scoundrel of an employee’, instead of the dative case of this word.

The Dutch reference grammar *ANS* differs in a positive way from its English and German counterparts, in that it does consider the EBNP as a separate construction that deserves discussion in a subsection of its own (p. 853–854). This is most certainly due to Paardekooper (1956), the title of whose article, *Een schat van een kind* ‘A darling of a child’, became the standard name in Dutch grammar for this construction. The *ANS* discusses the construction in much more detail than the English and German reference grammars. It points out that:

- N2 is the head, N1 specifies certain properties of N2
- The construction is called a ‘metaphorical construction’, i.e. the construction contains a metaphor as in *a bear of a man* ‘the man is a bear’, etc.
- N1 must be affectively loaded, and this affective meaning is then transferred to the construction as a whole.

However, there are some problems with regard to each of these three claims. First, the claim that N2 is the head is controversial. It seems to be mainly based on semantic intuition and paraphrase (see further 2.5). Sec-

9. In the discussion of the paper that I presented on the EBNP at the Germanic Department of UCLA, it turned out that there is uncertainty among native speakers of German what exactly the dative form of *Angestellter* in this context would be like: *Angestellten* oder *Angestelltem*. For further discussion on such nominalized participles in the EBNP construction see Vanlaere (1993: 170).

2.2. Construction Grammar

The first step that should be taken to improve the existing descriptions is to consider the EBNP as a genuine construction in the sense of Construction Grammar: a construction with its own set of formal properties and with its own non-compositional constructional meaning. I will not apply any Construction Grammar formalism here, but what authors like Goldberg (1995) and Michaelis and Lambrecht (1996a, 1996b) specify as general properties of constructions, seems to fit the expressive binominal NPs very well:

- Constructions are units sui generis in a grammar, with their own meaning.
- Constructions have a range of properties involving different levels: prosodic, morphological, syntactic, lexical. Insofar as a construction shares a certain property with another construction, there is a relation between these constructions. The grammar of a language is thus conceived of as a family of related constructions.
- In Construction Grammar, there is no strict dividing line between lexicon and grammar.
- Constructions that are often considered marginal by other grammarians, can teach us much about language. The core, fully generalized, unmarked constructions might be the endpoint of a continuum of generalization, they are not necessarily the only point of departure for a proper insight in the structure of the language.

The type of analysis I will follow for the EBNP construction is similar to the way Taylor (this volume) analyses the *bang goes my weekend*! construction. A main question to be answered is, therefore, which other constructions in the language is the EBNP construction related to.
2.3. The constructional meaning of the EBNP

As pointed out in section 1.1., speakers can use the EBNP construction when they want to show a feeling about someone or something to which they refer. Note that they do not describe that feeling, as they would do by saying "I am impressed by the size of that man", instead of "He is a bear of a man." The feeling is not expressed by one of the words in the construction, but by the construction as such. However, if the language provides a choice between a neutral word and a word with an emotional connotation, the NI position is typically filled with the connotational word: "guy" instead of "man," "Dutch vent" or "kerel," instead of "man," "wijf" instead of "vrouw."

So, instead of saying, as the Dutch reference grammar ANS does, that the first noun must contain an affective meaning, which is then transposed to the construction as a whole, I would prefer to see it the other way around: the construction has an expressive meaning, and this constructional meaning 'attracts' words that 'resonate' with this affective meaning.

Which feeling it is exactly that the speaker expresses, is not part of the constructional meaning. On the basis of the words used in the utterance, combined with properties of the textual and situational context, the hearer has to reconstruct the feeling that the speaker intended to express. There is no guarantee that this interpretive process leads to the intended outcome, as is illustrated by the following example. When I told a Chinese woman that in Dutch you can say "a dragon of a film," her spontaneous reaction was: 'Oh, that means that the speaker finds the film good'. The actual meaning of this expression in Dutch is, however, that the film was annoyingly sentimental.

Particularly striking is an observation that has been made by several authors with regard to Det1. This can be any determiner that is allowed in a normal NP, whereby exclamatory determiners like "what a" or "such a" are more frequent in this context than within other NPs. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the unmarked definite article "the" is very rare in this position, at least in the Romance and Germanic languages I looked at. It does not seem adequate to postulate a syntactic rule that stipulates a restriction on the use of the definite article here. It is not clear why the definite article does not occur in this position. Is it that a demonstrative like "that" gives better possibilities for a 'resonating' use? "That" can be used for 'distancing', whereas the definite article is 'neutral'. If there is a choice, the more 'loaded' option is preferred.

