

ARI PARIKKA  
Abo Akademi, Turku

## EXPRESSING POSSESSION: SIMILARITIES IN THE USE OF GENITIVE IN EARLY CHILD ENGLISH AND FINNISH<sup>1</sup>

The Finnish material for the paper was published and first analysed in Toivainen (1980, Appendix 2, pp. 201-302). Originally, it was tape-recorded from a randomly selected sample of 25 children aged 1-3 years. The corresponding English data, collected by Gordon Wells (1981), was downloaded from CHILDES homepage including 299 files from British children aged 1;6-3;7, but used only partially for the present purposes. The two above-mentioned data were investigated in Parikka (1998, unpublished Pro Gradu thesis, Åbo Akademi, Department of The English Language, Turku) with special reference to static locality. Also the doctoral thesis by Lisa Dasinger (1995) and the licentiate thesis by Merja Karjalainen (1986), both unpublished, were used as reference. The primary purpose for the present paper is to discuss the similarities between language acquisition of two languages from a different origin. The issue becomes difficult to examine for the reason that synonymy between adpositions, as in English, and inflectional affixes, as in Finnish, has to be defined very cautiously in advance. What is more, cultural differences affect the data: for example, the close physical environment and daily issues which the child's parents discuss can be quite different. This, amongst other things, affects the child's use of vocabulary by controlling how the expressions are being acquired in a certain order, speed and age. The primary topic of comparison in this study was the use of possessives where great similarities were found among the most typical genitive forms.

### **Introduction: the definition of ownership**

The present paper takes a morphological approach to how children begin to express ownership. Therefore the examples in the material do not require a verb phrase which is often ellipted in early child language. In addition, the possessives do not include abstract forms such as "my opinion". The definition of ownership is here treated as a static relationship between a living owner and the object that is owned. Merja Karjalainen (1986, p. 12) has also included utterances where children refer to an object which is treated as if living, for example, a doll. The present paper includes these forms as well. Semantic problems also arise when a child is referring to a member of the family, like "our Mum". In this paper these instances are included in the material, even though in discussing family mem-

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<sup>1</sup> Address for correspondence: Ari Parikka, Eerikinkatu 27 B 20, 20100 Turku, Finland. E-mail: ari.parikka@salo.fi

bers or relatives the definition of “ownership” is controversial. Karjalainen (Ibid., 15) has treated body parts of the speaker, for example “his foot”, in terms of ownership. In contrast, the present approach regards such instances as expressions of locality, rather than ownership. The genitive in English children’s speech has previously been studied in more detail, for instance, by McNeill (1970) and Cazden (1972).

## Material

The Finnish material is based on Jorma Toivainen’s (1980) study, and the English data have been collected by Gordon Wells (1981) and are available at CHILDES database in the Internet. For comparison’s sake I have used results of my (1998) study with the same material. The 25 children in Toivainen’s research were observed between the ages of 1.0 and 4.4. Two of the children, however, were recorded only once and did not affect the results. Unfortunately, not all the children were recorded after 2.11. Besides, the material after 2.11 was not included in the appendix, and this is why the exact speed of acquisition with the slowly acquired genitives would have required further investigation. This was not quite the case in Wells (1981), but in order to compare the data with similar methods only samples prior to 4.0 were taken into account. Also the number of children was equalised to twenty-three, and their age range at the time of recordings was 1.6-3.6. They were observed every three months and the Finnish children with a more variable frequency. The majority of the Finnish samples were 15 minutes long and sometimes involved an interviewer, whereas Wells observed the children by 90-second randomly recorded samples 24 times per day. This was possible by using a lightweight microphone attached to the children’s clothes.

