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Genitive *'s* and *of* possessive structures and their use constraints for Argentinian EFL learners: a reflective stance towards grammar errors

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Abstract

Possession is a universal domain, since every human language makes use of conventionalized expressions for it. The case of attributive possession, mainly as regards the genitive case (*'s*) and the use of the preposition *of*, can cause some difficulties for EFL learners. The aim of this work is to provide a preliminary study of those structures in comparison to the Spanish N *de* N structure so as to shed light on some concepts related to L1 interference and error analysis. Some contributions related to the teaching of grammar contents are also included.

Keywords: attributive possession; genitive case 's vs. preposition of; L1; interference between languages.

Resumen

El concepto de posesión es un campo universal, ya que las lenguas pueden utilizar expresiones convencionales para referir a ese campo universal. El caso de la posesión atributiva, principalmente en cuanto al caso genitivo (*'s*) y el uso de la preposición *of*, puede causar algunas dificultades para los estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera. El propósito de este trabajo es brindar un estudio preliminar de esas estructuras en inglés en comparación con la utilización de la preposición *de* en español a modo de ilustrar algunas situaciones relacionados con la interferencia de la lengua materna y el análisis del error. También incluye algunos aportes referidos a la enseñanza de contenidos gramaticales.

Palabras clave: posesión atributiva; caso genitivo 's vs. preposición of; interferencia entre lenguas.

LEARNERS OF ENGLISH whose first language (L1) is Spanish generally experience some problems when deciding on the use of attributive possessive structures, mainly because of their L1 interference. Based on my experience as an EFL teacher as well as on research studies carried out on the topic, I will analyze the use of those structures, especially the pre-nominal possessive (*'s* possessive or genitive case) and post-nominal prepositional constructions (*of* possessive) by Argentinian learners of English.

Students make mistakes during their learning process, since this is an inevitable part of learning a language. The way in which errors are treated, or ignored, is of paramount importance for the development of teaching attitudes towards error and correction. Thus, a second aim of this paper is to reflect upon the way in which grammar errors, specifically those related to attributive possessive structures, need to be dealt with so as to encourage appropriate teaching practices.

As regards the organization of this work, I will firstly provide an explanatory section to contextualize attributive possession within the broader sphere of possession as a universal domain. Then, I will describe and analyze *'s* and *of* possessive structures and their contrasts in English and Spanish. After that, I will refer to the main constraints for Argentinian learners of English as well as some considerations about error treatment. Finally, I will provide some suggestions regarding the implications for the teaching of grammar.

Possession: General Considerations

Possession is a universal domain, that is, any human language can be expected to have conventionalized expressions for it (Heine, 1997). Following Seiler (1983, pp. 2-4), possession may be defined 'as a bio-cultural domain involving a relationship between a prototypically human possessor (PR), in most cases presented as the topic, and the possessum (PM), normally the comment'. Baron and Herslund (2001) claim that what is normally called possession is the linguistic expression of the relation between two entities, a PR and a PM, such that one, the PR, is seen as being in some way related to the other, the PM, as having it near or controlling it.

McGregor (2009) describes three types of possession: attributive, predicative and external possession. The term attributive possession refers to constructions in which the PM and the PR expressions form a noun phrase (NP), as in '*My dog*, *The king of France*, and *Cliff's ankle*'. By contrast, predicative possession is used in constructions in which the possessive relationship is expressed in the predicate, often by a possessive verb as in '*I have a dog*'. Finally, constructions in which the possessive relation is not specified either by the lexical verb or within the NP but rather at the level of a clausal construction are examples of external possession, as in '*The dog bit Cliff on the ankle*' (McGregor, 2009, p.2).

The present work will be focused on attributive possession. Heine (1997) states that attributive possession appears to present a relatively simple structure: it consists essentially of two NPs linked to one another in a specific way. Accordingly, work on attributive possession has focused mostly on the way the two NPs are linked.

