

A FRIEND OF MY MOTHER('S): ON THE USE OF GENITIVE
VS. COMMON CASE IN POSTMODIFYING OF-PHRASES

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1. Aim

It is well-known that the so-called double genitive, or the post-genitive, occurs where the noun phrase following the preposition is definite and human (Quirk et al. 1985: 1283):

an opera of Verdi's BUT NOT: **an opera of a composer's*
an opera of my friend's BUT NOT: **a funnel of the ship's*

It is perhaps less known that *of*-phrases with a common-case noun phrase are found as alternatives to the post-genitive in similar contexts. Compare:¹

- (1) *Ultimately I took to wearing them all the time – only whipping them off when approached by a boy I vaguely fancied or at the doorway of the house of a friend of my mother's, with a boy my mother fancied for me inside.* ARJ: 3447
- (2) *We inherited him from a friend of my mother.* AL3: 1783

The aim of this paper is to study the choice between the two constructions illustrated in these examples. To clarify the issue, we must first examine the conditions governing the use of postmodifying *of*-phrases and the post-genitive, as compared with the ordinary *s*-genitive.²

¹ Unless specified otherwise, the examples have been taken from the British National Corpus.

² We are grateful to Bengt Altenberg, Lund University, for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2. *S*-genitive vs. *of*-phrase

The choice between *s*-genitive and *of*-phrase is governed by a range of interacting factors (Quirk et al. 1985: 1275ff.). Some of these are well-known and need no illustration, e.g., the association between *s*-genitive and personal nouns, and between *of*-phrases and inanimate nouns. *S*-genitives are generally less complex than postmodifying *of*-phrases and are typically used with reference to persons, things or phenomena which have given information status, either because they have been introduced earlier in the text or because they are part of the general knowledge of the speaker/writer and the addressee. In contrast, postmodifying *of*-phrases are commonly much longer and more often introduce new entities into the discourse. Compare:³

- (3) *Mr Walsh's murder came just 11 hours after the UFF shot dead four Catholics and injured a fifth man.* (news text)
- (4) *A New Zealand man was recently sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of an English tourist, Monica Cantwell.* (news text)
- (5) *The renowned Aberdeen Ballad-singer, Lizzie Higgins, died on Saturday in her native city at the age of 63.*
Lizzie was the daughter of a very famous mother, the late Jeannie Robertson, who after her "discovery" in 1953 was acclaimed internationally as the outstanding ballad-singer of modern times.
Lizzie's father was the prize-winning piper Donald Higgins, whose influence on her musical development complemented that of her mother. (news text)

The proportional use of *s*-genitives vs. *of*-phrases in a material examined by Johansson (forthcoming) is presented below. Each "*" represents 5%, and each "." 2.5%, of the occurrences within each row.

	% <i>s</i> -genitive	% <i>of</i> -phrase
1-word phrase	*****	*****
2-word phrase	*****	*****
3-word phrase	*	*****
4+ word phrase	.	*****
given information	*****	*****
new information	***	*****

³ These examples have been taken from Johansson (forthcoming).

To generalize, we could say that the *s*-genitive is closely related to the subject of clauses, and *of*-phrases to objects (or complements). There is a similarity between the position in the clause and in the noun phrase: early placement for subject and *s*-genitives, late placement for objects and *of*-phrases. There is also a correspondence between the types of relations expressed, most clearly shown in the preference for the subjective relation of *s*-genitives and for the objective relation of *of*-phrases. There is an analogous difference in complexity and information status: subjects and *s*-genitives are characteristically less complex and more typically convey given information, while objects and *of*-phrases show the opposite tendency. Finally, there is a parallel in the types of nouns which are most characteristically associated with these syntactic choices: personal nouns with subjects and *s*-genitives, and inanimate nouns with objects and *of*-phrases.

3. The post-genitive

The *s*-genitive specifies the reference of the head noun in the same way as a determiner, and it is mutually exclusive with the main determiner groups (see below). By choosing the post-genitive we can combine elements which are mutually exclusive. The head is introduced by the indefinite article, a demonstrative determiner, or a quantifier; a plural head noun may occur in the zero form:⁴

<i>a friend of my mother's</i>	BUT NOT:	<i>*a my mother's friend</i>
<i>this friend of my mother's</i>		<i>*this my mother's friend</i>
<i>two friends of my mother's</i>		<i>*two my mother's friends</i>
<i>friends of my mother's</i>		<i>(my mother's friends)</i>

