

Genitive and possessive constructions in Faroese

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1 Introduction

1.1 *The limited use of the genitive*

The use of the genitive in Faroese is “rather limited” (as Lockwood 1977:28 puts it), at least in the spoken language. It is mainly found when governed by a noun or a preposition. Verbs that used to assign their objects genitive case, such as *bíða* ‘wait’, *biðja* ‘ask’, *hevna* ‘avenge’, *njóta* ‘enjoy’, *vitja* ‘visit’, no longer do, cf. (1) (Thráinsson et al. 2004:261; cf. Henriksen 2000:67):

- (1) Kanst tú bíða mær (older: mín)
can you wait me.DAT me.GEN
‘Can you wait for me?’

The use of genitive governed by nouns is infrequent. When used, it either precedes or follows its head word (Barnes 2002:207–208):

- (2) a. ríkisins ovasta umboð
kingdom.the.GEN foremost.NOM representative.NOM
‘the kingdom’s foremost representative’
b. ovasta umboð ríkisins

With kinship terms, accusative and not genitive case is used in postnominal DP (e.g. Delsing 1993:156, Thráinsson et al. 2004:252):

- (3) sonur norska kongin
son.NOM Norwegian.ACC king.ACC

Faroese has developed a phrasal possessive marker, *sa*-possessive (or *sa*-genitive), mainly used in the spoken language (cf. Thráinsson et al. 2004:411). It consists of the clitic *-sa* which is normally suffixed to proper names and nouns used as such (e.g. *father*, *mother*) (Lockwood 1977:106, Staksberg 1996:28, Thráinsson et al. 2004:64):

- (4) a. mammusa bilur
mom’sa car.NOM
b. *bilur mammusa

Some prepositions, *innan* ‘inside’, *(i)millum* ‘between’, *til* ‘to’, *uttan* ‘outside’, *vegna* ‘because of’, sometimes govern genitive case, cf. (5), but normally they don’t—then they govern accusative, cf. (6) (Thráinsson et al. 2004).

- (5) a. millum landa
 between countries.GEN
 b. vegna tess
 because of it.GEN
- (6) a. millum londini
 between countries.the.ACC
 b. vegna tað
 because of it.ACC

1.2 Possessive prepositional use

Faroese uses various prepositions to denote possession. The ones discussed here are *at* ‘at, to’, *á* ‘on’, *hjá* ‘at’, *í* ‘in’, *til* ‘to’. *Hjá* is the most frequent (Thráinsson et al. 2004):

- (7) báturin hjá mær
 boat.the.NOM at me.DAT
 ‘my boat’

At and *til* are used to denote kinship terms (e.g. Thráinsson et al. 2004:63, 252):

- (8) a. abbi at dreinginum
 grandfather.NOM to boy.the.DAT
 ‘the boy’s grandfather’
 b. mamma til Kjartan
 mother.NOM to Kjartan.ACC
 ‘Kjartan’s mother’

Á and *í* are used to denote inalienable possession (e.g. Thráinsson et al. 2004:62–63):

- (9) a. hárið á gentuni
 hair.the.NOM on girl.the.DAT
 b. eyguni í dreinginum
 eyes.the.NOM in boy.the.DAT
- (10) a. takið á húsinum
 roof.the.NOM on house.the.DAT
 b. motorurin í bilinum
 motor.the.NOM in car.the.DAT

1.3 Outline of the talk

The aim here is to get an overview of the Faroese genitive and possessive constructions. The main results are that genitive is mainly assigned to the specifier of DP rather than to its complement. In section 2, a study of Faroese possessive constructions is presented. Section 3

discusses further the various constructions outlined above and results of the study are shown. Section 4 concludes the talk.

2 Magnitude estimation of Faroese genitive and possessive constructions

In August 2008, I conducted a field work at the 5th NORMS Dialectal Workshop in the Faroe Islands. The method applied was magnitude estimation, originally used in psychophysics (cf. Stevens 1975), but it has also been used to elicit acceptability judgments in linguistic research (Bard et al. 1996). 20 informants from six towns, Fuglafjørður, Klaksvík, Miðvágur, Sandur, Suðuroy og Tórshavn, filled out a questionnaire by judging sentences. The youngest participant was 15 year old, the oldest 63.

In the beginning, the informants were presented with the following sentence:¹

- (11) Hundurin beinið át.
dog.the.NOM bone.the.ACC ate

They were told that they were to judge the sentence by assigning a number to it. If it was a bad one they might give it a low number. It could be any number at all (fractions as well), except the number 0 or negative numbers. The speakers were then presented with a second sentence:

- (12) Beinið át hundurin í gjár.
bone.the.ACC ate dog.the.NOM yesterday

If they found it better than the first one, e.g. ten times better, they would give it a higher number, in this case the number would be ten times higher than the first one.