## Methods

The present study was carried out by using Jorma Toivainen’s methods of observation. The main goal was to find similarities in terms of age, speed and order of acquisition: to begin with, the age of acquisition was judged by the age of the twelfth child who used a certain genitive, that is, *the median child*. Secondly, the speed of acquisition in months was investigated by comparing *the median half* of the children, including the ages of the sixth and the eighteenth child. So as to make a valid comparison possible, every form had to be uttered by at least half of the children concerned. Finally, the order of acquisition was compared at the age of the median child. In my study (1998) I used the same methods. I found significant similarities in the use of the most common static locative markers including the prepositions “in”, “on”, and prolocatives, or demonstrative adverbs, “here” and “there”, with the Finnish synonyms.

## The morphological expression of ownership in early child English and Finnish

The genitive has three main uses in Finnish: if a word denotes possession or in some cases definiteness with the genitive ending “-n”, the word that follows it is a substantive, for example, in “isän auto” ‘Daddy’s car’. Before a postposition a phrase with a genitive suffix can denote locality but also a situation where someone else is involved, for instance,

Table 1. The forms expressing possession found in Toivainen (1980) and Wells (1981)  
 [N = noun, (+N) = a noun is optional in the phrase, GEN = a genitive suffix *-n*, ADE = an adessive suffixes *-lla/-llä*, P = pronoun; age range: 1;0-2;11 (for Finnish) and 1.6-3.6 (for English); comparison possible with the **bolded** forms]

|                      | Finnish                  | Users | English             | Users |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------|---------------------|-------|
| Singular: 1st person | 1) <b>minun(+N)</b>      | 14    | <b>my+N</b>         | 22    |
|                      | mun(+N)                  | 2     |                     |       |
|                      | 2) mine                  | 22    |                     |       |
|                      | 3) my own+N              | 3     |                     |       |
| 2nd person           | 4) <b>Own Name-GEN+N</b> | 9     | <b>Own Name's+N</b> | 6     |
|                      | 5) <b>sinun(+N)</b>      | 7     | <b>your+N</b>       | 18    |
| 3rd person           | 6) yours                 | 10    |                     |       |
|                      | 7) sen(+N)               | 1     | his/her+N           | 16    |
|                      | 8) his/hers              | 3     |                     |       |
| Plural: 1st person   | 9) his own+N             | 1     |                     |       |
|                      | 10) meidän(+N)           | 5     | our+N               | 10    |
|                      | 11) oman(+N)             | 1     |                     |       |
| 2nd person           | 12) ours                 | 1     |                     |       |
|                      | 13) heidän               | 1     | their+N             | 4     |
| Others:              | 14) theirs               | 1     |                     |       |
|                      | 15) <b>N+GEN(+N)</b>     | 19    | <b>N's+N</b>        | 21    |
|                      | 16) <b>N/P+ADE(+N)</b>   | 13    |                     |       |
|                      | 17)                      |       | N's one             | 5     |
|                      | 18) kenen?(+N)           | 2     |                     |       |
|                      | 19) semmoisen(+N)        | 1     |                     |       |
|                      | 20) tuon(+N)             | 1     |                     |       |
|                      | 21) toisen(+N)           | 1     |                     |       |
|                      | 22)                      |       | somebody's+N        | 1     |

in the sentence “minä menen Annen kanssa kouluun” ‘I am going to school with Anne’. A third function of the genitive is as a subject case in a nominal structure, before a verb.

As opposed to a comparison of static locatives, it is less difficult to examine genitive forms across these two languages. The reason for this is a closer synonymy among them. Table 1 shows the forms that express ownership and their possible synonyms found in the two above-mentioned studies.

To begin with, first person singular forms were common enough for an adequate comparison, and the synonymy is clear in examples 1) and 4). In Table 1 Example 4) is child talk which is replaced by 1) in Finnish, starting from 2.4 by the median child. In contrast, the second person genitive plus noun is much more common in early child English than in child Finnish, which hinders the comparison in terms of the above-mentioned criteria. Thirdly, noun and genitive plus noun forms in 15) are comparable in terms of synonymy and the number of users. Fourthly, due to a partial synonymy, example 16) can also be compared with 15).

