

On the Diachrony of the Genitive Case Marking in English*

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study the diachrony of the genitive case marking in English. As it is well known, English has become more and more analytic through its history. In fact, many linguists have pointed out that some kind of 'drift' has caused the change from synthetic to analytic structure in the history of English.¹

Therefore, English has lost much of the inflectional affixes that it originally had in OE period. Zwicky (1975 : 130) shows that NE has only the following inflectional affixes for nominal and verbal categories :

- (1) a. for nouns
 - (i) plural : Pl
 - (ii) genitive : Gen
- b. for verbs
 - (i) third-person singular present : Prs
 - (ii) present participle : PrsP
 - (iii) past : Pst
 - (iv) past participle : PstP

If we focus on the case inflection for nominal categories, what (1) means is that NE has only a general/genitive case distinction. Then, historically speaking, we can reach a conclusion that only the genitive case marking has survived from the OE period and that all of the other case markers have reduced to zero.²

As has been pointed out by many linguists, this sort of reduction caused the loss of inflectional morphology, which underwent two different processes : one is the introduction of various periphrastic constructions (e. g., those which make use of prepositions, auxiliary verbs, etc.) into syntax, and the other is the fixation of the rigid word order.

In this paper, I examine how the diachrony of the English genitive case marking should be described with special reference to the general deaffixation process which the genitive markers have undergone.

2. The Status of the -'s in NE

Before I go back in the history of English, let us first examine the status of the -'s in NE.

It has long been suggested that -'s in NE exhibits many characteristics different from all the other inflectional affixes in English. First, it can co-occur with another inflectional affix, whereas no other inflectional affixes can (cf. childr-en-'s toy vs. the woman I interview-ed-'s arguments).

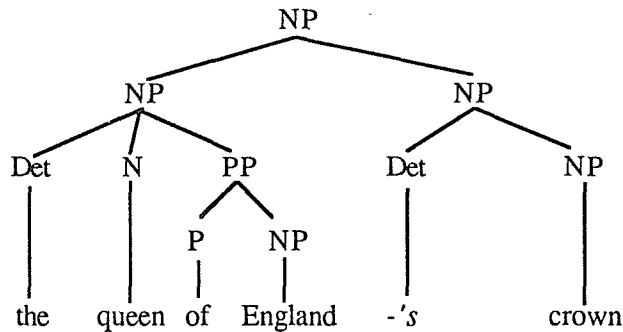
Second, usually inflectional affixes are located on the head of a constituent, whereas the -'s is located at the edge of the constituent. See the following examples:

- (2) a. the king of England's wife
 b. *the king's of England wife
 c. the person I live with's mother
 d. *the person's I live with mother

Due to these facts, some linguists conclude that the -'s is not an inflectional affix. For example, Janda (1978) states that "[i]nflections are always suffixes to the head of the phrase whose grammatical relationship to (the) other parts of the sentence they indicate" (p. 9). Actually, this makes him conclude that the -'s in English is not an inflectional affix but that a 'phrase-bound enclitic particle' (p. 1).

However, if it is not an inflectional affix, what kind of status does the -'s have in NE? As to this question, Janda proposes the following phrase-structure analysis:

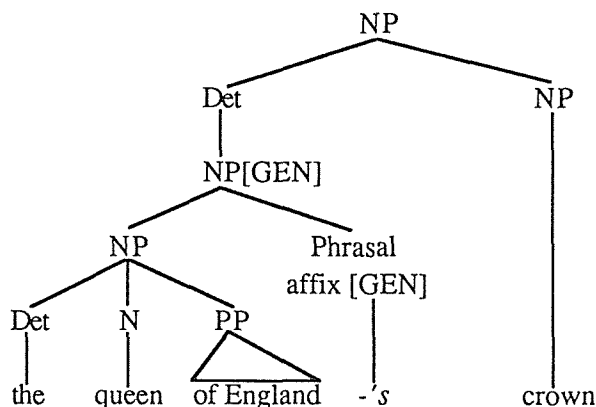
(3)



Though an analysis like (3) is interesting when it comes to explaining the earlier stages of English, it is extremely counterintuitive from a synchronic point of view. For example, English orthography and phonology clearly show that the -'s has a closer relationship with the preceding possessor NP than the following possessee NP.

Janda himself also admits that this analysis is "essentially a historical one" (p. 18), and that if a diachronic consideration is excluded, an analysis like (4) yields a better account of the phonological facts:

(4)



Moreover, this analysis has more support. Zwicky (1987) studies various cases of *z*-suppressions in the POSS constructions and concludes that these phenomena disfavor the analysis in which the *- 's* is treated as a syntactic formative. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, I assume (4) to be the correct analysis for the *- 's* in NE.

