

Exploring the Structure and Distribution of English Language -'s in Genitive Case Phrases

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Abstract The purpose of this article is to discuss certain issues concerning the origin, development and assignment of English genitive case. It is mostly focused on the 's possessive case constructions and their generation according to X' theory. It is obvious that there exist various explanations for the appearance and constant usage of the 's clitic. But as it is also stated in the article, one thing is for sure that such a possessive case marker originated from the OE case endings and as so it serves to prove the fact that OE used to be a synthetic rather than an analytical language. On the other hand, due to its structure characteristics (as being noun-main-noun constructions where one (posses sum) modifies the other (possessor)) by which the pre-posed modified nouns serve as a determiner and as so such 's genitive phrases are generated under the DP projection.

Key words: Genitive/possessive case, X' theory, determiner phrase, structural/inherent case.

English language has undergone a deep change in its grammatical structure since it has developed from a language expressing synthetic relations, still largely synthetically by means of inflectional endings, into a language expressing them mainly analytically by means of function words or word order. As for noun category it has also had an influence on the development on the morphological category of case. Old English (OE) showed a morphological system of four cases (Nominative (Nom), Genitive (Gen), Dative (Dat) and Accusative (Acc)) and several classes of declensions with different sets of inflections and also full vowels in the endings. At this language stage we speak of morphological case assignment.

	a-stem masculine	ō-stem feminine
Singular Nom	(se) cyning	(sēo) talu
Gen	(pæs) cyninges	(pœre) tale
Dat	(pæm) cyninge	(pœrce) tale
Acc	(pone) cyning	(pā) tale
Plural		
Nom	(pā) cyningas	(pā) tala
Gen	(pāra) cyninga	(pāra) tala
Dat	(pæm) cyningum	(pœm) talum
Acc	(pā) cyningas	(pā) tala

Toward the end of OE period most case endings were reduced to **-e**. The only distinctive case marker that was lastly left was the phonetically stable ending **-es** of the singular genitive of the former a-stem. By the 16th century the letter **-e** of this **-es** genitive ending no longer represented a sound. In this case, it is assumed that printers copied the French practise of using an apostrophe as a substitute for the letter **-e**. In later use the **-'s** was used for all nouns where the /s/ sound was used for the possessive form. Confusingly the **-'s** form was also used for plural nouns as well. These were derived from the strong declension **-as** ending in OE. In the Middle English (ME) its spelling was changed to **-es** reflecting a change in pronunciation and extended to all cases of plural including genitive case. Latter conventions removed the apostrophe form Nominative and Accusative case forms and added it after possessive case forms.

There exists another doubtful 18th century explanation of the **-'s** which is supposed to have replaced a genitive pronoun (his) as in "the king's horse" considered a shortened form of "a king his horse". This "his – genitive" appeared in English for a brief period of time and was never a common form. One must expect on the basis of "her and their" that feminine and plural nouns would form possessive using **- 'r*** as "the queen'r children". Such a construction never existed.

Back to our core issue we have to explain here some of the semantic relations denoted by genitive noun main noun constructions.

So, genitive case is considered to be one of four main cases in English language marking a noun as modifying another noun. It is the form that predominantly indicates possession and it is usually created by making use of either **-'s** clitic or the **-of** preposition.

As it is stated above the **-'s** morpheme originated in OE as an inflectional suffix marking a genitive case. In ME it can be attached at the end of the entire phrase as in "The king of Sparta's wife", enclitic usage of **-'s** by which the **-'s**

indicates possession not by the NP *Sparta* to which it is attached but rather by the entire phrase “*The king of Sparta*” as if it were a single word.

As a result –‘s genitive morpheme it is normally viewed as a clitic, that is to say, a morpheme that cannot be a word by itself but it is grammatically independent of the word it is attached to.

The –‘s morpheme with a historical origin tracing back to Anglo Saxon English is associated to denoting possession and as so in English language teaching such construction is also referred to as Anglo Saxon genitive.