My mother's friends (given in parentheses above) is of course possible, but it is not equivalent to the indefinite noun phrase on the left and rather corresponds to *the friends of my mother*, where the post-genitive is excluded: **the friends of my mother's*. The head noun can be preceded by a definite article, however, if there is a following restrictive relative clause:

- (6) *I remembered the friend of Aisha's who'd helped me escape from her house in London, carrying one of Aisha's children, while I took my suitcase and dragged the other child along with me.* AOU: 1374

Notice that in this case *Aisha's friend* would not do, as it would suggest that Aisha had only this friend, and the relative clause would be interpreted as

⁴ The post-genitive also occurs with singular head nouns in the zero form in examples like: *Martin Landau, friend of James Dean's when they were both in New York and again when they came to Hollywood, was running acting classes between jobs.* (APO: 382)

non-restrictive. It seems then as if there is complementary distribution between the post-genitive and the ordinary *s*-genitive.⁵

Before we go on to compare post-genitives and common-case *of*-phrases, there is a need to comment briefly on the relationship between post-genitives and partitive constructions, as in *a friend of my mother's* vs. *one of my mother's friends*. Notice, first of all, that a partitive paraphrase is not always possible:

(7) *A day or two before she was due to move she ran into a man she had known as a rather mysterious friend of Simon's who used to turn up on leave now and again during the war.* F9R: 943

(8) *She had been a friend of Emily's; possibly her only friend ...* ACV: 624

In (7) we could hardly replace the italicized phrase by *one of Simon's rather mysterious friends*. Substituting *one of Emily's friends* in (8) would make the continuation rather unnatural. In cases like *that big mouth of yours* a partitive paraphrase is of course ruled out altogether.

Partitive constructions pick out one or more entities from a well-defined group. In contrast, a post-genitive phrase like *a friend of Emily's* need not imply that Emily has more than one friend. Jespersen (1949: 18ff.) says that *of* in these cases should not be regarded as partitive, but rather as "a grammatical device to make it possible to join words which it is for some reason or other difficult or impossible to join immediately", and he goes on to say that "if we want to assign a definite meaning to this *of*, we may say that it means 'who is' or 'which is'" (1949: 18ff.).

4. Genitive vs. common case in postmodifying *of*-phrases

As genitives typically present given information, pronouns are a natural option:

a friend of my mother's *a friend of my mother*
a friend of hers **a friend of her*

Post-genitives with possessive pronouns are, in fact, far more common than those with genitive nouns (Johansson forthcoming), presumably because there is no alternative construction⁶ and because the use of pronouns is perhaps the most economical means of presenting given information.

⁵ Contrary to expectation, there are occasional instances of post-genitives in the British National Corpus which are equivalent in meaning to ordinary *s*-genitives, e.g. *if you took the ideas of Freud's seriously* (PS2R: 77).

⁶ A personal pronoun does, however, occur in cases like *a much loved friend of them all* (A7C: 898), where the possessive form is excluded (another type is illustrated in Section 4.4). Note also the personal or reflexive pronoun in examples with coordination: *a friend of my wife and I* (KBP: 3810); *It will be a special concern of myself and the Chairman to maintain the overall coherence and integrity of the organisation.* (HAU: 109)

The choice of genitive vs. common case is studied below on the basis of material drawn from the British National Corpus, more specifically 800 occurrences of the sequence *friend of*.

4.1. Types of dependent noun

After irrelevant examples had been eliminated (chiefly *of*-phrases with possessive pronouns), we were left with 497 examples containing *of* plus a noun-headed phrase. The distribution of genitive vs. common case by type of noun is shown in Table 1. In the category "human proper" we include sequences of title plus name such as *Chancellor Kohl* and coordinated noun phrases like *Wordsworth and Darwin*.

Table 1: The frequency of genitive vs. common case in noun phrases following *friend of*, classified by the type of dependent noun (definite and indefinite noun phrases)

Type of dependent noun	Definite NP		Indefinite NP	
	Common case	Genitive	Common case	Genitive
human proper	194 (68.8 %)	88 (31.2 %)	—	—
human non-proper	136 (87.2 %)	20 (12.8 %)	25	—
non-human proper	15	—	—	—
non human non-proper	12	—	7	—
Total	357	108	32	—

As Table 1 shows, the genitive is only found with human dependent nouns and only with definite dependent noun phrases, which confirms the description in Quirk et al. (1985) (cf. Section 1 above). Post-genitives are clearly outnumbered by postmodifying noun phrases in the common case, but they are a minority choice even with human proper nouns. With four exceptions (*a friend of the director's*, *a friend of the duke's*, *a friend of the young lady's*, *any friend of the little lady's*), the post-genitives of the type "human non-proper" all contain a possessive determiner plus a noun denoting a family relationship: *a friend of my mother's*, *a good friend of your granddad's*, *a friend of her late husband's*, etc.