2.4. Formal properties of the construction

All the formal properties of the construction, be they phonological, syntactic or morphological, point to a strong integration of N1 and N2. In the NP plus PP postmodifier counterpart of the EBNP, the formal properties of the two NPs are independent of each other. The formal properties of the EBNP that contribute to the integration of N1 and N2 are the following:

- Intonation: one overarching intonation pattern, a flat head pattern which does not focus on one of the nouns. In contrast, each NP of the normal 'NP of NP' construction is stressed; it is, however, possible to stress one of them more than the other: a "whéél of a bike" versus a "wheel of a bike."
- Syntax: adjectival modifiers precede the first noun and prepositional modifiers follow the second noun. Modifiers immediately preceding N2 are rare, probably because this would interfere with the strong unity between N1 and N2.

(10) a. that beautiful angel of a child of six years
b. that beautiful six years old angel of a child
c. ?that beautiful angel of a six year old child

A second syntactic property that points to strong integration is that it is not possible to pronominalize the second noun, or to move the prepositional phrase by extraposition or other movement rules, as is possible in the 'NP of NP' counterpart construction:

(11) Dutch:
   a. *Ik heb die schat van hem gezien. (in the EBNP reading)
      I have that darling of him seen
   b. *Ik heb die schat gezien van een kind (in the EBNP reading)
      I have that darling seen of a child
   c. Ik heb het wiel gezien van die fiets (in the non-EBNP reading)
      I have the wheel seen of that bike
      'I have seen the wheel of that bike'

Morphological: Number agreement is obligatory in all languages considered. In contrast to Dutch and German, English does not allow to use the construction in the plural (cf. Dutch "Schat ten van kinderen", 'treasures of children', German "Engel von Kindern" 'angels of children').
Case agreement: As was pointed out in 2.1, N2 in German does not have to take the dative case, as would be expected on the basis of the preposition von, but instead can take over the case of the first noun. This can only be observed in certain examples in the nominative case: *dieser Lump von Angestellter ‘this scoundrel of servant’. If the first noun is oblique, the second noun is also oblique, but in that case you cannot see whether this is the dative triggered by von or whether there is case agreement, triggered by the first noun (see Vuillaume et al. 1993 for further details).

Gender agreement: in Dutch the first determiner may agree in gender with the second noun: *dat dijk van een wijf ‘that dike of a woman’, meaning a strongly reliable woman), instead of *die dijk van een wijf. Wijf is neuter and takes that as the distal demonstrative pronoun, whereas dijk is non-neuter and would require die. There is, however, uncertainty on this point among native speakers, and they seem to avoid the construction in case of gender clash. *Die wolk van een baby ‘that cloud of a baby’ is fine because both nouns are non-neuter, but *Die/dat schat van een kind both sound less good, probably because of the difference in gender between the two nouns.10

Definiteness agreement: In Portuguese, when the first determiner is indefinite, then the second is null, cf. (12a), which is not different from what we see in the other Romance languages, but when N1 is definite, the second is also definite, cf. (12b):

(12) 
	a. Ela é uma beleza de mulher
     ‘She is a beauty of a woman’.  

b. Encontrei o estúpido do (= de + o) teu marido ontem
     ‘I met that idiot of your husband yesterday’.

The question of which part of the construction is to be considered the head was the subject of four articles that all appeared in 1997 and 1998: Leys (1997), Verhaar (1997), Den Dikken (1998) and Abraham (1998), and the question was also touched upon in a fifth paper, De Schutter (1997). All these authors assume that there must be a head, and only one head. The options of no head or two heads are not discussed. The authors agreed on the question, but they differed strongly with regard to the answer. If we disregard the first determiner for the moment,11 the other candidates, namely the first noun, the preposition and the second noun each had their defenders. But the arguments are, in each case, not very convincing and often highly theory-dependent.