3. The Status of the Genitive Marking in the Earlier Stages

In OE and ME, genitive case markers attached only to the possessor nouns (not possessor NPs) as their inflectional suffixes. Interestingly, there are no examples of phrasal affix used in OE. Apart from the limited number of *of*-constructions, the following so-called 'split genitive' was predominantly used in the earlier stages. (According to Zandvoort (1961 : 196), it was used until the beginning of the 18th century.)

(5) a. OE (1140):

7 nam [þe kinges] suster [of France] to wife

b. ME (Chaucer):

of [kinges] blood [Of Perse] is she descended

c. ENE (Shakespeare):

[The Archbishop]'s Grace [of York]

d. NE: No examples.

(*[the king]'s sister [of France])

(a and c are from Traugott (1972 : 124-5) and b is from Jespersen (1962 : 311).)

If we compare the historical development of the split genitive with that of the 'group genitive' shown in (6), we can observe that they are roughly in complementary distribution to each other. This complementary relationship can be shown in (7): ³

(6) a. OE: No examples.

b. LOE (*O. E. Homilies* ii, 3): ⁴

After [ure lauerd ihesu cristes] tocume

c. ME (1489):

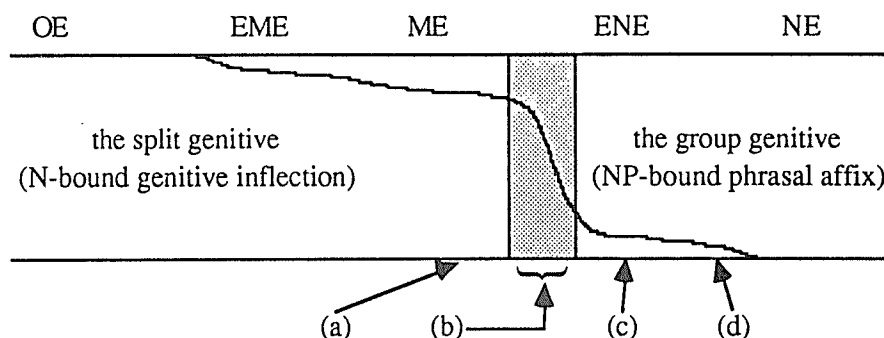
The grete [god of loves] name

d. NE:

[the king of England's] daughter

(b is from Traugott (1972 : 124).)

(7) The distribution of the split genitive and the group genitive:



(a) Chaucer's period: The split genitive is more popular.

(b) The 15th century: The period of word-order fixation (cf. Fries (1940)).

(c) Shakespeare's period: The group genitive has come to be used regularly.

(d) The 18th century: The split genitive dies out.

So far, we have seen that the genitive in the earlier stages of English were marked by the genuine inflectional affix. Here I used the word 'genuine', but what I meant by it is that it is an inflectional affix which can be attached to the **head** noun. As we have seen before, the -'s in NE can be regarded as a special affix which can be attached to the edge of the phrase.⁵

Then, let us pay attention to the following constructions:

(8) a. Augustus his daughter (1579)

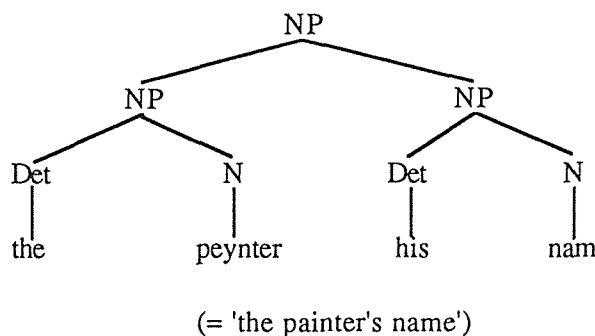
b. And art not thou Poincs, his Brother? (2 *Henry IV* 2. 4. 308)

b. And this we beg for Jesus Christ his sake (1662)

(from Pyles and Algeo (1982 : 186))

The construction exemplified in (8) is called the '*his*-genitive'. Though, as Altenberg (1982 : 45) suggests, this construction never became popular enough to threaten the regular inflectional forms, the existence of such a construction is very important because this appears to justify the following analysis which I have rejected in analyzing the -'s in NE (cf. (3)):

(9)



Indeed, as Pyles and Algeo (1982) observes, this analysis enables us to capture the generalization that the *his*-genitive is a kind of 'topic-comment construction that we still have in present-day English: "My brother—his main interest is football."' (p. 186)⁶ However, this sort of topic-comment appositive structure cannot explain the origin of the *his*-genitive because of the relative rarity of *her*- and *their*-genitives.

