Constraints on Old English genitive variation

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Introduction

In Old English nominal arguments can either precede or follow the noun. Late OE texts show that postnominal genitives decrease in frequency, and this phenomenon is independent from the rise of the preposition *of*, which was limited to partitive readings and could not be used to express possession or arguments (Thomas 1931, Mitchell 1985). We consider possible explanations for this change looking at the manuscripts in the YCOE.

Nominal Phrase in Old English

Old English noun phrases can have possessors and arguments on either side of the noun (1-2) and also display co-occurrence (3):

1. He is ealra **cyninga** cyning
   He is in-all.GEN.PL king-GEN.PL king
   "He is in all the king of the kings" ACHom_I,1:178.8.8

2. ba digelnysse **þisre** **radinge**
   the mystery this.GEN text.GEN
   "The mystery of this text" ACHom_I,23:366.29.4556

3. Godes berne **heofonan** **rices**
   God-GEN barn heaven-GEN kingdom-GEN
   "God's barn of the kingdom of heaven" AEHom_5:256.845

However, constructions like 2-3 are not common in late OE texts. Thomas (1931), Allen (2008) and Crisma (2012) show a gradual change in time in favor of prenominal genitives.

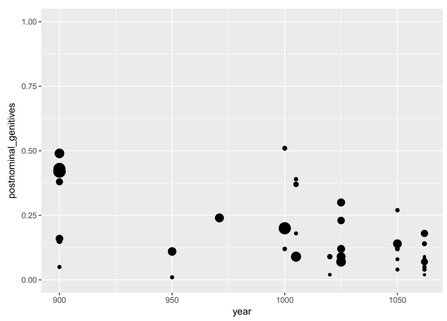

Figure 0 – A plot of the data discussed in Crisma (2012)

Some possible explanations for the phenomenon are:
A. **Loss of morphology** (Lightfoot 1999)
B. **Discourse processing** (Allen 2008)
C. **Grammar competition** (Crisma 2012)

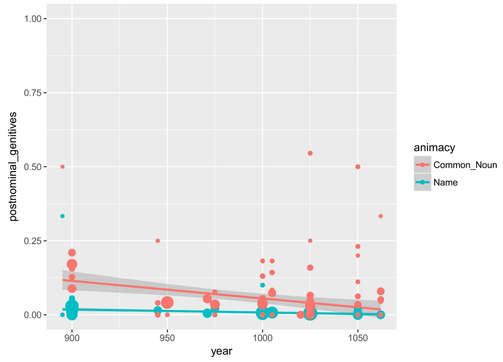

Figure 1 – Postnominal genitives in LNP. Tokens: 9269.
Godes lufu ('God's love')
Þære fóreteohunge **Godes** ('The predestination of God')

2. Modified Noun Phrases

A weighted linear regression returns an intercept of 0.849 (p=9.24e-14) and a non-significant effect of year as a predictor (-0.0005, p=0.493). Same for genitives containing a D+N combination: the intercept is 0.914 (p<2e-16) and year is not significant (-0.00007, p=0.864).
This means that in OE the presence of a modifier inside a noun phrase has a strong predictive power in determining whether a genitive phrase would appear prenominally or postnominally. This fact has been noticed in Mitchell (1985), McLagan (2004) and Sampson (2010), but what has been unnoticed is that these kinds of noun phrases are independent from the general shift towards prenominal position: in fact, the pattern is consistent also in late texts.

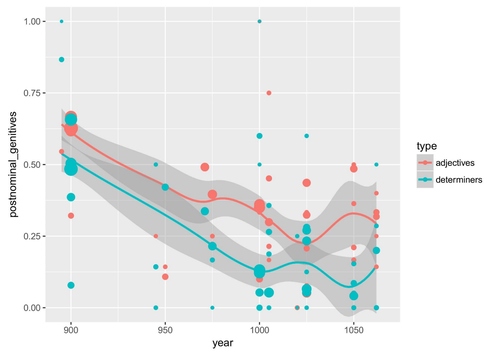

Figure 3 – Postnominal genitive with HG. Tokens: 6455.
Þæra cyninga gewinne ('The king's conquest')
Þam deorlingum **þara cyninga** ('The favorite-daughter of the king')

1. Light Noun Phrases

Other works have noticed the preference for prenominal genitives in light phrases (Mitchell 1985, McLagan 2004, Samson 2010). A weighted linear regression for common nouns yields an intercept of 0.117 (p=2.04e-09) and a significant effect of year as a predictor (-0.0006, p=0.0005). One might wonder whether the postnominal position was reserved for either non-possessive uses (e.g. internal arguments of the noun) or indefinite arguments, but this example (Matthew, 4:19) shows that it was not the case:

a) A. Grk. *αλιείς ανθρώπων*
b) Lat. PISCATORES HOMINUM
c) Got. Nutans manne
d) OE. Manna fisceras

English poem texts display the same amount of postnominal genitives as early prose texts (13%).

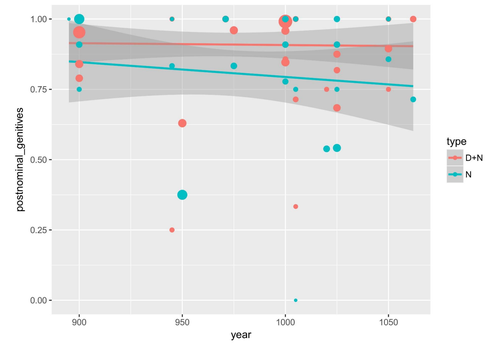

Figure 2 – Postnominal genitives in MNP. Tokens: 991.
Godes ancennedan Suna ("God's only-begottenson")
Þære wynsuman suetness **Godes** ("The winsome sweetness of God")

3. Heavy Genitives

McLagan (2004) and Sampson (2010) correlate the presence of an adjective internal to the genitive phrase to postnominal genitives. We see here that both the presence of an adjective or a determiner are causing a high number of postnominal genitives in early texts. However, no Costant Rate Effect (Kroch 1989) is detectable through AIC applied to logistic regression. AIC Full model=789, AIC Reduced model=814. This suggests that the change is not a grammar change, but there is simply a preference for the positioning of the genitive depending on the weight of the DP (like in modern English, cf. Rosenbach 2005).

This is the only context for which we see a clear change.

Analysis

A. **Loss of morphology** should be independent from animacy (1) and weight (3) considerations and does not predict the pattern in (2)

B. **Discourse processing.** According to Allen (2008), postnominal genitives were favored because they were the only DP-element which did not reveal the case marking of the DP. After morphological agreement was lost, a genitive was a better predictor of a noun than a modifier, and then it was favored in prenominal position. This predicts the pattern in (1) and (3), but not in (2).

C. **Grammar competition** fails the test in (3) but also does not explain variation depending on animacy (1) and presence of modifiers (2). Also, Old Norse had genitives in postnominal position (Nygaard 1905), therefore the pattern cannot be ascribed to Scandinavian pressure.

Speculation

The grammar is stable across the period, but constraints like animacy (1) and weight (3) lose their effect in time. Interesting analogue: effect of press diffusion on genitive alternation in PDE (Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi 2007).

Figure 4 – Google Ngrams for *the speech of the president* over the total of *the speech of the president* plus *the president's speech*

References and Acknowledgements

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