Jan Kochanowski University Press

This is a contribution from *Token*: *A Journal of English Linguistics*
Volume 5/2016.
Edited by John G. Newman, Marina Dossena and Sylwester Łodej.

Genitive alternation in New Englishes: The case of Nigerian English

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with influences on the forms of possessive expression in Nigerian English compared to influences reported in other Englishes such as British, American, and Canadian. The study examines and compares independently the four commonly investigated determiners of animacy, text type, prototypicality, and topicality, and it also shows the extent to which variation is attested in possessive form alternation in Nigerian English. The evidence adduced was drawn mainly from the Nigerian component of the International Corpus of English (ICE). More than 3000 data, mainly written register attestations of alternation, were analyzed. The findings suggest that animacy is the primary determiner of possessive expression form in Nigerian English. Prototypicality and syntactic weight/length, which have also been shown to exert strong influences, evidently have very little influence in this variety of English. Because multilingualism is widespread in Nigeria, these patterns likely indicate grammatical structuring partly or wholly derived from local Nigerian languages that have no such alternating system.

Keywords: genitive alternation, Nigerian English noun phrase, animacy, syntactic weight.

1. Introduction

The medium of language allows us to organize and express our thoughts in different yet limited forms. However, these different structures are usually constrained by the grammar of the language in use, such that having decided what to communicate, we thus arrange them into syntactic constructions, generating output best suited to the purpose and context. In some cases, the grammar provides us with more than one choice about how to convey the same, or nearly the same message, whereas in others we have only one

choice of construction. In expressing possession, two options are ordinarily possible. The choice of one over the other has been shown to be influenced by various factors, and their influences have also been shown to differ from one variety of English to another. The common factors of animacy, topicality, prototypicality, and length have been reported to be causal in many publications, albeit in varying degrees (Rosenbach 2014).

Of all syntactic alternations in English, the genitive has been the most widely treated in current scholarship. Rosenbach (2014: 215) argues that it is "Today, […] arguably the best researched of all syntactic alternations in English". Still, there has been no single work demonstrating the extent to which those common factors behave independently in motivating the expression of possession in the Nigerian English noun phrase. The present study is concerned with how the factors of animacy, prototypicality, topicality, and weight varyingly influence the choices of possessive genitive construction, and how frequently they do so. Consider the alternation in (1):

(1) a. the Federal government's exclusive right
b. Exclusive right of the federal government

This paper intends to show which, or which combination, of these factors is most influential in various instances in the choice between the Saxon, suffixal genitive and the Latinate, phrasal genitive as well as how those factors behave differently, as seen in their comparative frequencies of occurrence, in Nigerian English than they do in "older" varieties of English such as the British, American, and Canadian varieties.

2. Genitive variables influencing choices

There has been little agreement in the literature as to the relative strength of the various factors motivating genitive alternation. Thus far, animacy and syntactic weight have been analysed most often and have been found to be key factors, motivating genitive choices independently or simultaneously. Some researchers have tested the relative significance of these as well as other factors (Altenberg 1982; Jucker 1993; Leech et al. 1994; Arnold et al. 2000; Kreyer 2003; Szmrecsanyi 2013). However, common prediction is lacking because the relative independent and/or interactional strength of these factors is subject to different external and internal language variables. Predictions of the several factors are tabulated below (cf. Szmrecsanyi 2010: 2; Rosenbach 2014: 225-227).

3. Conceptualisation and predictions

In the context of previous research, expectations for the motivation of each factor are set out here. They are formulated in accordance with the hypothesis that grammars/constructional choices produced in Nigerian English are highly influenced by and reflective of the grammars of certain indigenous languages, languages which are in contact with this variety of English and which exhibit much less influence by these factors in regard to possessive construction choices.

3.1 Animacy

Animacy is well known to be an influential parameter motivating alternation in almost all varieties of English (Alternberg 1982; Hawkins 1994; Rosenbach 2005, 2014; Hinrichs – Szmrecsanyi 2007; Szmrecsanyi 2010). More specifically, the animacy of the possessor, not that of the possessum, typically determines the choice of *s*-genitive or *of*-genitive, and this is born out in the amount of attention that has been paid to the influence of the possessor's animacy status (cf. Gries – Stefanowitch 2004). The general conclusion is that animate possessors regularly take the *s*-genitive and inanimate possessors the *of*-genitive (Rosenbach 2014). Complicating matters, however, animacy itself is categorized variously among researchers (Kreyer 2003; Rosenbach 2005; Wolk et al. 2013). Wolk et al. (2013) propose five classes: human, collective, temporal, inanimate, and locative. In this scheme, nouns denoting animals fall into the class human. Kreyer (2003) collapses the categories of proper nouns, common nouns, and collective nouns in an effort to devise a personality scale. Common to the diverse groupings along the scale is a distinction of geographical and commercial entities as proper nouns because they behave referentially as proper nouns having one conceptually tangible referent.