The Finnish median half in Toivainen's study (1980: 141-142) used the genitive to refer to the owner, or possessor, at the age of 1.10-2.2-2.4. In contrast, genitive plurals were fairly rare in the early recordings, since only three forms were uttered by 2.7. The median half used genitive plurals at 2.7-3.2-3.10. (Toivainen 1980, p. 159).

Table 2: The expression of ownership in Wells (1981) from 1.6 to 3.6  
 N = noun; most common forms are in **bold**

| Expression                       | 6th-median-18th    | number of users /23 |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1) <b>my+N</b>                   | <b>1.9-2.3-2.3</b> | <b>22</b>           |
| 2) <b>mine</b>                   | <b>2.0-2.3-2.6</b> | <b>22</b>           |
| 3) <b>N's+N</b>                  | <b>2.0-2.3-2.6</b> | <b>21</b>           |
| 4) <b>your (singular)+N</b>      | <b>2.3-2.9-3.3</b> | <b>18</b>           |
| 5) <b>his/her+N</b>              | <b>2.9-3.3</b>     | <b>16</b>           |
| 6) <b>his+N</b>                  | <b>3.0-3.6</b>     | <b>12</b>           |
| 7) our+N                         | 2.6-               | 10                  |
| 8) yours                         | 3.0-               | 10                  |
| 9) her+N                         | 3.3-               | 9                   |
| 10) own name's+N<br>(First-last) | 2.9-               | 6                   |
| 11) N's+one                      | (2.3-3.3)          | 5                   |
| 12) their+N                      | (2.6-3.3)          | 4                   |
| 13) his/hers                     | (2.0-2-10)         | 3                   |
| 14) my own+N                     | (2.9-3.6)          | 3                   |
| 15) somebody's+N                 | (2.6)              | 1                   |
| 16) his own+N                    | (3.0)              | 1                   |
| 17) theirs                       | (3.3)              | 1                   |
| 18) ours                         | (3.6)              | 1                   |

Table 3. The use of expressions for ownership in Toivainen (1980) prior to 3.0  
 N = noun, (+N) = the noun is optional, -GEN = genitive suffix *-n*, P = pronoun, -ADE = adessive suffixes *-lla, -llä*; most common forms are in **bold**

| Expression                                 | 6th-median-18th     | Number of Users /25 |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1) <b>N+gen.</b>                           | <b>1,11-2,2-2,4</b> | <b>19</b>           |
| 2) <b>minun (+N) 'mine/my+N'</b>           | <b>2.3-2.7-</b>     | <b>15</b>           |
| <b>mun (+N) 'my/mine+N'</b>                | <b>(2.2-2.5)</b>    | <b>2</b>            |
| 3) <b>N/P-ADE(+N)</b>                      | <b>2.0-2.6-</b>     | <b>13</b>           |
| 4) Own name-GEN(+N) 'O's(+N)'              | 2.2-                | 9                   |
| 5) sinun(+N) 'your'+N                      | 2.9-                | 7                   |
| sun(+N) 'your'+N                           | (2.6)               | 1                   |
|  | (first-last)        |                     |
| 6) meidän(+N) 'our'+N                      | (2.0-2.10)          | 5                   |
| 7) kenen?(+N) 'whose?'+N                   | (1.11-2.1)          | 2                   |
| 8) sen(+N) 'his/her'+N                     | (2.8)               | 1                   |
| 9) semmoisen 'that one's',<br>adjectivally | (2.1)               | 1                   |
| 10) oman 'our own'                         | (2.6)               | 1                   |
| 11) tuon 'that one's'                      | (2.2)               | 1                   |
| 12) toisen 'another's'                     | (2.2)               | 1                   |

Melissa Bowerman (1973: 145, 203) found two-word utterances with a possessive function in two Finnish children's speech at 1.10 and 2.1: the first word included a genitive suffix and was followed by a noun. Furthermore, Argoff (1976, 228-229) found similar functions in two boys' speech as early as 1.6 ("mun" 'mine') and 1.8 ("laukku tädin" 'the briefcase (is my) aunt's').