The tests that are normally applied for deciding on head status within an NP, unfortunately, do not work for this construction:

- Number agreement with the verb: In the wheels of the bike were expensive, wheels is the head, because this noun determines the agreement

bike, there are two different (indefinite) referents, although they are related to each other, and although one might even be part of the other.

In addition to the properties just mentioned, we could formulate syntactic-semantic constraints like the following: The construction cannot occur in negated form (*no angel of a child), or in indefinite quantified form (*sommige schatten van kinderen ‘some darlings of children’). But such constraints probably follow from the function of the construction: If not a specific referent is involved, then expressive evaluation does not make much sense.

2.5. What is the head of the construction?

“Though treatment […] has been varied, depending on basic approaches, a few aspects of why constructions like those of (1) are problematic have been recognized widely: perhaps the most prominent of those is that of headedness. Is the first noun the head, or the second? Or perhaps both?” (Verhaar 1997: 264).

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10. Everaert (1992: 52) elicited native speaker judgments on examples with and without gender clash between N1 and N2. He found considerable variation in judgments.

11. Everaert (1992: 53) proposes a DP analysis, with Det1 as the head, but in the complement NP he considers N2 as the head.
with the verb. But as the two nouns in the EBNP construction must agree with each other, the test cannot differentiate between them.\textsuperscript{12}

- Optionality: In the unmarked construction the wheel of a bike, the prepositional postmodifier can be left out without loss of the nominal construction, so the first noun or noun phrase is the head. But in case the prepositional phrase in the EBNP is left out, a bear of a man \(\rightarrow\) a bear, it is not an EBNP construction anymore, so this does not work either.

Because the traditional tests are not decisive, other criteria were used to determine the head status, mainly paraphrase and analogy. Leys (1997) uses analogy as an argument in favor of N1. In his view, the construction ein Bär von Mann ‘a bear of a man’ strongly resembles the construction Lehrer von Beruf ‘teacher by profession’. In both cases, the first noun specifies the more general second noun. He calls this relation ‘Relation des Betreffs’, ‘relation of regarding’: regarding his profession, he is a teacher, regarding ‘man’, he is a bear. In Leys’ view, the relation between N1 and N2 in the two constructions is very similar. If we consider the first noun as the head in the Lehrer von Beruf case and the second noun as part of the prepositional postmodifier, then we should do that in the case of the EBNP as well.

The defenders of N2 as the head use paraphrase as their main argument, cf. Quirk et al. (1985). Besides the paraphrase argument, it is pointed out that adjectives preceding the first noun are interpreted as adjectives pertaining to the second noun (her cigar smoking devil of a husband: it is the husband who smokes cigars, not the devil). If we consider the first noun together with the functional categories of a/von einem/van een as a kind of adjective, than we get a ‘natural result’. The integration of hell of a into helluva would support this view, as would the possibility in French to use an adjective in this position: ce drôle d’homme ‘this funny man’. De Schutter (1997) takes a similar view, and McCawley (1998: 765) calls this phenomenon of a ‘noun mimicking an adjective’ ‘syntactic mimicry’. Verhaar’s proposal (1997) can be seen as a variant on this position: he considers N1 an evaluative classifier, in analogy to classifiers in classifier languages. Whereas the latter subdivide categories according to objective properties of form and function, evaluative classifiers in the EBNP subdivide the category of N2 in terms of positive or negative evaluation.\textsuperscript{13}

A generative view on the EBNP construction is presented by Den Dikken (1998), cf. also Abraham (1998). Den Dikken considers the preposition as the functional head, which takes a small clause as its complement: of [man bear]. Normally, it is the subject of a small clause that is raised, as happens in predicational sentential constructions: is [John ill] \(\rightarrow\) John is [it ill]. But in the EBNP construction, we have a ‘marked’ derivation: instead of the subject, the predicate of the small clause is raised to the subject position, which leads to bear of [(a) man t]. The construction is thus a case of predicate inversion, a type of movement which manifests itself also in certain constructions on the sentence level, cf. The biggest idiot in town is our doctor, where, in the generative view, the predicate is in subject position.