Results of the study will be cited here where relevant. Since the informants could choose any number to judge the sentences in the task the scales used were different from one person to another. Most people did not use fractions. One used a scale from 1 to 80 while another used a scale from 1 to 5. That means that the best sentence for one person was 80 times better than the worst one but to the other it is only 5 times better. Thus, I have decided to use median when presenting the results. The mean would not serve any better since the standard deviation was relatively high—then the mean does not represent the data very well.

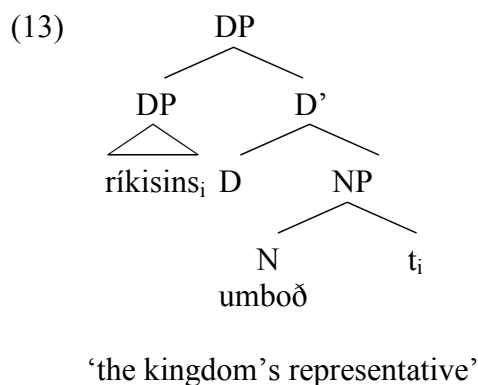
3 Head + modifier or modifier + head?²

3.1 Genitive

When the genitive precedes its head noun it moves to the specifier of the DP, cf. (13). When it follows the head noun, it stays in situ, i.e. the complement:

¹ Thanks to Caroline Heycock for providing me with the instructions in Faroese.

² Cf. Barnes (2002).



Genitive preceding its head noun is much more common in Faroese than in Icelandic, its closest relative, where this order is often ungrammatical (Magnússon 1984:101; cf. also Sigurðsson 1993):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>(14) <i>Prenominal genitive</i></p> <p>a. ?kennarans bíll teacher.the.GEN car.NOM</p> <p>b. *ríkisstjórnarinnar ákvörðun government.the.GEN decision.NOM</p> <p>c. ?verkamannsins kaup laborer.the.GEN salary.NOM</p> | <p><i>Postnominal genitive</i></p> <p>bíll kennarans</p> <p>ákvörðun ríkisstjórnarinnar</p> <p>kaup verkamannsins</p> |
| <p>(15) a. *allir kennarans bílar all.NOM teacher.the.GEN cars.NOM</p> <p>b. *Jóns síðustu bækur Jón.GEN last.NOM books.NOM</p> | <p>allir bílar kennarans</p> <p>síðustu bækur Jóns</p> |

Lockwood (1977:104) says that apart from certain prepositional phrases, genitive is only heard in everyday language in a few phrases, e.g. in the following:

- (16) a. hjartans takk
heart.the.GEN thank.NOM
‘sincere thanks’
- b. á Harrans degi
on Lord.the.GEN day.DAT
‘on the Lord’s day’
- c. annars manns barn
another.GEN man.GEN child.NOM
‘another man’s child’

Then he says: “Notice that the genitive precedes the word qualified” (Lockwood 1977:104).

Now consider, for example, the following DPs (or NPs) in the Icelandic novel *Englar alheimsins* (Guðmundsson 1993) and their Faroese counterparts in Petersen’s translation (Guðmundsson 1996):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>(17) <i>Faroese</i></p> <p>a. Alheimsins einglar universe.the.GEN angels.NOM [book title]</p> | <p><i>Icelandic</i></p> <p>Englar alheimsins angels.NOM universe.the.GEN [book title]</p> |
|--|---|

| | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|
| b. kærleikans | hús | húsi | ástarinnar |
| love.the.GEN | house.ACC | house.DAT | love.the.GEN |
| c. landsins | sögu | sögu | þjóðarinnar |
| country.the.GEN | history.DAT | history.DAT | country.the.GEN |
| d. heimsins | skuggar | skuggum | veraldar |
| world.the.GEN | shadows.ACC | shadows.DAT | world.GEN |

Petersen sometimes, though not always, switches the order of the original text from NOM + GEN to GEN + NOM.