English and Spanish Contrasted: *'s* and *of/de* Possessive Structures

Attributive possessive constructions overlap across English and Spanish in different ways. One case is the use of possessive pronouns, possible in both languages, which will not be under study in the present work because of length restrictions. Besides the use of pronouns, English has two ways of expressing nominal possession: genitives, which are realized pre-nominally with the *'s* marker, e.g. *John's eyes*, and the prepositional possessive, which is post-nominal and is realized with the preposition *of*, e.g. *the door of the cave*. In contrast, in Spanish only one realization is possible, the post-nominal prepositional possessive with *de* (of), e.g. '*la casa **de** Juan*' (John's house) since pre-nominal possessives are not accepted, e.g. '**María casa*' (*Mary house), as stated by Vásquez Carranza (2010, p.148).

To sum up, both languages realize nominal possessive constructions through post-nominal prepositional constructions with *of/de*, and English also allows pre-nominal *'s* constructions, which is not allowed in Spanish (Whitley, 2002). In the following sections, I will provide a more detailed analysis of English and Spanish possessive structures separately.

English *'s* and *of* possessives

Quirk (1985, p. 321) claims that in many instances there is a similarity of function and meaning between 'a noun in the genitive case and the same noun as head of a prepositional phrase (PP) with *of*. For example, in '*What's the ship's name?*' and '*What's the name of the ship?*', the two forms are equivalent in meaning and are both perfectly acceptable (Quirk, 1985, p. 321). In other cases, either the genitive or the *of* construction is the only appropriate choice, e.g. '*John's school/*The school of John* or *the front of the house/*the house's front*' (Quirk, 1985, p.321).

Different accounts have been proposed to explain why the use of one structure is selected over the other. For example, Quirk (1972) suggests the use of a gender scale and claims that the ' *'s* possessive is favoured when the PR is higher on that scale': human male and female (*aunt, uncle*) < human dual (both genders, such as *doctor*) < human common (*baby*) < human collective (*family*) < higher animals (*dog, cow*) < higher organisms (*ship*) < lower animals (*ants*) < inanimates (*box*) (Quirk, 1972, p.198). Following this scale, sentences like *Anna's car* and *the roof of this house* would be acceptable but **the car of Ann* or **this house's roof* would not.

Hawkins (1981), cited by Vásquez Carranza (2010, p.149), argues that 'it is not simply the humanness of the possessor what determines the choice of constructions; instead, it is a comparison of the animacy of the PR and the PM'. He proposes that human nouns have linear precedence over non-human nouns (Hawkins, 1981) and he supports his argument with two examples: '*Mary's car/the car of Mary*' (marginal because an inanimate precedes a human); and '*the foot of the mountain/the mountain's foot*' (marginal because an inanimate precedes a human attribute). In that way, Hawkins proposes a simpler animacy hierarchy: 'human (*Mary*) < human attribute (*foot*) < non-human animate (*rabbit*) < non-human inanimate (*table*)' (Vásquez Carranza, 2010, p.149).

Referring to the hierarchies described above, Vásquez Carranza (2010) cites Anschutz (1997), who argues that they should be interpreted as tendencies rather than rules. He states that 'the main factor that determines the choice is the information status of the nouns involved' (Anschutz, 1997, pp.28-35). Specifically, if the PR is old information and the PM is new information, then the structure will be realized with *'s*. When it is the other way round, the possessive phrase will be realized with the *of* construction. Similar to Anschutz's view, Quirk (1985, p.1282) also affirms that the choice between the genitive and the of construction 'is conditioned by the linear organization of utterances in discourse'. He claims that the genitive is generally favoured when the second noun has a higher communicative value than the first one, whereas the *of* construction is preferred when the thematic distribution is the reverse.

To sum up, it can be stated that two main criteria exist when providing explanations for the selection of one possessive form over the other: different categories from scales or hierarchies (Quirk, 1972; Hawkins, 1981) and information status of the nouns involved (Anschutz, 1997; Quirk, 1985).

Spanish N *de* N structures

Müller (2001) claims that if we search in the Spanish grammatical literature for a description of the meaning of the preposition *de*, it is very common to find the word 'possession' in the first lines of this description. The author also explains that the function of the preposition *de* is 'to combine entities in a given way and that the interpretation of N *de* N structures depends on the nature of the head noun, placing the whole construction on a sort of restriction/non restriction scale' (Müller, 2001, p.176).