Theoretically, this solution has some attractive features: The marked derivation accounts in a natural way for the marked status of the construction, and the predicational relation that is intuitively felt between the nouns has been given a syntactic basis. But a double price has to be paid:

Firstly, instead of a monostratal analysis we have to accept a derivational analysis with more than one level of representation. One could argue that this price has to be paid anyway somewhere in the description because, intuitively, the predicational paraphrase (‘the child is an angel’) is ‘natural’. If the predicational relation is not built into the syntax, then it will show up in the semantic-cognitive interpretation. But, one could argue, cognition provides a powerful interpretational apparatus, cf. Fauconnier (1999: 96): “Language is only the tip of a spectacular cognitive iceberg”, so, all in all, it seems attractive to let the predicational relation be part of the cognitive interpretation of the construction.

The second disadvantage of the generative approach has to do with the preposition of. In the summary of Den Dikken’s analysis I gave above, the prepositional head was specified by the item of; but Den Dikken (1998: 190) proposes that this of is only a spell-out form of an abstract functional category:

Just confining ourselves to the linear string of words found in the N of a N construction, there is one element that I so far ignored in my discussion of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[12.] Italian has gender agreement between subject and predicate. Here the agreement is with the second noun: Quel pezzo di una donna era belissima. Quella bestia di un professore era deciso (Pieter Seuren, p.c.). This would be an argument in favor of considering N2 as the head.
\item[13.] Milner (1978: 174–197) was an early study, in which the N1 was analyzed as a ‘specifier’ in relation to N2.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the construction but which should also be assigned a place in the final analysis – the word of separating the fronted predicate from its subject. Just like the copula be, this element is perfectly meaningless. Although it looks like a preposition, it does not behave like one. In German, for instance, von does not obligatorily entertain a Case relationship with the noun phrase following it.

So the price we have to pay in this type of analysis is accepting of as a meaningless part of the construction. For a cognitive linguist such a price is high (see the next section for further discussion). Meanwhile, I conclude with regard to the present section, that the literature does not lead to a final answer regarding the head-status of one of the constituents of the construction. If we restrict ourselves to N1 and N2, it seems that they both have some rights to be called the head. In section 4, I will make this view more concrete.

2.6. The meaning of of and the relation between N1 and N2

"Le tour ce fripon de valet est parmi ceux qui intègrent DE, peut-être celui qui a amené le plus de commentaires grammaticaux, et également le plus de désaccords" (Englebert 1992: 40) (‘The construction this scoundrel of a servant is one of the constructions in which ‘of’ is part of the construction, and perhaps the one that has led to the largest number of grammatical comments, and at the same time to the most controversies.’)

The meaning of the preposition of and its counterparts in other languages is not easy to pin down, probably because the meaning is rather general, like that of the copula be, the verb do or the noun thing.

Langacker (1999) acknowledges that of indicates a great variety of relations between a trajectory and a landmark, like the chirping of birds, a ring of gold, the state of California, an acquaintance of Bill’s. Of is thus polysemous. The part/whole relation as in the bottom of the jar he regards as a prototypical use, “one with special cognitive salience” (1999: 77). As to the schematic value of of, he makes the following proposal: “It seems quite accurate to describe them [the senses of of, A.F.] as designating an intrinsic relationship of some kind between the two participants” (1999: 78). The case of of in the EBNP construction does not occur in Langacker’s survey of possible senses, however.

Stefanowitsch (1998) contrasted the use of of with the s-genitive, like in the Bolt of the door vs. the door’s holt. He analysed a corpus asking whether there is some pattern in the distribution of the two forms, and if that is indeed the use, whether that should imply a different semantic analysis for of and ‘s. This led him to postulating the Possessed/ Possessor relation to be the central sense of the s-genitive. As for of, he subscribes to the abstract meaning of intrinsic relationship as proposed by Langacker, but on the level of the prototypical meanings, he assumes, besides Langacker’s Part/Whole relation, an additional prototypical meaning, namely the Origin ary/Origin relation, which is present in cases like This frying pan is made off/from steel, People die off/from AIDS. Historically, this meaning was the central one of of. Like Langacker, he does not take the EBNP construction into consideration.

