The Choice between the S-genitive and the Of-genitive

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Abstract

English has two ways of expressing genitive relations between two noun phrases: One is the s-genitive and the other is the of-genitive. Many studies show that English language learners face the difficulties in their distinguishing usage between the two genitives. This paper provides a brief description of the factors that affect the choice between the two genitives, the reasons for ESL/EFL learner’s incorrect use of the genitives, and implications for the ESL/EFL teachers.

*Keywords:* s-genitive, of-genitive, register, supra-sentential, nested s-genitive
The Choice between the S-genitive and the Of-genitive

Many studies (Larsen-Freeman, 1976; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007) have investigated the difficulties faced by English language learners in their distinguishing usage between the s-genitive and the of-genitive. This paper will explore two forms of the genitive construction, many factors that affect the choice between the two genitives, the reasons for ESL/EFL learner’s incorrect use of the genitives, and implications for the ESL/EFL teachers.

The grammar of Standard English has two competing ways of expressing genitive relations between two noun phrases: “THE GENITIVE CONSTRUCTION (i.e. the ‘s-genitive’) and THE OF-CONSTRUCTION (i.e. the ‘of-genitive’)” (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvick, 1985, p.1276). “THE GENITIVE CONSTRUCTION consists of two noun phrases: one a noun phrase marked for the genitive case by inflection [NP1]; the other a succeeding and superordinate noun phrase unmarked for case [NP2] in which the genitive noun phrase is embedded with a determinative function. ‘Determinative’ function means that the genitive noun phrase functions like a definite determiner: it plays a role in the superordinate noun phrase equivalent to that of a determiner such as the or our” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1276):

the location

its location

the city’s location (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1276)

“In THE OF-CONSTRUCTION, which is often equivalent in meaning to the genitive construction, the superordinate noun phrase [NP2] precedes a noun phrase introduced by of [NP1]. The [s]-genitive and the of-[genitive] thus occur in different order in the two constructions” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1276):
The city’s location \[\text{NP1’s NP2}\]

The location of the city \[\text{NP2 of NP1}\] (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1276)

In many instances like the previous examples, “there is a similarity of function and meaning between” these two constructions and both are “perfectly acceptable.” “However, in other cases, either the [s-]genitive or the of-[genitive] is the only appropriate choice” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 321):

my wife’s father But not: ?the father of my wife

the roof of the house But not: ?*the house’s roof (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 321)

“The use of the s-genitive and the postmodifying of-[genitive] is not indiscriminate. Rather, the choice between these two forms varies depending upon a number of factors” (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999, p. 301). Here, the factors are grouped in two major sections: subsentential/sentential factors and suprasentential factors. Phonological factors, lexical factors, semantic factors, and syntactic factors will be identified at the subsentential/sentential level and register, factors related to processing and parsing, and economy-related factors will be addressed at the suprasentential level.

**Sub-sentential and Sentential Factors**

Subsentential and sentential factors, that affect the choice between the s-genitive construction and the of-construction, are subcategorized as phonological factors, lexical factors, semantic factors, and syntactic factors.

**Phonological factors**

Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi (2007) relate phonological factors with the choice of the s-genitive and the of-genitive. According to their study, “the presence of a final sibilant in the
[superordinate noun phrases (NP2)], as in [the following example], may discourage the use of the s-genitive” (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 452):

But that is the sad and angry side of Bush. (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p.452)

Rohdenburg (2000) considers the phenomenon as “a phonological horror aequi effect” (as cited in Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p.452): Because “Bush ends in a sibilant /ʃ/, language users – according to the theory – avoid an immediately adjacent sibilant in the form of an s-genitive (i.e., Bush’s sad and angry side) and choose an of-genitive instead” as in the previous example (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 452).