The present study focuses on animacy and possessors with the expectations that not only will animate possessors decisively select the *s*-genitive, but inanimate possessors will indecisively select the *of*-genitive such that animacy will be shown to be an independent factor not decisive in predicting genitive construction choices in Nigerian English. Here animacy is categorized into three sets: human, peopled, and inanimate. The human and peopled sets are considered those of animacy, and, obviously, the inanimate set is regarded as that of inanimacy. This last set features nouns denoting animals, plants, and lifeless entities. A human sub-level accommodates proper nouns (e.g. Mary, Bandele) and supernaturals (e.g. God's, Chukwu).

The class peopled contains nouns referring to people-oriented entities, including, but not limited to, the names of places/countries/continents (e.g. Lagos, Amsterdam, Nigeria, Africa) as well as organizations/companies (e.g. the federal government, Shell).

3.2 Syntactic weight

The syntactic weight, or relative length, of possessor and possessum has been shown to determine choices in grammatical variation, and particularly, in English genitive alternation. At the most general level, it is widely accepted that language users realize short constituents before long constituents. Hawkins (1981), Rosenbach (2002, 2005), Szmrecsanyi – Hinrichs (2008), and Szmrecsanyi (2010) show that the lengths of the possessor and the possessum can influence genitive form choices. As a group, these scholars maintain that (1) the *s*-genitive is preferred when the possessor is shorter while the *of*-genitive is favored when the possessor is longer, (2) the *s*-genitive is preferred when the possessum is longer, while *of*-genitive when the possessum is shorter. Moreover, strong interrelation between animacy and weight is reported by both Hawkins (1994) and Rosenbach (2005). Hawkins (1994) argues further that weight is the primary motivator behind alternation. In this investigation, we do not expect shorter-possessor--longer-possessum-for-*s*-genitive nor longer-possessor-shorter-possessum--for-*of*-genitive. Rather, we predict short-possessor-short-possessum for both genitive forms such that length of possessor and/or possessum will be found to be important but not decisive as an independent factor determining genitive construction choice in Nigerian English.

3.3 Semantic relation

The conceptual distance between the possessor and possessum has been mapped and demonstrated to be a consequential factor in English genitive form choices. Relevant to this factor is Haiman's (1983) iconicity principle, by which the closer the meanings of the possessor and the possessum, the higher the probability that the *s*-genitive construction will occur. Accordingly, if the possessor and the possessum have meanings that are not significantly proximate, then the *of*-genitive is likely to occur. Mapping such semantic distance as a factor motivating English genitive alternation has typically been guided by prototype theory. Koptjevskaja – Tamm (2003) use a binary classification in which prototypical meanings are contrasted with non-prototypical ones. The designation prototypical obtains when possessor

and possessum express a commonplace relationship and may therefore be considered conceptually close (e.g. the Pastor's robe). The opposite designation is employed when the two are not in such a relationship (e.g. the Pastor's educational qualifications). Rosenbach (2002) makes a finer distinction in which prototypicality is assigned to subsets of terms for body parts, kinship members, parts of wholes, and legal ownership. In contrast, non-prototypicality is assigned to all others. Given that what is conceptually close or far in Nigerian English may or may not be so in other varieties of English, such as British English and American English, an approach to prototypicality similar to Rosenbach's is utilized here, though one including subsets which suit Nigerian semantic idiosyncrasies. It should be noted that Payne – Berlage (2011) have demonstrated that semantic relation significantly motivates genitive alternation. Here, we expect prototypicality to behave in Nigerian alternation as it has been predicted to do so by Rosenbach (2002; 2014: 229) and others (e.g. Kreyer 2003; Payne – Berlage 2011). That is, prototypical semantic relations will be expected to attract the *s*-genitive and non-prototypical ones the *of*-genitive.

