【Notes & Discussions】

Understanding the English Genitive: The Choice Between the *-s* and the *of* Constructions

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When two similar grammatical structures can be used almost interchangeably in certain linguistic environments, the finer distinctions between those structures often elude EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. Such is the case with the *-s* genitive and the *of* genitive. The similar and yet distinctive distributions of these structures can be problematic for EFL learners unless they are carefully led to understand the uniqueness of each genitive form.

Grammar references such as that of Quirk *et. al.* (1985) can be very helpful toward the objective of bringing clarification, as long as they are used as a supplement to the instructor's own linguistic analysis of the problem. In this paper I will assume such an approach as I seek to clarify some of the major factors which distinguish the *-s* genitive from the *of* genitive. I will use some of the main points of Quirk *et. al.* on this issue as a springboard for interpreting a variety of written and spoken data involving the genitive.

To begin with, Quirk *et. al.* (1985) summarize their discussion on the genitive issue by referring to "the most severe constraints on variation" (p.1282). One of these constraints is found when the nouns of the genitive phrase occur in an objective relation. This objective function is almost always conveyed via the *of*

structure, as in 1:

1. (Bartlett & Bartlett, p.80) We drove within sight of the sea.

To illustrate the objective relation in "sight of the sea," we could paraphrase the sentence as "we... saw the sea." Here the head noun "sea" thus functions as an object in the sentence.

If we try to convert example 1 from an *of* to a *-s* construc-tion, however, we will discover that the *-s* genitive does not give us the same meaning: "we drove within the *sea's sight." In this paraphrase "sea" would seem to take on a subjective function and an animate role, as though the sea has the ability of sight. It is evident, then, that only the *-of* construction can convey the intended meaning of objectivity in example 1.

Most of the other instances of the objective genitive are similarly restricted to the use of the *of* construction. As Quirk *et. al.* (1985) mention, though, there is one exception to this rule. When the head noun in the genitive phrase is derived from a verb, either the *of* or the *-s* structure can express objectivity. Consider 2, which is taken from the script of a lecture:

2. (Roguski & Palmberg, p.133) So the microcomputer revolution is based upon the development of the spread-sheet.

In this example the objective sense of "spreadsheet" could also have been conveyed through "the spreadsheet's development."

Besides this issue of expressing objectivity, Quirk et. al. (1985) also stress a second important area of distinction between the *-s* and the *of* genitive. They refer to a lexical "gender scale" which represents a continuum of noun classes that are more or less likely to take the *-s* genitive (pp.314-318, 322-325). On the higher

end of the scale are "personal" nouns related to humans, followed by nouns with "personal characteristics, *ie* animal nouns and collective nouns" (p.1277). Both types of nouns frequently use the *-s* genitive, in examples such as "John's bike," "the President's campaign," "the cow's horns," and "the committee's decision." Because the *-s* genitive is so common with these nouns from the higher end of the scale, Quirk et. al. stress "the 'personal connection' of the [*-s*] genitive" (p.1277).

Nouns from the lowest end of the "gender scale," however, function differently with the genitive. To these nouns, which are classified as concrete, inanimate nouns, Quirk *et. al.* (1985) apply their second "severe constraint" concerning variation between the two forms of the genitive: "with inanimate, in particular concrete, nouns, the *of* construction is normally required" (p.1277). This point is illustrated by the example of "the roof of this house," which Quirk *et. al.* diagram as questionable or unacceptable when converted into "the house's roof" (p.1277).

This "severe constraint" on the *-s* genitive deserves some further analysis. While it may be true that the *-s* genitive used with concrete, inanimate nouns is fairly nonstandard in formal English, in less formal environments such a construction certainly seems to emerge quite naturally, as in 3:

3. John: How are you doing with your rental properties?
   Mary: Oh, pretty good. We've got the shop all fixed up now, but several of the house's windows need to be replaced.