This scale is divided into two main parts according to the properties of the nouns in question (relational and non-relational). The bottom part of the scale consists of nouns that are either inherently relational: denoting objects (body parts), arbitrary parts and persons (kinship) or nouns that are morphologically related to predicates: deverbal and deadjectival nouns. The upper part of the scale contains nouns that do not refer to

external entities, and consequently are non-relational. It is important to note the part-whole constructions can be both relational and non-relational (Müller, 2001).

Although Müller (2001) presents every kind of N *de* N combination based on the described categories in detail, I will only introduce some examples to illustrate comparisons with English structures. To explain deadjectival nouns it is stated that the predicative force of the adjective is transferred to the derived noun, e.g. '*la inteligencia de Juan*' (John's intelligence) (Müller, 2001, p.177). As for deverbal nouns, the nominalized verb inherits the argument structure of the verb, e.g. '*la llegada de Juan*' (John's arrival) (Müller, 2001, p.178).

Inherently relational nouns are divided into three groups. In the first one, the head nouns denote quantities and arbitrary parts, e.g. '*el porcentaje del banco*' (the percentage of the bank); in the second group, they denote persons, e.g. '*las madres de Plaza de Mayo*' (May Square mothers); and in the third one, physical objects, e.g. '*la nariz de la chica*' (the girl's nose). Finally, '*la cola del caballo*' (the horse's tail) is an example of relational part-whole relationships, while '*la ventana de la casa*' (the window of the house) illustrates a non-relational one (Müller, 2001, pp. 179-180).

To summarize, the main criteria present in Spanish to organize possessive N *de* N structures is also a scale, as it was observed for English structures, but dependent mainly on the relational or non-relational nature of the nouns involved.

Main Difficulties for Argentinian EFL Learners

Swan and Smith (2001, p. 106) state that 'possession and related concepts that in English are expressed by possessive cases of nouns, e.g *Jim's bike*, are expressed by Spanish learners of English with an *of* phrase, e.g. *The bike of Jim.' Although this might be considered an overgeneralization, Argentinian learners, in general, might face difficulties when using those structures. Similar assumptions have been proved according to findings from some research studies on the topic carried out with Spanish speaking learners from different countries (Wolford, 2006; Vásquez Carranza, 2010; Fernández Dominguez, 2010; among others). Even more, the distinction between the use of the apostrophe and the preposition *of* for possession is signaled as a common mistake students make when sitting for international exams (see Driscoll, 2005, p. 12).

Additional problems might appear if we consider that the combination of two nouns together to mean one thing/person/idea, etc. also exist in English, such as *tennis ball*, *road accident*, *bank manager*, *life story*, *income tax*, (Murphy, 2004, p. 160), among many others. Those combinations, in which the first noun usually carries an adjectival value, can cause problems to students who might think about them as attributes the second noun 'possesses,' mainly because of the use of *de* in Spanish for almost every case. Thus, as in Spanish we say *una pelota de tenis* or *el gerente del banco*, learners

might probably think of *a ball of tennis* or *the manager of the bank* as valid options. Some specific cases can be even more confusing, for example the difference between *a sugar bowl* (perhaps empty) and *a bowl of sugar* (=a bowl with sugar in it) or *a shopping bag* (perhaps empty) and *a bag of shopping* (=a bag full of shopping) (Murphy, 2004, p. 160).

The adding of unnecessary apostrophes plus *s* is also common, mainly when dealing with complex nouns, such as *garden vegetables*, *the restaurant owner* or *the garage door* (Murphy, 2004, p. 160). It is not strange to find cases in which students think of *garden's vegetables*, *the restaurant's owner* or *the garage's door* as possible options. This occurs because once learners become familiar with the genitive case, they might tend to over generalize its use to every noun + noun combination. Many other confusing cases exist if we consider the use of the genitive *'s* or the preposition *of* for time expressions, organizations and geographical names, without forgetting that in many cases the decisions towards which is the best option purely depends on contextual features such as end-focus or end-weight (Quirk, 1990, p. 104).

