

SOME REMARKS ON  
ENGLISH AND JAPANESE GENITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS  
—THEIR SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS—

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I

I would like to discuss two arguments about English genitive constructions in contrast with Japanese in this paper. One of them is a contrastive typological study in morphology between English and Japanese, and the other deals with a history of the genitive construction in Modern English and Japanese.

II

When we observe the languages of the world whose number amounts to be something between 3,000 and 5,000, we notice many common phenomena in their morphological and syntactic structures. Although it is natural that the languages which are related have many common features as to their morphology and syntax, this is true also of the fact that many different languages share numerous similarities even when they have no family relationship. This is one of the many outsets of linguistic typology. For instance, the existence of vowels and consonants, active and passive voices, negative constructions, phrasal and clausal constructions and so on are undeniable facts of all the existing languages in the world. The phenomena listed above are usually called language universals and have been the research focus of a group of linguists who are engaged in the study of linguistic typology.<sup>1</sup> When the phenomenon in question exists without

exception, this is called the absolute universal. On the other hand, when the phenomenon exists only in some languages, especially when it is observed among unrelated languages, this is called the relative universal.<sup>2</sup> It has been observed for long that between English and Japanese, two totally unrelated languages, there exist some relative universals. Countless studies in contrastive linguistics have appeared introducing these and they have been highly evaluated.<sup>3</sup>

### III

The functional and semantic status of case are quite variable. In a sense, case presents the most mysterious spot grammarians must cope with. In most languages, case is indicated by several marks, both morphological and syntactic. Among those marks declension is the most popularly known grammatical feature in such classical languages as Greek, Latin, and Gothic. From the standpoint of considering declensions of nouns as the most obvious marks, Modern English lacks many case categories. In English there are only three cases represented as subjective, objective, and genitive. But from the viewpoint of form, English nouns have only two case forms, *i. e.*, common case<sup>4</sup> and genitive case; whereas in pronominal paradigm Modern English still retains three cases such as subjective, objective, and genitive. However, if we expand the idea of genitive to the consideration of group genitive, which exists only in English,<sup>5</sup> regarding the construction  $NP_2$ 's  $NP_1$ , it can be said  $NP_2$ 's is a form of phrasal suffix rather than a form of declension. Then it is not too exaggerated to say that Modern English is not equipped with any declensional changes as to its noun case system.

On the other hand, in Japanese the case relationship is always marked by the attachment of a case-particle called "zyosi" after a noun or a pronoun (sometimes even to a phrase or a clause). Hence, Japanese nouns and pronouns are considered as having no declensions which indicate a case

category. By its agglutinating characteristics case-particles can follow any nominal expressions and phrases and clauses which anticipate a nominal expression.

From the Chomskian standpoint of generative grammar, the observations made above are merely the problems of surface structure since those generative grammarians have only paid some inadequate amount of attention to the semantic structures of case. Fillmore's Case Grammar, however, which extends the analysis of case to deeper levels, can present a better explanation. By Fillmore's model, in which he bases the analysis on the part of deeper structures of a noun accompanied by case marker, such different languages as English and Japanese, which have totally different surface structures, have a common case system universally.

My attention has been directed toward the above mentioned universal phenomena dominating the semantics of English and Japanese case systems these few years and some of my insights were presented in my past papers.<sup>6</sup> This time I would like to deal with the mysterious status of genitive constructions in English and Japanese.

#### IV

Case represents one of these relative universals and has been much studied by linguists at home and abroad. The linguistic structures that signal case relationship are various: declensions, word order, and attachment of case-particles are some representative examples. As I mentioned above, the case system in Modern English can be observed in declensions (pronouns), word order (subject, object, complement), and the attachment of prepositions to nominal expressions (Agentive by BY; Instrumental by WITH; Locative by IN, AT; Ablative by FROM and so on). On the other hand, in Japanese the case system is mainly signaled by the attachment of particles (postpositions) after each nominal expression as I introduced before.

## V

I would like to present a hypothesis that there exists a relative universal between genitive constructions in English and Japanese. The English genitive case is signaled by the phrasal composition of *NP's* or *of NP*, while the Japanese genitive case is, in most cases, signaled by the phrase *NP+no*.