In the case of prepositions such as *vegna* and *millum*, as shown in (5) above, they sometimes govern the genitive. But, when the noun has a suffixed article or is modified in some way, these prepositions govern accusative instead of genitive:

- (18) a. Teir gingu oman til sands. (median: 8)
they walked from-the-top to sand.GEN
‘They walked down to the sand.’
- b. Vit gingu oman til sandsins. (median: 1)
we walked from-the-top to sand.the.GEN
- c. Anna gekk oman til eins vakurs sands. (median: 1)
Anna walked from-the-top to a.GEN beautiful.GEN sand.GEN
- (19) a. Hann gekk oman til sand. (median: 2)
he walked from-the-top to sand.ACC
- b. Hon gekk oman til sandin. (median: 10)
she walked from-the-top to sand.the.ACC
- c. Vit gingu oman til ein vakran sand. (median: 10)
we walked from-the-top to a.ACC beautiful.ACC sand.ACC

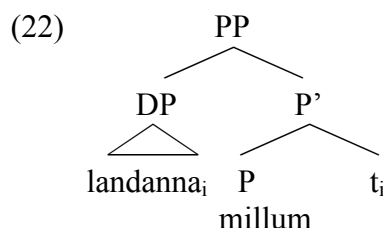
Interestingly, when the prepositions *millum* and *vegna* follow their NPs, genitive is preserved with, e.g., a suffixed article (Thráinsson et al. 2004:177–180).

- (20) a. millum londini
between countries.the.ACC
- b. landanna millum
countries.the.GEN between

The *sa*-clitic is also used in this position (Thráinsson et al. 2004:180):

- (21) Hjalmarsa vegna
Hjalmar’sa because-of

This seems to be in line with (13) above:



3.2 Possessive pronouns

Some discussion has been about the unmarked order for possessive pronouns and nouns, whether the pronoun precedes the noun (*mítt hús* ‘my house’) or follows it (*hús mítt*). Barnes (2002) gives a good overview of this. Lockwood (1977:116), e.g., says “[t]he normal position of the possessive adjective [i.e. the possessive pronoun] is after the noun it qualifies.”

Faroese differs from other Scandinavian languages that allow postnominal possession (e.g. Icelandic and Norwegian); definite suffixed article on the head noun is lacking (cf. Delsing 1993:155–156):

- (23) a. hús mítt *Faroese*
 house my
 ‘my house’
 b. húsið mitt *Icelandic*
 house.the my
 c. huset mitt *Norwegian*
 house.the my

When showing the order noun + pronoun, Thráinsson et al. (2004:117) say the reverse order also occurs, “e.g. when there is emphasis on the genitive.” Henriksen (2000:121) also talks about emphasis in regard to this order:³

- (24) a. mamma mín (mótvegis øðrum fólki – vanligt vaksnamannamál)
 mother my
 ‘my mother (in contrast to other people – normal language of grownups)’
 b. mín mamma (mótvegis øðrum mammum – vanligt barnamál)
 ‘my mother (in contrast to other mothers – normal in children’s language)’

When an adjective is also used, the possessive pronoun normally precedes the noun phrase (25a) rather than follows it (25b) (Barnes & Weyhe 1994:208, Lockwood 1977:116):

- (25) a. mín nýggi bátur
 my new boat
 b. nýggi bátur mín

- (26) har endaði hann sínar seinastu dagar
 there ended he his.REFL last days
 ‘There he passed his last days.’

The order noun + possessive pronoun or possessive pronoun + noun was looked at in the study:

- (27) a. Hvørji krøv setur tú til **børn** **tíni**? (order: n + p; median: 9)
 what demands put you to children your
 ‘What do you demand of your children?’
 b. Hvørji krøv setur tú til **tíni** **børn**? (order: p + n; median: 10)

³ Cf. also Stolz et al. (2008:224): “The order Possessor > Possessee is clearly related to pragmatic factors (and syntactic weight) in Faroese.”

- (28) a. Eg kann seta meg í **støðu tína**. (order: n + p; median 8)
 I can put me in position your
 ‘I can put myself in your position.’
 b. Eg kann seta meg í **tína støðu**. (order: p + n; median: 10)
- (29) a. **Telda hennara** er sera orkumikil. (order: n + p; median: 8)
 computer her is very powerful
 ‘Her computer uses a lot of enenergy.’
 b. **Hennara telda** er sera orkumikil. (order: p + n; median: 9,5)

There isn’t much of a difference between the median of those two orders, but in these minimal pairs the order p(ronoun) + n(oun) is preferred in general.

