

Investigating Idiomatic English for Chinese ESL/EFL Learners: Corpus Investigation of Using the Genitive Marker in English Written Texts

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Abstract: While the genitive marker in English is early encountered in language teaching, the result of learning is seldom researched over the past 20 years in mainland China. This paper describes queries of how the genitive marker in English is used in British National Corpus and by Chinese native speakers in Longman Learners Corpus. Results showed that: 1) Chinese native speakers and English native speakers have different lexical choices for the possessors and the possessums before and after the marker; 2) the difference might be because of culture, mother tongue, and the learners' limited understanding of English word meaning; 3) Chinese learners sometimes overuse 's in a N-N genitive. The contribution of this paper is to alarm on non-idiomatic usages of small, critical English language morphemes by Chinese learners of English as a second or foreign language (ESL or EFL), and even greater issues of language learning attitude and teaching methodology.

Keywords: corpus linguistics, genitive marker, learner English

1. Introduction

For anyone who have instructed middle-school and high-school English language classes, the genitive marker in English is a language morpheme encountered early in the English language learning process and might have been taken as easy to learn by both teachers and learners. Over the past 20 years, Chinese native speakers' usage of the marker was seldom examined in contrast to native English speakers' usage in mainland China academia [1]. This paper cast doubt on the learning result of the marker. It describes corpora exploration of how Chinese native speakers use the genitive marker in English in Longman Learners Corpus, in comparison with the usage by English natives in the British National Corpus. The aim is to find out difference between the two usages and to report the author's reflection accordingly. Queries were restricted within written texts in corpora to ensure sufficient language data.

Research Question 1: How do English native speakers use the English genitive marker in their writings, for language teachers and learners to keep as a possible reference?

Research Question 2: Are there any contexts in which Chinese native speakers are most likely to make errors with the genitive marker in English?

2. Method AND DATA ANALYSIS

The paper is qualitative analysis of concordances processed by computer in large-scale annotated language text pools, the corpus [2-6]. Rosamund Moon claims that a corpus can teach us about lexical elements and their behaviour [7]. Various essential elements, such as the common vocabulary, word growth, phrases, word meaning, sets, and synonyms, can be explored using corpora. Using corpus searching, Chris Greaves and Martin Warren described how to find multi-word units with a single form and meaning and how to investigate those meanings [8]. Susan Conrad described grammatical comprehension through patterns and situations. She presented four sorts of patterns seen in corpus-based grammar analysis, as well as how to analyse numerous aspects at the same time [9]. This paper will consolidate the approaches stated in the literature but will primarily investigate the use of genitive markers at the lexis level, with a brief examination of associated sentence structure and grammar.

For samples of native English writings, the paper investigated in the British National Corpus (BNC, XML edition, provided by CQP web at Lancaster) [10-11]. The British National Corpus (BNC) is a widely used 100-million-word collection of samples of the English language. The written portion consists of extracts from a range of sources – regional and national newspapers, specialist periodicals and journals for people of all ages and interests, academic books and popular fiction, published and unpublished letters and memoranda, school and university essays, and a variety of other types of text. The most recent version is the BNC XML Edition. [10]

For samples of Chinese learners' written English, the paper investigated in Longman Learners Corpus (LLC) [12]. The corpus was run by PearsonELT.com. Pupils and teachers from all around the world send in essays and exam scripts to help build a 10-million-word electronic database comprised exclusively of language authored by English pupils. The corpus covers a wide range of nationalities, data collection locations, and language level scales, therefore the corpus data includes learner English by Chinese native speakers not just from mainland China but also from Hong Kong SAR, Malaysia, and elsewhere. Users can zoom in on a certain set of pupils (for example, French advanced students) and then discover what the unique difficulty areas are for this group. They can also focus on a word or phrase to see the mistakes made by the entire student group [12].

