

THE EARLY MODERN GENITIVE *ITS* AND FACTORS INVOLVED IN GENITIVE VARIATION¹

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Abstract

This article explores the variation between the emergent genitive *its* and the periphrastic form *of it* in Early Modern English, situating this case in the larger picture of English genitive variation. As previous studies have often focused on non-pronominal possessors (given that Present Day English pronominal possessors often appear pronominally, with limited variation), this early pronominal genitive variation provides unique insight as it illustrates some of the same factors significant in pronominal genitive variation as in other cases. Additionally, as neuter pronouns commonly correlate with inanimate referents, this variation provides new evidence on the independence of weight and animacy in genitive variation. The importance of another factor, pressure from the pronoun paradigm, is also illustrated.

1. Introduction

The variation between genitives (e.g. *the book's cover*) and *of*-constructions (e.g. *the cover of the book*) has been a topic of investigation in studies of both historical and Present Day English (e.g. Rosenbach 2002, 2005; Rosenbach and Vezzosi 2000; Leech, Francis and Xu 1994; Altenberg 1982). Previous studies, however, have tended to focus on constructions involving non-pronominal possessors, as most pronominal possessors,

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or possessive pronouns, in Present Day English strongly prefer a prenominal position, thereby limiting variation. However, in spite of apparent differences in distribution, at least in Present Day English, a more unified analysis may be possible. This study shows how the emergence of the Early Modern neuter genitive *its*, and the resulting variation between this emergent form and the periphrastic form *of it*, provide special insight into the relationship between pronominal genitive variation and other cases of genitive variation in that they demonstrate the same factors to be significant in this early case of variation as in other non-pronominal cases. In particular, this study highlights the importance of weight as a factor in determining genitive variation. As the use of neuter pronouns commonly correlates with inanimate referents, these results are also significant in that they provide new evidence on the independence of weight and animacy in genitive variation.

Prior to the Early Modern period, the form *his* served as both the masculine and the neuter third person singular genitive possessive pronoun form, as seen in (1) below.

- (1) The wide sea with all his billows raves. (Pope 1725: XI. 195)

As grammatical gender was lost in English, it became increasingly awkward to use this form, more and more associated with masculine gender, in neuter contexts, as can be seen by the increased avoidance of this form in neuter contexts. By the time of the earliest attestations of the new analogical form *its* in the middle of the sixteenth century, according to corpus data, the neuter genitive *his* was already dramatically in decline, making up only around 26% of the total third person singular neuter genitive constructions. Instead, speakers used a number of alternate constructions, such as *thereof*, *of the same*, and most notably the periphrastic form *of it* (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1994).

2. Previous Literature

There has been very little research devoted to the emergence of this new genitive pronoun, though it is remarkable as it is one of the major grammatical developments of the period and also constitutes an addition to a rather conservative closed class, the system of personal pronouns (Baugh and Cable 2002). Other than standard textbook accounts, noting *its* as a new analogical form with the basis of analogy being other 's genitives (e.g. *John's*, *the book's*), there is just one prior study providing a more detailed look at the emergence of the genitive *its* and making use of corpus data, as cited above (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1994). This study considers a number of factors in the selection between *its* and comparable periphrastic forms, with a focus on the relationship between the possessor and the possessum. As weight has been found a major factor in the choice between 's genitives and *of* forms generally, both historically (Altenberg 1982) and in contemporary English (Rosenbach 2002), Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1994) consider weight as a potential factor, but ultimately rejects it as an unimportant factor.

There is a fair amount of research on the selection between 's genitive forms and *of* constructions (taking the form 'the N of NP'), as mentioned above; and an assortment of features has been considered in the selection between the two forms – the relationship

between possessor and possessum, animacy, weight, and phonological factors. While all of these factors have been found to be significant in the selection between these forms in contemporary English, a more recent study poses the question of whether or not animacy and weight are two distinct factors, as they have been shown to be highly statistically correlated – with animate nouns, which are generally lighter, more frequently occurring as prenominal possessors (Rosenbach 2005). Rosenbach ultimately argues that these factors are distinct, using both experimental and corpus data.