A third proposal was made by Campe (1997), who contrasted postmodifiers introduced by German von ‘of’ with postmodifiers in the genitive case, cf.: der Abschied vom Lehrer vs. der Abschied des Lehrers, both meaning ‘the leaving of the teacher’. Like Stefanowitsch, Campe analysed a corpus and in addition she used a questionnaire to elicit native speaker judgments. Campe came to the following conclusion (1997: 181): “The most basic semantic difference between the two alternatives is thus that the genitive tends to focus on a stable, objective and intrinsic relation of independence between the referents of two entities, whereas the von-phrase concentrates more on a [subjective], dynamic, separational, extrinsic relation of relative independence between the referents of two entities.” In contrast to Langacker and Stefanowitsch, Campe did take the EBNP construction into consideration. She observed that the EBNP construction does not allow free variation between von and the genitive: The use of the genitive instead of von is considered bad to very bad by 95% of the native speakers she interviewed. Campe calls the type of von relation in this construction ‘subcategorizing’: In dies er Trottel von einem Mann, ‘this idiot of a man’, the speaker characterizes the man as a certain type of man. And she adds: “The use of von [in this construction] creates a distance between the two components of the relation. It is possible that by means of this linguistic distance, a conceptual distance is highlighted, viz. the one between the objective individual and the subjective (positive or negative) value judgment someone else passes on that individual” (1997: 172).

Intuitively, Campe’s analysis of von fits the use of von in the EBNP construction better than those of Langacker and Stefanowitsch of of. We should, of course, be aware that we cannot identify without further discussion the meaning of von and of, as they are embedded in different systems of contrast (German has in addition to the two types of postmodifiers also
the premodifying genitive, like English: *Peters Buch*, ‘Peter’s book’). But as Langacker and Stefanowitsch did not take the EBNP construction into consideration, they should at least feel challenged by Campe’s analysis to ask themselves how they would accommodate the construction.

Defenders of a ‘meaningless’ of might comment that this type of semantic analysis of the preposition leads to such a general, vague meaning that the step to assuming a meaningless purely formal relator is only a small one. The step in itself indeed seems a small one, but involves a principle, namely the principle of allowing for meaningless elements in linguistic analysis. Cognitive linguistics prefers not to do so, and therefore I propose to adopt Campe’s analysis of *von* as the meaning of the preposition as it occurs in the EBNP construction.

In this view, the preposition relates the referential meaning of N2 to the evaluative meaning of N1. Normally, a semantic relation of the type ‘evaluation – reference’ results in an attributive construction. The EBNP is special, in that in this case it results in a construction where the evaluative part does not have attributive status with relation to the referential part.

3. Two types of expressive binominal NPs

3.1. Impression versus attitude

Up to now, I have treated all examples of the construction in the different languages as equal. But we have seen that the instantiations of the construction do show variation on more than one point. At least the following slots can vary in a systematic way:

- Det1 can be definite or indefinite.
  - N1 can be a metaphor for the referent it applies to (bear of a man, castle of a house) or an expressive word (French idiot, fripon, German Lump, Dutch feestneus), functioning as an insulting or endearing term with respect to the referent. A test for terms of the latter type is the exclamative frame *X that you are!* If a word can take the position of X in this frame, it should be able to function as the first noun in the EBNP construction.

- Det2 can be definite, indefinite or zero. In Dutch and English, it is invariably indefinite, in German it can vary between indefinite and zero, and in the Romance languages it can vary between definite and zero.

Although there is no absolute co-occurrence between the values these parameters take in the different languages, there are some correlations. The correlational pattern seems to be as follows: indefinite Det1 – metaphor N1 – indefinite Det2, versus definite Det1 – insulting/endearing N1 – definite/null Det2. Let us call the two subtypes resulting from these correlations Type I and Type II respectively. Type I seems to occur more frequently in the Germanic languages whereas Type II is typical for the Romance languages. Moreover, Type I occurs in predicate position (He is an X of a Y) and Type II in argument position (subject, object or other), cf. the following contrast:

(13) a. He is a bear of a man.
  b. Cet idiot de ton frère a oublié de me répondre.
    ‘That idiot of your brother has forgotten to answer me’.

There seems to be a pragmatic difference too: Type I is used when the speaker is impressed by someone or something, as a result of a perception, Type II is used to express a certain feeling towards a referent, a feeling that might already exist in the speaker. As Dutch and English do not have a possible variation in the second determiner position, these languages have to use the indefinite determiner in both subtypes:

(14) a. Hij is een boom van een kerel.
  ‘He is a tree of a man’.
  b. Jouw feestneus van een broer wilde deze mooie dag nodig naar Lembang toe.
    ‘Your party-nose of a brother urgently wanted to go to Lembang at this nice day’.

