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Constraints on Old English Genitive variation

Introduction In Old English, noun phrases marked with genitive case can occur before or after the noun they modify. This is true for early texts but not for late ones, where genitive phrases are almost categorically prenominal. This shift is gradual and has been well documented since Thomas (1931).

Explanations Some explanations for this shift have been suggested:
i) Loss of morphological marking obscured some syntactic cues necessary for children to acquire the target grammar (Lightfoot 2006).
ii) Independently from the previous hypothesis, the presence of Scandinavian settlers might have triggered a grammar in competition scenario (Crisma 2012).
iii) Discourse processing considerations led children to prefer genitive phrases in prenominal position (Allen 2008).
These hypotheses come with certain predictions. For instance, if the loss of morphological marking is the external force triggering the change, we would not expect the presence of other elements in the noun phrase to interact with the change. However, under discourse processing considerations, properties of other elements of the noun phrase may play a role.

Results I show that in this case "weight" considerations are crucial, even though the observations in Allen (2008) are not sufficient to explain the data.
First, Mitchell (1985) observes that "simple" (i.e. one-word) genitive phrases tend to occur in prenominal position. According to our working hypotheses the tendency should be stronger in late texts and more relaxed in early manuscripts. Figure 1 shows the distribution of "simple" genitive phrases in OE prose manuscripts from the YCOE and shows that there is no such strong tendency. On the contrary, genitives appear prenominal by default in the whole period. Second, if the noun has other modifiers (i.e. it is "complex"), genitives tend to occur postnominally. Figure 2 shows that this is true in late texts as well, which is not well explained by grammatical change, but can be explained by parsing considerations (Gildea and Temperley 2010).
I found only one particular context in which there is indeed a change: when genitive phrases are "heavy" (i.e. they contain more than one element), they may occur postnominally (cf. the principle of End-Weight, Rosenbach 2005). This tendency is visible in early texts but it vanishes in late texts.

Conclusion These results suggest a picture different from the one described in Lightfoot (1999, 2006), where the apparent freedom of Old English in placing nominal arguments was constrained after case morphology was lost. This hypothesis did not explain why the genitive suffix survived and was reanalyzed as a clitic in the prenominal position, but not in the postnominal one. Here I suggest that this development was not the result of a change in the grammar, but it results from an asymmetry that was already present at the earliest attestations of the language, wherein the prenominal position was the default one and the postnominal position was reserved for cases in which the noun phrase was "complex" (i.e. it contained modifiers or double genitives) or, occasionally, cases in which the genitive was "heavy", a phenomenon which also correlates with "split genitives" (Lightfoot 1999, 2006).

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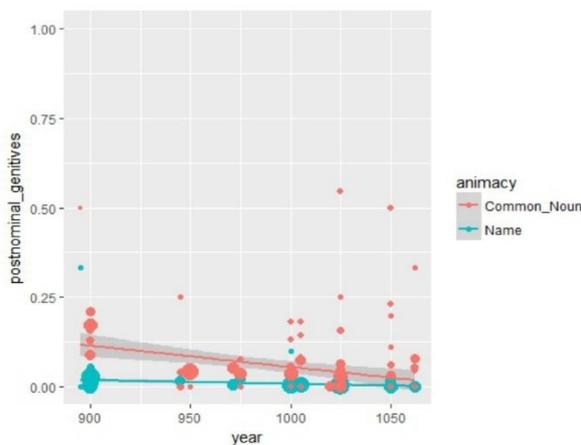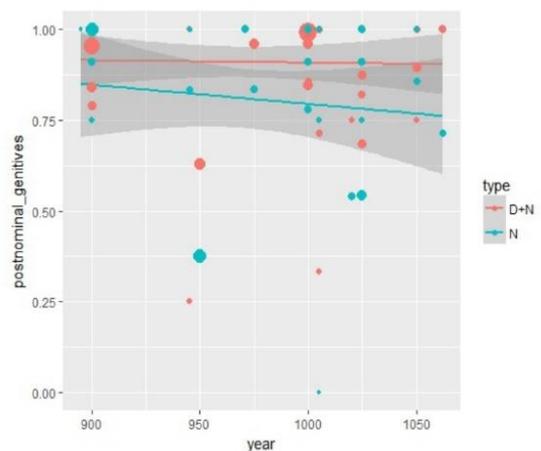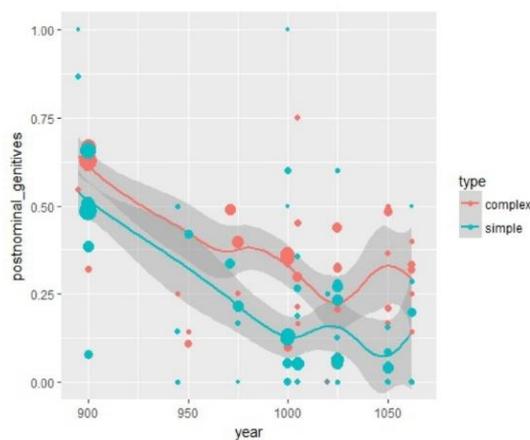
Figure 1. Number of tokens: 9515.

Figure 2. Number of tokens: 920.

Figure 3. Number of tokens: 6069.