3. Historical Insight into Contemporary English

The emergence of the new form *its* and this period of variation and are naturally of interest in their own right as this form constitutes an addition to a closed class system, the personal pronouns. In addition, however, the patterns of usage associated with the new form *its* may illuminate a broader spectrum of English genitive constructions. As the innovative form *its* is generally understood as an analogical form, based on analogy with other *'s* genitives, perhaps the early competition between *its* and *of it* can shed light on the larger question of the selection between *'s* genitives and *of* constructions. Specifically, since *its* is a neuter form, it provides a unique opportunity for exploring the distinctness of two previously explored factors – animacy and weight.

4.1. Corpus and Tools

Whereas previous work on the emergence of the genitive *its* (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1994), has made use of only the Early Modern English sections of the Helsinki corpus, resulting in a small sample (only 107 instances of the genitive *its*), the current study makes use of the Lampeter Corpus, which is a larger corpus specifically devoted to Early Modern English. This corpus of approximately 1.1 million words of running text is comprised of Early Modern English tracts, with a balanced selection of tracts pertaining to subject matter, divided into six categories: religion, science, law, economics, politics, and miscellaneous.

Processing of the data consisted of a combination of the use of a basic concordancing program and hand editing of the resultant concordance data. This combination allowed for a more detailed analysis, ensuring that only cases where variation could at least in principle be considered possible would be included.

4.2. Selectional Criteria

With regard to this consideration, only constructions where the possessor-possessum relationship was subjective, as illustrated in (2a), objective, as illustrated in (2b), or possessive, as illustrated in (2c), were included, as these are the contexts which have previously been identified as choice contexts, where there may be variation between the two constructions (Rosenbach 2002).

- (2) a. The sun was observed before *its* setting to appear of a pale and dead color
- b. They and their instruments were the first kindlers *of it*
- c. It continued acting *its* illegal cruelties, upon all occasions

In example sentence (2a), the possessor *its* acts as the subject of the gerund *setting*; in example sentence (2b), *it* acts as the object of the possessum *kindlers*; and in example (2c), *its* stands in a general possessive relationship with *illegal cruelties*. While there certainly are statistical tendencies for the preference of one form versus the other in these cases, with *its* being preferred in subjective and possessive relationships, and *of it* being preferred in objective relationships, it has been argued that a choice between forms is at least theoretically possible (Rosenbach 2002) for each of these. (Compare such relationships with partitive relationships, for example, which categorically require *of* constructions: “one of the geese” versus **“the geese’s one”*.)

In addition, there is a further restriction related to definiteness. Since, the possessive pronoun *its* acts as a definite determiner, in that it cannot be used in addition to another definite determiner such as *the*, a definite determiner is required to head the noun phrase in the cases of periphrastic constructions with *of it* in order to establish real equivalence. Therefore, all cases of the periphrastic *of it* attaching to nouns with no determiner have been excluded. In other words, syntactically, (3) and (4) have been treated as equivalent.

- (3) *its* N
- (4) the N *of it*

Also, with regard to syntax, cases involving postmodification (e.g. “its appearance *in print*”) have been controlled for, following Rosenbach (2005). Since postmodifiers range in syntactic complexity, including, for example, relative clauses, prepositional phrases, and other postmodifiers; premodifiers serve as a better measure of weight as they represent less variation in syntactic complexity, often being simply adjectives. Though, as Rosenbach (2005) points out, weight and syntactic complexity correlate, selecting a specific, concrete measure of weight, such as premodification, may help parse out the effects of one versus the other.

Finally, fixed phrases, most notably *its own* and *its self*, must be excluded from a variationist analysis given their high degree of collocation which more importantly reflects the impossibility of an alternative comparable *of* construction (e.g. **“the self of it”*).

Though the idea of grammatical variation is controversial, as it is difficult to argue that different constructions truly mean “the same thing” (for a recent affirmation of these difficulties, see Guy 2007), these measures have been taken in an effort towards a variationist analysis of these genitive constructions.