Lexical factors

There are many lexical factors which affect the choice between the s-genitive and the of-genitive (Quirk et al., 1985, p.1277; Biber et al., 1999, pp. 302-303; Huddleston & Geoffrey, 2002, p. 477; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 315). “The [s-]genitive is favored by those gender classes which are highest on the gender scale, in particular where N[P]1 is a personal name, a personal noun, and a noun with personal characteristics, ie animal nouns and collective nouns” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1277):

John’s house *the house of John
the boy’s bike *?the bike of the boy
the cat’s tail ?the tail of the cat
the family’s last name ?the last name of the family

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1277)

“With inanimate, in particular concrete, nouns, the of-[genitive] is normally required” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1277):

The legs of the table *?the table’s legs (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1277)
“There is, however, a group of inanimate nouns which permit the [s-]genitive, especially geographical nouns and nouns denoting location and time” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1277):

- China’s population
- the population of China
- the world’s economy
- the economy of the world
- last week’s menu
- the menu of last week

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1277)

**Semantic factors**

“Although both the s-genitives and postmodifying of-[genitives] are used with a wide range of semantic interpretations, each expresses some preferred relations” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 303). The s-genitive is usually preferred when the meaning of the NP2 is possession, attribute, origin, or subjective (Biber et al., 1999, p. 303). When the relationship between the two noun phrases is a subject-verb relation, it is called subjective (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1278):

- Mrs. Johnson’s passport
  (possession: Mrs. Johnson has a passport.)
- the victim’s courage
  (attribute: The victim was courageous.)
- Byron’s poems
  (origin: Byron wrote poems.)
- Her parents’ consent
  (subjective: Her parents consented.)

(Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 321-322)

“Other relations commonly expressed by the s-genitive are time and measure” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 303; Huddleston & Geoffrey, 2002, p. 470). “In addition, s-genitives are commonly used with a classifying function” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 303):

- Yesterday’s job
  (time)
- ten days’ absence
  (measure)
- children’s cloth
  (classifying)(Biber et al., 1999, pp. 265-296)
When the NP2 means “partitive, defining, [or] objective” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 303), the of-genitive is preferred.

This section of the discussion  
(partitive)

The city of Fort Collins  
(definition)

The brutal murder of a baby  
(objective)  
(Biber et al., 1999, p. 303)

“In addition, of-[genitives] are commonly used after quantifying nouns and species nouns” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 303; Huddleston & Geoffrey, 2002, p. 477). “Quantifying nouns are used to refer to quantities of both masses and entities, which are specified in a following of-[genitive] by uncountable nouns and plural countables.” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 252) “Common species nouns are: class, kind, make, sort, species, and type” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 255).

A cup of coffee  
(quantifying nouns)

A certain species of bacteria  
(species nouns)

“The preferred uses of the two constructions are shown most clearly where they are both present in the same noun phrase” (Biber et al., 1999, pp.303-304):

The Government’s denial of the need for the draft directive is a clear breach of the welfare principle enshrined in the UN convention.  
[1]

After yesterday’s disclosure of the court action, the curator of the university’s art collection spoke out in favor of its plans to sell one of the Torrie works.  
[2]  
(Biber et al., 1999, pp.303-304)

Shown in the example of [1] and [2], “less commonly, the objective relationship is expressed by an s-genitive, and the subjective relation is expressed by [an of-genitive]” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 304).

**Syntactic factors**
The choice between the s-genitive and the of-genitive is affected by syntactic factors. “Most typically, s-genitive constructions are used in one-word [NP1]s. In contrast, the of-genitive[s] are commonly used in much longer [NP1]s” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 303). In other words, complexity appears to be one of the main factors influencing the choice of the s-genitive vs. the of-genitive (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 303-304; Huddlestone & Geoffrey, 2002, p. 478; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 315). Compare the following examples (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 304-305):

The trustee’s appointment [1]
The recent appointment of a part-time woman and two men [2]
Mr. Walsh’s murder [3]
The murder of an English tourist, Monica Cantwell [4]
The sudden arrival of Mr. Uppal, who hitherto had taken no interest in the case [5]
The withdrawal of the service to the port’s St. Andrew’s Road area [6]

The s-genitives in these examples consist of just determiner/title plus noun. Where an s-genitive contains more than a single word, it is normally restricted to a simple structure (such as determiner + noun, or premodifier + noun.) The of-genitive, on the other hand, can be much more complex. The complexity of the [NP1]s in the above examples is due to coordination, an appositional construction, a postmodifying prepositional phrase, and a relative clause” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 305).