(Helga Ruebsamen, Het lied en de waarheid, p. 52)

German is an interesting test case because it is the only language with the possibility of varying between the indefinite article and zero in the Det2 position. This variation has been regarded by most authors as stylistic or dialectal (cf. Abraham (1998: 342) and Campe (1997, her example 12 b)). But Vuillaume et al. (1993) have looked at the actual distribution of the two variants in language use, be it in a small corpus, with only 70 examples. Their finding was that there is more to it than style. They discuss several examples, among which the following:
Und nun sah er wirklich Kröger auf sich zukommen, den grossen Kröger, den früheren Genossen Kröger, einen Ochsen von einem Mann [...].

‘And now he really saw Kröger approaching him, the big Kröger, the former comrade Kröger, an ox of a man [...]’.

In this context ‘ox’ is clearly used metaphorically for the big size of the man, which made a strong impression on the subject. It is thus a Type I example. If Det2 had been left out, the construction would have an insulting meaning: the subject calls the man an ox, which means he considers him stupid. Then it would constitute a Type II case.

3.2. The built-in metaphor

A few words should be said about the metaphor that is part of the Type I EBNP. We should be well aware that this is not a case of conceptual metaphor. The latter type of metaphor pertains to general categories: TIME IS MONEY, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, etc. In that case, several aspects of the source domain are mapped onto the more abstract target domain. The target domain is understood in terms of the more accessible source domain. But in the EBNP case, only one aspect or dimension of the two related categories is relevant, cf. Ruiz (1998: 263): ‘[...] the mapping is used to single out and place in focus one aspect of the target which is, by convention, particularly relevant; the rest of the domain remains unaffected’.

According to Ostergard (1998: 92), one should analyze such cases of metaphor (his example is This surgeon is a butcher, but it holds for a butcher of a surgeon as well) in terms of blending. Not the whole butcher scenario is mapped onto the target, ‘only selected parts of the butcher space [are] mapped into the blend’, in this case for example the lack of precision in cutting. This leads to the desired inference that the surgeon is incompetent.

In such comparisons, the dimension, in this case cutting precision, must belong to the range of properties or relevant dimensions of both categories. And at the same time the two categories should hold prototypically different values on the intended dimension: The cutting precision of the surgeon is prototypically precise, that of the butcher prototypically imprecise. In the blend we preserve the surgical scenario, but we substitute the surgical value of cutting precision with the value of the butcher scenario, leading to a non-prototypical, extreme value in this dimension for the surgeon scenario, which is suggested to hold for the referent we are talking about. Note that the relevant dimension is not mentioned explicitly in the construction, the hearer must reconstruct which quality or dimension the speaker has in mind.

So, it is not simply a calculus of semantic features that is involved in the interpretational confrontation between the two nouns, it is a whole complex of experience that is the input for the blending process. The construction is a guide in the interpretational process, insofar as it requires an outcome of a certain type: a quality of the referent must come out as representing an extreme case. If a man is compared to a tree, a possible outcome pertains to extreme size, tallness in particular, and it is indeed this outcome that is the conventional meaning of Dutch een boom van een kerel ‘a tree of a man’. But false interpretation and misunderstanding are quite well possible. If you don’t know what English speakers conventionally mean by a bear of a man you have to deduce from the context whether personality, physical size or a strong appetite for sweets is meant.

This type of analysis seems to be adequate for metaphors as they occur in this surgeon is a butcher as well as in the EBNP construction a butcher of a surgeon, but also for certain adjectival compounds. Consider Dutch Dit taken is sneeuwwit ‘This blanket is snow white’. In this case, the relevant dimension, namely ‘white’, is explicitly mentioned in the construction, which makes the interpretation less of a puzzle. The example implies that, normally, the value for blankets on the scale of whiteness is less high than the one for snow. And the actual blanket we are talking about is exceptional in that its value in this dimension takes an extreme value, a value that is the normal value of whiteness for snow.

