

On the use of the English Genitive vs of-construction by Macedonian learners

Liljana MITKOVSKA
Faculty of Foreign Languages
FON University
Skopje, Republic of Macedonia
liljana.mitkovska@fon.edu.mk

In this research I look into the usage of the possessive genitive construction (*the student's achievement*) compared to the corresponding *of*-construction (*the achievement of the student*) by Macedonian learners. There is no substantial difference in meaning between the two structures, yet they are not fully interchangeable. The choice of one or the other is subject to interplay of structural, semantic and discourse-pragmatic factors which determine the tendency for preference of one or the other construction (as noted by Taylor 1996, Biber 1999, Kreyer 2003, among others). The main aim of this research was to investigate how well Macedonian learners of English acquire the distinction between these two structures and if the fact that the most common construction for nominal possession in Macedonian is the prepositional *na*-construction has a significant effect on the acquisition.

The investigation is carried out on two types of corpora: monolingual English corpora (Mark Davis's Corpus of Contemporary American – COCA and the British National Corpus – BNC) and the Macedonian English Learner Corpus – MELC, a learner interlanguage corpus compiled by a group of researchers in Skopje, Macedonia. The latter contains around 500 000 words of text written by learners of English of various ages and at different proficiency levels. The search in the native English corpora establishes the frequency of use of the two investigated constructions with human possessors (Ps) in American English and in British English. Two features are considered: (1) the semantics of the possessed (Pd) (ownership, body parts, kinship, abstract) and (2) the syntactic complexity of the Pd NP (one, two, three or more words). The learner corpus is used to measure the frequency of the same constructions in the English interlanguage of three groups of learners with L1 Macedonian: learners at proficiency levels A2, B1 and B2.

The statistical analysis of the results shows how the performance of each group of learners compares to that of native speakers with an aim to investigate if Macedonian learners acquire native-like intuitions about the distribution of possessive genitive and *of*-construction, and verify which factors, if any, play a more significant role. Results indicate that learners strictly follow the general semantic and syntactic principles at the lower levels, which changes with language proficiency. They start with *s*-genitive in most 'optimal' context (Rosenbach 2003), being more confident with the *of*-construction in other contexts, presumably relying on L1. Thus, this research will also point out the difference in the distribution of the two constructions between learners at different proficiency levels, which reveals the dynamics of acquisition of the investigated structures.

References

- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Kreyer, R. (2003). 'Genitive and of-construction in modern written English. Processability and human involvement.' *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 8: 169-207.
- Rosenbach, A. (2003). 'Aspects of iconicity and economy in the choice between the *s*-genitive and the *of*-genitive in English.' In: Rohdenburg, G. & Mondorf, B. (eds).

Determinants of Grammatical Variation in English. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 379–412.
Taylor, J. (1996). *Possessives in English*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.