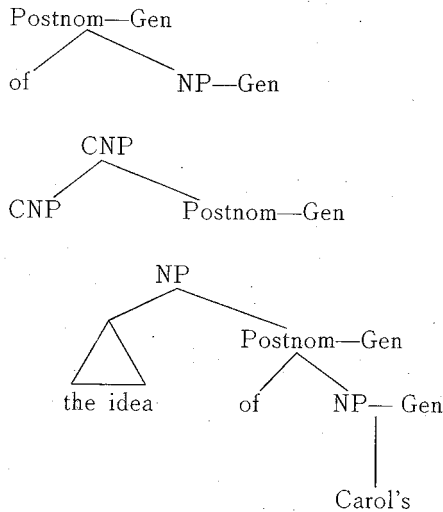
The reason I avoid the commonly used term "possessive" and use "genitive" instead is that the sense given by this oblique case is not necessarily the sense of possession, but ranges in some other different semantic dimensions such as senses of origin, subject (Agent), object, description, apposition, portion (partitive) and so on. Namely, to give the name "possessive" to "non-possessive" functions seems to me inadequate.<sup>7</sup> In English genitive case is used in such semantic categories as:

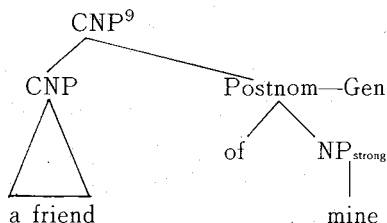
- |   |                        |  |
|---|------------------------|--|
| 1 | Possessive(Belonging): | <i>John's</i> book<br><i>her</i> favorite song                                 |
| 2 | Origin:                | <i>Hemingway's</i> novels<br><i>Rodin's</i> "Thinker"                          |
| 3 | Subjective:            | <i>John's</i> deed<br><i>Henry's</i> arrival<br><i>The King's</i> reign        |
| 4 | Objective:             | Betty's dislike <i>of Tom</i><br>They set out for <i>their</i> rescue          |
| 5 | Descriptive:           | <i>the adult's</i> rate<br><i>a foreigner's</i> price<br><i>a month's</i> rent |
| 6 | Appositive:            | <i>City of New York</i><br><i>St. Paul's</i> Cathedral                         |

- 7 Partitive:                    *some of my friends*  
                                       *the king of kings*
- 8 Compositive:                *a piece of chalk*  
                                       *the crown of thorns*  
                                       *the candy of sugar*

Among recent practical generative grammarians, Baker discusses the generation of prenominal and postnominal constructions in *English Syntax*,<sup>8</sup> presenting the following:

A postnominal genitive can be formed by combining the preposition *of* with a following genitive noun phrase. If the genitive is a pronoun, the strong form of the genitive must be used.





Although Baker very skillfully formalized the genitive construction, his analysis, as is always of the generative formalists' way, completely lacks semantic consideration.

On the other hand, it is interesting, that in Japanese, the genitive construction *NP+no*, which is the only construction denoting genitiveness in this language, is used in similar categories.

- 1' Possessive(Belonging): *Taroo no hon*  
 "Taroo's book"  
*neko no hitai*  
 "a cat's forehead"  
*tukue no asi*  
 "the legs of a table"<sup>9</sup>
- 2' Origin:  
*Sooseki no syoosetu*  
 "Sooseki's novels"  
*Miro no hanga*  
 "Miro's print"  
*Tikamatu no sakuhin*  
 "Tikamatu's works"

3' Subjective:	<i>syuzin no kitaku</i> "the husband's return" <i>oosama no tisei</i> "the king's reign" <i>isya no tootyaku</i> "the doctor's arrival"
4' Objective:	<i>siyoonin no kaiko</i> "the employee's discharge" <i>Taroo no syasin</i> <sup>10</sup> "Taroo's picture"
5' Descriptive:	<i>san-guramu no kin</i> "the gold of 3 grams" <i>iti-kukan no ryookin</i> "the fare of one section"
6' Appositive:	<i>Oosaka no mati</i> "City of Osaka" <i>Nara no miyako</i> "Capital of Nara"
7' Partitive:	<i>tomodati no itibu</i> "some of my friends" <i>kedamono no oosama</i> "the king of beasts"
8' Compositive:	<i>kome no kasi</i> "cakes of rice" <i>isi no ie</i> "the house of stone"

It is surprising that English genitive corresponds to the Japanese counterpart in such an exact way. Since the semantic category of genitive

constructions may be more complicated and rich in variety, more minute studies concerning this aspect is to be hoped for.

## VI

Among the categories of genitive case the most popular use is the one being used as indicating possession. According to C. C. Fries,<sup>12</sup> forty percent of all the examples of genitive forms he had collected was the so-called "possessive genitive." This percentage is really overwhelming, although there are some dubious points as to Fries' criteria of what possessive genitive is. As I discussed above, some examples I quoted may not indicate distinctive borderlines between two categories. For instance,

John's arrest

which, in my categorization, is classified as objective genitive, may be paraphrased as

the arrest *that John had* = *John's* being arrested

Then, this may be said to express possession instead of objective status. This is to say some ambiguous elements are involved in the general categorization from a more strict point of view.