Here the choice of the *-s* rather than the *of* construction is shaped by the context. Because of the rapidity of speech discourse, Mary is most likely thinking as efficiently as possible in order to answer John quickly. She therefore more readily conceives of "several of the house's windows" instead of the more complex "several of the

windows of the house." While the latter phrase hides the genitive in its chain of prepositional phrases, Mary's phrase accentuates the genitive ("house's windows") and keeps it together as an integrated unit. Therefore, in this context Mary chooses the *-s* genitive since it is more concise and cohesive than the *of* genitive, which would feel awkward to use because of its complexity.

Besides such examples from normal conversation, other data from informal types of writing also reveal the use of the *-s* genitive with inanimate, concrete nouns. Note example 4, which is taken from a novel:

4. (Hamilton, p.155) Behind and below me, I could no longer make out the gaunt tree skeleton marking the Chrysler's hiding place.

Also consider 5, which appeared in an advertisement essay of a mail-order catalog (DAK Industries, Late Summer 1992, p.6):

5. But, I'll describe a really huge one to demonstrate CD ROM's awesome search power.

In both of these examples the writers have "personalized" an inanimate object, ie the Chrysler is hiding, and the CD ROM has an innate, human-like ability to search for something. Because "Chrysler" and "CD ROM" are given animate characteristics, they function in 4 and 5 as other animate nouns on the gender scale would. That is, they occur quite naturally with the *-s* genitive.

In light of examples 3, 4, and 5, all of which allow inanimate, concrete nouns to be used with the *-s* genitive, it seems reasonable to surmise that the second of the "most severe constraints" on genitive variation mentioned by Quirk *et. al.* (1985) may not be as "severe" as we would be led to believe. In other words, the lexical

factor of animate versus inanimate features does not always prevent variation in the choice of the genitive construction. Such discoveries of occasional variation are really only the "tip of the iceberg," though. If we also explore the common, subjective function of the genitive, we will soon realize that variation in the choice of the *-s* versus the *of* construction is even more widespread.

The task remains, then, of discovering further conditioning factors which would define the reasons for this variation. Quirk *et. al.* (1985) briefly mention one area which can help us partially explain the variation between the use of the *-s* versus the *of* construction. In their discussion of "communicative factors," they refer to the principle of "end-focus," in which structures are organized so that the word or words of greatest communicative value occur at the end of the phrase. In this final position the word(s) receives emphasis and attention. Consider 6, a possible announcement on a public poster:

> 6. A meeting of the Riverside Neighborhood Association will take place on Sunday, October 10 at **the home of Judith Mason, 255 N. Dill.** Open to the public.

Notice the information in bold-faced type at the end of the first sentence. This phrase contains crucial information; the reader of the announcement needs to learn about the specific location of the meeting if he or she is to attend. In other words, the reader needs to know that the meeting will be held at the home of Judith Mason, and not at the home of someone else in the association. Therefore, the announcement is written so that "Judith Mason" and "255 N. Dill" appear at the end of the phrase and at the end of the entire sentence. In this position of end-focus the details of the meeting's location are emphasized for the reader.

Concerning our issue of choosing the appropriate genitive

construction, consider the effect of rephrasing "the home of Judith Mason" into "Judith Mason's home." This latter phrase seems somewhat unnatural since the communicative focus of the invitation is not on "home" but on the more specific "Judith Mason," a piece of information that tells the reader exactly which home the meeting will be held in. The progression of general to specific information in the genitive phrase is thus important for this context, and the *of* construction is chosen because it provides such a progression.

In other contexts the *-s* genitive appropriately fulfills the conditions for the principle of "end-focus." For example, imagine a different scenario than the one which was assumed for the neighborhood meeting in 6: the Riverside Neighborhood Association has always met at Judith Mason's office in the past. Prior to the announcement about the October 10th meeting, the association's members would therefore assume that the next meeting will be held at her office as well. In this situation, then, the announcement will need to give communicative focus to the word "home" so that the members will perceive the change in location:

> A meeting of the Riverside Neighborhood Association will take place on Sunday, October 10 at Judith Mason's home, 255 N. Dill.

