

On the Distribution of the Genitive Attribute and its Prepositional Counterpart in Modern Standard German

It has been observed that, in the course of a development from a synthetic language to an analytical language, the genitive in German is disappearing [5, 342-346]. The genitive as a case for encoding verbal arguments and adverbials has become marginal. In many contexts, the genitive attribute is replaceable by a prepositional phrase containing the preposition *von* ('of') plus a noun phrase in dative. The terms *genitivisches Attribut* ('genitival attribute') [6] and *analytischer Genitiv* ('analytic genitive') [4] applied to the prepositional phrase make clear the degree to which these two structures are seen to be interchangeable. An important concern in the literature has been describing the increased use of the 'analytic genitive', and on establishing it as a widespread phenomenon [4, 6]. This is understandable in a context in which self-described language critics decry a decline of the genitive as a supposed sign of linguistic degeneracy. Lists of contexts in which the 'analytic genitive' is preferred can be found along with suggestions as to why it is preferable in those contexts [1, 2, 3, 4, 6].

The question why the genitive attribute has resisted replacement in certain other contexts and why two constructions with such a similar function coexist has received little attention. The current paper will show, based on a corpus of 40,000 sentences of German newspaper text from the mid-1990s, that the distribution of the genitive and the 'analytical genitive' in contemporary written language is far from arbitrary, and that, while the 'analytical genitive' is well established, its synthetic counterpart is still alive and well. The distribution of the two types of structures is based largely on the following factors: the degree to which the genitive is clearly morphologically marked in a particular noun phrase, the distance between the attribute and

the noun, the need to clearly encode inherited arguments of deverbal or dejectival nouns, and the need to disambiguate syntactic relations in complex noun phrases with multiple embedded attributes or involving coordination.

It will be shown that, while there is an area of overlap, in which both constructions can be found, each has its own niche. The two coexist and interact. Especially in complex noun phrases containing multiple attributes, the existence of the two different structures is important, as it aids disambiguation.

References

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