At this point of our discussion, we have to clarify that between most scholars there exists a misconception of genitive constructions as denoting only possession and as so we usually refer to as possessive case constructions. But, on the contrary we have to think of genitive case as being a large cake and a cut-out piece of that cake represents the possessive case. Putting it in other words possessive case is considered to be a part or subset of genitive case as:

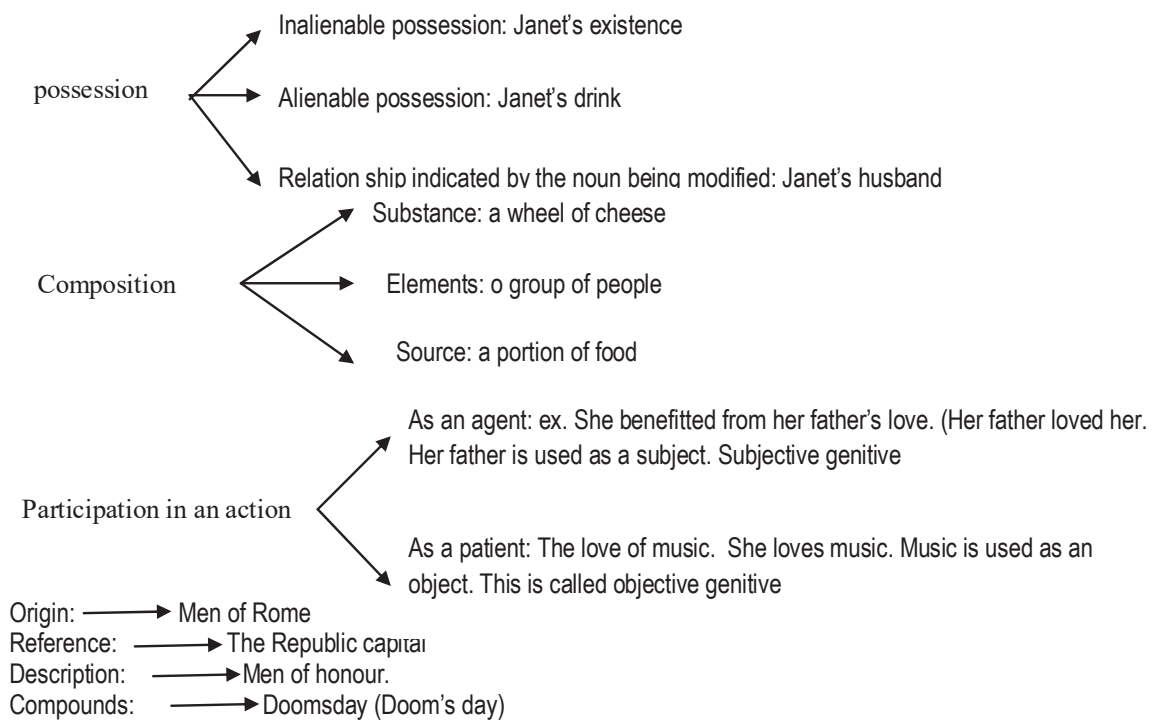
- The genitive case suggests the relationship between nouns.

Ex. The pile of sand. → genitive case: denotes the relationship between the sand and the pile. Neither of the nouns belongs to the other.

- The possessive case denotes the relationship of possession between two nouns.

Ex. The texture of the sand. → possessive case: denoting that the texture belongs to the sand.

As so genitive noun-main-noun constructions making use of either –‘s clitic or –of preposition denote a variety of relationships such as:



Depending on the language some of the noun-main noun relationships mentioned above have their own distinct case different from genitive

In addition, it is of great interest treating such genitive phrases from the syntactic point of view and what is most important, basically referring to the recent linguistic approach known as generative linguistics. In this context, we begin by introducing the historical shift in linguistic choice of genitive markers. So, the –‘s possessive case and –of constructions co-existed in English language since the 19th century. The possessive case was the most usual construction and with English still being a synthetic language it appeared in almost equal numbers either in front of or after the modified noun. In the 4 hundred years to follow the situation changed drastically as the gradual reduction of English language inflectional system and the development of a fixed word order led to the extinction of the post-posed genitive. By the 1300 up to 1200 the post-posed genitive was substituted by its pre-posed variant in the majority of all classes. In Late Middle English and Early Modern English the –‘s form gained ground in certain variants of English as: journalistic writing, academic writing etc. Kellner assumes that this –‘s genitive construction was originated in Old English in order to make up for the want of

genitive inflections. Furthermore, various studies on the genitive case historical development argued that genitive case underwent a change from the genitive case ending to a determiner construction.