3.3 *Sa-possessive*

As mentioned above, Faroese has developed a possessive clitic, *-sa*, mainly used in the spoken language. The possessor noun is usually a proper name or a noun used in a similar way, cf. (30). *-Sa* is attached to a whole phrase, and not a head, as is clear from (31) (cf. e.g. Thráinsson et al. 2004:64):

- (30) Abbasa telda er brotin. (median: 8,5)
 grandfather’sa computer is broken
- (31) a. Hetta er Tummas Jacobsensa hús. (median: 7)
 this is Tummas Jacobsen’sa house
 b. Hetta er Beintu og Róasa bók. (median: 7)
 this is Beinta and Rói’sa book

In general, *-sa* is not found with an inanimate possessor, cf. (32) (Staksberg 1996:30, Thráinsson et al. 2004:64, 251), but it seems to be possible, at least for some speakers (cf. Thráinsson et al. 2004:251), when an inanimate possessor is a proper name (it didn’t, though, get a high score in the survey), cf. (33):⁴

- (32) a. *bilurinsa lyktir
 car.the’sa lights
 ‘the lights of the car’
 b. *nevndinsa vegna
 committee.the’sa because-of
 ‘because of the committee’
- (33) Hetta var í Hotell Hafniasa tíð. (median: 2,5)
 this was in Hotel Hafnia’sa time
 ‘This was during the time of Hotel Hafnia.’

⁴ I have found examples similar to (33) on the Internet:

(i) nú verður tad nokk sum í Titanic’sa tíð.
 [...] Titanic’sa time

<http://www.kvinna.fo/Default.asp?action=kjak&subaction=vistrad&kjakid=13&tracid=1107>

Examples found on the Internet indicate that *-sa* is not only used with proper names and the like:⁵

- (34) a. [...] fyri tykkum øll'sa skyld.
for you all'sa sake
'For all of your sake.'

<https://www.kvinna.fo/Default.asp?action=kjak&subaction=vistrad&kjakid=5&tradid=5274>

- b. [...] og man ikki "snakkar" hinum-sa høvuðssprog [...]
and man not talks other'sa main language
'... and you don't talk the other person's language ...'

<http://www.kvinna.fo/default.asp?action=kjak&subaction=vistrad&kjakid=10&tradid=8950>

- c. Hví gert tú tað so ikki fyri børninisa skyld?
why do you that then not for children'sa sake
'Then why don't you do it for the children's sake?'

<http://www.kvinna.fo/Default.asp?action=kjak&subaction=vistrad&kjakid=10&tradid=7686>

The clitic *-sa* is similar to *s*-genitive in e.g. English and Swedish:

- (35) John and Mary's house *English*

- (36) den gamle mannens hus *Swedish*
the old man.the's house
(Delsing 1993:160)

In English, e.g., as well as in Faroese, *s*-genitive is frequently used with animate possessors. Then *of*-genitive is frequently used with inanimate possessor (Quirk et al. 1985:321):

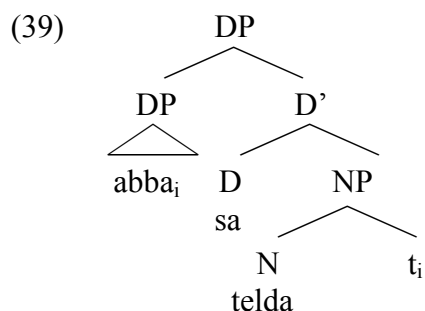
- (37) a. *John's* school
b. ?the school of *John*

- (38) a. the front of *the house*
b. **the house's* front

S-genitive occurs though and is on the increase with inanimate possessors, especially in certain noun classes, cf. *today's weather* (temporal nouns) or *Germany's chancellor* (geographical nouns) (Rosenbach 2002).

Before looking at prepositional possessive, let's have a look at how *sa*-possessive might be with respect to (13) and (22) above, with *-sa* in D:

⁵ Rakul Napoleonsdóttir (p.c.) says that children even use *-sa* with the possessive pronouns *hansara* og *hennara*, i.e. *hansarsa/hennarsa bilur* 'his/her car.'



grandfather's computer

3.4 Prepositional possessives

As shown above, a few prepositions are used to denote possession of some kind. *Hjá* 'at' is the most common one. It is often used with a concrete noun, cf. (40) (and with abstract nouns as well):

- (40) a. Hetta er fløgan hjá henni. (median: 10)
 this is cd.the at her
 'This is her cd.'
- b. Báturinn hjá Óla var fullur av sjógvi. (median: 10)
 boat.the at Óli was full of sea
 'Óli's boat was full of sea.'

Hjá is also used with kinship terms (41a) (cf. Barnes 2002:66)⁶. *At* 'at, to' and *til* 'to' are also used for that purpose (41b,c):

- (41) a. Mamman hjá Róa tosar ikki føroyskt. (median: 10)
 mother.the at Rói talks not Faroese
 'Rói's mother doesn't speak Faroese.'
- b. Tróndur er abbi at dreinginum. (median: 10)
 Tróndur is grandfather to boy.the
 'Tróndur is the boy's grandfather.'
- c. Pápi til Kjartan er deyður. (median: 6)
 father to Kjartan.ACC is dead
 'Kjartan's father is dead.'

