

A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF GENITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS WITH “OF”

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Résumé

Cet article est consacré à l'analyse sémantique des constructions génitives en « of ». Le génitif exprime une relation de dépendance entre deux noms en grammaire. Il peut être exprimé en anglais par « 's » et « of ». L'analyse de cet article porte sur une analyse sémantique de la construction génitive en « of ». Nous avons constaté que c'est une construction qui peut véhiculer plusieurs significations et sa compréhension cause quelques problèmes pour les apprenants de la langue. Le but de ce travail est donc d'analyser sémantiquement les constructions génitives avec “of” afin de décoder les messages derrière cet opérateur.

Mots clés : *constructions génitives, sémantique, of, opérateur.*

Abstract

This article is about a semantic analysis of genitive constructions with “of”. Genitive shows interdependency between nouns. It is expressed in English grammar by “of” and “’s”. This work focusses on the genitive construction with of. We notice that of can convey a variety of meaning and this can cause some problems for English language learners. Thus, the aim of this article is to analyze semantically genitive constructions with “of”, in order to discover the hidden messages behind this operator.

Keywords: *genitive constructions, semantic, of, operator.*

Introduction

Grammar appears as a means of discovering the inner functioning of a language. It is defined as “*a description of the ways in which a language uses patterns of structure to convey meaning*” (Steible,1967: 55). So it is not an end in itself, it allows us to master the secret mechanisms of a language in order to make them in practice in teaching, learning and in daily activities., but also to discover its marvels. In linguistics, the noun and the verb are two main parts of the speech. This work is about a semantic analysis of genitive constructions with *of* in English. Genitive is used to express a relationship of dependency between two or more than two

nouns. It is expressed by genitive markers like “*of*” and “’s”. The focus of this present study is “*of*” genitive marker. In genitive constructions with “*of*”, there are number of meanings conveyed. So what is the role of the operator *of* in genitive constructions? Does its origin impact on the meanings it conveys? Is the order of words important in genitive constructions with “*of*”? what are the different meaning that can convey the operator “*of*”? Number of works exist in the field of genitive with *of*. But whatever these works may be, some research can still be added as a contribution in this field. The operator *of* can convey number of meanings. So English language learners may face some difficulties about the meaning with *of* and also to order rightly sentences. This article has been written in order to shed light on those points and contribute in research field about English genitive. So, to write this article, a lot of research has been made in libraries, others from books and net sources. We base on an utterer-centered approach, a grammar of operations as elaborated by Henri Adamczewski. It is an explicative and a unifying` framework that is needed for the good understanding of the semantic analysis of genitive constructions with *of*. Its importance lays especially on the fact that it accords much attention to describe linguistic phenomena in languages, a description that can be fully done if one can detect and explain clearly the operations that exist in utterances to convey special meanings. Then we are going first to talk about the origin of the genitive marker *of*, then determine the order of elements in utterances with *of* genitive marker, and deal with the semantic aspects in genitive constructions with “*of*”.

1. “**OF**” origin:

‘*Of*’ originated from old English: *aef*, (very close to the German word ‘*ab*’) meaning ‘away’, ‘away from, indicating the origin or some relations of that kind (Lapaire, 1991:33). It had in fact the same meaning as ‘*Off*’. It is said that the old form of the “*OF*” genitive was ‘*aef*’. It originates from the German word ‘*ab*’ that means in English ‘*away*’, ‘*away from*’. English and German are very linked languages, then this meaning is most of the time seen in modern English with the particle “*off*” as an instance: *off with her head, hands off, the plane took off*, that means that ‘*of*’ and ‘*off*’ have the same origin which is the German word ‘*aef*’. So that word ‘*aef*’ has undergone some changes under the influence of French language and

becomes the quite perfect equivalent of “*de*” in French. This explains that languages keep on evolving, this example can give evidence about that: *The duke of Normandy*. In other words, this serves to mark a genitive link between the two nouns: ‘Duke’ and ‘Normandy’. Indeed we totally agree with that view about *of*. In the grammar of operations, *of* appears as an operation of the genitive. It has to link the first and the second noun, to convey a variety of meaning. But in genitive constructions with “of”, words cannot be placed at random. Then let’s tackle the next part with the syntactic aspects.

2. Word order in genitive constructions with “of”

In English, the order of words controls virtually everything. Besides, word order is central in the grammar of operations. Let’s consider the following sentences in “of” constructions: *Bag of the girl the, the girl bag of the, Bag girl the the of etc.*,

So we may have other possibilities of ordering the words. We notice none of these sentences are meaningful, because the order’s not correct. The right order is: *the bag of the girl*. One cannot give a correct meaning to the other sentences because merely words are jumbled. To make a sentence meaningful, it must be rightly ordered. From the above example: ‘*the bag of the girl*’, we can say that it is the order of elements which is the key to understand what the sentence really means. In grammar, word order is so central to meaning. “*Grammar is after all the basis of the way in which we organize our utterances so that they make sense through the processes of sentence constructions, and it’s not an aspect of language that changes very easily unlike vocabulary and pronunciation*” (Steible, 1957:55). In fact the order of words in an utterance doesn’t change and that’s what gives to the utterances a real meaning that can be understood”. As far as this study is concerned, it is the right order of elements which makes the utterances ready to be understood. We are going to use the terms of “possessed” and “possessor” in this part. That being we are going to call N1 the possessed and N2 the possessor. To determine word order in “of” constructions, let’s consider these examples:

The roof OF the house
N1 OF N2
Pssd OF Pssr

In this example, the first noun, called N1, represents the possessed. The genitive marker “of” is placed after it, and N2, the second noun, comes at last.

