The genitive alternation in early English

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The so-called genitive alternation of present-day English (1) has been a major focus in linguistic research (amongst others, Rosenbach 2002; Rosenbach 2005; Feist 2012; O'Connor, Maling & Skarabela 2013; Grafmiller 2014; Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi 2014; Payne & Berlage 2014; Heller, Szmrecsanyi & Grafmiller 2017).

(1) a. the president's daughter
     b. the daughter of the president

This paper examines the extent and nature of alternations with genitive morphology in Old English. The consensus in the literature is that the genitive alternation begins to be relevant in the history of English in the late Middle English period, once *of* has begun to be used extensively as a marker of possessive relations (Rosenbach 2002: 177–178; Allen 2008; Anderson 2016; Ceolin 2021). We argue that data from the *York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose* (YCOE) demonstrate that contrary to widely-held assumptions, there is alternation between the morphological genitive and prepositional phrases headed by *of* in the Old English period. In (2a), the subset relation is marked by an *of*-phrase, whilst in (2b) the same relation is marked by the genitive pronoun, *heora*.

(2) a. Roger het   an   **of heom**
         Roger name.PASS.3SG.PST one.NOM.SG OF 3PL.DAT
         'One of them was called Roger'
         (cochronE, ChronE_[Plummer]:1087.30.2998)

     b. **heora** þær wearð   an   ofslegen þam   wæs   nama   Wipped.
         3PL.GEN there become.3SG.PST one.NOM.SG slain   REL.DAT be.3SG.PST name.NOM.SG Wipped
         'There one of them was killed, whose name was Wipped'
         (cochronC, ChronC_[Rositzke]:461.1.67)

Based on a data set that includes all examples of adnominal *of* in YCOE, we propose that variation with the genitive case exists in the expression of a limited range of semantic relations: subsets, origins, and some arguments in eventive noun phrases. Some of these relations are precisely those excluded from the variation at later stages, like subset relations. In addition to delineating the alternation, we also conduct an investigation into the factors that favour either realisation, focusing on the nature of the NPs complementing of in our data set.

A more detailed examination of a second data set of eventive noun phrases, however, indicates that *of* is not unique amongst prepositions in alternating with the genitive in Old English. Other prepositions including *be*, *on*, and *to* also alternate with genitive morphology. A set of eventive noun phrases featuring varied forms of argument realisation shows that the alternation is motivated by specific semantic relations that can be expressed by both genitive morphology and by a range of different prepositions. Moreover, *of* in Old English appears to have no special status amongst prepositions: it is at this stage a lexical preposition yet nevertheless alternates with the genitive. We are therefore able to show the semantic basis for this genitive alternation in Old English, which also involves a wider set of forms, namely, the various genitive morphemes and a wider range of prepositions.

Variation is more widespread than has previously been considered, both in its diachronic longevity and in the size of the envelope of variation.

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