

On Possessive Constructions Relating to Inanimate Objects

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ABSTRACT

The present paper, which is primarily for the attention of authors of English-language grammar guides, investigates a variety of reference sources with the aim of discovering what kind of information is generally available in English concerning possessive constructions relating to inanimate objects in the written language, and finds that information on the whole to be inadequate.

Keywords: animate, attributive, genitive, inanimate, of-phrase, possessive

INTRODUCTION

The correct and natural formation of English possessive constructions is a well-known source of difficulty for many learners. Although the tendency to avoid a genitive construction*¹ (i.e. typically the addition of a final 's to a singular, or s' to a plural, noun) in the case of inanimate nouns (apart from the relatively well-defined cases of (a) names of geographical areas/organizations composed of people, e.g. *Italy's* victory, *Toyota's* profits, etc. and (b) temporal noun phrases, as in *an hour's* walk) is generally well understood, at least by intermediate-level learners, the exceptions to this rule - whether standard or simply widely tolerated by natives - are less so.

Thus, regarding the following examples,

[1] The ship's funnel is rusty.

[2] The train's arrival was delayed.

[3] *The house's roof was damaged.

[4] *The bedroom's door is open.

we find [1] and [2], despite the nouns 'ship' and 'train' denoting inanimate objects, to be well-formed, unlike ostensibly similar [3] and [4], where natives would prefer, in the case of the former, an of-construction:

[3a] The roof of the house was damaged.

and, in that of the latter, an attributive noun construction (i.e. the adnominal use of a non-inflected canonical noun):

[4a] The bedroom door is open.*²

In the course of this paper, which is intended primarily for the attention of authors of English-language grammar guides (i.e. guides to English grammar written in English), we will be surveying a variety of commonly available reference sources, both in print and online, with a view to ascertaining, with particular regard to the admissibility or otherwise of genitive constructions as exemplified in [1]~[4] above, what kind of guidance concerning possessive constructions the contemporary English-learner wishing to study grammar via the target language can reasonably expect to find, and thus to determining the general level of adequacy of said guidance in both quantitative and qualitative terms.*³

SURVEY

Amongst the various authorities in print here examined, arguably the clearest guidance on our topic is to be found in Swan¹⁾, who notes (p.424) that

the 's genitive is most common in expressions where the first noun is animate... In other cases we often use the of structure.

inviting the reader to compare such expressions as *the dog's name* and *the name of the street*.

He then, however – with what might be regarded as refreshing honesty – goes on to admit that

It is not easy to give very clear rules for the difference between the two structures. The 's genitive can be used with quite a lot of inanimate nouns, especially nouns that have

*some relationship to human activity, e.g. plan, report, university, book.*⁴*

citing in defence of the latter observation a set of alternative formulations including *the plan's importance / the importance of the plan* and *the book's author / the author of the book*.

Finally he comes closest to touching directly on our topic when noting that “in some expressions the *of* structure is the only one possible”, citing unacceptable **the house's windows* and **the glass's bottom* (versus correct *the windows of the house, the bottom of the glass*). Nevertheless, we are left none the wiser concerning the supposed distinction between a house and a ship.

In Quirk, Greenbaum et al.²⁾, usually a source of the most detailed and informative analysis of almost any grammar issue imaginable, we find an uncharacteristic dearth of information on our topic, the only comments relating directly to it consisting in noting (p.321) the possibility of saying either *the ship's name* or *the name of the ship*, and the incorrectness of **the house's front*, but with no explanation offered, even when (p.324-325) they go on to provide a lengthy list of types of noun that frequently take the genitive, as to the key point – a clear reason for distinguishing, for grammatical purposes, between a ship and a house or a train and a bedroom.

Greenbaum³⁾, on the other hand, provides relatively clear and concise guidance concerning the use of genitive constructions, noting (p.112-113) (1) that

The genitive is preferred to the corresponding of-phrase when the noun

phrase denotes persons, animals or human institutions.

(citing, among others, *the designer's studio* and *the birds' first brave cheepings*), (2) that

*The genitive is also commonly used with noun phrases that denote entities, states and activities associated with human beings.*5*

(citing, among others, *my heart's desire* and *the program's user*), and, most significantly, (3) that

The genitive sometimes occurs with noun phrases where none of the above conditions applies.

(citing, among others, *the cell's genetic material*⁶ and *an apple's flesh*). Again, however, there is no attempt to systematically analyse the exceptions.

Huddleston et al.⁴⁾ provide (p.474) a list of natural instances of genitive-case nouns that includes inanimates, such as *the room's Persian carpet*, *the sun's rays* and *the cathedral's spire*, justifying them on the grounds that they imply assertions of the type [A has B] (where A is, in some sense, considered the “possessor” of B, and thus capable of taking a genitive inflection). However, once again we find no attempt to explain the unacceptability of [3] and [4] from our introduction, despite the evident possibility of asserting both that a house *has* a roof (just as a cathedral has a spire) and that a bedroom *has* a door (just as a room

has a carpet).

In stark contrast to the above, Strumpf⁵⁾ informs us (p.27) that

*Many English teachers advise against applying a possessive case to inanimate objects... It does not make sense for a car or a house or a bicycle to own anything in the way that a possessive case expresses ownership. The type of possession allowed inanimate objects is typically expressed by a phrase beginning with of.*7*

citing, by way of illustration, incorrect **the car's hood* and **the bike's tire* versus correct *the hood of the car* and *the tire of the bike*.