4.2. Length of the dependent phrase

Another factor that may influence the choice between genitive and common case is the length of the dependent noun phrase. The distribution by length is

shown in Table 2. Here we only include the types where there is variation; non-human nouns and indefinite noun phrases are thus excluded. In calculating the length of a phrase, we include phrases in apposition and postmodifying clauses (see the examples below).

Table 2: The frequency of genitive vs. common case in noun phrases following *friend of*, classified by the length of the dependent noun phrase and the type of dependent noun (definite noun phrases only)

Length of dependent NP	Human proper		Human non-proper	
	Common case	Genitive	Common case	Genitive ⁷
1	56 (46.3 %)	65 (53.7 %)	–	1 (100 %)
2	62 (75.6 %)	20 (24.4 %)	78 (83 %)	16 (17 %)
3	16 (94.1 %)	1 (5.9 %)	20 (87 %)	3 (13 %)
4	14 (93.3 %)	1 (6.7 %)	17 (100 %)	–
5+	46 (97.9 %)	1 (2.1 %)	21 (100 %)	–
Total	194 (68.8 %)	88 (31.2 %)	136 (87.2 %)	20 (12.8 %)

Table 2 shows that there is a clear length effect. The post-genitive is virtually restricted to very short noun phrases, but it is in fact only slightly more frequent than a common-case *of*-phrase, even with a single proper noun. With longer phrases, the proportion drops sharply. Some examples of longer dependent noun phrases are:

- a close friend of Mr Hawke* A1S: 354
- a close friend of George IV* A4A: 122
- a friend of owner Mark Waghorn* ACM: 1122
- a friend of Lawrence of Arabia* A7C: 592
- a close friend of the Duke of Windsor* CJW: 1466
- a neighbour and friend of Balbinder's mother* CRS: 1199
- a friend of her future husband's brother* ADM: 1923
- a friend of her other sister, Jane* A7H: 153
- a close friend of Ricardo and Jose Weibel* A91: 124
- a friend of John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, F.D. Maurice, and many others* CDC: 729
- no warm friend of Churchill, the Prime Minister, who ...* ARC: 389

⁷ The only single-word example of "human non-proper" contains the noun *Dad*, which behaves grammatically like a proper noun: *a friend of Dad's*.

We may thus conclude that the common case is frequent overall and that it is strongly preferred with long dependent noun phrases.

The use of a genitive rather than a common-case *of*-phrase signals a difference in structure in examples like:

- (9) *A friend of Butcher's, who has strong football links with Japan, said last night: 'He is very popular over there and they are keen to strengthen the coaching side of their game.'* CEP: 1786
- (10) *He was also a friend of Lady Elcho through whom he was introduced to her special friend, A. J. Balfour, with whom he could discuss philosophy.* AE6: 100

In (9) the genitive marks the end of the dependent noun phrase, and the antecedent of the following relative clause is the whole of the noun phrase *a friend of Butcher's*. In (10) the relative clause modifies the immediately preceding common-case noun. The genitive is, however, not used consistently in cases like (9):

- (11) *A friend of Henry James who shared his passion for Venice (although the novelist had reservations about her creation of a fake palace in his home town), Mrs Gardner transferred her passion from clothes and jewels to art in the 1890s.* ABF: 596

Here the antecedent of the relative clause is *a friend of Henry James*.

Whereas a common-case form is compatible with both types of readings illustrated above, the genitive signals the end of the dependent phrase. The only exception in the material is:

- (12) *Prig, Mrs Betsey, nurse at St Bartholomew's Hospital, and friend of Mrs Gamp's, whom she closely resembles in her slatternly ways, brutal behaviour towards patients, and ignorance of elementary nursing procedure.* B0Y: 1531

Mrs Gamp's is clearly the antecedent of the relative clause in (12). The choice of the genitive may be connected with the nature of the text (an index).