In the attributive use of the genitive, the construction  $NP_1$  of  $NP_2$  is very generally used. For instance, expressions such as

the streets *of the city*

the boss *of the group*

the history *of the nation*



are observed, as very common examples.

In the case of personal pronouns it is very rare that in an  $NP_1$  of  $NP_2$  construction the  $NP_2$  is a pronoun (objective case). Some exceptional examples are

for the life of me

the lively picture of him

(only to mean that the picture in which he is shot)<sup>13</sup>

I do not like the face of her who is always in the blue.

As genitive pronouns in English, there are two sets, namely,

Genitive Pronouns I: my, your, his, her, its

Genitive Pronouns II: mine, yours, his, hers, its

The former forms are used as adjectivals and the latter as nominals. The former are called "possessive adjectives" and the latter "possessive pronouns" in the traditional grammar of English.<sup>14</sup> However, as I mentioned above, I would call them both genitives and classify them as genitive I and II.

As the following examples indicate, the genitive pronouns II are used as the second nominal (namely,  $NP_2$ ) in the  $NP_1$  of  $NP_2$  construction.

a good friend of mine

a nice dress of hers

The only means of communication is the telephone of ours.

Also these genitive pronouns II are used as other sentence elements. For example,<sup>15</sup>

You are mine.

The nearest house to ours is about a mile away.

His is the only telephone in the village.

The door of Henry's lunchroom opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter. "What's yours?" George asked. (Hemingway)

What I would like to discuss next is the status of "its" as genitive pronoun II. The editors of *The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Linguistics and Philology*<sup>16</sup> list a paradigm of personal pronouns in Modern English on p. 926, but the readers will find that "its" as a genitive pronoun II is missing. Quirk and Greenbaum also skip this form of pronoun in their list of pronouns on p. 102 of *A University Grammar of English*.<sup>17</sup> Other dictionaries and grammar books either ignore or deliberately omit the form and usage of this completely forgotten pronoun.

According to *Sanseido's Dictionary of English Grammar*, genitive pronouns II are used less frequently and they have been replaced their seats by the  $NP_1$  of  $NP_2$  construction.<sup>18</sup> And more specifically, "its" remains only in archaic uses.<sup>19</sup>

Halliday and Hasan are praiseworthy in their successful introduction of their functional approach to English grammar. They mention "its" as genitive pronoun II, saying

... The form *its* is also rare as Head, although there seems to be no very clear reason for this restriction. ...<sup>20</sup>

And they quote only the following example:

... You know that mouse you saw? Well, that hole there must be its.<sup>21</sup>

They also introduce a very interesting usage of the indefinite pronoun "one" as an anaphora. But I would prefer not to connect this to my present discussion.

The above mentioned *Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Linguistics and Philology* also states that the use of "its" as a genitive pronoun II is very rare,<sup>22</sup> and cites two old examples Jespersen quoted:

The children's health is poor except the baby's and *its* is perfect. (Curme)  
 I wish we church folk read our religious literature as faithfully as their  
 crowd I speak of read *its*. (G. Eliot)

As an older example it also presents an example from Shakespeare:

Each following day  
 Became the next day's master, till the last  
 Made former wonders *its* (Henry VIII, I, i, 18)

The uses of pronouns, especially the genitive, are most significant because they are the most frequently used words, without which no appropriate speech communication could be carried out, but the change of the form of the pronoun by declension has gradually lost its intensity and some forms even are about to disappear. One such example is "its" as the genitive pronoun II. This phenomenon in English may be explained as the result of the intensification of the function of prepositions in Modern English.

While in Japanese, the reduction of some case-particles is going on. For instance, the particle "ga," which was used both as the nominative and genitive case marker is currently used only as the former. Hence, we feel some archaism in such expressions as

ora *ga* kuni (=orera no kuni)  
 "our country"

Siramatu *ga* monaka<sup>23</sup> (=Siramatu no monaka)  
 "Siramatu's rice red-bean cakes [a trade mark]"

These are passable only as stylistic variants of more standard expressions,

though they were current in 17th century Japan.

## VI

The above may appear to be a discussion of utterly varied topics. However, those who read my arguments with care may have noticed that the two arguments are closely related.

What I wish to emphasize is that the necessity of contrastive studies of case systems between English and Japanese must be accelerated and the relationship between grammatical discoveries and practical usage must be placed side by side. Neglecting this, the study of what Chomsky calls "performance" or what de Saussure called "parole" cannot be achieved.