Beyond the influence of "end-focus" for choosing a particular genitive construction, there are other communicative factors unmentioned by Quirk *et. al.* (1985) which also influence the choice which is made. For example, when the genitive phrase is in the subject position of an independent clause, the greater communicative weight often seems to be placed at the front of the phrase and not at the end of it. Example 7, taken from a magazine

ad for Toyota, illustrates this point:

> 7. (*National Geographic,* back-cover of Aug. 1992 issue) Your parents' car. Your first car. The car you learned to drive in. Millions of people have fond memories of a Toyota Corolla. And though we've made lots of changes to the Corolla over the years, the soul of the car has always stayed the same.

Notice that "the soul of the car" could have been rephrased to "the car's soul," since "car" is personalized in a similar manner to what we observed in 4 and 5 above. The communicative emphasis on "soul," however, requires that it be placed at the beginning of the clause. In this position the reader's attention is drawn to "soul."

This importance of "front-focus" is also supported by 8, a typical formal description of an animate being:

> 8. The wings of the North American spotted moth are predominately gray in color.

Again the head noun "wings" needs to stay in the initial position so that it will receive primary emphasis. In fact, if the *-s* genitive were to be used instead, as in "the North American spotted moth's wings," the word "wings" would be greatly deemphasized. The lengthy premodification would detract from the focus on "wings." The *of* genitive is therefore the natural choice for this context.

Having thus considered the influence of "end-focus" and "front-focus" in the three previous examples, we should also take note of another communicative factor which affects the choice of the genitive in these situations. This factor is the register of language used in the situation. If we consider 6, 7, and 8 again, we can observe that all three examples are written in a formal

register. This formality is expressed, in part, through the use of the *of* genitive. In this respect the formality of the *of* construction seems to contrast the less formal, more intimate use of the *-s* genitive. As noted earlier, the *-s* genitive often conveys a sense of personal association.

If we consider again the examples which use the *-s* genitive, we will find further support for correlating the choice of genitive construction and register. Examples 3, 4, and 5, which are all variations from a lexical restriction on the choice of the genitive, commonly use an informal register. Their informal register is expressed, in part, through the use of the *-s* genitive. In light of these examples, as well as those considered in 6–8, it would seem that the register used in a given linguistic context has a great effect on the choice of the *-s* versus the *of* genitive. An informal register will often use the *-s* rather than the *of* construction, while a more formal register will often take the *of* rather than the *-s* construction.

One other communicative factor that seems worth considering in the genitive choice issue occurs in colloquial English. In this style and medium of language, stress is often used to mark the communicative weight of an utterance. Consider 9, an example from spontaneous conversation (capital letters are used to indicate stress):

9. (Svartvik and Quirk, 338)
   A The GENERAL standard of living has gone UP, HASN'T it?
   B Enormously.
   C But people WRITE as if EVERYBODY'S standard of living has increased.

In speaker C's utterance, vocal stress on "EVERYBODY'S" gives communicative emphasis to this word. By using stress, then, this

speaker does not need to rely on end-focus as a medium of expressing emphasis. That is, speaker C does not need to use the *of* construction, as in "the standard of living of everybody," in order to emphasize "everybody." Instead, speaker C's vocal stress fulfills the function of marking emphasis and allows the use of the *-s* genitive in: "EVERYBODY'S standard of living."

We can observe the same function of stress in 10, which is an example taken from a "Dimetapp" television commercial (NBC TV, Oct. 11, 1992):

10. All families catch colds, even DOCTOR'S families.

Here again vocal stress is used with the *-s* genitive to mark communicative emphasis, and the use of stress provides an alternative to using the *of* genitive in a pattern of end-focus (*ie* even families of doctors).

Here we can also note that in 9 and 10 the choice of the *-s* genitive is again associated with an informal register. This observation supports our previous conclusion that the factor of register seems to have a strong effect on the choice of the *-s* versus the *of* genitive. Even though this factor alone can not be used to explain all of the issues of variation in the choice of genitive construction, the data of this paper would suggest that register does play a significant role in shaping the genitive in various contexts. Further study is therefore needed to more clearly define the relationship between register and other factors which influence the choice between the *-s* and the *of* genitive.

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