As so, a pre-posed genitive nominal with its own determiner functions as a determiner to the head, so the head noun does not need and in fact cannot be determined by any other extra determiner.

Ex. John's hat

John's **a/the** hat*.

At this point of our argument we have to clarify that there exist a great difference between a noun and a noun phrase (NP), as a noun specifies a type of thing whereas the NP specifies an instance of the type specified by its own head noun.

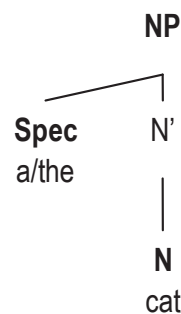
Ex. "cat" → specifies the type of cat

"a/the cat" anchors an instance of "cat" either known or unknown to the speaker.

So, what seems to have happened from Old English to Modern English is the emergence of a new structure of NP consisting of the functional determiner category (generated under SpecNP node) and noun as its head. At the very beginning of Modern English period we also witnessed the development of definite and indefinite articles which are prototypical members of Determiner class as they have the following distinguishing features.

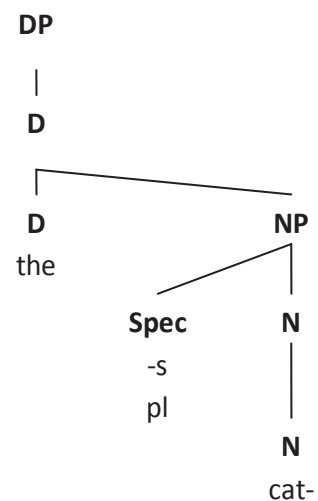
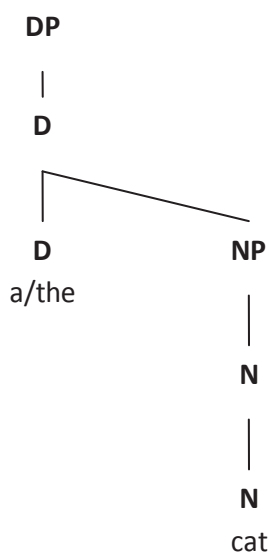
- Occur at the beginning of the NP.
- Are invariant in form.
- There is only one structural position for the determiner.

They determine the head noun.



Such a generation of the above NP will sound perfect but on the other hand what if the NP will be in its plural form as "the cat". In this case, there does not exist any free node in the X' scheme for the plural **-s** ending to be generated.

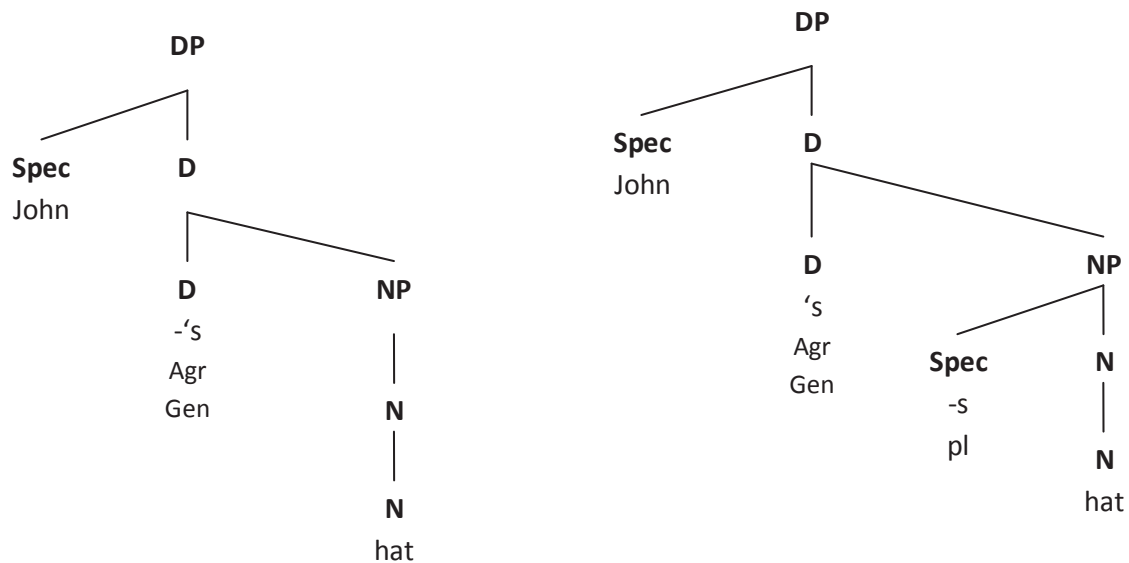
Given such an assumption, Abney (1987) proposed a new functional projection known as the determiner phrase (DP) by which every instance of a noun phrase will be analysed under the Determiner Phrase (DP) construction. He argues that such functional projections of DP syntactically serve to provide free nodes in case of head or other nodes movements. As so the above DP "a/the cat" will be projected as follows:



In addition, we argue that genitive case is said to be assigned to subjects of NP and is morphologically realised by affixation of some elements to the NP. This case takes two forms in English.

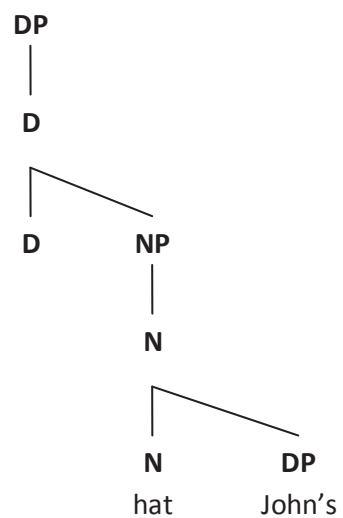
- Spec.-Head affixation as in: John's hat
- Oblique genitive as in: The top of the table. (The genitive –of construction is considered to be a Prepositional Phrase PP.)

As the genitive case is assigned to the subject NP under a Spec-Head agreement “the agreement category of D” as the nominative case is assigned to the subject of the finite clause under the Spec-Head agreement (the agreement category of I) and as the pre-posed genitive is said to serve as the determiner of the NP we can depict the structure of such a genitive construction (i.e. DP) using the attested morphemic alternant.

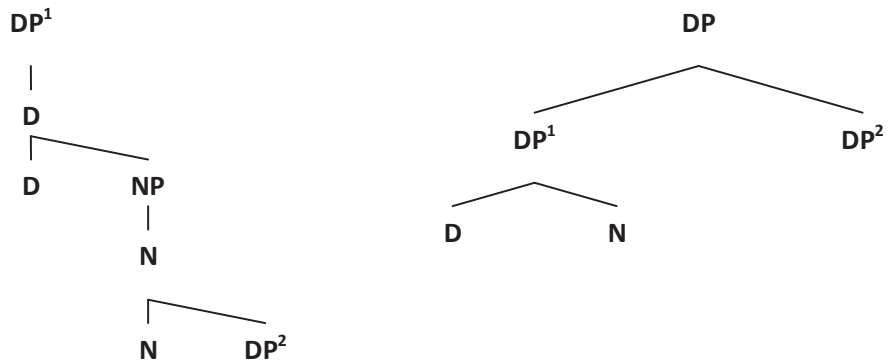


According to Strunk (2004;2005) and Wolk (2001) the –'s is part of the possessor phrase in the Spec of the DP. The explanation why there is no determiner co-occurring with the possessor phrase is that possessives are inherently definite, so a determiner would be redundant.