“The choice between the genitive and the of-[genitive] is also conditioned by the linear organization of utterances in discourse, in particular factors (such as end-focus and end-weight) that encourage the placing of more complex and communicatively more important constituents towards the end of the superordinate noun phrase. The genitive (N[P]1’s N[P]2) is generally
favored when N[P]2 has a higher communicative value than does N[P]1, whereas the of-[genitive] (N[P]2 of N[P]1) is preferred when the thematic distribution is the reverse” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1282).

Supra-sentential Factors

There are also many factors that affect the choice between the s-genitive construction and the of-genitive construction at the supra-sentential level (i.e., discourse level). Supra-sentential factors are sub-categorized as register, factors related to processing/parsing, and economy.

Register

The registers vary greatly in the distribution of the s-genitive and the of-genitive. According to Biber’s (1999, pp. 301-302) corpus findings, “the s-genitives are outnumbered by the of-[genitive]s in all registers,” which is “due to a general preference for less compact structures.” “The frequency of the s-genitive is particularly high in news, presumably because it represents a good way of compressing information.” “Academic prose has the highest frequency of of-[genitive]s and low frequency of s-genitives”, because the structure of the of-genitives makes it clearer which words go together, and accordingly gives more clarity of the information.

Factors related to processing and parsing

According to Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi (2007), factors related to processing and parsing include “all those constraints whose effects have been said to facilitate parsing (e.g. end-weight) or to avoid processing difficulties (e.g. nested genitives), or factors which can be (partly) explained by properties of the human speech production system (e.g. persistence)” (p.453).

According to the principle of end-weight, which was defined by Behaghel and Wasow (as cited in Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 453), “language users tend to place ‘heavier’, more
complex constituents after shorter ones, which yields a constituent ordering that might facilitate parsing” (p. 453). “It has been claimed that the principle of end-weight impacts on the alternation between” the s-genitive and the of-genitive as follows: if the NP1 is heavy, “there should be a general preference for” the of-genitive because it places the NP1 last; if the NP2 is heavy, “we expect a general preference for” the s-genitive “because it places” NP2 last. For illustration, consider the following example:

Latter domain, under the guidance of Chef Tom Yokel, will specialize in steaks, chops, chicken and prime beef as well as Tom’s favorite dish, stuffed shrimp. (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 453)

“In the of-genitive (e.g. the guidance of Chef Tom Yokel), the [NP1] consists of three words (Chef Tom Yokel) and the [NP2] of two words (the, guidance)” (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p.453).

Persistence is a “further processing-related factor on the genitive choice”, that is, “precedence of an identical genitive construction in the preceding textual discourse” (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 455). “Language users tend to reuse linguistic material that they have used or heard before; depending on the analytical perspective (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 455). This phenomenon has been called ‘persistence’ by Szmrecsanyi (2006), ‘priming’ by Bock (1986), ‘structural parallelism by Weiner & Labov (1983), and ‘repetition in discourse’ by Tannen (1989) (as cited in Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 455). Szmrecsanyi (2006) says, “persistence significantly impacts on genitive choice in spoken English” (as cited in Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 455), and Gries (2005) says, “the phenomenon is known to be observable in both spoken and written language” (as cited in Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p.455).
In both countries the cases appeared to indicate what is most feared: that the continent’s river systems are now infected, making the spread of the disease extremely difficult to control. In Ecuador, the country’s Medical Association said 100 people had died of a total of 5000 cases. (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p.455)

The s-genitive is preferred when either of the two noun phrases contains a nested of-genitive, and the of-genitive is preferred when either of the two noun phrases contains a nested s-genitive. In other words, language users avoid two identical genitive constructions in the same noun phrase (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 456):

Because of the recent death of the bride’s father, the marriage of Miss Terri to John will be a small one at noon tomorrow at the Forest Park. [1]

Also in the House of Representatives’ bill was more than $65 million for refurbishing the Presidio over the next two years. (p.456) [2]

In [1], the NP1 contains “a nested s-genitive (the bride’s father), which might be one reason why the superordinate genitive construction is realized as an of-genitive and not as an s-genitive. Note here that the bride’s father’s recent death, besides not being very aesthetic, is probably also more difficult to parse,” (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 456) because it is not transparent. [2] shows that NP1 contains a nested of-genitive (the House of Representatives) and its superordinate construction is an s-genitive.