3.4 Topicality

Knowledge of a possessor or a possessum has been shown to impact positively on the selection of the shorter *s*-genitive. If the referent of the possessor construction is known to the speaker/writer and the listener/reader, then prior or shared knowledge of the possessor is present. Focusing on topicality of possessor, Rosenbach (2002) distinguishes between a referentially given possessor and a new possessor. In the main, topicality of possessor highlights a referent which is known to the speaker/writer and the listener/reader and which, ordinarily, has recently been mentioned. Additionally, topicality of possessor involves definite expression of a referent in the real world, or one already mentioned, knowledge of whose existence is also shared. Hinrichs – Szmrecsanyi (2007:451) operationalise topicality in terms of giveness and non-giveness, and find it to have an insignificant effect on genitive alternation. However, Grafmiller (forthcoming: 18), cited by Rosenbach (2014: 228-229), finds topicality in fact to be significant as a motivator of genitive alternation.

In this investigation, following partly Rosenbach (2002) and partly Hinrichs – Szmrecsanyi's (2007), topicality and giveness are collapsed into a single factor. Since topicality correlates highly with animacy (Rosenbach 2014: 230), this factor alone is not expected to influence genitive form choices significantly.

3.5 Text type

The nature of the text in which we express our thoughts has been found to influence choices of genitive form. On one hand, Alternberg (1982: 284) and Dahl (1971: 172) claim that more formal texts tend to utilize the *s*-genitive and less formal ones the *of*-genitive. On the other, Biber et al. (1999: 300) show that the pressure to be brief is more permissible in certain text types than it is in others, which accounts for the comparative abundance of *s*-genitives in less formal texts. Use of this genitive helps satisfy requisites of length economy. Hinrichs – Szmrecsanyi (2007) find that texts required to disseminate large amounts of information markedly prefer the *s*-genitive. Press language, or journalese, in contrast to non-press language, has been shown to make greater use of the *s*-genitive, likely because it exhibits less formality and also because it needs to be "more compact". This text type features a "tendency to brevity" (Rosenbach 2014: 233-234). It should be noted that most of these conclusions are based on text types of British and American varieties of English. Since, according to Hinrichs – Szmrecsanyi (2007), the tendency for text types such as journalese to prefer the *s*-genitive over the *of*-genitive seems to show the effect of lexical density, here, where the focus is on Nigerian English, we do not expect lexical density, or "tendency to brevity", to be influential.

4. Method

Data analysed in this study were culled from a variety of written register texts of the Nigerian component of the International Corpus of English. However, limits were necessarily imposed on the types of data considered. Only those constructions that can exhibit alternation of genitive form without change of meaning were analyzed. Those which cannot were excluded. Examples (2a) and (3a) below illustrate what is considered zero meaning change or retention of meaning, which is key to interchangeability. Excluded were contracted forms as well as those that fall into categories (2b) and (3b) where alternation (into 2b and 3b) causes a shift or loss of the original meaning, resulting in ambiguity[1].

[1] For a detailed description of criteria for exclusion, with examples, see Rosenbach (2002, 2014).

(2) a. Welfare of teachers
b. Chief of Staff
Interchangeability and non-interchangeability: teachers' welfare versus Staff's Chief

(3) a. Bloomfield's behaviourism
b. Pregnancy's plans
Interchangeability and non-interchangeability:
Behaviourism of Bloomfield versus plans of pregnancy

After the exclusion criteria were applied, a sample of 3371 interchangeable genitive constructions, divisible into 1299 *s*-genitives and 2072 *of*-genitives, remained. The 3371 items were then analysed in regard to the several influential factors mentioned above. The analyses presented in sections 5.1 – 5.5 show the strength of each factor as an independent determiner of genitive form choices. The operationalisation of the determiners as well as the annotation procedures are discussed immediately below in Sections 4.1 – 4.4.

4.1 Animacy

Classifying the animacy of possessors required some revision of the common animacy categorisations present in the literature (e.g. Bergen 2011, Rosenbach 2008, Zaenen et al. 2004). In the end, the four main categories of human, peopled, animal/plant, and article were employed. Human and peopled were classified as animate while animal/plant and article were classed as inanimate. This scheme differs from those of most researchers in that animals and plants are classified not as animate but rather as inanimate (cf. Kreyer 2003, Bergen 2011, Rosenbach 2003). It also differs from the common schemes in its collapse of the categories location and organisation into one labelled peopled. Human embraces names ordinarily signified by proper nouns, names that refer to distinct entities, and names for supernatural entities. Peopled takes in the names of places, countries, continents, organizations, societies, and companies. This category collapses the classes of location and organization which are kept distinct by various other researchers (e.g. Zaenen et al. 2004). By way of illustration, *world* and *Nigeria* are coded as peopled in the following constructions: *The world is at war with itself* and *Nigeria is the second most culturally diverse in the world*.

