

## The Oblique Genitive in English

John Payne  
Linguistics and English Language  
University of Manchester  
john.payne@manchester.ac.uk

### 1. Terminology

- |     |     |                       |                             |
|-----|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| (1) | (a) | My photograph         | Subject-determiner genitive |
|     | (b) | A photograph of me    | <i>Of</i> oblique           |
|     | (c) | A photograph of mine  | Oblique genitive            |
|     | (d) | One of my photographs | Partitive                   |
- (Payne & Huddleston 2002: 467-478)

### 2. Oblique genitive and subject-determiner genitive

(a) The subject-determiner genitive is definite and occupies the determiner position, while the oblique genitive permits a full range of determiners (e.g. Lyons 1986: 123, Taylor 1989: 665):

- (2) I was looking for John's book, but I couldn't find it/\*one.
- (3) a/every/this/no/another book of John's.

Examples of the oblique genitive with the definite article *the* are generally considered ungrammatical unless they receive restrictive modification (e.g. Jackendoff 1968). For Lyons (1985: 123), the restrictive modification must be post-head. Barker 1998: 679) calls this the anti-uniqueness effect:

- (4) a. \*I met the friend of John's.  
b. I met the friend of John's that you pointed out last night.

Given that the subject-determiner genitive is unnatural when there is similar restrictive modification, there is thus claimed to be a "rough" complementary distribution between the two constructions (Lyons 1985:123):

- (5) a. the book of John's that you borrowed  
b. \*John's book that you borrowed

Why "rough"? Lyons does not explain, but consider:

- (6) a. the closest friend of John's  
b. John's closest friend

(b) Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement that the oblique genitive is much more semantically restricted than the subject-determiner genitive. The constraint on the oblique genitive is variously expressed, e.g. it must be human (Quirk et al. 1985: 1283), personal (Quirk et al. 1972: 203), animate (Lyons 1986, Taylor 1989). In terms of semantic relations, Taylor (1989) claims that the oblique genitive works best with “true” possession and various kinds of interpersonal relationship, but also “somewhat marginally” with authorship and attribution. Christianson (1997: 102) counterclaims that authorship and attribution are far from marginal.

- |     |    |                      |                 |
|-----|----|----------------------|-----------------|
| (7) | a. | that dog of yours    | true possession |
|     | b. | that son of theirs   | interpersonal;  |
|     | c. | that new book of his | authorship      |
|     | d. | no fault of mine     | attribution     |

Compare:

- |     |    |              |
|-----|----|--------------|
| (8) | a. | your dog     |
|     | b. | their son    |
|     | c. | his new book |
|     | d. | my fault     |

However, many relations which are possible for the subject-determiner genitive are claimed to be systematically excluded (examples adapted from Lyons 1986: 128-129, Christianson 1997: 101, Payne & Huddleston 2002: 478):

- |     |    |                                    |                                  |
|-----|----|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (9) | a. | *another destruction of the city’s | patient of derived event nominal |
|     | b. | *that photograph of mine           | theme of description             |
|     | c. | *that funnel of the ship’s         | proper part                      |
|     | d. | *this weather of the summer’s      | time                             |

Compare:

- |      |    |                        |
|------|----|------------------------|
| (10) | a. | the city’s destruction |
|      | b. | my photograph          |
|      | c. | the ship’s funnel      |
|      | d. | this summer’s weather  |

### 3. *Oblique genitive and of oblique*

Lyons (1986) argues that the oblique genitive and *of oblique* are in near complementary distribution, and represent the same construction. Roughly, when the dependent NP is animate, the genitive oblique is preferred (Lyons’ star in 11a). When the NP is inanimate, the *of oblique* is preferred:

- |      |    |                       |     |                          |
|------|----|-----------------------|-----|--------------------------|
| (11) | a. | *the car of John      | a.  | that car of John’s       |
|      | b. | the arm of this chair | a’. | *that arm of the chair’s |

The heaviness of the dependent NP may improve the *of oblique* with non-relational head nouns like *car*, and generally with heavy dependent NPs:

- (12) a. the car of the people next door  
 b. that puppy of the woman who lives across the street  
 c. ??that puppy of the woman who lives across the street's

When both constructions are possible, as with relational nouns such as *friend*, there is no “difference of meaning”:

- (13) a. This man is a friend of Mary  
 b. This man is a friend of Mary's

Contra Lyons, nevertheless, it is clear that with head nouns like *photograph*, there is a clear semantic distinction (see also Barker 1989: 686):

- (14) a. That photograph of me  
 b. That photograph of mine

#### 4. *Oblique genitive and partitive*

Barker (1989) proposes an explicit semantic relationship between the oblique genitive and the partitive. Essentially, there are two different prepositions *of*:

- (15) a. a silhouette of<sub>GEN</sub> Mary (an outline of Mary herself)  
 b. a silhouette of<sub>PART</sub> Mary's (could be one she cut out)

The semantics of partitive *of* imposes anti-uniqueness, so that the normal interpretation of (16a) is that John has more than one friend, and (16b) conflicts with world knowledge about motherhood:

- (16) a. a friend of John's  
 b. \*a mother of mine

However, as Barker himself acknowledges, determiners like *this* and *that* do not impose anti-uniqueness in the oblique genitive:

- (17) that nose of his

As a solution, he proposes that this is a distinct construction, with a third variety of the preposition *of*.

#### 4. *Syntactic compatibility*

The oblique genitive and the subject determiner genitive are syntactically compatible (see also Barker 1989: 684):

- (18) my favourite story of yours

So are the oblique genitive and the *of* oblique:

(19) that new analysis of yours of the double oblique construction  
And even:

(20) my favourite analysis of yours of the double oblique construction

Some attested examples (Webcorp):

- (21) a. I've never been a real fan of La Plante: **my favourite performance of hers** was a low-key and self-effacing appearance she made, in the 1950s, as a contestant on Groucho Marx's 'You Bet Your Life'.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0017672/>
- b. I am rejoicing at the return of the sleek bob, with the side sweeping bangs. That was always **my favourite hairstyle of hers**.  
<http://www.redcarpet-fashionawards.com/2009/01/runway-to-valkyrie-london-premiere.html>
- c. I think Marxy is referring to a recent characterisation **of yours of Japan as a pacifist nation**  
<http://www.plink.com/mt/marxy/archives/2005/08/some-aspects-of.html>
- d. This policy **of yours of mindless violence** is not even practical, never mind ethical.  
<http://www.talkleft.com/story/2007/3/15/14955/2543>

The several attempts to consider the oblique construction as a syntactic variant of other constructions have thus always been doomed. We have an independent construction, as argued by Taylor 1989, Christianson 1997), whose properties overlap partially with other possessor constructions. Where do these overlaps actually occur?

#### 5. Usage based analysis: *of mine*

There are 842 examples of the string *HEAD + of mine* in the British National Corpus (BNC) which genuinely reflect the oblique genitive construction. A semantic analysis of the relations between head and dependent NP reveals the following possibilities:

##### (A) Personal relation: social, work, spiritual (546 examples)

*friend* (393), *colleague* (27), *constituent* (16), *mate* (22), *employer* (1), *ghost* (1)

- (22) a. The regular vet - **a friend of mine** - has gone to live in Australia and he recommended me to the zoo as his replacement.
- b. **A past employer of mine** used to give himself a gourmet week at home once a year .

- c. I have my spirits to confront and he has his realities. I am continually rattled by his insecurity. I can't feel anything substantial in him, anything well-founded about him. Perhaps he'll have to go? No, too cruel. But am I strong enough to watch him trying to fly over things and skim around things and fritter energy and search? He still needs the freedom of a four-year-old, to explore, to laugh suddenly in surprise at the world, to be open, to wander with the secure knowledge of a base to return home to. These **ghosts of mine** are trying to reveal something to me, but he, I fear, will be cut off from himself, sullied, put down completely by all the conflict at earth level, the materialism, the panic, the meanness, the blocked souls, the rubbish.

