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of-genitive versus *s*-genitive: a corpus-based analysis of possessive constructions in 20th century American English

The increase of *s*-genitives (e.g. *My father's house*) at the expense of *of*-genitives (eg. *The house of my father*) is a phenomenon that has received increasing attention during the last few years (see the project GerManC on Germanic possessive –s at the University of Manchester, UK). Corpus-based works by Altenberg (1982), Jucker (1993), Rosenbach (2002), and Szmrecsany & Hinrichs (2007) have focused on the interchangeability between the *s*-genitive and the *of*-genitive in areas where either construction can be chosen and which is constrained by a number of conditioning factors: language internal (i.e. syntactic, lexical, phonological, semantic) as well as external (i.e. factors related to processing, economy-related factors, and socio-stylistic factors). We contribute to previous work by offering a quantitative analysis of three subcorpora of the Brown-family, namely the genre J (Scientific writings) in B-Brown (1930), Brown (1960) and Frown (1990), while focusing on the syntactic parameter only. We argue that the change in increase of *s*-genitives took mainly place between 1930 and 1960, and less so between 1960 and 1990 in American English.

Our approach uses automatic parsing (Schneider 2008), and (a) semi-automatic filtering compared to (b) fully automatic filtering. Both approaches deliver very similar results, thus confirming each other. Chi-square and log-likelihood significance tests were used to compare the datasets. Within the syntactic parameter, two features were measured: post- and premodification of either the possessum (*My **father's** house*) or the possessor (*My father's **house***) and mean possessor and possessum length. We have also extended the fully automatic approach (b) beyond category J and beyond American English to British English.

The results show an increase of *s*-genitives with premodified possessums (*My father's **old** house*) and *of*-genitives with premodified possessors (*The house of my **old** father*) indicating that the principle of end-weight gains ground, i.e. the longer constituent is in the last position of the nominal construction. The calculation of the mean possessor and possessum length in graphemic words further illustrates that heavy possessors prefer *of*-genitives and heavy possessums *s*-genitives, confirming influence of end-weight on genitive choice in both analyses. The data shows a higher significant increase of *s*-genitives from 1930 to 1960 than from 1960 to 1990. Our findings demonstrate that working with parsed corpora is a prolific mean to analyse structural historical changes in the English language.

List of References

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