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Download date:21. Sep. 2019
What’s wrong with possessive ’s?

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University of Manchester

Structure of talk
1. Views of the English possessive
2. Our data
3. Kinds of poss-s
4. Evidence for nature of poss-s
5. Choice between poss-s and of-possessive

Poss-s
- Genitive and possessive each problematic as labels.
- We prefer the term possessive ’s for the ’s morph, abbreviated poss-s.

Theoretical status of poss-s
- English poss-s commonly described as a clitic, often the standard example
  - Clitic: element which does not have the independence of a word (prosodically) but which is positioned by the same rules as independent words, i.e. by syntactic rules
- Another theoretical tradition takes poss-s to be a phrasal affix
  - Internal structure of host word and host phrase should be invisible to clitic, and they aren’t

Descriptive grammars
Theoretical accounts agree that poss-s can be freely added (only) at the right edge of an NP
Descriptive accounts recognise that things are not quite so neat
- Quirk et al. (1985)
- Biber et al. (1999)
- Huddleston/Pullum (2002)
Biber et al. (1999)
- Genitive is a 'case inflection for nouns'
- 'Most nouns rarely occur in the genitive'
- '[s]-genitives are outnumbered by of-phrases in all registers'
- 'The group genitive is chiefly used with more or less fixed collocations. When there is post-modification, the more common alternative is to resort to an of-phrase rather than an s-genitive'

Payne & Huddleston (2002)
- Pronouns treated as subtype of noun; possessive D (e.g. my, mine) = genitive case of pronoun (e.g. I)
- Two kinds of poss-s:
  - head genitive has poss-s on head noun
  - phrasal genitive ≈ group genitive
- Phrasal genitive 'is normally restricted to post-head dependents with the form of a PP, including else' [!] (2002: 479)

So-called “group genitives”
- This is critical pattern for all analysts
- Poss-s attached at right edge of possessor NP to element that is not head
- Should be as acceptable as attachment to head noun
- Said to be spoken/colloquial (Carstairs 1987, Rosenbach 2005)
- We have started with spoken component of BNC, and ...

Spoken BNC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>total tokens (= words)</td>
<td>10,409,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of-possessive</td>
<td>31,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poss-s total</td>
<td>11,419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poss-s not double or classifier</td>
<td>9,813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>double genitive</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a friend of John’s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classifier genitive</td>
<td>1,386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(men’s magazines)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Added to stem in one-word NP

Jackie’s talk
One of life’s little comforts

- Most straightforward use of poss-s
- Poss-s added like an inflection to a noun or even, perhaps, as an inflection
- (All examples from spoken BNC)

Added to irregular plural

children’s needs
the mice’s nest
young people’s money

Coincides with regular plural

If I could draw members attention to the supplementary papers
And don’t forget <pause> erm perhaps we ought to say a word on the er on the conservative’s side here.

- Is one occurrence of -s ‘suppressed’?
- (Classification ignores missing or misplaced apostrophes in transcription)

No extra syllable after sibilant

when I was in Hans’ class

- Not an example of poss-s if suppressed or otherwise absent
- ??Arguably could be analysed as poss-s somehow merged with final sound of stem, cf. portmanteau analysis of regular plural possessives

Added to head-final NP

the oldest girl’s name

- Usually treated as addition to stem, just like simplest Jackie’s talk pattern
- In Old English, genitive would have been marked on all or most words in NP
- In PDE poss-s has semantic scope over the whole NP:
  [the oldest girl]’s name

Added to pronoun + else

it’s not right up against somebody else’s house

- Assumption is that somebody is head of possessor NP
- else is post-head dependent
Added to N & N coordination
If you happen to know your bride or
bridegroom's tastes
What was your father and grandfather’s
attitude to authority in the pit?
- Poss-s fully acceptable after this routine
kind of coordination
- Remains grammatical if either 1st or 2nd
conjunct plus conjunction omitted:
your father’s attitude
your grandfather’s attitude

Added to N & N coordination
- Poss-s again has semantic scope over
whole coordinated NP:
[your [father and grandfather] ]’s attitude
*your father attitude
- Poss-s applied to whole coordination
rather than each conjunct – which also
possible
- Choice partially correlated with semantic
interpretation, but inconsistently applied
by speakers (Biber et al. 1999: 298)

Added to measure coordination
- an hour and half’s discussion
- a year or two’s hiatus
- a day or so’s time
- In time/measure phrase, usually adds
fractional or approximate value which
cannot stand on its own as possessor:
*so’s time
- Fractional ones ≈ archaic numeral (an
hour and [a] half = one and a half hours)
- Approximation coordinations semantically
equivalent to postmodification

Coordination possessives
- Quirk et al. treat measure coordinations
as group genitive (1985: 1345), though
?silent on N & N type (her mum and dad’s
house)
- Biber et al. (1999: 298) include both
coordination types under group genitive
- Payne & Huddleston treat N & N
coordination as head genitive, not phrasal
genitive (2002: 481-2)

Added to non-head-final NP
- the presbytery of Hamilton’s claim/
  overture/etc [×4]
- the director of social services report [×2]
- the Department of Transports manual of
  environmental appraisal
- [a] cat in hell’s chance [×2]
The implications for my daughter’s safety
and security, and and mine and the rest of
my family’s

Added to non-head-final NP
- a huge percentage of the whole of Scotland’s
  population
- contribute to China’s, China as a whole’s economic
development
- the colour of the leader of the council’s shirt
- he was engaged to, then to the then president of
  America’s daughter
- the Prime Minister of the time’s favourite WDA head
- it’s our land <pause> it’s not our land <pause> it’s
  the people of Leicestershire’s land
Added to non-head-final NP

- the whole of the planet’s energy existence
- the lady of the house’s dress
- the world-wide Fun [sic] for Nature’s Walk for the Rain Forest
- the Archbishop of Canterbury’s special envoy
- near one of my sister’s houses
- your letter from the er director of er <unclear>
- the Officers of the Director General’s broadcasting Principle Assistant Dalek to the Director General

So-called “group genitive”

- At most 22 examples (20 certain), just 0.22% of poss-s in spoken BNC
- All have noun immediately before poss-s (cf. received wisdom that any category will do)
- Many have phrasal proper name as possessor
  - the Presbytery of Hamilton (×4, all in one text), the Department of Transport, the Archbishop of Canterbury,
    the World-Wide Fund for Nature, the Director of Social Services, etc.
- and/or well-established collocation
  - the lady of the house

Additional “group genitives”?  