What, then, is the origin of the *his*-genitive? With respect to this question, Janda (1978) states that "...the rise of the *his*-genitive is due to a reanalysis of the genitive case-inflection descended from OE *-es* because of its homophony with the unstressed form of *his*..." (p. 27). Actually, this view has been supported by many scholars such as Jespersen, Schibsbye, etc. Not only traditional grammarians but also generativists have supported this view.

Therefore, we can observe that four competing structures functioned as genitive markers during the ME period: (i) the 'genuine' N-bound inflectional affix (i. e., the split genitive) whose origin can be traced back to the nominal paradigm in OE, (ii) the NP-bound phrasal affix (i. e., the group genitive) which has just come into use, (iii) the *his*-genitive, the appearance of which can be traced back to OE⁷, and (iv) the *of*-construction which started to be used in LOE (e. g., *ba nitenu of eallum cinne* 'the animals of every kind' (*Gen.* 7, 8 from Schibsbye (1977: 62)).⁸

4. The English Genitive Case Markers and Agglutination Hypothesis

The considerations we have given to the English genitive case marking yields the following observations: First, the overall diachrony of the English genitive case marking can be regarded as a case of liberation from morphology into syntax. As Nevis suggests, between the two historical processes of the language, examples of agglutination (i. e., morphologization) are quite numerous, while examples of loosening (i. e., demorphologization) are rare:

- (10) a. Agglutination:
- | | | | | |
|------|---------------|--------|------------|-------|
| WORD | > | CLITIC | > | AFFIX |
| | cliticization | | affixation | |
- b. Loosening:
- | | | | | |
|-------|--------------|--------|-----------------|------|
| AFFIX | > | CLITIC | > | WORD |
| | deaffixation | | decliticization | |
- (Nevis: 1986 b: 10)

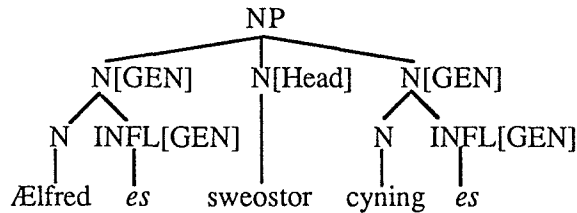
However, it is obvious from the previous discussion that the diachrony of the English genitive case marking exhibits an obvious example of loosening.

Secondly, this loosening can be considered to be caused by the homophony-based reanalysis, and hence it is not a sporadic or abrupt process.

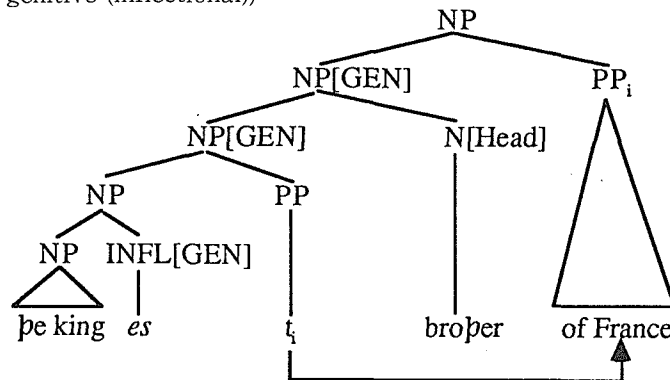
Thirdly, this particular liberation from morphology into syntax gave rise to the hotly-discussed NP-bound phrasal affix -'s in NE.

The following are the analyses of some of the typical English genitive markers in three different historical stages :

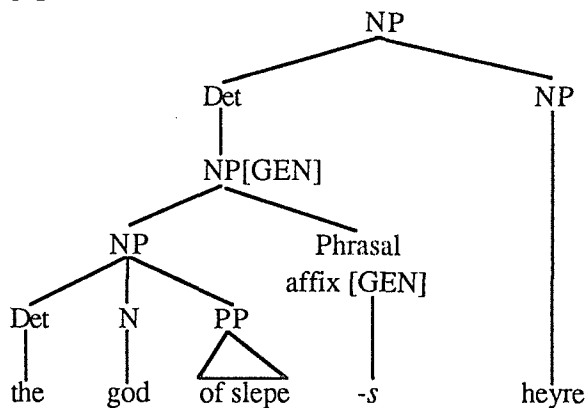
- (11) OE : (the split genitive)