4.3. Collocations

So far, we have focused on postmodifying *of*-phrases with the noun *friend*. This is no coincidence: *friend* is the most typical head noun appearing in post-genitive constructions. Of all the nouns preceding *of mine/yours/ours/hers/theirs*⁸ in the British National Corpus, *friend* is by far the most frequent. The

⁸ These sequences were selected as they are frequent and uniquely identifiable as post-genitives (with very few exceptions).

nouns with the highest collocation values (mutual information value above 2.0) are listed below.⁹ It is striking that many of these nouns represent inalienable possession.

admirer, aunt, brother, colleague, constituent, cousin, daughter, favourite, friend(s), girl, girlfriend, husband, mate, mother, neighbour, pal, son, sister, student, wife; ambition, business, concern, eyes, fault, hair, hand, idea, temper, voice; country, land, society, world

The head nouns which appear most typically in post-genitive constructions with possessive pronouns are thus personal nouns, especially those denoting social or family relationships. Non-personal nouns are found as well, however. These typically combine with specific determiners. The last group above is restricted to sequences containing the demonstrative determiner *this* and the postmodifying sequence *of ours*:

this great/little country of ours
this dear/sovereign/Royal and Ancient/green and pleasant land of ours
this so-called affluent/this alleged child friendly/upwardly mobile society of ours
this great big/wonderful/relatively well-fed world of ours

Three of the non-personal nouns listed above are virtually restricted to sequences containing *no* or (*not*) *any*:

no/not any business of mine/yours ...
no/not any concern of mine/yours ...
no/not any fault of mine/yours ...

Other non-personal nouns with high collocation values denote personal characteristics and typically occur in sequences with a demonstrative determiner, frequently combined with one or more premodifiers:

those golden eyes of hers CM4: 223
those wide blue peasant eyes of hers J17: 2682
that beautiful hair of yours BMS: 3365
that firm, forceful boy's hand of hers HGG: 758
that fiery temper of yours HGV: 6252
that hoarse, cracked voice of yours BNP: 105
this faulty new voice of ours FYV: 1795
that sultry, husky voice of hers HA9: 2609

⁹ Another noun with a high collocation value is *fellow*. It is not listed here as it is normally found in sequences like *fellow student*, where it is not the head of the noun phrase.

The pattern with a demonstrative determiner and a possessive pronoun seems to be characteristic of literary language (Johansson forthcoming). It is found with a variety of nouns, both personal and non-personal, and appears to express familiarity or an emotive (positive or negative) attitude on the part of the writer.

To what extent are these findings as regards collocates and types of determiners applicable to sequences with post-genitive nouns? Personal head nouns are found in combinations with genitive nouns as well as possessive pronouns, with one notable exception: *admirer*. There is only one example of a genitive noun after *admirer* and, significantly, it is found in coordination with *friend*:

- (13) *As a result of this, the Earl of Lauderdale, a friend and admirer of Baxter's, with the King's permission, offered him any position he cared for in Scotland, either a church, a bishopric, or a university position.* ALK: 636

All the other examples (*a whole-hearted admirer of Eliot, an admirer of Picasso*, etc.) contain common-case nouns, presumably because of the semantic relationship between head and dependent noun; cf. Section 4.4.

Of the three non-personal nouns which tend to occur with *no/not any*, two are instanced in the British National Corpus with common-case *of*-phrases only: *no business of the police, no business of the government, no concern of Mr. Reynolds, no concern of the tenant*, etc. The third combines with both genitive and common-case forms: *no fault of the Metro's, no fault of the present author's, no fault of the applicant, no fault of that industry*, etc. The pattern with demonstrative determiners appears to be particularly characteristic of sequences with non-personal head nouns + *of* + possessive pronoun.

On the basis of the survey above, we may conclude that there are important collocational patterns with post-genitives, but that sequences with genitive nouns are more restricted than those containing possessive pronouns.

4.4. Semantic relations

The choice between genitive and common-case may be associated with different meanings (Quirk et al. 1985: 1284):

- (14) *a painting of my sister's* ['done by my sister' or 'belonging to my sister']
a painting of my sister ['representing my sister']
- (15) *He's a student of Jespersen's.* ['one who studied under Jespersen']
He's a student of Jespersen. ['one who studies Jespersen's writings']

The genitive expresses relationships associated with the ordinary *s*-genitive, the *of*-phrase those associated with *of*-phrases in general (cf. Section 2).¹⁰ Corresponding to (14), we would even have a contrast between a possessive and a personal pronoun: *a painting of hers* vs. *a painting of her*. The contrast in (15) is found in examples like:

- (16) *Tony Perratt, also a plasma physicist of Los Alamos National Laboratory and a former student of Alfvén's, has carried out experiments that bear out Alfvén's ideas at laboratory level ...* CB9: 971
- (17) *Mind you, our fair student of Tasso may – may succeed ...* HGS: 880
- (18) *Nottinghamshire's earnest captain Tim Robinson doesn't strike me as a student of W.C. Fields, but recent events at Trent Bridge suggest that he may not be unacquainted with his philosophy.* CU1: 244

In (16) there is clearly a reference to somebody who studied under Alfvén, while (17) just as clearly refers to somebody who studies Tasso, and the same relationship is presumably found in (18) as well. The great majority of the common-case sequences, however, have the first type of reading, e.g.:

- (19) *They were working on a suggestion, made by George Gamow (once a student of Alexander Friedmann), that the early universe should have been very hot and dense, glowing white hot.* H78: 99

The common-case construction is thus more widespread than one would suppose.