5.1. Variation Related to Time

Analysis of data from the Lampeter Corpus confirms previous accounts on the time line of the emergence of the new form *its*, as displayed in Figure 1 below. The new form *its* first becomes common in print in the early to middle seventeenth century, as can be seen in the relatively equal proportions of *its* and *of it* in the first two decades represented in the corpus. Prior to these earliest decades represented in the Lampeter Corpus,

attestations of the new form are comparatively less frequent. The relatively equal counts for *its* and *of it* constructions during the first two decades represent the growing frequency of *its*, but also the lingering usage of other periphrastic forms such as the previously mentioned *thereof* and *of the same*, the lower total number of neuter genitives represented in the table for these decades being a product of the use of these other forms. Subsequent to the 1660's, the innovative form *its* is relatively more common. Though the new form is not commonly found in writing until the mid seventeenth century, it is important to note the often conservative nature of written texts. The new form, then, may have been in circulation, perhaps in spoken discourse, for some time before that period.

Decade	Form	Text Genres						Total
		Econ.	Pol.	Law	Rel.	Sci.	Msc.	
1640	<i>its</i>	5	1	6	12	10	0	34
	<i>of it</i>	2	1	6	21	4	1	35
1650	<i>its</i>	3	5	11	13	3	1	36
	<i>of it</i>	10	3	1	0	10	9	33
1660	<i>its</i>	17	12	0	27	62	57	175
	<i>of it</i>	16	7	0	12	12	3	50
1670	<i>its</i>	9	3	0	20	40	10	82
	<i>of it</i>	10	3	3	10	3	4	33
1680	<i>its</i>	9	17	5	27	52	16	126
	<i>of it</i>	15	17	3	2	17	5	59
1690	<i>its</i>	12	18	3	6	16	0	55
	<i>of it</i>	1	14	18	10	6	6	64
1700	<i>its</i>	39	7	2	24	39	10	121
	<i>of it</i>	10	4	8	15	6	2	45
1710	<i>its</i>	9	16	9	14	19	22	89
	<i>of it</i>	1	1	9	8	12	4	35
1720	<i>its</i>	0	3	5	26	19	39	92
	<i>of it</i>	4	0	5	19	20	5	53
1730	<i>its</i>	2	5	18	3	17	25	70
	<i>of it</i>	1	7	21	2	7	2	40
Total:	<i>its</i>	105	87	59	172	277	180	880
	<i>of it</i>	80	57	74	119	97	41	447

Figure 1. Relative Distribution of the Genitive *its* and *of it* in the Lampeter Corpus

In an effort to faithfully represent the emergence of the new form *its* with regard to the dimension of time, all instances of *its* and *of it* have been included in this table, including fixed collocations, such as *its own* and *its self* and cases with postmodification, since these comprise a considerable portion of the early usages, with 62 individual instances of the collocation *its own*, for example. These figures then are more useful in depicting trends over time of the emergence of this new form, without regard to whether or not the forms are completely interchangeable in each circumstance. A variationist analysis with statistical comparison taking into consideration all of the selectional criteria identified above appears in subsequent sections.

5.2. Variation Related to Subject Matter

There is variation in the choice of neuter genitive in relation to the subject matter of the text, as well. Scientific texts have one of the highest proportions of the innovative form, which accords with previous accounts (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1994). Interestingly, however, religious tracts show a similarly high count of the form *its*, though they have traditionally been thought to be a more formal register, less conducive to use of innovative forms (Altenberg 1982). Altenberg does however note that religious texts constitute “one of the most heterogeneous genres” (p. 256), with texts which are expected to be read (as opposed to heard), having higher proportions of the *'s* genitive in general. The discrepancy in results may point to the heterogeneity in this text type, as well as perhaps a need for a wider range of linguistic features to be considered in the labeling of this text type as generally more “conservative” or “innovative”.

5.3. Variation Related to Weight

Weight as discussed in terms of grammatical variation has been characterized and measured in a number of different ways. In the case of genitive variation, while some studies have considered the direction of the syntactic branching of the possessor and possessum (e.g. Jucker 1993), other studies have attempted to characterize syntactic complexity of the two noun phrases in terms of number and type of constituents (e.g. Altenberg 1982), and yet others have simply counted relative number of words (e.g. Biber et al 1999, Altenberg 1982). While all of these measures have been previously used to discuss weight and the relative weight of possessors and possessums in studies of genitive variation, Rosenbach (2005, p. 617) argues that if we are concerned chiefly with “weight”, it is best to control for syntactic complexity. Rosenbach then argues that this may be accomplished by counting premodifiers on the noun phrases: premodifiers are almost always adjectives and are more constrained in variety than postmodifiers, which may be prepositional phrases with varying lengths and complexity or varying types of dependent clauses, among others (Rosenbach 2005). By this measurement, the possessor in (5) would be “heavier” than the possessum as it is modified; and the possessum in (6) would be “heavier” than the possessor by the same reasoning.