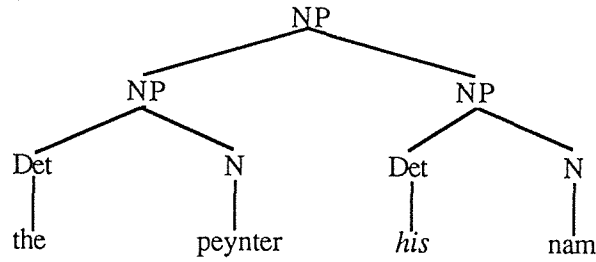
- (12) ME : (the split genitive (inflectional))⁹



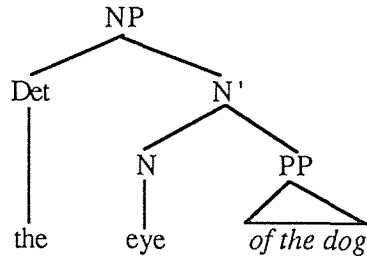
- (13) ME : (the group genitive)



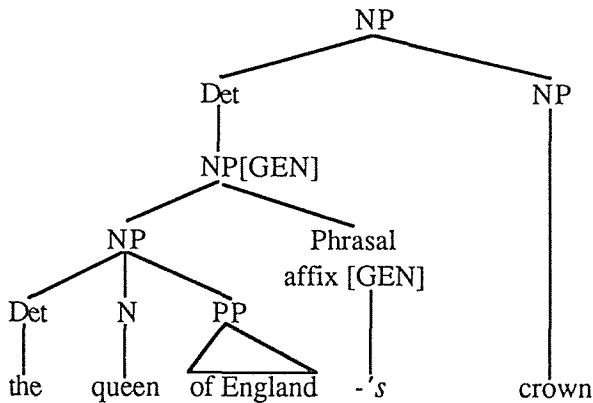
- (14) ME : (the
- his*
- genitive) (=9))



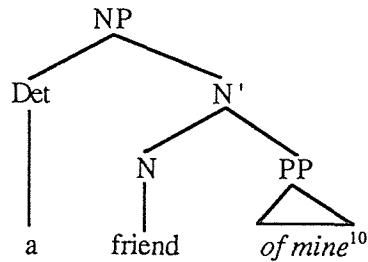
- (15) ME : (the
- of*
- construction)



- (16) NE : (the phrasal affix) (=4))

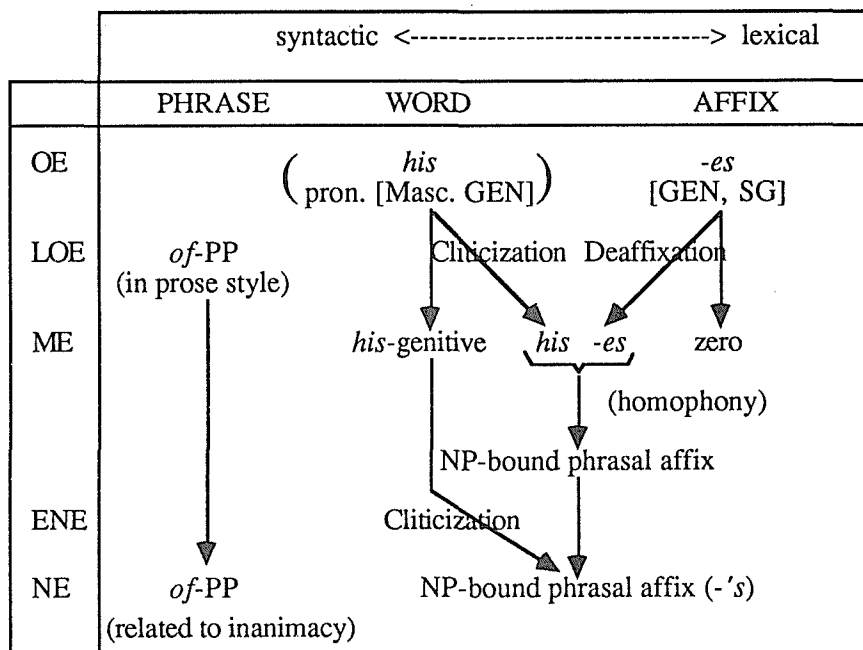


- (17) NE : (the
- of*
- construction)



In summary, we can assume the following diachronic changes to have happened in the diachrony of the English genitive case marking :

(18) The diachrony of the English genitive marking :



5. Implications and Related Issues

In this final section, I will summarize some of the implications of this particular diachrony and the related issues it raises.