As to research procedure, for Research Question 1, the author reported usage of the marker in corpus BNC written texts in terms of word formation, multi-word units, sentence structure and grammatical feature. Patterns of how to use different names before the marker were summarized in Appendices. Other usages were illustrated by concordance examples. For Research Question 2, the author reported restricted exploration in three pools of written texts by Chinese ESL/EFL learners, namely, learners' academic writings, written texts by learners of elementary level of English language proficiency, and written texts by those of intermediate level of English language proficiency. When learners are writing academically, the desire of showing language capability would be surpassed by the desire of academic meaning expression, so there tend to be errors in language use. The elementary and intermediate language proficiency levels are representative of immature learner language capability, where they are just halfway to profound understanding of grammatical points, not performing stable in language use as those of the advanced levels, and thus very likely to make errors. Queries were made to search if there were detailed contexts that the learners tend to make errors when using the genitive marker.

3. RESULTS OF Corpora exploration

3.1. Usage of the Marker by English Native Speakers

3.1.1. General Survey of 's in BNC

The British National Corpus (XML edition published by CQP online at Lancaster) has 4048 texts totalling 112,102,325 words. In the corpus, the genitive marker is labelled P.O.S, which stands for possessive (or genitive morpheme). The marker has two word-forms – 's and (s)'. Query "'s_POS", restricted to texts meeting criteria "Mode (spok.writ): Written", returned 429,924 matches in 3,095 different texts (in 100,119,205 words [3,140 texts]; frequency: 4,294.121 instances per million words), thinned with method random selection to 100 hits, sorted on position -1 (1 left), query returned the final 100 hits, which was not limited to "Speaker: First language is British English or North American English" so as to avoid sparse data.

3.1.2. Word Formation

In most times, a genitive marker entails at least two words – a possessor with the marker and a possessum after the marker. Periodically there was no possessive relationship between the two words. In terms of word formation, the 's marker appeared to follow names frequently, such as those of position or political figures (*the prince's*, *the duke's*, *Vulso's*), well-known professionals (footballer *Mill's*, musician *Mulliner's*, author *Brik's*, *Hardy's*), researchers (*Mannheim's*), and of private businesses (*Reid's*). Sometimes a whole name is followed by the genitive marker (*Ann Pearman's*, *Murray Perahia's*). Other instances included the genitive marker following the names of a team, a club, or just certain first names of fictitious characters (*Rigby's*, *Rab's*, *Ruth's*, and *Shelly's*). The names were either influential or particularly referred in texts. There could be the pattern "(SUR)NAME of people + 's", frequency 34 out of 100 hits, that mostly came from written books, academic and non-academic journals, fiction, and poetry.

Other names followed by 's were those of countries (*Poland's*, *Israel's*), places (*Shrewbury's*), and social groups with active members such as a church, a school, a bank, a political party, a business organization, or a sports club. Personification was used in *the sun's energy*. There was one concordance of *the poem's ritualistic treatment of history*.

3.1.3. Multi-word Units or Grammatical Constructions

In terms of multi-word units, there might be the pattern *Mr./Mrs. + Surname + 's* (*Mr Deng's*, *Mr Kinnock's*). A search for "Mr*" in BNC written texts yielded 80,499 hits across 2,088 different texts (frequency: 804.032 times per million words), among which 6,657 hits collocated with 's (i.e., *Mr./Mrs. + Surname + 's*), with default setting but statistics of either MI3, log-likelihood, t-score, or rank by frequency, and with collocation window from 1 to the right to 2 to the right. There is also the multi-word unit "*number + of + the UK's*", where UK could be substituted for a country's name, or simply be replaced by *Britain*, and the unit could be followed by an adjective or adjective superlative to denote something or someone distinct. Consider examples 1 and 2 as the following.

Example 1-2:

1. ...substantially dropped'. The survey, which covered 93 of the UK's top 500 companies and 21 financial services groups, was carried...
2. ...men 's tennis squads, guaranteeing financial support to fourteen of the UK's most promising players. The three new squads will be formed...

Some set phrases such as *at arm's length*, *the drug's safety profile*, *at my mother's*, *the user's guide*, *in a fortnight's time*, and *children's home* occurred when sorting the 100 hits on position +1. There

are loose word units like “last name of a political figure + ’s” appearing with *governorship, freedom, democracy, president, and triumph*, and *volumes, data, findings, program, and hypothesis* appearing with “the surnames of scholars + ’s”.