## NOTES

1. Of the books dealing with language universals and linguistic typology, the below are most valuable. Arnold *et al.* (eds.), *Essays on Grammatical Theory and Universal Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); E. Back and R. Harms (eds.), *Universals in Linguistic Theory* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968); B. Comrie, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology* (London: Blackwell, 1981); J. A. Hawkins (ed.), *Explaining Language Universals* (London: Blackwell, 1988); W. P. Lehmann, *Syntactic Typology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); W. E. Rutherford (ed.), *Language Universals and Second Language Acquisition* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1984); T. Shoppen (ed.), *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, Vol. III *Grammatical Categories and Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
2. In his introductory linguistic essay Professor Eiichi Chino gives an excellent definition of two types of language universals. E. Chino, "Gengogaku e no izanai (An Invitation to Linguistics) 8" *Sanseido Booklet* No. 59 (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1985), pp. 46–51. Of the discussion of linguistic relativity Julia M. Penn's *Linguistic Relativity versus Innate Ideas—The Origins of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in German Thought* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972) gives an excellent general view. The lengthy essay attached to the Japanese version by Professor Michiko Arima also presents

- her original interpretation of the issue as well as a superb introduction.
- 3 For instance, the splendid insights presented by the Japanese linguists introduced below are really admirable. Saburo Ohe, *Nichi-Eigo no Hikaku Kenkyu* (Comparative Studies of Japanese and English) (Tokyo: Nan'un-do, 1999); Susumu Kuno, *Nihon-Bumpo Kenkyu* (The Study of the Japanese Grammar) (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1973), which is the Japanese version of *The Structure of the Japanese Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972); Susumu Kuno, *Shin Nihon-Bumpo Kenkyu* (The New Study of the Japanese Grammar) (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1983); Masayoshi Shibatani, *Nihongo no Bunseki* (The Analysis of the Japanese Language) (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1978); Seiichi Makino, *Kurikaeshi no Bumpo* (The Grammar of Repetition) (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1980).
  - 4 Most English grammar books recently published recognize only two cases. For instance, one of the most widely circulated English grammar books by Quirk and Greenbaum keeps the same standpoint. Cf. R. Quirk and S. Greenbaum, *A University Grammar of English* (London: Longman, 1976), p. 102.
  - 5 O. Jespersen, *Philosophy of Grammar* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), chap. III. Some information given here is mainly based on T. Otsuka (ed.), *Sanseido's Dictionary of English Grammar* (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1959), pp. 438–9.
  - 6 The following are some articles by the author of the present article which deal with English and Japanese case systems. "Case in Deep Structure" *Doshisha Studies in English* Nos. 47 & 48 (1989); "The Interplay of Case and Aspect" *Doshisha Studies in English* No. 49 (1989); "Some Remarks on Case Shifting Transformations" *Doshisha Studies in English* No. 51 (1970); "Japanese Benefactive Accessory Verbs" *Doshisha Studies in English* Nos. 52 & 53 (1991).
  - 7 The original discussion of this problem was given by O. Jespersen, who maintained that case category was only given by declension in Indo-European languages and that it is mistaken to call the genitive of English possessive, because English genitive forms ( $NP_2$ 's  $NP_1$  and  $NP_1$  of  $NP_2$ ) function in many other ways than signaling the sense of possession. Jespersen, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–29 and pp. 173–187, especially pp. 180–182.
  - 8 C. L. Baker, *English Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 264–5.
  - 9 The diagram is slightly modified by the author.
  - 10 In English,  $NP_2$ 's  $NP_1$  construction is used with an animate  $NP_2$ ; however, the

- modern tendency shows, according to many native informants, NP<sub>2</sub> can be an inanimate NP. Therefore, "the table's legs" can also be acceptable.
- 11 *Taroo no syasin* is an ambiguous construction as is the English equivalent *is*. For more minute explanation, see my "Some Remarks on Case Shifting Accessory Verbs" *Doshisha Studies in English* Nos. 52 & 53 (1990).
  - 12 C. C. Fries, *American English Grammar* (New York: Appleton Century Croft, 1940). For further explanation, T. Otsuka (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 704-5.
  - 13 This is my interpretation; however, most native informants I have consulted support mine.
  - 14 T. Otsuka (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 706-7.
  - 15 *Ibid.*
  - 16 K. Akai *et al.* (eds.), *The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Linguistics and Philology* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1982), p. 926 gives comprehensive information and a profound analysis of genitive constructions.
  - 17 R. Quirk & S. Greenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
  - 18 T. Otsuka (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 706-7.
  - 19 *Ibid.*
  - 20 M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (London: Longman, 1976), p. 45.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
  - 22 K. Akai *et al.* (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 926-8.
  - 23 This is a popular trade mark one often encounters while traveling on JR trains.