Many informants said they would not use (41b, c) and, as is seen above, the *til*-construction got considerably lower median. They would rather, they said, use *hjá* but most likely they would use the "accusative version":

- (42) a. abbi dronginn
 grandfather.NOM boy.the.ACC
 b. pápi Kjartan
 father.NOM Kjartan.ACC

⁶ This use might be somewhat marginal since Thráinsson et al. (2004:123) say that the *hjá*-construction is not used to denote kinship terms:

(i) *pápin/*mamman/*abbin/*omman/*konan/*dóttirin ... hjá mær
 father/mother/grandfather/grandmother/wife/daughter ... at me

Lastly, *á* ‘on’ and *í* ‘in’ are used with inalienable possession, cf. (43a) and (44). When the possessor is animate, e.g. with body parts, it is also possible to use *hjá*, cf. (43b). The informants even seemed to like that one better:

- (43) a. Fóturinn á mær er sera hovin. (median: 7)
 foot.the on me is very swollen
 ‘My foot is really swollen.’
 b. Fóturinn hjá mær er sera hovin. (median: 10)
- (44) Eyguni í honum eru blá. (median: 8)
 eyes.the in him are blue
 ‘His eyes are blue.’

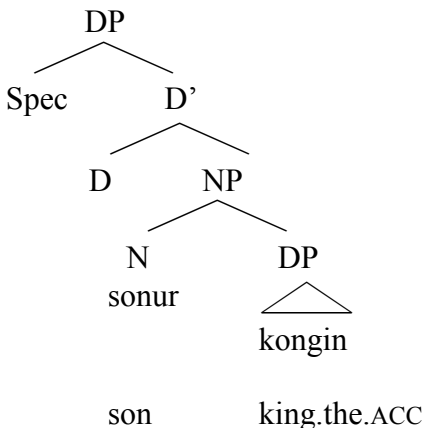
When the possessor, on the other hand, is inanimate, *hjá* does not replace *á* and *í*:

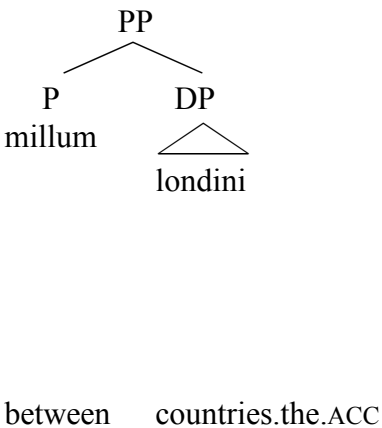
- (45) a. Takið hjá húsinum er brotið. (median: 3,5)
 roof-the at house.the is broken
 ‘The roof of the house is broken.’
 b. Hárið hjá bringuni hefur ongantíð verið so vakurt sum nú. (median: 2)
 hair.the at chest.the has never been so beautiful as now
 ‘The hair on the chest has never been so beautiful as it is now.’

Just like *sa*-possessive, possessive *hjá* needs an animate possessor.

4 Conclusion

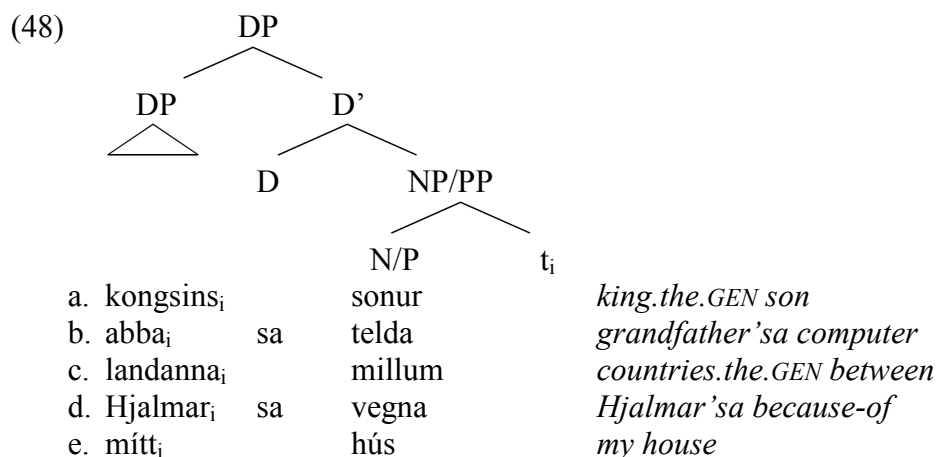
As we have seen, genitive is frequently not assigned to complements of DPs or PPs:

- (46) 

 son king.the.ACC
- (47) 

 between countries.the.ACC

But, when the complement DP moves to Spec,DP genitive is preserved:



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