

Thesis abstract

My MA thesis explores genitive variation in spoken Late Modern English in the 18th century. Genitive variation is the variable of main interest in recent research on syntactic alternations in English (Rosenbach 2014: 215). While there exists ternary alternation, my thesis excludes noun-noun structures and only focuses on the binary and interchangeable choice between the inflective *s*-genitive (1) and the periphrastic *of*-construction (2).

(1) *The prosecutor's* [possessor] *wife* [possessum] *went away* [...]. (OBC)

(2) *You are the wife* [possessum] *of the last witness* [possessor]. (OBC)

While the inflectional variant used to be predominant up until Middle English, the use of the *of*-genitive increased vastly from the 13th century on, almost eradicating the *s*-form (Rosenbach 2002: 179). It has, however, risen again since the Early Modern English period and its domains have been extended from solely human possessors to collective and even inanimate possessors by the time of Late Modern English (Hackert & Wengler 2022: 4), although for the time being the *of*-variant prevailed. The trend of favoring the *s*-genitive nevertheless continues in Present Day English (Hackert & Wengler 2022: 4). The choice of variant is influenced by quite a number of parameters (Szmrecsanyi & Hinrichs 2008: 292–293); the analysis of my thesis will, however, be limited to animacy, semantic relations, definiteness, syntactic weight, and sibilancy, and how these factors interact with each other.

My data stems from the Old Bailey Corpus, a text corpus based on the Proceedings of the London criminal court Old Bailey from 1647 to 1913. As the proceedings were taken down in shorthand, the transcribed verbatim passages are as close as possible to spoken language of that time period (Huber 2007).

References

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