3.1.4. Sentence Structure

In terms of sentence structure, the preposition *of* appeared before the genitive marker *'s* to form a double genitive. The object of the genitive case could be omitted, and the marker *'s* could be followed by a comma or a full stop. See example 3-4.

Example 3-4:

3. 'Fr McKenna gives his fee (less than half Alan Ball's, and a sixth of Emlyn Hughes 's) to charity .

4. Thatcher 's potential to lead the party to electoral victory with Heseltine's. Not least , they used them to demonstrate his credibility as ...

There were 22 concordances of appearing at the head and 15 concordances of appearing at the end in the randomly thinned 100 matches from the query.

3.1.5. (s)' in BNC

For the genitive marker *(s)'*, the BNC query “‘_POS” gave 45,346 matches in 2,835 different texts (in 100,119,205 words [3,140 texts]; frequency: 452.920 instances per million words), thinned with technique random selection to 100 hits. This result was filtered to texts fulfilling the criteria “Mode: Written”.

In terms of word formation, *(s)'* was used after the (sur)names ending with the letter *s*, for example, in *Moses', Joshua Reynolds', Parsons',* and in *Laos' northeast corner*. It was mostly used after the plural form of nouns, or sometimes used after nouns without the definite article to represent a profession, as in *boys', teachers', workers', students', actors', protagonists', lovers', electricians', architects', artists', writers',* and *auctioneers'*. There is also the usage of “definite article + name of a place” to express local people, like in *the Scots'* and *the Greeks'*.

In terms of multi-word units or grammatical constructions, *(s)'* was used in set phrases *navvies' apples, Teachers' College, on 24 hours' notice*, or in fixed time expressions *25 years' loyal service, three years' duration*. Omissions of the noun after *(s)'* was rare. There was only one concordance of a double genitive: *the subjective 'states of minds' of actors'*. Meanwhile, *(s)'* was found seldom used with adjective superlatives to form any grammatical structure.

Reversely, there were 8 instances of phrases containing *(s)'* appearing at the beginning of a sentence and 22 instances of that occurring at the end of a sentence. In terms of sentence structure, there were fewer sentences starting with *(s)'* while more sentences ending with *(s)'*.

3.2. Usage of the Marker by ESL/EFL Chinese Native Speakers

Chinese native speakers' written English provided examples of how they use the genitive marker, which could be collected from the Longman Learners Corpus: powered by CQPweb (LLC for short) [11-12]. The corpus contains 33,702 written texts with a total of 8,974,424 words. The primary classification is based on learners' English proficiency level. The corpus also contains data on the category of the learner's native language and the type of task.

3.2.1. 's and (s)' in Learners' Academic Writings

In LLC, the genitive marker is tagged “GE”. Query “’s_GE”, restricted to texts meeting criteria “Native language category: Chinese; Learner’s proficiency level: English for Academic Studies”, returned 68 matches in 34 different texts (in 57,391 words [106 texts]). That was small-sized sample, and sentences including the genitive marker were largely simple and short. There were very few uses of ’s after names – *Brown’s*, *Yule’s*, *Isaac Newton’s*, *Taiwan’s*, *HongKong’s*, *China’s* – and no signs of multi-word units or grammatical constructions as discovered in BNC. There were no double genitives, either. However, approximately 13 concordances had the marker ’s appearing at the head of sentences and 11 concordances had the marker at the end of sentences. That was similar to the usage of ’s in BNC. Besides, query of the genitive marker (s)’ in LLC academic writings did not return much data.

Among the 68 hits, one cannot overlook those 15 hits of *child’s* and 6 hits of *children’s* used for the topic “first language acquisition” in LLC. While in BNC, there were also more uses of *child’s* than *children’s* collocating with *language* in academic writing, a proportion of 5.22% for *child’s* and a proportion of 3.63% for *children’s*, displaying a co-incidental similarity.

As to the contexts where learners tend to make mistakes, there tended to be redundant or superfluous uses of *one’s* or *people’s*, such as *one’s mother tongue language*, *to affect one’s language development*, *one’s learning of a second language*, *to imitate other people’s speech*, and *not good for people’s health*. See examples 5-6 as the following.

