

Per Anker Jensen and Carl Vikner: The Genitive and Lexical Semantics

Abstract

Some earlier treatments of the semantics of the prenominal genitive assume two syntactic types for genitive phrases (GPs) like *the girl's*, one which combines with relational nouns like *sister*, and another which combines with non-relational nouns like *car*. In the former case they take the genitive relation to be provided by the relational head noun, in the latter the source of the relation is taken to be provided by the utterance context.

Our analysis also distinguishes between lexically and pragmatically determined readings. However, we demonstrate that some readings assumed in earlier treatments to be pragmatic, and hence unpredictable in the absence of specific contextual or discourse knowledge, may be treated systematically as lexical readings.

According to our theory the GP always delivers an argument to a relation by virtue of the semantics of the NP preceding the genitive *-s*, i.e. *the girl* in a GP such as *the girl's*. The central issue, however, is how to determine the nature and origin of this genitive relation, that is, the relation to which this argument is provided. We posit four sources for the genitive relation. Three of these are lexical in nature, and the fourth is pragmatic:

- 1) a Control-relation contributed by *-s*
- 2) a relation contributed by a relational head noun of the full genitive construction
- 3) a qualia-relation contributed by one or both of the Agentive and the Constitutive roles of the qualia structure of the head noun. This will turn non-relational nouns into relational ones, and add one or two further relational readings to relational head nouns
- 4) the context

These four sources of the genitive relation are not mutually exclusive, and hence a genitive construction may be several ways ambiguous. Consider first an example with an inherently relational head noun, such as, e.g., *the girl's picture*. Looking first at possible lexical readings, we hypothesize that, on the one hand, the GP may contribute the Control-meaning, giving the reading 'the picture that the girl has at her disposal'; on the other hand, the GP may provide the theme argument to the relation denoted by *picture*, giving the reading 'the picture of the girl', and, thirdly, the GP may access the Agentive role of the qualia structure of the head noun, giving the reading 'the picture that the girl has painted'. In the example at hand the Constitutive role cannot come into play since a picture could not literally form part of a girl. Looking secondly at pragmatic readings derived from discourse or non-linguistic context, we can get an infinite number of other readings, e.g., 'the picture which the girl is always talking about', 'the picture which the girl has written a paper about', etc.

It is understood that the predictive power of our theory relies crucially on reasonable assumptions concerning the selectional restrictions of the semantic predicates involved. So, in most cases the semantic sorts of the arguments of the three lexical types of relation place heavy restrictions on which lexical readings are actually available for a certain genitive construction.

An important consequence of our analysis is that the area of lexically determined interpretations is extended, and we get a proportionate reduction of the unpredictable, context-determined, pragmatic area. In particular, contrary to former analyses, our theory systematically includes the Agentive and the Constitutive readings as lexical readings, reflecting their default availability to native speakers provided the selectional restrictions of the semantic predicates involved are met.