(B) Kin relation (80 examples)

*son* (13), *child* (11), *cousin* (8), *ancestor* (4), *daughter* (1)

- (23) a. It 's bad enough to have a **son of mine** in this place .
- b. Had **any ancestor of mine** been minded to donate works of art to a national institution , he would have chosen a museum or art gallery and assuredly not a university.

(C) Mental product (67 examples)

Includes all things which are ultimately products of the mind of the dependent, whether they take physical form or not.

*book* (4), *letter* (3), *idea* (3), *description* (1)

- (24) a. Nelson 's had just issued a **short book of mine** on Turkey , and he scrutinized it with care , holding it high up and bending back the spine as if to test its durability .
- b. But it should also be said that some elements of **this description of mine** could be taken to characterise the activity, sometimes ominous enough in its human implications, of all imaginative writers, however remote they may be from the dualistic confederacy.

(D) Ownership (35 examples)

Totally varied, e.g. *T-shirt* (2).

Interestingly, the only example of *photograph* (1) is probably a pure ownership example, not mental product:

- (25) a. I rip up **an old T-shirt of mine** and offer it .

- b. This is much more important than **any wedding photograph of mine** could ever be, Catherine assured him.

(E) Human attribute (26 examples)

*fault* (6), *ambition* (5)

- (26) a. If Yorkshire Pudding ever catches on over there it won't be **any fault of mine**.
- b. It 's **a life-long ambition of mine** to be a chauffeur and I just want to be given a chance.

(F) Action (18 examples)

Cases where the dependent is agent, performing act or activity.

*hobby* (5)

- (27) **Another hobby of mine** in which I have used pressed flowers as a design tool is in cake decorating.

(G) Human interest or concern (21 examples)

*business* (9), *concern* (8), *interest* (2)

- (28) It 's **no business of mine** to worry about how sick you are.

(H) Like or dislike (23 examples)

Typically with the head noun *favourite* (11), or other noun with *favourite* as attribute:

- (29) a. He certainly made a great entrance: I played a slow air, **a favourite of mine**, Cuaist Nam Fir-Cun Og ( The Flight of the Eaglets).
- b. Oh What a Lovely War is **a very favourite film** of mine still.

(I) Body part (14 examples)

*body* (3), *hand* (2), *hair* (2), *leg* (2)

- (30) Forgive my not rising, but I dare not move out of this chair until **this wretched hair of mine** is dry.

(J) Human experience (5)

*experience (3), feeling (1)*

(31) **A recent experience of mine** is a case in point .

(K) Location (4 examples)

*habitation (1), school (1)*

(32) a. It is as though she was deliberately coaxed into that warm and shabby coffee bar by whatever saving force or spirit I can feel ever more strongly in **this no longer quite so bleak habitation of mine**.

b. Yeah, well my local schools the girls say there 's a football team and they 've done quite well through to the finals so it is en encouraged in **in local school of mine**.

(L) Verbal noun (2)

*asking (1), doing (1)*

(33) It was **no doing of mine**.

(M) Group membership (1 example)

*team (1)*

(34) This team of mine, who were down there last night , we 've got to get them swimming, you know .

Summary:

personal	546	attribute	26	body part	14	team	1
kin	80	like	23	experience	5		
mental product	67	interest	21	location	4		
owner	35	action	18	verbal noun			

Not found:

Recipient *my letter*  
Human topic *my obituary*  
Image *my photograph*

Patient                      *my surgery*

Generally: undergoer macrorole (van Valin 2005)

## 6. Determiners

The vast majority of determiners in the *HEAD + of mine* construction are indefinite

<i>a</i>	555	<i>this/these</i>	66
<i>NULL</i>	69	<i>that/those</i>	32
<i>no</i>	42	<i>the</i>	8
<i>some</i>	20		
<i>any</i>	12		
<i>another</i>	9		
<i>a few</i>	2		
<i>every</i>	2		
<i>many</i>	1		
<i>certain</i>	1		
<i>what?</i>	1		

So the oblique genitive is indeed largely in complementary distribution with the subject-determiner genitive in this respect.