4.2 Syntactic weight

The syntactic weights of the possessor and the possessum concerned only adjectives, single-word adjectivals, and nouns. These lexical constituents were considered significant elements of the possessor and possessum, and they were counted in order to quantify respective syntactic weights. The annotation below details syntactic weight as length (Altenberg 1982; Rosenbach 2005). Determiners, quantifiers, and prepositions were not counted. For example, *the world's information* was counted as a 1-word possessor (*world*) and a 1-word possessum (*information*) while *Five important steps of political developments* was deemed to contain 4 words (*important*, *steps*, *political,* and *developments*), so that both possessor and possessum were counted as 2-words, respectively. Therefore, our operationalisation of syntactic weight involved the quantification of lexical constituents but not grammatical constituents.

4.3 Topicality

The topicality of the possessor was measured in a manner which follows Rosenbach (2003). Proper nouns signifying distinct entities such as persons (e.g. *Helen*) or countries (e.g. *Nigeria*) were annotated as topical, as were instances of the definite article. Consider (4) and (5):

(4) the boy's eyes
(5) her husband's needs

The use of *the* in these noun phrases suggests foreknowledge of the possessor *boy*, perhaps due to previous mention, and that knowledge is shared by the writer/speaker and the reader/listener. Although Rosenbach (2003) collapsed constructions like those of (4) and (5) into the single category of definiteness, they were viewed separately in order to obtain a fuller picture. Thus, because the use of the possessive determiner *her* in (5) implies shared knowledge of the possessor, this and similar instances were accounted as topical. However, markers of indefiniteness, such as the article *a* in the phrase *a boy's eyes*, revealed a lack of foreknowledge (in the real world) and disqualified such instances from being regarded as topical. Quantifiers such as *one* in *one's baby* were similarly disqualifying. Lastly, while Rosenbach (2003) considered items containing *a, some, many, any* as of the single category indefinite expression and deemed them non-topical, such items were accounted for separately

in the present study, which was meant to allow for a finer analysis of the system underlying the noun phrase configurations.

4.4 Prototypicality

The notion of prototypicality may be used to measure the conceptual distance between the possessor and the possessum. Rosenbach (2002) operationalises this notion and reckons as in close relationship, and therefore prototypical, items denoting kinship members, body parts, and legal ownership. Other types of relationship between the possessor and possessum are classified as non-prototypical. In this investigation, Rosenbach's categorization of prototypicality was altered to include those types of possessive relationship that are more generic, such that the possessor-possessum relationship evident in *student's learning* would be considered as conceptually close and so prototypical. When the conceptual distances were so great that causality could not be established, the relationships were reckoned non-prototypical. Here, prototypicality was used to measure possessive relationships conceived of as either conceptually close (+) or conceptually far (−).

5. Results

In this section, the results of how each factor behaved independently are presented.

5.1 Animacy

Table 1 shows genitive alternation by animacy.

Table 1. Genitive alternation by animacy

	s-genitive		of-genitive		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Animate possessor	1201	54	1013	46	2214	100
Inanimate possessor	98	8	1058	92	1156	100
Total	1299	39	2071	61	3370	100

As can be seen, there is some relationship between the animacy of the possessor and genitive form choice $\{\chi^2(1) = 671, p < 0.0000\}$. The difference

between animate possessor (54%) and inanimate possessor (8%) is significant, such that animate possessors are clearly more likely to occur in *s*-genitive construction than are inanimate possessors. However, there is the same likelihood that an animate or an inanimate possessor would occur in an *of*-genitive construction.

5.2 Syntactic weight of possessor

Table 2 displays length of possessor in relation to genitive construction type.

Table 2. Length of possessor in relation to genitive construction type

	s-genitive		of-genitive		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1-word	1138	44	1420	56	2558	100
2-word	133	21	508	79	641	100
3-word	20	20	114	80	134	100
4-word	8	26	23	74	31	100
5-word	0	0	2	100	2	100
6-word	0	0	4	0	4	100
Total	1299	39	2071	61	3370	100

As presented above, there is very little relationship between length of possessor and genitive form choice $\{\chi^2(5) = 32.26,\ p < 0.0000\}$. At once, a one-word possessor is shown to be more likely than a two or three-word possessor to occur in the *s*-genitive and a one-word possessor is seen to be more likely than a two or three-word possessor to occur in the *of*-genitive.

