

What's wrong with possessive 's?

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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

2

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Poss-s

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

4

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

5

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)

6

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'

8

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)

9

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11

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 ...

12

Spoken BNC

total tokens (≈ words)	10,409,858
<i>of</i> -possessive	31,640
poss-s total	11,419
poss-s not double or classifier	9,813
double genitive (<i>a friend of John's</i>)	220
classifier genitive (<i>men's magazines</i>)	1,386

13

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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)

15

Added to irregular plural

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

16

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)

17

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

18

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

19

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

20

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

21

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)

22

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

23

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)

24

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 Transport's 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

25

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

26

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

27

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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*

29

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*]
- Approximations are most group-like:
 - (iii) *a day or so's time, a year or two's hiatus*
 - Real "group genitive" or set phrase? [×2]

30

"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

31

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

32

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, 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, we're having a go at
 is it Clarke Kent, is that the guys 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> wha 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

ordinary poss-s	≥9,673
split	16-17
N & N coordination	28-31
measure coordination with <i>half</i>	4
<i>else</i>	64
proper name or set phrase	14-15
approximation coordination	2
real group	6-7



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

39

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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

41

possessor animacy

factor	weight
human	0.177
...	...
place	0.675
body part	0.932
inanimate concrete	0.954

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

42

possessor length in words

factor	weight
1	0.306
2	0.470
3	0.627
4	0.657
5 or more	0.869

43

possessor post-modification

factor	weight
no	0.473
yes	0.829

- Post-modification strongly disfavours poss-s

44

possessor final sound

factor	weight
other	0.445
unvoiced sibilant, etc. [s, ks, ʃ, tʃ]	0.666
voiced sibilant [z, ʒ, ʒ]	0.670

45

possessum animacy

factor	weight
no possessum	0.173
inanimate concrete	0.260
collective human	0.308
...	...
time	0.768
human	0.779

46

possessum length in words

factor	weight
10 or more	0.007
9	0.080
...	...
6	0.122
5	0.191
4	0.365
3	0.564
2	0.743
1	0.088

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- Project website
<http://www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/germanic-possessive-s/>

48

Our 's project continues ...

This presentation will be available – comments welcome – on project web page and also on

<http://tinyurl.com/DD-UMan>

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50