But perhaps Strumpf's most enlightening comment is that which immediately follows the one cited above:

Like many grammar issues, however, this one requires a judgement call. Through popular usage, some nouns that name inanimate objects have acquired the rights to their possessive case forms.

citing, among others, *my mind's eye* and *the sun's rays*. Unlike Swan and Greenbaum, however, Strumpf makes no attempt to classify the exceptions, listing them alongside temporal noun phrases such as *a moment's (delay)* and *a week's (vacation)*. However, his main point seems clear: such exceptions are quite arbitrary.

Sadly, none of the following popular English grammar guides has anything useful to offer with regard to our topic: Downing & Locke⁶⁾,

Lester & Beason⁷⁾, Gucker⁸⁾, Terban⁹⁾, and Azar¹⁰⁾.

Moving on to online reference sources, the website tspu.edu.ru¹¹⁾, under the heading *The Possessive Case of Nouns*, has a most interesting insight to offer, noting that a genitive 's can be affixed to "nouns often called 'she/he'", citing *the ship's passengers* and *your car's number*. Although it stops short of specifically positing 'vehicles' or 'modes of transport' as a category, this hypothesis would seem to account very plausibly for [2] as well as [1] from our introduction.

EnglishGrammar.org¹²⁾, on a page titled *Formation of the Possessive Case*, comments thus:

The possessive case is not normally used with the names of lifeless things; instead, we use a structure with of.

citing, among other examples, "the leg of the table (NOT the table's leg)" but also noting an interesting category of exceptions vaguely reminiscent of the previously noted suggestion in tspu.edu.ru, namely that of personified objects, citing, among other examples, "Nature's laws" and "at duty's call".

CliffsNotes.com¹³⁾, under the heading *Possessive Case of Nouns*, observes that

*When a possessive noun sounds awkward, reword to use an of construction. *8 This is a better way to indicate the relationship, especially when referring to an inanimate object: the top of the page instead of the page's top...*

while the following grammar websites, despite the promise of their various headings (given in parentheses), have little or nothing to offer of any significance to our topic: grammarly.com¹⁴⁾ (Possessive Case of Nouns: Rules and Examples), grammar-monster.com¹⁵⁾ (What is the Possessive Case?), learngrammar.net¹⁶⁾ (Examples of the Possessive Case/Genitive Case), grammar.com¹⁷⁾ (Possessive Case), englisch-hilfen.de¹⁸⁾ (s apostrophe, genitive s), prezi.com¹⁹⁾ (The Possessive Case) and English4u.de²⁰⁾ (Possessive Case).

The least reliable advice in any of the sources surveyed is to be found on the website lovelylanguage.com²¹⁾ which, under the heading *Cases of Nouns in English – Possessive Case and Common Case*, states that

*In rare occurrences (sic.) the possessive case used with inanimate nouns is limited to the value of a specific object: the car's roof (the roof of a certain car). *9*

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that, while some authorities do offer sound guidance regarding the correct formation of possessive constructions relating to inanimate nouns, quality of coverage varies greatly, and many fail to offer any guidance at all.

It is thus to be hoped that, when composing new, or revising current, English grammar guides, authors will endeavor to devote greater attention to this topic.

FOOTNOTES

*1 The definition by which we shall abide here, as distinct from “possessive”, which we apply to any construction indicating possession of something by someone/something else, including both nouns inflected for the genitive and of-constructions (but excluding, for instance, partitive constructions). It should, however, be noted, that authorities are not entirely consistent in this regard, some using “genitive” as little more than a synonym of “possessive”.

*2 There is some room for disagreement as to whether [4a] even constitutes a true possessive construction, since attributive nouns are typically regarded as a subcategory of modifier (*cf.* ‘rubber’ in *a rubber ball*), so that the initial article relates, not to ‘bedroom’ but rather to ‘door’, whilst, in the case of [1] and [2], the article relates to the genitive-case noun, which accordingly is reckoned a determiner (*cf.* “John’s” in *John’s hat*) rather than a mere modifier.

However, even if we accept the essential validity of this apparently nitpicking objection, we are left with the somewhat awkward task of determining just what the true equivalent possessive construction would be, the choice being between manifestly possessive, but highly unnatural,

[4b] ?The door of the bedroom is open.

and

[4c] The door to the bedroom is open.

which, while certainly idiomatic and, to all normal communicative intents and purposes,

semantically identical to [4a], would seem, by dint of employing ‘to’ rather than ‘of’, to be of equally questionable status as a “true” possessive construction.

*3 Naturally, we are concerned here only with subjective genitives, i.e. those that indicate the possession of something – whether in a legal or simply physical sense – such as *Peter’s nose*, rather than objective genitives, such as *Peter’s execution*, denoting typically some kind of action performed by a third party with respect to the “possessor”.

*4 We might, however, be inclined to take issue with the vagueness of the expression “some relationship to human activity”: people write books, but (to return to two nouns in which we have a particular interest) they also build houses and sail ships. All three might in some sense be said to bear “some relationship to human activity”.

*5 A strikingly similar expression to that encountered above in Swan, although exemplified rather differently.

*6 We might, however, be forgiven for wondering on what grounds a heart counts as an entity associated with human beings, but not a cell!

*7 One might, however, feel that his interpretation of the term ‘possessive’ is a little simplistic. We are, after all, dealing with a grammatical, rather than a strictly legal, concept.

*8 One feels obliged, however, to question the usefulness of this advice for learners: are they really in a position to judge what does, or does not, “sound awkward”?

*9 My boldtype. Most authorities would reject *the car’s roof* (see e.g. Strumpf, p.27).

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Accepted: Nov. 8, 2021

Published: Nov. 24, 2021

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主として英文法ガイドの著者に向けられた本論考では、筆記英語における無生物に関する所有格構文についてどのような情報が一般的に英語で入手可能かを発見する目的で様々な参考資料を調査し、その情報が全体的に不十分であると判断する。