In Finnish, the possessor can also be indicated by the adessive suffix "-lla", "-llä" after a noun or a pronoun (Toivainen 1980: 139-149). For instance, Bowerman (*ibid.*, p. 283) found noun plus adessive utterances in Rina's speech at 2.1. The adessive is, however, semantically dissimilar in comparison with genitive forms. According to Jorma Toivainen's definition, "an adessive ending appended to a noun stem generally has the meaning of possession or means, possession being the dominant reading with animate nouns, and means, manner or instrument with inanimate nouns." (1980, p. 102). Toivainen has translated the substantives with the adessive suffix so that they contain a verb, for instance, Kyösti's (1.8) utterance "Kyöstillä" 'I have'. Even without a copula a child's utterance can still be interpreted as a possessive one, since the adessive suffix alone can indicate this function. As concerns English utterances with the "have" verb, John Lyons (1977, pp. 722-723) claims that "there is no reason to treat the verb 'have' [—] as anything other than a transformally inserted variant of the locative copula". The semantics of the "have" verb in English is, nevertheless, more variable than that of the Finnish synonym plus adessive. The present approach, being more morphological than syntactical, excludes English phrases with the "have" verb. In conclusion, as Toivainen puts it, the Finnish adessive refers to possession, but the habitivity is temporary. In spite of that, a partial comparison is possible with some of the English near synonyms.

The English "your" is interpreted as singular here, because the vast majority of conversations are dialogues, and the genitive therefore refers to one person only. Another English expression of ownership is "of" genitive; nevertheless, the "possessor" is then rather a part of some larger physical construction e.g. "the roof of the house", or an abstract concept e.g. "the name of the game". In Wells' material those forms were not found.

### **Comparison between the expression of possession in child English and Finnish**

Table 2 below shows all the forms used by the English children including the median half as well as the number of users by 3.7.

If the forms "his" and "her" plus a noun are counted as one form, there are sixteen different possessives in child English before 3.7. The first six of them were used also by the median child and are thus common enough for comparison. In Wells' study, the median half began to use genitives at 1.9-2.0-2.0. McNeill (1970, p. 83) and Cazden (1968, p. 227) claim that English children do not master the genitive until 2.11-3.3. After that they will start using genitive plural forms. This is supported by the present study: at 3.3 the English median child in Wells (1981) had uttered five different genitive singular forms, but no plurals. Table 3 shows all the Finnish genitive forms found in Toivainen's study as well as the number of users by 3.7.

If forms like "sun" and "mun" are regarded as informal variations of "sinun" and "minun", there were twelve possessives in early child Finnish. Even though the Finnish median half had uttered at least one genitive denoting ownership by 2.5, there were only

Table 4. Similarities in terms of speed, order and time of acquisition

| Expression   | Median Half   | Users | Speed   |
|--|---------------|-------|---------|
| 1) N-GEN(+N).<br>"apinan lakki" 'The Monkey-GEN cap'<br>'the monkey's cap' (Mari 2.2)    | 1,11-2,2 -2,4 | 19    | 5 mts.  |
| 2) my+N<br>"come up my Teddy bear" (Betty 2.3)   | 1.9 -2.3 -2.3 | 22    | 6 mts.  |
| 3) mine<br>"they're mine" (Frances 2.3)  | 2.0 -2.3 -2.6 | 22    | 6 mts.  |
| 4) N's+N<br>"there's a fire in Grandma's house" (Gerald 2.3)                             | 2.0 -2.3 -2.6 | 21    | 6 mts.  |
| 5) N/P-ADE(+N)<br>"Arjalla ei ole" 'Arja-ADE have-NEG'<br>'Arja doesn't have' (Arja 2.4) | 2.0 -2.6 -    | 13    | 9+mts   |
| 6) minun (+N)(mine/my+N)<br>"minun apina" 'I-GEN monkey'<br>'my monkey' (Virpi 2.8)      | 2.3 -2.7 -    | 15    | 7+mts.  |
| 7) your (singular)+N<br>"xxx put your shoes" (Penny 2.3)<br>(xxx= unidentified form)     | 2.3 -2.9 -3.3 | 18    | 12 mts. |
| 8) his/her+N<br>her not having her dinner yet (Frances 3.3)                              | 2.9 -3.3      | 16    | 9+ mts. |
| 9) his+N<br>"this is his beach buggy" (Ellen 3.6)  | 3.0 -3.6      | 12    | 6+mts.  |