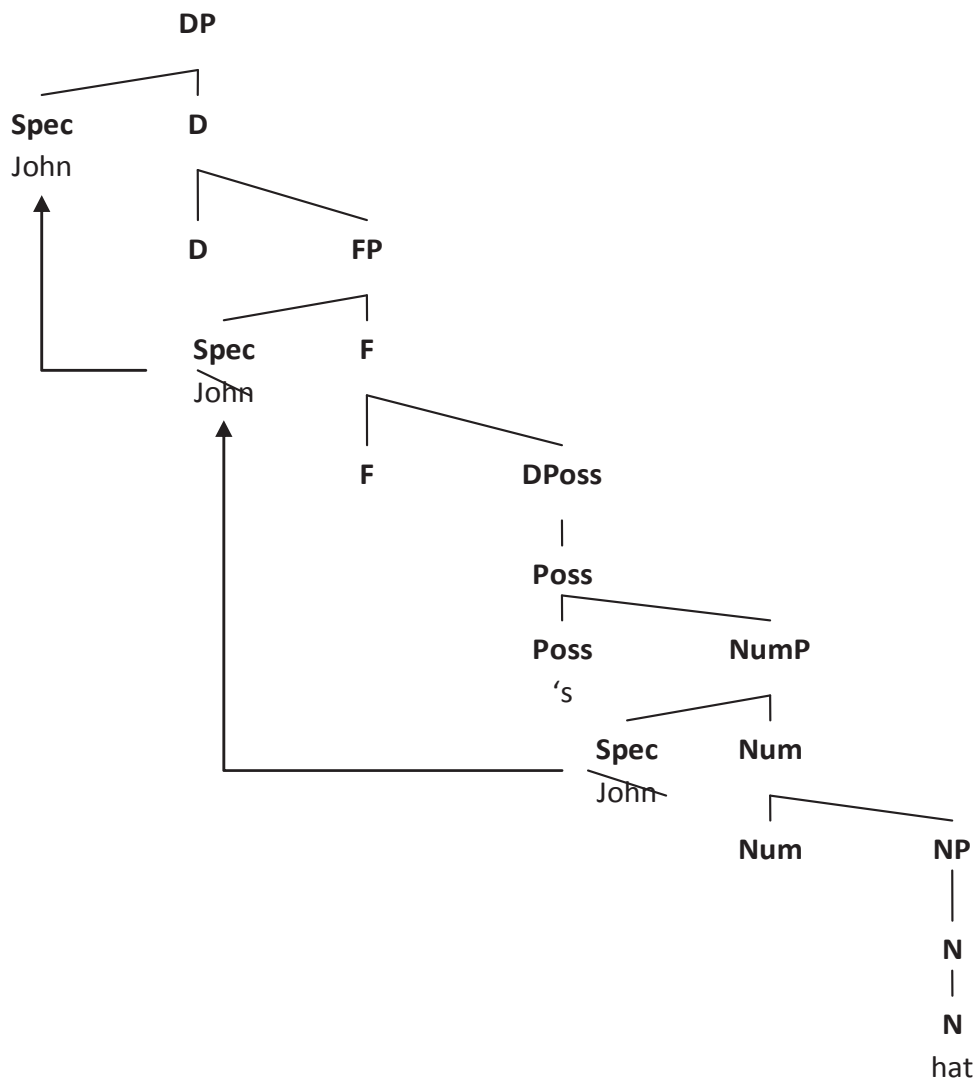
A different line of analysis has been developed by Dielsing and Dobrovie-Sorin. Dielsing opt for a theory in which genitives are DP arguments of the head noun. They are base generated post-nominally as complements.



But such an analysis can account for the word order in sentences “two hats of John’s” without resorting to movement. On the other hand it cannot explain how the possessor would be considered a complement of the possessum. Dobrovie-Sorin proposed two generative options, one by which the genitival phrase can be generated as the complement to a NP or it can be right adjoined to the DP.



Whereas the most accepted approach is that adopted by the possessive pronoun constructions by which it is assumed that structures containing possessive elements and genitives have the same structure.



In such a representation of genitival phrase the genitive clitic is analysed as an instantiation of D_{Poss}. This D_{Poss} projection hosts the DP possessive phrase. The clitic *-s* is realised under Poss head, whereas the possessive NP “*John*” is realised as the Spec of the NumP projection (as it serves as a subject of the whole phrase) and in order to be assigned case it functions as a subjective genitive (*John has a hat*) moves to the SpecFP and from that to the SpecDP.

As so, there has been arisen a great debate concerning the question of what kind of case inherent or structural¹ is assigned to possessive genitive phrases.

Chomsky begins by treating the genitive case within the NP as being assigned either by a possessive phrase or by the semantically preposition *-of*, but ends up by proposing that genitive case should be considered an inherent case rather than a structural case assigned by the NP.

But other linguists as Abney, Alexiadou and Wilder taking advantage from the recent treatments of the possessor as occupying the SpecDP position, parallel to the SpecIP position taken by the subject of the sentence come to the conclusion that genitive SpecDP is assigned structural case as nominative is assigned to SpecIP.

References

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¹ Structural case is assigned on the basis of grammatical role (position or grammatical relations). The assignment of inherent case is governed by certain lexical items. Chomsky assumes that the inherent case is assigned at a deeper level than the structural case which impels movement of the NPs from their underlying position in a sentence in order to receive case.