Example 5-6:

5. endless memorization. However, this was necessary and essential for one’s learning of a second language. When I was in Secondary 1...

6. have a crowded living space. It is not good for people’s health. The third aspect I want to point out is social...

In fact, “mother tongue” entails the meaning of “one’s language”; “other” is equal to “other people”; “the language development” or “the learning of a second language” are enough to clarify that they are something about a person. “Health” has the default meanings of “man’s health”, so there is no need to write as clear as “people’s health”.

Besides, there were literary translations from Chinese to English such as *from Yule’s point of view*, *Taiwan’s transport system*, *government’s public system*, *HongKong’s labor*, *the train’s route*, *in mankind’s history*, *the world’s politics*, and *language’s origin*. While in BNC, the phrase *point of view* was seldom used after *NAME+’s* (7 out of 151 concordances) in academic proeses, it was commonly following nouns of a group of people: *author’s*, *patient’s*, *teacher’s*, *seller’s*, *reader’s*, *child’s*, *speaker’s*, *woman’s*, *tenant’s*, *consumer’s*, *landlord’s*, *buyer’s*, or in few concordances following the plural forms: *employers’*, *parents’*, *settlers’*. As to the phrase *transport system*, in BNC the phrase was following adjectives *public*, *integrated*, *good/better*, or simply an article *the*. There was very rare expression *London(s)/Welsh/Czech transport system*, and only a few concordances using the phrase *public system* and there were no *government’s* used. Similarly, *train* and *route* did not coexist much before and after ’s in BNC, where there few *the convoy’s route* or *NAME+’s route*, and *train’s departure/journey/arrival*. *In mankind’s history* in LLC could be considered versus *the history of mankind* in BNC. In LLC there were phrases *the world’s politics*, *language’s origin*, but in BNC, the meanings were expressed by an NN-genitive or of-genitive: *world politics*, *language origin* or *the origin of language*.

To sum up, compared with the academic texts in BNC, the LLC academic writings displayed no same use of the genitive marker in English as that by the English native speakers. There was scarce use of the marker with various names, or word units or grammatical constructions, and there were superfluous expressions of *one’s* or *people’s* because adding them in are quite acceptable, sometimes

not redundant at all, in Chinese. Some lexical choices before and after the marker were literary translation from Chinese, the mother tongue.

3.2.2. 's and (s)' at the Elementary Level of Learner English Proficiency

Apart from “English for academic studies”, there were data from various levels of learner’s English proficiency in LLC. Queries for the genitive marker “’_GE” and “’s_GE”, restricted to texts meeting criteria “Native language category: Chinese; Learner’s proficiency level: Elementary”, returned 5 matches in 4 different texts (in 79,988 words [408 texts]; frequency: 62.509 instances per million words) and 135 matches in 86 different texts (in 79,988 words [408 texts]; frequency: 1,687.753 instances per million words). Altogether 140 concordances.

In terms of word formation, there appeared a few uses of ’s following a name: *Budis and Wati’s grandfather and grandmother*, *Ayesha’s worry/homeland*, *Pakistan’s transportation system*, and there was idiomatic usage *an hour’s drive*. The sentences with the marker were simple, having no double genitives, and there were approximately 7 concordances of the marker appearing at the head of a sentence and 44 of it appearing at the end of a sentence, which was quite unlike that in BNC.

As to the contexts where learners tend to make mistakes, there were frequent evidence that concepts of the genitive marker in English and the plural form of a noun were confused – they were mistaken as the same. For example: *complete their exams’, next to the shop’s, ...My wife and my son’s are fine*.

There was also erroneous usage that possessive pronouns were confused with the genitive marker in examples as the following:

Example 7-8:

7. weeks where we have a lot of time because the children/ your’s grand-sons will have a long vacation. Now, they are still...

8. ...them are there. O.K. I hope you are enjoy in your’s stay. See you later next time. Thank you very much...

Grammatically, same as that was found in learners’ English for Academic Writings, there was the tendency of overusing the genitive marker in N-N genitives, for example, in LLC there were 3 hits of *hair’s color* and 2 hits of *hair color* out of total 256 concordances of the word *color*. While in BNC, there were 28 hits of *hair colour* out of total 11332 concordances of the word *colour*; there were no matches of *hair’s colour*, *hair color* or *hair’s color*. Other evidences were *bamboo’s trees* and *new year’s holiday* in LLC versus *bamboo trees* and *new year holiday* in BNC.

