
Reviewed by Chris Barker & Maria Polinsky, UCSD

Few topics in English linguistics match the possessive in richness of construction types, token frequency, and the challenge for both a syntactician and a semanticist. Yet, apart from a number of recent dissertations and a monograph or two, this may be the first full-bore, book-length treatment of the English possessive, which makes T’s book a welcome addition to the growing body of literature approaching the syntax-semantics interface. The book strives to achieve a certain level of cross-theoretical dialogue, primarily between Cognitive Grammar (CG) in which T works and generative grammar (lexicalist approaches are also mentioned but receive less attention throughout the book). The cross-theoretical comparison is promoted in the context of a sustained investigation into the nature of the prenominal possessive construction in English, gathering together and extending work that has already appeared in various articles by T. Thus, the book has two aims—to present a comprehensive description of various uses of the English possessive ‘s and to demonstrate the strengths of CG as a linguistic framework.

Although interrelated, the goals of the book are kept carefully apart, which adds to its clear organization. The book consists of thirteen chapters which fall, roughly, into three distinct categories: chapters dealing with a more or less pretheoretical discussion of the form and meaning of possessives, primarily in English (chapters 8, 10-12); chapters dealing with presentation of the general CG framework (chapters 2-4, 9, 13), and chapters devoted to other approaches (chapters 5-7). A reader interested in English possessives can skip chapters 2 through 4, though that will make it more difficult to understand T’s explanations if the reader is not already fluent in CG. Conversely, readers interested primarily in CG can read the same chapters separately as a primer or a refresher course (other works introducing CG include Langacker 1987, 1990; Rudzka-Ostyn 1988, and T’s own 1995 monograph) and also concentrate on chapter 13. The book is written clearly and its more theoretical chapters can provide good introductory reading. There is a brief but useful topic index, and an index of names.

From the descriptive point of view, T builds his paradigm using the possessive clitic ‘s as the point of departure. He uses “possessive” just as a label to denote the clitic, and he states so clearly from the very beginning. (One could only wish that the clitic nature of ‘s be addressed.) This determines the range of constructions T considers, namely: prenominal possessives, e.g., the country’s population (chapters 5-7); ing-nominalizations, e.g., the enemy’s destroying (of) the city (chapter 10); possessive compounds, as in writer’s block (chapter 11), and various postnominal possessives (e.g., a student of Kant’s), pronominal possessives (the little girl put her sticky hand in Philip’s), and predicative possessives (this car is John’s), all discussed in chapter 12.
T’s ultimate goal is to achieve a semantic characterization of ‘s, and although he states in the very beginning that he is not committed to any semantic value until it “emerge[s] in due course” (p. 1), he does not seriously entertain the idea that no such semantic value may exist (we will return to this issue later in the review). As he develops the semantic characterization, T also attempts to persuade the reader that explanations based on CG are better than generative ones (most of the relevant literature represents the Principles and Parameters theory, although some minimalist work is also discussed). The cross-framework comparison is frank but decorous, and it is highly unusual that a proponent of one framework pays serious attention to its opponents. The rhetoric struck us as neither strident nor acrimonious, though there is one passage concerning a published analysis involving multiple projections and null functional categories (pp. 144-5) that is rather surprising in tone, given T’s general well-balanced attitude.

Despite a modest disclaimer on p. 146, T clearly sets out to discuss as wide a range of previous work as possible, including often-neglected traditional approaches. (We noticed just one, rather surprising omission from his otherwise stellar collection of earlier work—for some reason, Emile Benveniste’s classical study on possessive constructions as transitive or intransitive clauses is ignored.) As a result, this book provides the most comprehensive survey of work to date on the possessive in English and on possessives in general, for that matter, by a considerable margin.1 T seems to be at his strongest when he analyzes and compares various syntactic accounts of prenominal possessives (chapter 5). This chapter is remarkable in two respects—it summarizes current approaches to the possessive as a case marker, as a head (either an adposition or a predicate), and as a determiner, and it provides the reader who is not fluent in all of the relevant frameworks with “translation equivalents” of various terms (e.g., grounding in CG corresponds to the notions of individuation or definiteness; profiling corresponds to headedness, etc.). Unexpectedly, the book completely ignores quantificational possessives, although some of their accounts (e.g., Pesetsky 1987; Reinhart 1987; Barker 1995) are fully compatible with T’s view of possessors as topics (see below).