As a way of illustrating the topic I will describe a recent teaching practice with a group of teenagers (pre-intermediate level). Students were asked to work in pairs on the writing of a horror story to be part of a school contest. Some words with different scores were given and learners had to use as many as they could. Some of the given words were: *man*, *voice*, *roof*, *haunted*, *house*, *cat* and *eyes*. When reading the stories, I noted that most students had not used the *'s* possessive structure where it would have been more appropriate. They tended to use the *of* construction most of the times, e.g. *Suddenly, I heard the voice of a man* (instead of *a man's voice*), *The eyes of the cat were bright red* (instead of *the cat's eyes*). Unsurprisingly, no problems appeared when they wrote sentences like *A cat was walking on the roof of the haunted house*. What is more, nobody wrote phrases like *a haunted house's roof*. As a preliminary conclusion, it can be stated that two tendencies appear: the overuse of the *of* possessive structures and the evident absence of *'s* possessive ones.

These difficulties experienced by learners can be explained through the concepts of L1 interference and the development of interlanguage. When writing or speaking the target language (L2), learners tend to rely on their native L1 structures. If the structures of the two languages are distinctly different, a relatively high frequency of errors could be expected, thus indicating an interference of L1 on L2 (Ellis, 1997). Lott (1983, p. 256) defines interference as 'errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue'. Similarly, Ellis (1997, p.51) refers to interference as 'transfer,' which he says is 'the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2'.

As regards interference errors, Alonso Alonso (1997), citing Lott (1983), distinguishes

three types. The first one is defined as 'overextension of analogy' and it occurs when the student misuses a vocabulary item because it is similar to another form in the Ll. 'Transfer of structure' forms constitutes the second group of errors. These happen when the student makes a grammar mistake because the mother tongue rules are followed. The third type is called 'interlingual/intralingual' and consists of the errors students make because a word distinction, either lexical or grammatical, which is made in the L2, does not exist in their L1 (Alonso Alonso, 1997, p.8).

In an attempt to classify the two typical errors made by EFL learners according to Lott's (1983) categories, I would say that they belong to two types. The overuse of the *of* structure would be a 'transfer of structure' error, since students follow the rules of Spanish and transfer the N *de* N structure to the *of* construction to all possessive instances. The absence of *'s* possessive constructions could be case of 'interlingual error', as learners make mistakes because that particular structure (*'s* possessive) does not exist in Spanish.

Some last considerations about errors are important, as suggested by Thornbury (1999). The first one is priority: which errors really matter and which do not? Some errors are likely to distract the reader or listener while others go largely unnoticed. Another aspect is intelligibility: to what extent does the error interfere with, or distort, the learner's message? (Thornbury, 1999, p.115). In the case of the use of possessive structures by EFL learners, any of the two most frequent errors described above would not cause serious problems as regards intelligibility, and perhaps in some cases they would even go unnoticed among NNS. However, they could distract or make the message a bit awkward for NS.

Finally, there are many complex decisions that teachers have to make when monitoring learner production. Although the way teachers respond to error tend to be more often intuitive than consciously considered, reflecting upon their attitudes towards error as well as adopting different feedback alternatives become pedagogical strategies that might prove fruitful.

Considerations for an Effective Teaching of Grammar

First of all, I will refer to the way in which attributive possessive structures are present in most grammar books. In general, the use of categories has been present in most course and grammar books, although simplified according to the language level. For example, in materials for elementary levels, it can be found that *'s* 'is commonly used for people, and *of* is used for things and places' (Murphy, 1997, p. 134). However, in the same book series but aimed at an intermediate level, it is found that *'s* is used 'for people or animals and *of* is used for ideas, things and organizations, together with many more examples and exceptions' (Murphy, 2004, p. 162).

Secondly, I would like to introduce a definition of the concept of teaching grammar as provided by Larsen-Freeman (1991, p. 280): 'Teaching grammar means enabling language students to use linguistic forms accurately, meaningfully and appropriately.' In order to do so, Larsen-Freeman (1991) proposes a framework of reference which includes three interconnected dimensions of language: the form of structures (how a particular grammar structure is constructed), their semantics (what the grammar structures mean, lexically or grammatically), and the pragmatic conditions governing their use (the study of those relations between language and context that are encoded in the structure of a language).