And there are times when learners used *somebody’s house* to express *somebody’s home* (examples 9), and they used *(to) go to somebody’s house* for the meaning “to visit someone” (examples 10).

Example 9:

9. you. My family and I must go weekend to my grandmother’s house in Malang. I really miss you. I wish, ...

Example 10:

10. But I'm very sorry because I would go to my teachers’s house on Sunday too. It's never mind, you may...

Some non-idiomatic expressions were evidence of erroneous understanding of the grammatical function of the English genitive marker (*Jati’s trees*, *Kecak’s dance*) and the way of expressing meaning in English words but thinking in Chinese (*Lahore’s situation*, *Jakarta’s people*, *a lot of dance’s people*), and to make modification could bring about changes in phrase structure: *the situation in Lahore*, *people in Jakarta*. There was also *political system’s difference* in LLC versus *a different political system* in BNC, and *I wish I will be there in a year’s time* in LLC versus *stay for a year* in BNC.

In general, Chinese native speakers with elementary English proficiency displayed only

elementary understanding of the genitive marker. The learners were largely on the way to distinguish the two markers ((s)' and 's) from the plural form of a countable noun or from possessive pronouns and reflexive pronouns. Keeping in mind to avoid overusing the genitive marker 's is indispensable, and more contact with idiomatic English may help to improve (for example, using "Please feel like home." to avoid the errors of *your's house*).

3.2.3. 's and (s)' at the Intermediate Level of Learner English Proficiency

Query "'_GE", restricted to distribution over Native language category of Chinese and to Learner's proficiency level of intermediate, returned 210 matches in 173 different texts (in 459,303 words [1,957 texts]; frequency: 457.215 instances per million words). Query "'s_GE" in the same way returned 1,040 matches in 625 different texts (in 459,303 words [1,957 texts]; frequency: 2,264.300 instances per million words), thinned with method random selection to 100 hits.

In terms of word formation, there were a number of hits where 's followed a concrete name, including people's names (*Jim's, Adam's, Miranda's, Annibale Carracci's, Mr Smith's*), name of a country (*China's*), name of a private business owner (*Smith's*), and *New Year's Eve*. There was no use of multi-word units or grammatical constructions as appearing in BNC. About sentence structure, there was good sign that one concordance had the double genitive *the show of teachers'*, and the genitive marker 's appeared at the head of 18 sentences and at the end of 28 sentences. The genitive marker (s)' appeared at the head of 5 sentences and at the end of approximately 62 sentences, which resembled the use in BNC.

As to the contexts where learners tend to make mistakes, same as in the elementary level, there was superfluous or redundant meaning in expressions *teachers' teaching, students' study, to cause many people's death, to listen to someone's voice*. It could be clear enough in meanings to use *the teaching, the study, death and listen to someone*. There were top-heavy usages of "modifier plus genitive", such as *several years' famine, poor families' life, the chief actors and actress' performance, the leader's students' free workers, the woman's parents' home, Oriental Daily News' Sunday Magazine*, which could be resolved by adding in of-genitives. There was also influence from learners' mother tongue in *restaurants' safety, to stir the readers' strong interest, the motor car's driving, acquire others' respect and this activity's purpose*. Whereas in BNC, *restaurant* did not collocate with *safety*, and there were expressions *to hold/keep/retain/maintain reader(s)' interest, driving (a) motor car, to earn the respect, give people respect or to make people respect you*. Prepositions *for* and *to* are enough express the meaning of a kind of purpose.

In addition, there were mis-uses of *others'* to express the meaning *other students', other people's* or *off/from other students/people*, and of using *themselves/ourselves + (s)'* to express the meaning of *their, our*. See examples 11-12.

Example 11-12:

11. foundation to create mutual relationship. It makes sense to considerate others' feeling or reaction. The children will get rid of being childish...

12. ... high school students, we could talk to each other about ourselves' secret and share some happy private things. Whenever we do not ...