- Coordinated types are not all the same:
  (i)  mum and dad’s house
  - In N&N, final word of NP is really part of head [between 28 and 31 examples]
  (ii)  a(n) hour/week/year and (a) half’s discussion/etc.
  - Can be treated as set phrase [×4, all with half]
  (iii)  a day or so’s time, a year or two’s hiatus
  - Real “group genitive” or set phrase? [×2]

“Group genitive” with else?

- 64 examples of indefinite pronoun + else + poss-s
- But else always comes immediately after head without possibility of movement
- Head in BNC data always indefinite pronoun like somebody, everyone, etc., items which only permit post-modification, even by Adj

Avoidance strategy: of-possessive

We’re speaking for working people in this country and we are a reliable indicator of the feelings, the dreams, the hopes of working people right across the country […]

- No poss-s despite human, topical possessor and lengthy possessum (but also – naturally – lengthy possessor)
- More work to be done on statistics
Avoidance: split possessive

Oh you must put something in a person's mouth that has epilepsy until they landed on somebody's desk who was actually supposed to carry out the work has allayed people's fears who've been used for those residential home agreements and I went to my son's, er which is now coming

Avoidance: split possessive

A bit of a twinkle in somebody's eye with no money at all to spend on physical work. We don't know the gentleman's name with the tape recorder when it's someone's birthday in the family. It's somebody else's fault in a different organisation. I was very friendly with the manager's secretary of the Co-op, Cyril [...]

Avoidance: split possessive

Yes, er no it's the neighbour's house across the road. My neighbour's husband down the stair instead of borrowing other people's in the yard. This is someone's baby in the audience that we're having a go at is it Clarke Kent, is that the guy's name on television?

Avoidance: split possessive

He gives me a bit of paper with the horses names on wants galloping. What they've paid me <pause> wa what I'm entitled to <pause> is erm <pause> obviously my week's wage <pause> that I've worked. It doesn't affect the value of anybody's vote in those countries

Split possessive

- 16 or 17 examples, comparable with "group genitive"
  - Theoretical analyses and descriptive grammars all predict group genitive
  - Speaker actually produces split possessive with poss-s attached to head noun and not at right edge
- Not randomly distributed
- "Group genitive" not always available

Headedness of possessor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ordinary poss-s</td>
<td>≥9,673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>split</td>
<td>16-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N &amp; N coordination</td>
<td>28-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>measure coordination with half</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>else</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proper name or set phrase</td>
<td>14-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approximation coordination</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>real group</td>
<td>6-7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‡ Not randomly distributed
‡ "Group genitive" not always available
Attachment tendencies of poss-s

- Strongly prefers to attach to:
  - Head of NP
  - Noun
- **In practice**, these tendencies rarely allowed to be overridden, and even then:
  - NP is often (partly) lexicalised
- Distinction between headed and phrasal poss-s not sharply drawn and not needed

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Multivariate analysis

- Logistic regression, Goldvarb 3
- Mutual dependence of factor groups not properly controlled for yet, analysis not complete
- Difficulties with topicality and definiteness (cf. Szmrecsanyi & Hinrichs 2007)
- Some trends clear already
- Factor weights, all significant, are given such that:
  - those nearer zero favour poss-s
  - those around 0.5 have little effect on choice
  - those nearer 1 favour of-possessive
- Thanks to Maciej Baranowski

possessor animacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>factor</th>
<th>weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>human</td>
<td>0.177</td>
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<td>place</td>
<td>0.675</td>
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<tr>
<td>body part</td>
<td>0.932</td>
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<td>inanimate concrete</td>
<td>0.954</td>
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</table>

- Non-collective human referent is strongest factor in this group predisposing to poss-s

possessor length in words

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>factor</th>
<th>weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or more</td>
<td>0.869</td>
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possessor post-modification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>factor</th>
<th>weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>0.473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>0.829</td>
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</table>

- Post-modification strongly disfavours poss-s
possession final sound

<table>
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<tr>
<th>factor</th>
<th>weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>0.445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unvoiced sibilant, etc. [s, ks, f, ũ]</td>
<td>0.666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voiced sibilant [z, ź, ʤ]</td>
<td>0.670</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

possession animacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>factor</th>
<th>weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no possessum</td>
<td>0.173</td>
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<tr>
<td>inanimate concrete</td>
<td>0.260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collective human</td>
<td>0.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>0.768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human</td>
<td>0.779</td>
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possession length in words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 or more</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.080</td>
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<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>0.365</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0.564</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.743</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.088</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Acknowledgement

- We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for financial support 2006-9 for the project ‘Germanic possessive -s : an empirical, historical and theoretical study’.
- Project website
  http://www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/germanic-possessive-s/

Select references


Our ‘s project continues ...

This presentation will be available – comments welcome – on project web page and also on
http://tinyurl.com/DD-UMan