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Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Concordia University School of Law, tfordyce@cu-portland.edu

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Feeling Possessed: The Use of the Genitive Case

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Maybe it's just the end of the winter, but I always go a little stir crazy this time of year. Not like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, of course. But I do long for a nice long walk in the sunshine with those dogs of mine. Or to do a little gardening with my husband in our yard. Or to get away from my students' gripes about having to write a 20-page appellate brief in a mere six weeks.

Wow — there was lot of possessing in that paragraph! In fact, we tend to do a lot of possessing in writing (or we write about a lot of possessing).

So let's take a closer look at possession in the English language.

Possession: A brief lesson

In English we use the genitive case of nouns to express possession. Sometimes the genitive case is called possessive, but that is too narrow a term. Genitive nouns can function in seven different ways.

The genitive case can show ownership (Tenielle's car), a relationship (Tenielle's assistant), agency (Tenielle's real estate agent), the role of the subject (Tenielle's application), the role of the object (Tenielle's release), or an idiomatic shorthand form of an "of" phrase (one day's time).¹

Our focus today will be on the ownership function of genitive nouns.

Possessive formation

The genitive case is formed different ways, depending on both the noun and its usage in the sentence.

The genitive of a singular noun is formed by adding an 's.

Amanda's car is white.



When the singular noun ends in an "s," still add the 's.

Mr. Jones's car is yellow.

Form the genitive of a plural noun that ends in an *s* or *es* by adding just an apostrophe.

My parents' car is blue.

The Joneses' car is also blue.

If a plural noun is irregular, the genitive is formed by adding an 's.

The women's cars were green.

Compound nouns take the appropriate ending on the last word in the compound.

My brother-in-law's truck is red.

The Society of Friends' bus is yellow.

Indefinite pronouns also take an 's. (Indefinite pronouns refer to no specific person or thing; everyone, someone, no one, something.)

Someone's car was ticketed.

Everyone's car was damaged during the hailstorm.

Sometimes, too, the preposition *of* may precede a noun to express possession.

The windshield of the car was cracked.

The choice between the two genitive markers is mostly a matter of style.

The car's name. . .

The name of the car. . .

There are a few expressions, however, that sound right only in the *of-genitive* formation.

When his car slid on the black ice, it felt like the end of everything.

When his car slid on the black ice, it felt like everything's end.

Individual and joint possession

Things get a little trickier, however, when there are multiple nouns in a sentence. So let's move on to how to differentiate between individual and joint possession.

If two or more people together own something, mark only the last noun as genitive. Let's say you're trying to tell someone about my car. You could write:

Tenielle and Charlie's car is white.

This is because my husband and I own the car together.

But if the nouns are both in the genitive case, the sentence would tell

you that each person owns a separate thing.

The mechanic worked on Pam's, Amanda's, and Bo's cars.

The mechanic was busy — he serviced three different cars, owned by three separate individuals.

Double possessives

Unfortunately this isn't about owning twice as much of something: *She had two luxury cars.* Instead, double genitives are formed with both the genitive case and the word *of*.

It was a habit of Susan's to change her oil yearly.

Now, the use of the double genitive confounds some people. Why would you use both genitive markers — the 's and *of*? Shouldn't you write instead: "*It was a habit of Susan to change her oil yearly.*"?

No. Think about it this way: if you were to use pronouns, you would use possessive pronouns.

It was a habit of hers to change her oil yearly.

Not:

It was a habit of she to change her oil yearly.

Now you know that the double genitive is correct, but why would you want to use it? It can shift the focus of the sentence to the object.

The focus above is now on the *habit* of changing oil, not on *Susan*.

Possessives and gerunds

Finally, if the noun or pronoun in your sentence modifies a gerund, use the genitive case or possessive pronoun. Remember, a gerund is a verb form ending in *ing* that functions as a noun.

We had to pay a fine for Chad's driving without a license.

We had to pay a fine for his driving without a permit.

Here, because "*driving without a license*" and "*driving without a permit*" both function as nouns, the use of the genitive case, *Chad's*, and the possessive pronoun, *his*, is correct.

Conclusion

Now that you understand a little more about possession in the English language, I will leave you. I see the sun peaking out and I need to wash my car!

Sources

- The University of Chicago Press, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 207-08 (16th ed. 2010).
- Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*, 150 (3d ed. 1995).

If you were to use pronouns, you would use possessive pronouns.

It was a habit of hers to change her oil yearly.

Not:

It was a habit of she to change her oil yearly.



Endnotes

1. The University of Chicago Press, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 207 (16th ed. 2010).

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is an Assistant Professor of Law and the Director of the Legal Research and Writing Program at Concordia University School of Law in Boise. She is also Of Counsel at Fisher Rainey Hudson. You can reach her at tfordyce@cu-portland.edu or <http://cu-portland>.



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