5.3 Weight of possessum

Table 3 shows length of possessum in relation to genitive construction choice. As displayed here, unlike with length of possessor shown in Table 4 below, there is some relationship between length of possessum and genitive form choices $\{\chi^2(4) = 28.85,\ p < 0.0000\}$. A one-word possessum is more likely than a two, three, or four-word possessum to occur in the *s*-genitive and the *of*-genitive. Also, while there is little or no likelihood of a five-word or six-word possessor occurring in the *s*-genitive (see Table 4), there is some likelihood of a five-word possessum occurring in the *s*-genitive.

Table 3. Length of possessum in relation to genitive construction choice

	s-genitive		of-genitive		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1-word	865	35	1641	65	2506	100
2-word	311	45	385	55	696	100
3-word	95	72	37	28	132	100
4-word	22	73	8	27	30	100
5-word	6	100	0	0	8	100
6-word	–		–		–	
Total	1299	39	2071	61	3370	100

5.4 Topicality

Table 4 exhibits topicality of possessor in relation to genitive choices.

Table 4. Topicality of possessor in relation to genitive choices

	s-genitive		of-genitive		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Topical possessor	1171	43	1575	57	2746	100
Non-topical possessor	128	21	496	79	624	100
Total	1299	39	2071	61	3370	100

As shown above, there is some relationship between topicality of possessor and genitive choice $\{\chi^2(1) = 105.13,\ p < 0.0000\}$. A topical possessor is more likely to occur as an *s*-genitive (43% versus 21%), while a non-topical possessor is more likely to occur as an *of*-genitive (79% versus 57%).

5.5 Prototypicality

Table 5 displays the frequency distributions of genitive choices by prototypicality.

Table 5. Relative frequency distribution of genitive choices by prototypicality

	s-genitive		of-genitive		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Prototypicality	37	23	91	18	128	100
Non-prototypicality	125	77	411	82	536	100
Total	162	24	502	76	664	100

As can be seen in Table 5, there is an inverse correlation between genitive form choice and possessor-possessum semantic relation $\{\chi^2(1) = 0.87, p < 0.3501\}$. When possessor and possessum have little or no semantic relationship, the choice can be either s-genitive (77% versus 23%) or of-genitive (82% versus 18%).

6. Conclusions

The results of the study are summarized in Table 6 below. There, the behaviour of each factor as an independent variable which motivates genitive alternation in the Nigerian English noun phrase is indicated.

Table 6. Summary of findings of factors as independent variables

Variables	's-genitive	of-genitive
Animacy of possessor	+	−
Topicality of possessor	+	+
Prototypicality	−	−
Weight of possessor	+	+
Weight of possessum	+	+

If we compare the contents of Table 6 with those of Tables 1 and 2, we can easily discern the noteworthy results. From these we may draw two main conclusions.

First, the factor of animacy behaves in Nigerian English much as it does in British English and American English. In all three varieties, an animate possessor is more likely to take *s*-genitive form and an inanimate possessor *of*-genitive form.

Second, the factors of topicality, prototypicality, and syntactic weight behave differently in Nigerian English. The choice between *s*-genitive and *of*-genitive is not in this variety of English influenced by the level of topicality. Both genitive forms occur when topicality is high and both when topicality is low. This finding for Nigerian English contrasts with Rosenbach's (2002) for other varieties of English, according to which high topicality is linked to the selection of the *s*-genitive. Similarly, genitive form choices are not determined by prototypicality in Nigerian English. Whether a possessor and possessum are semantically close is immaterial. Because this factor has been shown to be influential in British, American, and Canadian Englishes, this

is an important finding. As regards syntactic weight, the effect of length is bidirectional here rather than unidirectional, as it has been found to be in the varieties just mentioned (Szmrecsanyi 2010; Jankwonski 2009). One-word possessors take *s*-genitive form as often as they take *of*-genitive form, and the same is true of one-word possessums.

The differences in the behaviours of these factors in Nigerian English suggest interference from local Nigerian languages which multilingual Nigerians also speak. Those languages exhibit no such genitive alternation. Though an *of*-genitive equivalent may in some cases be interchangeable with an adjective phrase (e.g. in the local language equivalents of *the exclusive right of the federal government* and *the federal government exclusive right*), an equivalent of the *s*-genitive is absent from the syntactically unique local Nigerian languages. In that language contact situation, including the presence of French and its *of*-genitive, transfer of patterning from languages in contact with Nigerian English seems the most reasonable explanation for these differences. Nigerian English, like the many other varieties spoken by bilinguals and multilinguals, is increasingly differentiating itself from established Englishes like British English and American English.

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