To briefly sum up, learners' usage of the genitive marker in English improved from elementary level to intermediate level of language proficiency. However, there were redundant use of words before or after the marker, and learners must pay attention when the marker is combined with the use of pronouns.

4. Conclusion

For Research Question 1, English native speakers have their style of using the genitive marker in English in their writing. The corpora investigation started from a general survey of how the genitive marker 's and (s)' was used in the British National Corpus, finding that it was mostly used after a concrete name, in set phrases, as a head or an end of a sentence, and could appear with the preposition *of* or superlatives.

For Research Question 2, the paper explored in Longman Learners Corpus to investigate in what contexts Chinese learners are most likely to make errors with the genitive marker. Comparisons between usage of the genitive marker in Longman Learners Corpus and the British National Corpus did reveal different lexical choices on the position of the possessors and the possessums between Chinese native speakers and English native speakers. The lexical choices could have been influenced by learners' mother tongue, their limited vocabulary and possible mis-understanding of the English genitive marker. It was also found that Chinese learners sometimes overuse 's in a N-N genitive. One surprise was that as corpus observations progressed from the elementary level to the intermediate level, Chinese native speakers used more genitive markers after a concrete name, indicating that learners' usage of the genitive marker tend to resemble that of native English speakers as their language proficiency improves.

It should be noticed that the influence from mother tongue (or even culture in some literatures) might be long-lasting. The influence has its root in cognitive process of human language learning, including awareness of meaning, neuro circuits to control the expression, and neuro networks to understand and react to informational contexts. English language learners and native English speakers do not experience or interact with language the same way; they might not possess the same language neuro networks or language memories. For native language speakers, language experience begins early while they were infants. The brain grows and develops as it keeps record of language use and stores vast body of word meaning, pronunciation, sentence structure, pragmatic situations (tones, gestures, surroundings, feelings, situation, other contexts), and human feedback (mostly by native speakers). All tasks are finished instantaneously. When second or foreign languages are learned, the model is mostly "from context to meaning". Learners receive training in word meaning, pronunciation, sentence structure, but they do not often receive sufficient pragmatic information as compared with native speakers. They also lack in linguistic feedback, and part of their training tasks could not be finished instantaneously.

Therefore, it is highly complicated process that human brains get to know linguistic idiomaticity. Gradual theoretical awareness of the complexity has led linguistic theories from the structuralism to the generativism, the functionalism, and presently the cognitivism, the big-data approach and neurolinguistic studies. Second language acquisition studies and foreign language acquisition studies also converge somehow to make joint efforts to research bilingualism, to compare monolingual children's language and bilingual children's language, as well as carrying out brain studies. Practically speaking, learners are better to familiarize themselves with usage of different genitive cases (the genitive marker, the *of*-genitive, the N-N genitive, the double genitive) and focus more on possessor and possessum pairings, i.e., the lexical collocates before and after the genitive marker.

There are limitations of the essay. First, the BNC contains largely proof-read texts so might not be a full indication of native-speaker competence or production when it comes to using the genitive. Second, the paper did not consider cases where the genitive should have been used but was not used (e.g. a search of *_NN2 *_NN1 produced results like *readers attention, animals language, families house* etc). Third, the paper did not go through all language proficiency levels in Longman Learners Corpus to uncover more sufficient evidence that learners were 'most' likely to make errors in particular contexts.

Nevertheless, the efforts to find idiomatic usages for learners proved indispensable – there are small particles of language use that betrays the real language proficiency. While being fluent in a second or foreign language implies much effort, being both fluent and idiomatic implies multiple or even exponential efforts. Using idiomatic language requires of the speaker the ability to use and react to precise phonological-syntactic-semantic-pragmatic tuples of any particular word in one go, which asks for tremendous practices if not living in the target language environment. For language learners, understanding the importance of idiomaticity helps to conceptualize a multi-dimensional course of language learning. It also helps to cultivate (esp. modern) language respect. For language educators, it is suggested to put an emphasis on idiomaticity usage of small language particles, for example, the genitive marker in English, in class teaching, textbook and teaching method design, advanced language ability tests or evaluation, or even curriculum and syllabus design, because they are often unheeded.

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