## 7. Examples with the

Four have a post-head restrictive relative or similar:

(35) a. David Helton replies: I agree that there's some quite beautiful romantic poetry in the Bible — a tribute to King James's translators as much as anyone — but **the statement of mine** that you object to actually read: 'After page one, the Bible is not about raw nature very much.'

b. Scathach and Morthen are **the only two children of mine** who survived out of a great number .

c. These were probably one of **the few things of mine** not due to be on show at the First Church of Christ the Spiritualist later this morning .

(35a,b, c with subject-determiner genitives would be unnatural)

d. Will the hon. Gentleman tell **the constituent of mine** who is over 21 and earns £50 for a 40-hour week why he has taken a greater percentage of the young man 's earnings than he has from his right hon. and hon. Friends who go to the City and , for part-time work, earn hundreds of thousands of pounds?

(35d has a non-referential interpretation, and could not anyway be replaced by a subject-determiner genitive)



A number have pre-head restrictive modification:

- (36) a.. If **the least word of mine** was to cause him trouble, I don't know what I 'd do.
- b. About this time Wyndham Lewis expressed the wish to paint **the Somerville friend of mine**, and the "Portrait of Miss Close" appears in Walter Michel 's compendium (No. 5).
- c. But **the other** {bathroom} **of mine** had {UPVC blinds}

This example is arguably non-restrictive:

- (37) d. About **the withheld novel of mine** she wrote nobly: 'It must not be spoiled by being adapted to the sensibilities of living persons. It is better to hold it still. It may live beyond their lives and should not suffer from them.'

(36a,b,c) and (37) could be substituted by subject-determiner genitives)

Primary identifiability via head nominal, rather than dependent NP?

#### 8. Further examples with *the* and no modification

- (37) a. GRUNDIG LXW 8510 LCD TV POWER SUPPLY BOARD BLUE  
STANDBY LED FLASHES BUT TV DOES NOT START NEED  
HELP WITH PARTS[/b][[/code]  
Hi Bert, Could you kindly send me a copy of **the 29PT6231 of yours**,  
th e-mail is judy\_s@samafitro.co.id Thanks, JudyS  
<http://forum.eserviceinfo.com/archives/99999647.html>
- b. Good bye Cutler, you weenie... Too much heat here in the Rockies for  
yor sensitive soul and way too much for **the McFans of yours** to  
stand... They cry with you as you depart for some scary new city with  
big scary new fans.  
<http://neighbors.denverpost.com/viewtopic.php?p=740080>
- c. To the viewers of all televisions, about creatures in the sea where they  
dwell! Aqua-lung, **the brainchild of yours** is still playing happily  
around all nations - Better known as 'Scuba', it is widely used globally,  
in marine explorations!  
<http://www.wowzone.com/cousteau.htm> (poetry)

## References

- Barker, Chris 1989. Partitives, double genitives and anti-uniqueness. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 16,(4), 679-719.
- Christianson, Kiel 1997. A text analysis of the English double genitive. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 35(2), 99-113.
- Jackendoff, Ray 1968. Possessive in English. In Stephen R. Anderson, Ray S. Jackendoff & Samuel Jay Keyser (eds) *Studies in Transformational Grammar and Related Topics*, 23-31. AFCRL-89-0032. Revised version translated into French by Edmond Grimberg 1969. Les constructions possessives en anglais. *Langages* 14(1), 7-27.
- Lyons, Christopher 1986. The syntax of English genitive constructions. *Journal of Linguistics*, 22, 123-143.
- Payne, John & Rodney Huddleston 2002. Nouns and noun phrases. In Rodney Huddleston & Geoffrey K Pullum et al., *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*, 323-523. Cambridge University Press.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik 1972. *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. London, New York: Longman.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London, New York: Longman.
- Taylor, John R. 1989. Possessive genitives in English. *Linguistics* 27, 663-686.
- Van Valin, Robert D. 2005. *Exploring the syntax-semantics interface*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.