4. EBNP, PLAC, and DRNA

With the help of the studies by Ross (1998) and Malchukov (2000), we can put the EBNP into a wider perspective. Ross shows that in different Oceanic languages of Northwest Melanesia the adjective-noun construction does not have the ‘normal’ form with the noun as the head. Instead, the relation between attribute and noun is constructed in analogy to the possessive construction a wheel of a bike. This leads to constructions like: a big one of a house. Ross calls this phenomenon ‘Possessive-like attribute construction’, PLAC for short. This construction has also been attested in
Ross discusses extensively the difficulty of determining the head of the construction. His conclusion is that in some of the Oceanic languages the attribute is the head, whereas in other Oceanic languages the second noun has gained head status. It seems that diachronically, a process of head shift is taking place, leading to ‘normal’ attribute-nominal head constructions.

How did the Oceanic languages develop the marked PLAC construction in the first place? Ross hypothesizes that Proto-Oceanic had an EBNP construction (he calls it a whopper construction, from his example a whopper of a house) (p. 271): “[T]here was a (marked) attributive structure, a whopper construction that was patterned on a possessive-construction and that had a marked discourse function.” This construction functioned as a kind of ‘catalysator’ for the development of PLACs. Ross explains the head shift occurring later as follows (p. 273): “Once [PLACs] became the basic attribute construction, it seems to have been a natural process for speakers to reinterpret the referring element (the modified noun) as the head and the attribute as a modifier, doing away with the mismatch.” By ‘mismatch’ he means the discrepancy between the syntactic and the notional side of the construction.

Independently of Ross’s work, Malchukov (2000) discovered patterns of this type in other languages (Tungusic languages, Aleut, Gude, Chinook). His name for the construction is DRNA (Dependency Reversal in Noun-Attribute constructions). Malchukov notes that in languages where the DRNA exists besides a ‘normal’ attributive construction, the DRNA is used to give the attribute high “discourse-pragmatic salience” (p. 45). As a general explanation, he invokes “the notion of iconicity or rather isomorphism between pragmatic and syntactic structures: a pragmatically salient NP-constituent tends to be syntactically salient as well, that is, tends to reveal head properties.” (p. 49).

This view is particularly helpful in relation to the EBNP construction. The ‘upgrading’ of the attribute to a noun which is the head of the construction can be understood against this background. Without the upgrading, the attribute (for example in ‘an angel of a child’) would surface in an adjective (‘angelic’ or in a adverbial constituent ‘like an angel’). With the upgrading, there is the further advantage that the attribute can become a head and an early constituent. All these properties contribute to making it more salient, i.e., more expressive. However, it seems that besides the motivation for expressivity, there is a competing motivation in favor of treating the ‘conceptual’ N2 as the head, which leads to a constant pressure towards ‘head shift’. We should not exclude the possibility that the different European languages we discussed differ with regard to the position they have on this ‘cline’. And even within a language, not all instantiations necessarily take the same position on the cline, cf. the English helluva job case, which seems to be an example in which the head shift has progressed to near completion.

It is well known that expressive constructions are diachronically ‘weak’, i.e. they lose their expressive force, which creates the need for new expressive forms. The life cycle of expressive forms is shorter than that of representational forms. Head shift might be simply a symptom of the loss of expressivity. The construction ‘slides back’ into normal patterning.

In future research, we should look at the different European languages again and try to determine which place the construction in the different languages takes on the cline. Such an approach might resolve the difficulties that have turned up again and again with regard to the headedness question.

5. Conclusions

1. The general approach of Construction Grammar is a fruitful framework for the analysis of the expressive binominal construction. At the same time, the findings can be seen as support for a constructional view on grammar.
2. Two subtypes of the EBNP can be distinguished, the ‘impressive’ one, and the evaluative one. They differ lexically (first noun) and syntactically (the determiners).
3. We did not find an unequivocal answer to the question of which element in the EBNP construction should be considered the head of the construction. The head properties seem to be distributed over the two NPs. Further research is necessary on this point, however.
4. The EBNP construction is motivated in the iconic sense: the salience of the expressive meaning is ‘mirrored’ in the salience given to the notionally attributive part of the construction.
5. With regard to the ‘ecology’ of the construction, the EBNP is motivated by the possessive NP-of-NP construction and by the attributive A-N construction. This double motivation leads to diachronic instability, the latter construction being the stronger ‘attractor’ in the long run.
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