Economy-related factors

Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi (2007, p. 457-459) show that in spoken language and also in written language, the s-genitive is preferred in the contexts where lexical density is high. In the context where high lexical density is needed, there is a need to “economically code more information in a given textual passage.” As mentioned above, the s-genitive can be seen as the
“more compact and thus it can be a more economical” choice compared to the of-genitive. According to Biber et al. (1999, p. 302), the of-genitive “produces a less dense and more transparent means of expression.” The s-genitive, by contrast, “represents a good way of compressing information” (as cited in Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 457).

Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi (2007) also explain the preference of the s-genitive with the given passage’s numbers of nouns, which is “much in analogy to increased lexical density” (p. 458). Increased numbers of nouns can indicate the need to make the passage more compact and dense. Thus, the s-genitive should be preferred because the s-genitive is “more relatively economical” and the s-genitive has a “more ‘nouny’ structural design” (Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 458).

**Conclusion**

To summarize, genitive choice is dependent upon a complex mechanics of interlocking factors. The factors that influence strongly the choice of construction are categorized into two main factors: one sub-sentential/sentential factors; the other supra-sentential factors. Phonological factors, lexical factors, semantic factors, and syntactic factors are identified as the sub-sentential/sentential level. Register, factors related to processing/parsing, and economy-related factors are identified as the supra-sentential level. The of-genitive constructions are preferred to avoid a phonological collision between two adjacent sibilants. The nouns that show the highest s-genitive frequency most typically refer to individual human beings. Semantically, the s-genitive is closely related to the subject of clauses, and of-genitives to the object. There is a similarity between position in the clause and in the noun phrase: early placement for subjects and s-genitives, late placement for objects and of-genitives. There is also a correspondence between the types of relations expressed, most clearly shown in the preference for the subjective relation...
of the s-genitives and for the objective relation of the of-genitives. There is an analogous difference in complexity and information status: subjects and s-genitives are characteristically less complex and more typically convey given information, while objects and of-genitives show the opposite tendency. Besides sub-sentential/sentential factors, there are supra-sentential factors that affect the genitive choice. The frequency of the s-genitive is particularly high in news, whereas the frequency of the of-genitive is strikingly high in academic prose. The choice of the genitive construction is also explained with the consideration of parsing, persistence, nesting, and economy.

Because there are so many complicated factors affecting the choice of the genitive construction and there are no clear cut rules for distinguishing their usage, ESL/EFL students often use the genitive construction incorrectly. Another reason for the ESL/EFL students’ incorrect use of the genitive construction is explained by Larsen-Freeman (1976), who claims that “there exists an acquisition order of English morphemes to which ESL/EFL learners adhere” regardless of their “age or language background” (p. 125). She correlates “the common morpheme difficulty order of the learners and the frequency of occurrence of these morphemes” (Larson-Freeman, 1976, p. 125). So she explains the ESL/EFL students’ difficulty in the use of the genitive by the relative infrequency or the s-morpheme in the s-genitive compared to “other morphemes such as the plural, the past tense, and the progressive” (as cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 315). “For example, the short plural morpheme in the speaking task is ranked fifth, whereas the genitive morpheme (NP’s) occupies the tenth rank” (Larsen-Freeman, 1976, p.128, Table 2). Finally, another reason can be found in the “interference from the students’ native language” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 315). Although all languages have a way of expressing the genitive construction, they do not all regard the same factors as English
does. Thus, ESL/EFL teachers should not teach the usage of the genitive construction in an
oversimplified way like “use the s-genitive with human NPs and the of-genitive with nonhuman
NPs.” ESL/EFL teachers should introduce the different usage of the two genitive constructions
and decide how deeply and in detail they will teach about the factors which affect the choice of
the genitive construction according to the students’ English competence.
References


