What's driving German genitive alternation? New findings on variation in placement and phrase type

Speakers of modern German may use two types of attributes interchangeably as in (1): a synthetic genitive phrase and an analytical prepositional phrase headed by *von* ,of'.

(1) a. ein   düsteres   Bild   **von   der   Ineffizienz**
         a   somber   impression   of   the   inefficiency
         ,a somber impression of inefficiency'

     b. ein   Bild   **der**   **Inkonsequenz**
         an   impression   ART.GEN   inconsistency
         ,an impression of inconsistency'

While this looks very similar to the alternation found in English (e.g., Rosenbach 2003, 2014, Szmrecsanyi 2010), German has an additional option: genitive attributes containing a proper name may, under certain conditions, either precede (2a) or follow the head noun (2b).

(2) a. eine   Komposition,   die   [**Mannheims**   Stadtplan]   reflektiert
         a   composition   which   Mannheim.GEN   street map   reflects
         ,a composition which reflects Mannheim's street map'

     b. [dem   quadratischen   Grundriss   **Mannheims**]   nachempfunden
         ART.DAT   square   layout   Mannheim.GEN   imitated
         ,imitating Mannheim's square layout'

The positional variation of the genitive NP and the alternation between genitive NP and *von* PP are best seen as two separate phenomena. Both have been studied extensively (e.g., Smith 2003, Scott 2014, Lang 2018), mostly focusing on single influencing factors or the relative importance of the variants in usage. In contrast, we present a comprehensive, rigorous analysis that takes a wide array of factors into account. Based on a total of 15,000 relevant constructions sampled from the German Reference Corpus (DeReKo, Kupietz et al. 2010) and from internet discussion forums (DECOW16B, Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012), we address the following questions:

1. Is the prepositional phrase a true alternative to the genitive (e.g., Pfeffer & Lorentz 1979) or just a fallback in cases in which genitive use is impossible (e.g., Smith 2003, Scott 2014)?
2. Which syntactic and semantic contexts allow variation (choice contexts; c.f. Rosenbach 2003) and which contexts do not (categorical contexts)?
3. Regarding the placement of genitive attributes, is the prenominal position preferred for proper names across the board or is there variation according to different types of proper names (as suggested by Peschke 2014)?
4. In choice contexts, which factors influence the selection of the attribute type (genitive vs. prepositional phrase)? Which factors influence the placement of genitive attributes?

The first three questions can be answered by closely examining the distribution of the alternants in different kinds of contexts. To answer the question(s) in (4), we use regression analysis (mixed effects logistic models) on a number of intra- and extralinguistic variables (e.g., animacy, name type, syntactic structure; decade, publication medium, country).

The results show that the prepositional phrase is a true alternative to the genitive attribute only in a limited number of contexts. It is favored most strongly when the attributive phrase lacks a determiner or consists of a proper name. Genitive position is mostly determined by syntactic function of the whole phrase (non-subjects tend to favor postnominal position) and name type (personal name, collective name, or place name). Typically, choices can be interpreted as reinforcement strategies in cases where grammatical properties (mostly case) would become less visible otherwise.

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