By organizing grammar contents considering the three dimensions of language teachers can easily identify where the challenge will lie for their students. Then, for each grammar content they are about to teach, teachers should think about which of the three dimensions of language is likely to offer the greatest challenge for their students and provide them with different tasks to tackle it. For instance, considering the teaching practice I described before, I think that the three dimensions of language would cause some difficulties for learners, although as their level is pre-intermediate, they are probably familiarized with the form and meaning of the structures, so perhaps the pragmatic dimension would be the most challenging at this stage. However, as regards form, the adding of apostrophe plus *s* or apostrophe alone after plural nouns ending in *s* as well as aspects of *'s* pronunciation according to different ending sounds could constitute problematic issues. Considering meaning, some distinctions about the relations between the two nouns involved in the structure could also cause trouble. Finally, as I said before, the distinction between *'s* and *of* structures and when to use each would constitute the biggest challenge from a pragmatic point of view.

This idea of identifying the challenge presented by some grammar contents is related to the concept of consciousness-raising (CR), which, according to Thornbury (1999) is essential for successful grammar teaching within a communicative language framework. Ellis (2002) makes a useful distinction between CR and mere 'practice'. The main difference is that CR does not involve the learner in repeated production. This is because 'the aim of CR is not to enable learners to perform a structure correctly but to help them know more about it' (Ellis, 2002, p.169). It is only after CR that effective, contextualized practice will result useful. However, as an inevitable part of the language learning process, learners make mistakes. It is then that teachers have to develop pedagogical tools to deal with those errors in an effective way.

'Attitudes to error run deep and lie at the heart of teachers' intuitions about language learning' (Thornbury, 1999, p.116). On the one hand, there are people who still believe that errors are contagious. On the other hand, many teachers believe that to correct errors is a form of interference, especially in fluency activities. These different views are

reflected on the shifts of thinking among researchers, who see errors as being evidence of developmental processes rather than the result of bad habit formation. Thus, current methodology is much more tolerant of error. However, some studies about learners whose language development has fossilized suggest that the lack of negative feedback (also called 'correction', which occurs when learners are told that they cannot say something) may have been a factor. Thus, if the only messages learners get are positive (learners are told when they are right), it may be the case that there is no incentive to restructure their mental grammar.

I think that we need to find a balance between negative and positive feedback, which can be reached if we give learners clear messages about their errors. So the question is: what options do teachers have when faced with a student's error? It will depend, above all, on the type of error, the type of activity and the type of learner, but teachers can always make use of a wide range of strategies. Self-correction and peer correction, clarification requests, echoing mistakes with a quizzical intonation, using finger-coding, gestures and drawings, elicitation, reactive teaching and reformulation, among others, are useful techniques (Thurnbury, 1999, pp. 117-119).

Conclusion

Argentinian EFL learners generally find it difficult to decide which kind of possessive structure is more acceptable for different instances of attributive possession. As a result, two main consequences arise: the overuse of *of* structures and the absence of *'s* possessive ones. Those errors can be explained through the concepts of L1 interference and the development of interlanguage.

As regards grammar teaching, a general four-stage process could be implemented in order to help students acquire the grammatical knowledge needed for effective communication and tackle difficulties with the use of possessive structures: identify a potential challenge through the consideration of form, meaning and use of the grammar content; help students know more about the grammar structures (CR) and provide learners with instances of meaningful practice; and deal with errors in a constructive way by making use of different feedback strategies.

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Appendix 1.

Observations:

I used *italics* for examples in English and Spanish.

An English translation was added between parentheses after Spanish examples to clarify meaning.

Abbreviations:

CR: consciousness-raising

L1: first language

L2: target language

N: noun

NP: noun phrase

PM: possessum

PP: prepositional phrase

PR: possessor

Symbols:

(*) used before unacceptable expressions

(?) used before expressions when native speakers are unsure about acceptability, showing a marginal use