- (5) The *red* book’s cover
- (6) The book’s *leather* cover

In the case of variation with regard to the neuter genitive pronoun, the possessor will always be a comparatively light element, being only a single word, *it*. Therefore, if the possessum is modified, it will be heavier than the possessor.

The previously observed trend in genitive variation with full noun phrases is that heavier elements generally appear later in the construction. So, if the possessor is heavier, this will generally make an *of* construction more likely; whereas, if the possessum is heavier, this will generally make an 's genitive more likely. In the case of genitive variation with the neuter genitive pronoun, we would then predict that if the possessum is modified, these conditions would prefer the new form *its*, as the possessum would then be heavier than the possessor and would be expected to appear after the comparatively lighter possessor.

Given an increased sample set from the Lampeter Corpus, relative weight, as measured by premodification of the head noun, does prove to be a significant factor in the selection of a genitive form (χ^2 , $p < .01$), the relative counts being displayed in Figure 2 below. Specifically, premodified heads prefer the new form *its*, as seen in the contrast between (7) and (8). Here, the modified head *love* in (7) takes the prenominal form *its*, and the non-modified head *Inhabitants* in (8) takes the periphrastic form *of it*:

- (7) God forbid that ever this Parliment should lose any of *its* first love to Religion.
- (8) It is named thus originally from the Lappi or Lappones, the Inhabitants *of it*.

Modification	Genitive Form	
	<i>Its</i>	<i>Of it</i>
Premodification	186	68
No Premodification	482	307
Total:	668	375

Figure 2. Variation and Premodification

This is in accordance with previous predictions that items with more weight appear later (Rosenbach 2002, 2005; Altenberg 1982), though contrasting with previous conclusions (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1994), derived from an analysis of the relatively smaller sections of the Helsinki Corpus. Given the fact that these new results regarding the importance of weight in this case of genitive variation match up with predictions with regard to weight made by related non-pronominal constructions, one interpretation that suggests itself is that the larger corpus has allowed for a previously unavailable statistical comparison of relatively low frequency occurrences, modified noun phrases with neuter pronoun possessors from the period when *its* was first in usage and already a relatively low frequency occurrence.

5.4. Avoidance of Repetition of the Same Form

Another syntactic pattern that is significant in the selection between forms relates to the avoidance of repetition of structure. Specifically, the new form *its* is more likely to occur

in the object of a preposition in a prepositional phrase headed by *of* than a noun phrase modified by *of it* (χ^2 , $p < .01$), as seen by the relative counts displayed below in Figure 3:

Position	Genitive Form	
	<i>Its</i>	<i>Of it</i>
In OP headed by <i>of</i>	112	27
Other	556	348
Total	668	375

Figure 3. Variation with Regard to Position: Whether in Object of Preposition

This variation is illustrated by the following examples in (9) and (10), with examples such as (10) being more common.

- (9) ...notice being given to the generality of the Trustees of the meeting, and
of the end of it
- (10) ...have been the greatest obstructor's of its relief heretofore

Though the use of the neuter genitive or *of* construction in the object of a prepositional phrase headed by *of* is a relatively low frequency occurrence, there are clear patterns in the choice between the genitive and the *of* construction in this context. Specifically, the use of the genitive is more frequent in these contexts, and may be attributed to considerations involving prosody or the avoidance of repeating the same form. This pattern, too, fits predictions made by patterns of use with other genitive constructions, where *combinations* of 's genitives and *of* constructions are most common in the case of nesting genitives, at least as early as the Early Modern period (Altenberg 1982).

6. Discussion

As can be seen from the previous syntactic evidence, in the period when the innovative form *its* first emerged, patterns of variation between *its* and *of it* correspond with larger patterns of variation between 's genitives and *of* constructions both in Early Modern and in Present Day English. As the new form *its* was formed by analogy with other 's genitives, these similarities in patterns of usage, though previously unobserved, perhaps are of little surprise.

