

The *s-* vs. *of-*genitive in standard Canadian English: Grammatical change or register change?

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This paper presents a corpus-based variationist analysis of the *s-* and *of-*genitive, as in (1), focusing on cross-register variation and change in Canadian English.

- (1) a. ...the continued callous indifference *of* the federal government. [B/u/1956]
- b. The federal government's environmental plan... [B/u/1956]

Increased use of the *s-*genitive throughout the 20th century is long-cited (Barber 1964: 132–133, Jespersen 1909–49, 327–328, Mair 2006: 144–48), and the variation between the forms is widely studied (see, for example, Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi (forthcoming), Ljung 1997). In particular, it has been noted that journalistic prose appears to be a locus of the continuing increase of the *s-*genitive and that its use is spreading to inanimate subjects (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi: 4).

Studies in register variation (Biber 1988, 1995) and corpus linguistics (Mair 2006, Hundt & Mair 1999) have shown that different written registers, such as journalistic prose and edited transcripts of speeches, exhibit different frequencies for linguistic variables such as the genitive, and that those frequencies can change over time. The variationist and comparative methods, however, have shown that changes in the frequency of a variable are not always indicative of how it relates to the language's underlying grammar (Tagliamonte 2002: 735–737). Change in frequency can therefore be a result of either changes in the underlying grammar, changes in the register, or both. The methodology of variationist sociolinguistics (Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001), including multivariate analysis, allows us to account for changes beyond those of frequency and identify whether the grammar or the register, or both, is changing with respect to a variable.

A recent study of the genitive in written and spoken American and British English by Szmrecsanyi & Hinrichs tests not only internal linguistic factors (subject animacy, end weight), but also factors drawn from work in corpus linguistics, which they propose tap into the notion of “economy”, i.e. the preference for brevity in registers like journalism. Such factors include the lexical density of a text passage and frequency of the head noun of possessor NP. They conclude that the significance of these factors means that need for economy is driving forward the increase of the *s-*genitive in journalistic prose—in other words, a register-internal change rather than a change in the underlying grammar (Szmrecsanyi & Hinrichs: 9–11, 17–18).

For the present study, *s-* and *of-*genitive tokens were extracted from two Canadian English registers spanning 1906–2006: journalistic prose (N=703) and Ontario “Hansard” (transcripts of formal parliamentary debates, N=481). Early results show increase of the *s-*genitive over time in both registers, with journalistic prose leading the change. As expected, animate subject is the strongest predictor of *s-*genitive use. The “economy” factors are currently being coded in order to determine the contribution of intra-register factors to the change. However, spread of the *s-*genitive into a highly constrained subtype of inanimate subjects—places (N=271)—is apparent in both registers. This indicates a possible grammatical change in conjunction with register change.

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