three different types that were used by the median child prior to 3.0. Therefore using the median child and half is a suitable method of comparison only for investigating the most common utterances, at least prior to 3.0.

### Similarities

Table 4 shows the similarities in terms of speed, order and time of acquisition. The order is primarily judged by the age of the median child, then by the number of users.

The English median child acquired four forms in comparison to three by the Finnish prior to 3.0.

When expressing ownership the English child firstly refers to him, or herself, then to somebody else, thirdly to second person and fourthly to third person subject. In Finnish, the order is 'somebody else', 'the speaker' and 'second person'.

The greatest similarity occurs with 1) at 2.2 and 4) at 2.3: a noun with a genitive suffix plus noun is acquired almost at the same age and speed by the median child. The Finnish median half is slightly faster in acquisition. Examples 2) and 3) are clearly acquired simultaneously as well as at a similar speed. These "my" and "mine" forms, acquired at 2.3, can be regarded as synonymous for the reason that they are first person forms which do not necessarily need a verb phrase. Besides, they were used in similar contexts. The Finnish examples 1) and 5) share the same type of use, as well. Therefore both child languages include a near synonym pair, but the English pair refers to first person only. Example 8) is

interesting because speakers of Finnish do not use the genitive in similar semantic contexts. Examples 2) and 3) are quite comparable with 6) which is acquired by the median child only about four months later, and probably only a few months slower.

As to the speed of acquisition, Toivainen (1997, pp. 135-137) describes it *rapid* if it has occurred in six months by the median half. A contrast to this is a *slow acquisition* which happens in approximately two years. It is likely that all the most common forms were acquired rapidly, in something like 12 months. At 2.9 the English median child has acquired the possessives of second person and third person at 3.3, while the Finnish median child has not yet used second or third person forms of ownership. It may thus seem that the English children would be slightly earlier in the acquisition; nevertheless, the use of adessive in 5) and genitive in 1) may replace second and third person forms at least to some extent. For instance, adessive with noun stem is acquired at 2.7 whereas “your” plus noun at 2.9 and “his/her” plus noun at 3.3 by the median child (see 5), 7) 8)). Another probable explanation to the earlier acquisition of some of the English genitives is that the children may replace the use of definiteness by using genitive singular forms instead. This is supported by Lisa Dasinger’s (1995, pp. 7-20) study in which she refers to several previous studies on the appearance of definiteness in English children’s speech. The conclusion she draws is that a full competence in reference-making abilities does not occur until late childhood, between 8 to 10 years. The replacement of definiteness markers by genitives, nevertheless, requires further investigation.

## Conclusions

To claim that the children acquire the same markers of ownership approximately at the same age, in the same order and at a similar speed is true only for a few types. Nevertheless, these forms are the most common ones. The two first expressions of ownership refer to the speaker and to somebody else who can be a second person or many persons. Both groups refer to the first person speaker by using their own names fairly often, but this occurs later in English. What is similar to the markers of static locality is that the first acquired forms may have a wider semantic extension than in adult speech, excluding expressions like “my car” which have no semantic ambiguity. Finally, it is likely that the adessive forms are used instead of second and third person singular forms in Finnish, whereas in English the second and third person singular forms are acquired earlier. Similarly, the early acquisition of some genitive singular forms in English may replace the use of indefinite and definite article forms.

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