The streets of Manathan
N OF N
Pssd OF Pssr

In this example N1, ‘the streets’ is the first element, it’s the possessed. N2, the second noun represents the possessor. The genitive marker is placed before N2.

The leg of the table
N1 OF N2
Pssd OF Pssr

The possessed, N1 is represented by ‘the leg’ and N2, the possessor is represented by ‘the table’. OF stays at the middle between the first and the second element. It links them.

The windows of the bedroom
N1 OF N2
Pssd OF Pssr

In this example, N1, the possessed, is “the window”, “my bedroom”, N2 is the possessor. “OF” links both of them.

In “of” genitive constructions, the first noun, N1, is always placed before the genitive marker “of”, and N2, the second noun is placed after it. The genitive marker links the first noun and the second noun to give a variety of meaning. So we are going to study the semantic aspects conveyed by the genitive marker “of”.

3. Semantic aspects in genitive constructions with “of”

“Of” conveys different meaning that only the narrow viewpoint of the utterer can detect. They are also important element that are to be taken into account: the operators, to really get the meaning of utterances. “of”, from its origin that means “away, away from”, is used in partitive expressions (Lapaire, 1991:33), in other words, “of” appears in partitive genitive, for example: *A piece of luggage- A slice of cake-A sip of tea.*

At this part of the work, it seems normal to us to explain why partitive.

In fact this type of construction with “of” genitive marker, underlines a part-whole relationship in the examples. Why part-whole? Because the second noun N2 represents the whole thing and N1, the first noun is only a part of the whole thing as in the given example: *a slice of cake*. The same thing goes for the other examples given as well: *a sip of tea*

In grammar no point is used at random, everything has an explanation, we are going to focus the reflection on this point of ‘partitive’. To be clearer, we are going to put in one part what comes before ‘of’ and in another part the rest of the sentence for each of the above examples given. In fact, the idea given about “of” origin which is ‘away’, ‘away from’ seems to be reactivated in partitive expressions. In other words, only a segment is stripped from the whole thing, it is isolated from the totality of the thing. The author gives the idea that ‘a’ has an analytic value and “of” has a separative value. We find that the utterer works on the totality of the segment from which, it is taken only a fragment.

To illustrate that, a chart can be drawn for that purpose:

Fragmentation-partition of the whole thing	Globality of the thing- the whole thing
A piece	of luggage
A slice	of cake
A sip	of tea

With this chart, we can clearly notice the origin of the genitive marker “of”. Now let’s come to the constructions itself.

“Of” is one of the most frequent word in English language and it shows a relationship between two nouns (Adamczewski, 1992:234). We can say that we have to analyze deeply the utterances, the hearer has to detect narrowly the idea hidden behind the utterances. From the examples given we can deduct a comparison towards the writing and the metalinguistic meaning of the utterances in a given context. To be clearer we can take one of the above given examples to explain so.

A slice of cake

In this example, we have the genitive marker “of” which links

both nouns to convey a part- whole relationship. As far as the writing is concerned, we can divide the sentence into two parts: *a slice / of cake*, then, ‘*a slice*’ is in one part and ‘*of a cake*’ in another part. We can say that in order the sentence make sense, the fragment “*a slice*” is the first element and then the other portion of the sentence “*of cake*” is placed in final position, it can be represented as follows:

A slice *of cake*
 N1 N2

We mean by here that N1 is at the left, it comes first, N2 is in final position. Now in a metalinguistic context, ‘*a cake*’ N2 is primitive towards N1 *a slice*’. The part of the segment ‘*of cake*’ is rhematic towards ‘*a slice*’ because we have the whole thing first: the cake before thinking of *a slice of it*. Besides, *a slice (of the cake)* cannot exist before the cake.

Let’s check another example:

A piece of luggage

The second segment ‘*of luggage*’ is primitive towards the first segment ‘*a piece*’.

Let’s study our third example:

A sip of tea

For this example, if the sentence is parted into two, we will have at left N1 ‘*a sip*’ and at the right “*of*” plus N2. For this example, N2 , ‘*tea*’ exists first before ‘*a sip*’.

Though partitive notion is one of the meanings in of genitive constructions, or rather the main one, we can have other semantic aspects. Let us consider the following examples: *People of Rome*
 The genitive marker marks a relationship of origin, in fact, it tells us about the origin of the given people.

Died of nutrition

In this example, the genitive marker shows the cause of the death.

“*Of*” can denote the substance by which the thing in question is built of: *built of bricks*

“*Of*” can also denote identity as in: *The city of Rome*

“*Of*” can denote a relationship like a separation, for example: *Get rid of them*

Sometimes the relationship shown by the genitive marker “*of*” can be a description: *A person of tact*

The *OF* marker can also show reference or direction for example: *Beware of the dog*

All these examples given don't mean different types of genitives but they are just interpretations of the operation of genitive constructions with of. As we aforesaid in defining the genitive, it can have number of different meanings.

Sometimes genitive constructions in OF can denote possession. Let's study the following examples:

The works of Shakespeare.

Conclusion

From the origin of the operator “of” in this meaning in the source is seen in the different meaning that are conveyed in of genitive constructions. In the utterer-centered approach, word order has an outstanding place, it allows to know the place of each element to get meaningful utterances. In genitive constructions with “of”, written as N1 of N2, N1 always appears first and stands for the possessed. It is followed by the genitive marker OF and N2 which stands for the possessor comes at last position. At any rate, “of” convey a variety of meaning. The meaning conveyed by the genitive marker OF can be partitive, possession, source, origin, cause, distance, direction, identity, separation or other relationship of that kind.

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