However, in addition to being influenced by larger trends in genitive variation with full noun phrases, the new form seems eventually to show influence from the rest of the pronoun paradigm as well. Jucker (1993), in a corpus analysis of Present Day English, found that 98.5% of pronominal possessors take the form of a personal pronoun, as opposed to an *of* construction, leading Rosenbach (2002) to treat pronouns as a categorical environment with regard to genitive variation. Similarly, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1994) found only 50 instances of the construction *of it* in the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus of Present Day English. These findings suggest that periphrastic possessive constructions involving pronouns, including *of it*, are rather uncommon in Present Day English.

While the periphrastic form *of it* may have been relatively common in English prior to the point when the innovative form *its* became established in the Early Modern period, periphrastic possessive constructions involving most of the other personal pronouns even in the Early Modern period were nearly categorically absent, with one clear exception – periphrastic possessives involving the pronoun *them*.

Construction	Occurrences with <i>of</i>	Total Occurrences of Pronoun
The N of <i>me</i>	3	1,226
The N of <i>you</i>	5	3,342
The N of <i>him</i>	24	2,910
The N of <i>her</i>	3	1,572
The N of <i>us</i>	13	2,155
The N of <i>them</i>	174	5,162
The N of <i>it</i>	447	12,887

Figure 4. Frequencies of *of* Constructions with Other Pronouns²

We can surmise that this exception with the form *them* is likely not related to number, as the frequency of periphrastic possessive constructions involving *us* is not similarly elevated. Instead, the distribution of possessive constructions involving *them* seems to pattern with the distribution of *it* possessives. The pronominal possessive *their* still far outnumbers *of them* constructions (7,356 instances of *their* as opposed to only 174 instances of the *of them* construction) as compared to *its* and *of it* (with 880 instances of *its*, and 447 instances of *of it*). The comparatively high frequency of periphrastic *of it* constructions in the Early Modern period, especially in light of their gradual decline in frequency since then seems to reflect a period of instability in which the new form *its* was still in the process of being established. Remarkably, what these two periphrastic possessive constructions, *of it* and *of them*, have in common seems to relate to the previously mentioned factor of animacy.

While all of the other personal pronouns – *me*, *him*, *you*, *her*, *us* – are used to refer almost exclusively to animate referents, *it* is most commonly used to refer to inanimate referents, and *them* may be used to refer to inanimate referents. It seems then that the factor of animacy may be playing an important role in the slight elevation in frequency of these two periphrastic pronominal possessive constructions. Yet, as these forms constitute a clear minority of the total inanimate pronominal possessive constructions (when compared with *its* and *their*), it appears as if these two periphrastic forms may be experiencing some pressure from the rest of the pronominal system, which has chiefly animate referents, and which clearly favors pronominal possession, as other animate nouns do.

7. Conclusions

Given the clear patterns of usage associated with weight, the variation between *its* and the *of it* constructions provides more evidence in favor of the distinctness of animacy and

² Note that the counts for *her*, *you*, and *it* may be somewhat inflated as these are raw counts, therefore including the determiner *her* and nominative *you* and *it*, whereas the counts for *me*, *him*, *us*, and *them* only reflect counts for objective case pronouns.

weight. It also provides evidence that the same constraints that operate synchronically on established constructions may come into play with the emergence of a new analogical form, in this case suggesting that there is no reason to treat this instance of variation differently than other cases of genitive variation, in spite of previous claims. When Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1994) previously conclude that “pronouns do not behave in a similar fashion with genitive nouns or *of* phrases” (p. 194), they base this claim on an apparent lack of correlation between patterns of modification and weight in general NP genitive variation and those patterns of variation related to the innovative form *its*. Given the larger corpus used for this study, it does, however, appear that the initial variation between *its* and *of it* conforms to previously observed syntactic patterns of use with full NP genitives. Still, there may be some truth in the original claim, if for somewhat unexpected reasons. The innovative form *its* stands in a unique position in the history of the English language: as an analogical form, it is initially subject to the same patterns of variation as generally observed in the choice between *'s* genitives and *of* genitives. However, as this new form settles into the pronoun paradigm, it appears to be subject to competing pressures related to the patterns of usage associated with other pronominal genitives, which generally appear pronominally. And, yet, the periphrastic form *of it* has not disappeared from the language entirely and appears to represent a case of stable variation at this point in the language – a lingering testament to the strength of competition between different language internal factors, and the persistence of variation.

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