Constraints on Old English Genitives variation

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“Other points of syntax might perhaps be ascribed to Scandinavian influence, such as the universal position of the genitive case before the noun (where Old English like German placed it very often after it)....”

1. Syntactic analysis
2. State of the art
3. Animacy and Weight constraints
4. Conclusions
1 SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

Crisma (2012)
1. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

**GEN + N** (like PDE ‘the president’s speech’)

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

Forgang ðu **anes treowes waestm**
Forgo you one-GEN tree-GEN fruit
“Forgo the fruit of one tree” ACHom_I,1:181.79.74

**D + N + GEN** (like PDE ‘the speech of the president’)

þæt **cyrographum ure geniðerunge**
the writ_ our condemnation.GEN“
The writ of our condemnation“ ACHom_I,21:348.81.4163

þa **digelnysse pisre radinge**
the mystery this.GEN text.GEN
“The mystery of this text” ACHom_I,23:366.29.4556
1. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

**GEN + ADJ + N** (like PDE ‘the president’s great speech’)

mid þas *folces* eorðlican ðeowote
with the-GEN people-GEN terrestrial slavery
"with the terrestrial slavery of the people“

| CP:18.131.11.890 |

**Godes** ancennedan *suna*
God-GEN only-begotten son
"God’s only begotten son“

| ACHom_1:427.220 |

**D + ADJ + N + GEN** (like PDE ‘the great speech of the president’)

on þa *frecnan* *tid* þære *ehtnysse*
in the dangerous time the.GEN persecution.GEN
"In the dangerous time of the persecution“

| Bede_1:8.42.3.345 |

se wolberenda *stenc* þære *lyfte*
the polluting stink the.GEN air.GEN
"The polluting stink of the air“

| Bede_1:11.48.16.433 |
STATE OF THE ART

2. STATE OF THE ART

Thomas (1931): decline of postnominal genitives in OE
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Crisma (2012): decline of postnominal genitives in OE
2. STATE OF THE ART

**Loss of morphology**

Case-marking is no longer perceived by children in late OE

**Grammar in competition**
Jespersen (1912), Crisma (2012)

Scandinavian influence and grammatical change

**Information Structure (or Theory?)**

Syncretism reduces the amount of information associated to determiners and adjectives
ANIMACY AND WEIGHT CONSTRAINTS

“When the phrase consists of two nouns only [...] the genitive is regularly in pre-position”

Mitchell (1985:550)

“When there are items present which have the effect of adding length of weight to the genitive phrase, the genitive phrase tends to be placed after the head”

McLagan (2004:38)

“When a genitive consisted of a human referent with high topicality and light weight, prenominal positioning was nearly 100% predictable”.

Allen (2008:96)
3.1 LIGHT NOUN PHRASES
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Godes lufu  
(‘God’s love’)

Pære fóreteohunge Godes  
(‘The predestination of God’)

animacy
Common_Noun
Name

tokens
200
400
600
### Linear Regression Coefficients:

|            | Estimate  | Std. Error | t value | Pr(>|t|)       |
|------------|-----------|------------|---------|---------------|
| (Intercept)| 0.1174578 | 0.0166076  | 7.073   | 2.04e-09 ***  |
| year       | -0.0005944| 0.0001603  | -3.709  | **0.000462 *****
(Matthew, 4:19)

A. Grk. αλιείς ανθρώπων
Lat. PISCATORES HOMINUM
Got. Nutans manne
(Matthew, 4:19)

Grk. ἁλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων
Lat. PISCATORES HOMINUM
Got. Nutans manne

OE. Manna fisceras
3.2 HEAVY GENITIVES
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þæra cyninga gewinne ('The king’s conquest')
þam deorlingum þara cyninga ('The favorite-daughter of the king')

þæra cyninga gewinne
þam deorlingum þara cyninga

bæra cyninga gewinne
bam deorlingum þara cyninga

(‘The king’s conquest’)
(‘The favorite-daughter of the king’)

tokens
100
200
300
400

animacy
Adjectives
Determiners

ratio
0.75
0.50
0.25
0.00

year
900
950
1000
1050
3.2 HEAVY GENITIVES

No **Constant Rate Effect** (Kroch 1989) detectable through AIC applied to logistic regression. AIC Full model=789, AIC Reduced model=814
3.3 MODIFIED NOUN PHRASES
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_Godes_ ancennedan Suna
þære wynsuman suetness _Godes_  
("God’s only-begotten son")
("The winsom sweetness of God")
1. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

GEN + ADJ + N

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"with the terrestrial slavery of the people“ CP:18.131.11.890

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D + ADJ + N + GEN

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3. ANIMACY AND WEIGHT CONSTRAINTS

Loss of morphology

It should be independent from animacy/weight considerations.

Wrong prediction for the behaviour of modified noun phrases.

Grammar in competition

It predicts that the rate of change is constant across contexts, but here we have many contexts that behave differently.

Information Structure (or Theory?)

This theory makes a prediction about the behaviour of modified noun phrases that turns out to be false.
CONCLUSIONS
4. CONCLUSIONS

1) Children are sensible to Weight and Animacy constraints. In a period of relative instability, most of the constraints are diachronically consistent.

2) The prenominal position of genitives in OE seems to be the default one in absence of modifiers, contradicting the claims of genitives in OE being heavily postnominal (Nunnally 1985).
3) Scandinavian influence seems weaker than suggested by Jespersen (1912). On the other hand, variation in early texts (Allen 2008:117) can be explained by OE internal forces, e.g. dialectal variation (also Lightfoot 2006:116).

4) Information Structure/Theory does not look like a plausible explanation.

5) Proponents of Morphological reanalysis need to solve the problem with the stability of contexts marked for Weight.
Thanks!

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Otto Jespersen. Growth and Structure of the English Language, 1912.


Russell Thomas. Syntactical processes involved in the development of the adnominal periphrastic genitive in the English language. 1931.