First of all, we have assumed that the genitive marker in NE is an NP-bound phrasal affix but I leave it open whether it constitutes a natural class or should be decomposed into several domains of research. In this connection, what seems interesting to me is the tack taken by Zwicky (1987) when he bases his argument on the morphological haplology and concludes that this affix should be analyzed as an inflectional affix. He further suggests the possibility that phrasal affixes can always be treated as a subtype of inflectional affix, but this is not conclusive.

Secondly, it is necessary to consider how we should accommodate this sort of diachronic process into the recent studies of grammatical organization. With Joseph and Janda (1987), I also believe that the morphological component should be given a more important role than it has been before. Then, at a glance, the overall diachrony of the English genitive marking appears to go counter to such a 'morphocentric' view. How should we explain this sort of 'exceptional' diachrony? In Koshiishi (1989a, 1989b), I ascribed the origin of the English group genitive to the conspiracy of the following language-particular characteristics: (i) the general tendency of English to become more and more constituency-based in its sentence structure;¹¹ (ii) the necessity of the 'demarcative' genitive markers between words of the same part of speech, i. e., between nouns;¹² and (iii) the increasing configurational parallelism between the S-structure and the NP-structure. However, how this sort of conspiracy-based explanation actually works has not yet been fully clarified.

Finally, we may need to take some stylistic or sociolinguistic factors into consideration as well. For example, there is a certain amount of acceptability vacillation concerning the group genitive, which the following judgements of Sadock (1991 : 58) illustrate :

- (19) a. ? the man I told you about's book
 b. ?? the man who arrived's book
 c. ?* a friend of his's apartment

I do not have any clear-cut explanation for this acceptability vacillation at the moment, but there is a possibility that some stylistic factors may be responsible for it.

In the history of English, it is sometimes the case that stylistic or sociolinguistic factors trigger some diachronic change. The fate of the *his*-genitive is a case in point ; many linguists point out that the decline of the *his*-genitive has many things to do with the pro-Latin bias of many stylists in the sixteenth century.¹³ Therefore, possible areas of future research concerning the diachrony of the genitive case marking may include the study of such factors.

NOTES

*The original version of this paper was written in June, 1988. This version was completed on January 5, 1992.

1. See Fries (1940), Lakoff (1972), Sapir (1920), and Vennemann (1975) for further discussions on the notion of 'drift.' Vennemann (1975) summarizes previous discussions and points out that the following series of changes are important in the history of English :

Phonological change → Loss of morphology → Compensating word order change

2. Traugott (1972 : 121-2) observes: "[f]or both nouns and pronouns genitive case has to be distinctly marked right up to the present day. All other case markings have been lost for nouns and considerably reduced for pronouns".
3. For the details concerning the origin of the group genitive, see Koshiishi (1989a, 1989b).
4. As this example clearly shows, appositive constructions are normally involved in the earliest examples of the group genitive.
5. According to the classification of clitics proposed by Nevis (1986a), the possessive clitic in NE is a *phrasal affix*. However, Zwicky (1987) analyzes it as an inflectional affix. See Zwicky (1987) for the terminological definitions.
6. Janda (1978 : 16) points out that this analysis can explain the generation of non-restrictive appositive constructions such as *John, the director ; my son, the doctor ; the emperor, Akihito ; Sherlock Holmes, detective ;* etc. He assumes that rules of semantic interpretation rule out such examples as **John, the book ;* etc.
7. According to Traugott (1972 : 125), this construction only occurred with foreign names in OE (e.g., *Nilus seo ea hire æwielme* 'Nile that river her flood').
8. As Nakao (1974 : 219) points out, *of*-PPs are extremely predominant in the literature in which French influence is obvious.
9. Here I adopt a GB-type transformational analysis. See Huck and Ojeda (1987) for different analyses of discontinuous constituents.
10. This is so-called 'double genitive' construction. There have been many heated discussions as to

how this construction should be explained synchronically and diachronically. Especially well-known are the explanations based on the partitive construction and the appositive construction. I think it is better to adopt the explanation based on the appositive construction in order to account for synchronic facts.

11. Matthews (1981 : 71-95) suggests that syntactic models can be classified into the following two types : (i) constituency-based type and (ii) dependency-based type.
12. Note that in the case of other relations like nominative, demarcative markers are not necessary because the qualitative difference between the noun and the verb can by itself function in a demarcative fashion.
13. Traugott (1972 : 125) conjectures that "[t]he pronoun form dropped out partly perhaps because of the antipathy of most stylists from the sixteenth century on to 'pleonastic' or repetitive pronouns." Janda (1978 : 22) further suggests that maybe its decline in use was due to the antipathy "to any analyticity (periphrasis) in English where it diverged from Latin syntheticity".

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