Jespersen (1949: 23) draws attention to a potential difference in meaning between genitive and common-case constructions with *friend*:

After *friend* we may perhaps make a similar distinction and say that *a friend of Tom's* means one whom Tom looks upon as a friend, and *a friend of Tom* one who looks upon Tom as his friend; therefore we say *friends of the people*, *friends of France* ...

There are instances in the corpus which appear to support Jespersen's observation: *a friend of the family* (consistent use), *a friend of the Scots*. Compare also:

- (20) *She's OK, is Daggy – she's a friend of Sonja's.* A74: 903

¹⁰ Cf. Altenberg's (1982: 70) comment on the post-genitive in his study of the genitive vs. the *of*-construction in 17th century English: "... when OF replaces GEN in non-definite NPs there is a risk that it will be understood as 'objective'. In such cases the addition of a genitive case marker to the *of*-complement will reinforce the 'subjective' meaning and eliminate possible misunderstanding."

- (21) *The greatest wild-flower expert in this country is Dr Miriam Rotschild, who had known Charles since he was a child, and was also a friend of Mollie Salisbury.* A7H: 784

We could interpret (20) as saying something like 'she is OK – we know Sonja – her friends are our friends'. In contrast, (21) seems to say that the person in question 'had known Charles and was also acquainted with Mollie Salisbury'. Nevertheless, even though there might be a contrast of this kind, it is certainly a subtle distinction (friendship is normally a mutual relationship), and it is not carried through consistently:

- (22) "Good morning, I'm Chris Ludlow, a friend of Tony Greenslade." CS4: 1388
- (23) "Chris Ludlow, a friend of Tony Greenslade's." CS4: 2116

Here there is variation in the same text and with reference to the same relationship.

4.5. Form of the dependent noun

It is possible that a common-case form may be preferred with dependent nouns ending in sibilants: *a great friend of Matisse*, *a friend of the Empress*, *a friend of Pericles*, *no friend of Mike Martinez*, etc. It could hardly be a coincidence that the post-genitive is found only once with a plural noun in our material:

- (24) *But the mystery deepened when a friend of the Rallis', Lady Sarah Bagge, insisted Gilbey HAD rented a house.* CH6: 9511

All the other examples containing plural dependent nouns have a common-case form: *a friend of the musicians*, *a personal friend of the Kinnocks*, *a friend of the Mozarts*, etc. The common case is presumably chosen more commonly in the plural because the case distinction is very weakly marked (no phonological difference and only an apostrophe in writing). Other contributing factors are length (cf. Section 4.2) and, possibly, also the nature of the semantic relation (cf. Section 4.4): it is more natural for an individual to feel friendly towards a group of people than for a group to share the same friend.

5. Conclusion

Our study confirms Quirk et al.'s (1985) observation that the post-genitive occurs where the noun phrase following the preposition is definite and human. However, *of*-phrases with common-case nouns are often used under the same conditions. This is not surprising: after all, common-case *of*-phrases compete

with the ordinary *s*-genitive. The overlap between the two types is nicely shown in the following example, where a post-genitive and an *of*-phrase with a common-case noun are coordinated after the same head noun:

- (25) *She had always been the great friend of Noreen's and of Liam too in his young days.* ATE: 1829

This example is special in that the head noun is preceded by the definite article, a context where the post-genitive does not normally occur. Nevertheless, the distribution of genitive vs. common case is in agreement with the tendencies we have observed: the genitive is used with the single proper noun *Noreen* and the common case with *Liam* and the following qualification *in his young days*.

To summarize, we can say that the choice between genitive and common case in postmodifying *of*-phrases is regulated by the same types of factors which apply to *s*-genitives and *of*-phrases in general, e.g. as regards the type of dependent noun and the length of the dependent noun phrase. The difference is that the post-genitive is more restricted than the ordinary *s*-genitive. It is limited to a fairly narrow range of collocational patterns, and it only occurs with the types of nouns which have the highest overall *s*-genitive tendency, i.e. nouns with human reference (especially proper nouns). What might at the outset seem like more or less random variation thus turns out to conform to systematic distributional patterns.

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