Overall, T seems stronger on the syntactic coverage than the semantic coverage, elaborated on in parts of ch. 6 (6.4-6.7) and in ch. 7. For instance, we were surprised to find that T treats Grimshaw’s treatment of nominalizations (1990) as semantic. As the very title of her book suggests, Grimshaw’s primary

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1Nevertheless, there are a few omissions from T’s bibliography that deserve to be mentioned here. T’s discussion of the morphosyntax of the phrase-final clitic ‘s would have benefited from the extensive treatment in either Miller (1992) or Halpern (1995). T’s emphasis on the importance of distinguishing possessive compounds from productive syntactic possessives echoes Barker (1995), right down to several specific arguments (though T goes much further than the discussion there). T’s attempt to characterize subtle differences in the aspectual properties of various types of nominalizations would have benefited from consideration of Zucchi’s (1991) dissertation on precisely this topic.
The goal is to establish linguistic mapping principles which, although observing semantics, link it to the syntactic structure in a predictable manner.

Although T explicitly says, on several occasions, that he is interested in comparing the Chomskyan tradition with the CG tradition, the actual comparison is hardly there. Rather, the presentation of the two frameworks runs along parallel lines which never meet. This is particularly disappointing because T indeed knows both frameworks very well and seems to be best-suited to actually treat them on a par. Despite the richness of detail, we felt that the exposition of both frameworks lacked a discussion of the basic assumptions of each theory and its explicit methodology.

In the Chomskyan tradition, an analysis strives to isolate the necessary and sufficient conditions on a phenomenon in question. This basic assumption is consistent with the idea of the evaluation metric inherent in a theory. One of the major tools of CG is the notion of a prototype. In principle, a prototype can be defined either by the necessary and sufficient conditions or by the most comprehensive list of conditions possible. The latter strategy, which is more of a conventional practice, likens prototypes to experiential Gestalten, and T does indeed compare the two (pp. 339-48). Thus, the frameworks differ in a fundamental approach to the object of study and this leads to important methodological consequences.

The approach which relies on necessary and sufficient conditions might strike one as reductionist, and this is how T assesses the work by Ray Jackendoff, Steven Pinker, Beth Levin and Malka Rappaport Hovav (p. 44). On this approach, inasmuch as the meaning of lexical items determines their grammar, this meaning should include entailments but exclude inferences (cf. also Dowty 1991). A commonly heard argument against this approach is that it does not take into consideration subtle nuances of semantics, pragmatics, and discourse; it typically also ignores "diachronic residues" in language. The appealing aspect of this approach is its cross-linguistic strength and a fairly clear division of labor between different aspects of a linguistic representation. The prototype approach is by far more inclusive and accounts for a richer array of facts, especially by bringing in the pragmatics of linguistic expressions. However, it does not set any boundaries as to where the list of properties should end, does not rank these properties, and is rather vague on establishing links between the prototype and its instantiations.2 Interestingly, despite the vast ontological gap separating them, both approaches pledge allegiance to parsimony (cf. T’s statement on p. 23).

Many cases of possessives in English actually lend themselves to a comparison between the two approaches. One of the most striking cases are various types of ing-nominalizations (chapter 10). T studies three

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2We refer the reader to a very interesting alternative to the prototype approach, also presented in the CG framework, with regard to the Japanese classifier hon (Matsumoto 1993). The basic idea is that certain elements should be semantically underspecified in order to account for their full distribution.
types, which he wisely refers to only as Type A *(the enemy’s destroying of the city)*, Type B *(the enemy’s destroying the city)*, and Type C *(the enemy destroying the city)*. If any group of distinguishable constructions has fuzzy and overlapping boundaries, surely this is it, and therefore, the prototype approach should yield promising results here. Instead of emphasizing this point, T diligently catalogs various distinguishing properties of *ing*-nominalizations and concludes that at least as far as these constructions are concerned, researchers in other frameworks have a “not dissimilar analysis”. In the meantime, there are at least two approaches to the analysis of *ing*-nominalizations, one driven by feature decomposition, as in generative approaches to mixed categories (e.g., Abney 1987), the other, formulated over lexical rules which is probably conceptually closer to T’s approach (Croft 1990b). Under the second type of analysis, carried out in terms of inheritance principles, it is the general nature of possessors that may explain the differences between genitive and accusative gerundial constructions in English, as for example in (1) versus (2), where the dummy it can be used in the genitive but the dummy there cannot:

(1) a. *It raining on Sunday upset our travel plans*
    b. *Its raining on Sunday upset our travel plans*

(2) a. *There being a fly in my soup was your imagination*
    b. *There’s being a fly in my soup was your imagination*

Although T discusses the difference between genitive and accusative subjects of gerunds as differences in construal (especially pp. 283-6), he does not consider such minimal pairs as (1) and (2), and we do not see how his semantico-pragmatic analysis could differentiate between them.

One of the most delightful set pieces in the book is surely the discussion of possessive compounds. T notes that expressions like *the men’s room* is ambiguous between a productive (syntactic) possessive with the constituency [[the men’s] room], meaning the room belonging to some salient group of men, versus a possessive compound with the constituency [the [men’s room]], with the idiomatic interpretation involving a bathroom. As T notes, adjectival modification of the possessum nominal is incompatible with the possessive compound reading, which is why the *men’s clean room* does not have an interpretation on which the room is entailed to be a bathroom. T dives into a welter of facts, such as the contrasts involving the presence versus the absence of the possessive connective. Why do we say *driver’s seat* but *passenger seat*? Why *Mother’s Day* and *bridesmaid* but *mother tongue* and *bridegroom*? Although some historical explanations are possible (p. 305-7), T also suggests that the inconsistency is a reflex of the inherent fuzziness of the linguistic categories involved. Nevertheless, he discerns subtle semantic patterns explaining part of the variance. His rather interesting conclusion is that these two types of possessive are constructions that have prototypes to which individual instances match to different degrees, so it is no wonder that there are intermediate examples that are neither truly fish nor fowl. This
conclusion suggests an interesting consequence—given the “mixed” character of possessive compounds, one would expect them to present a particular problem in first or second language acquisition as well as to demonstrate a certain historical and cross-dialectal variation.

T gives a generous measure of credit for many of the insights developed in this book to Ronald Langacker. This includes the foundation of T’s analysis, which is notion that the prenominal possessive is a grammaticalized reference point construction: that is, the function of a possessive is to enable the listener to apprehend the descriptive target (the possessum) by first establishing mental contact with a more familiar or more topical entity (the possessor). Since CG relies heavily on the direct link between the conceptual and the linguistic, the experiential rationale for this strategy seems to reside in the basic human experience with the whole-part relationship, of which inalienable possession is a particular case. Langacker’s (1993) paper on reference point constructions discusses the English prenominal possessive. He compares such pairs as Lincoln’s assassination and *the assassination’s Lincoln and explains the apparent asymmetries by the fact that the possessor (but not the possessum) is more readily accessible and serves as the point of departure for establishing the identity of the possessum (Langacker 1993: 8).

This analysis leads to two further questions: what makes a reference point accessible and what determines the choice between several candidates for a reference point within a construction? what determines the strategy of accessing a referent indirectly, via another referent, instead of accessing it directly? The second question is still awaiting an explanation. As far as the former question is concerned, T goes on to develop a number of predictions that follow from the reference point analysis in chapters 8 and 9, where he states: “It is not at all surprising that a reference point construction should impose restrictions on both reference point and target” (p. 236). It seems that the main factors which contribute to the accessibility of the possessor as a reference point (T’s term is “cue validity”) include subcategorization for a nominal argument (relational nouns) and topicality. Since a relational noun takes another noun phrase denotation as its argument, that referent can be unambiguously recovered.

Using Chafe’s notion of topicworthiness, T defines topic in a very broad sense as an “active concept” (p. 210). He then establishes a number of criteria which determine topicality, either through context or as an inherent feature defined over the hierarchy resembling the well-known animacy hierarchies. It seems that T purposefully avoids the distinction between external topics, internal dislocated topics, and subjects-topics, although this might be too extensive a group. Once a nominal is established as a topic, it allows one to access other, more mentally remote referents, including the possessum. Note that this description is fully compatible with the use of relational nouns as topics. Thus, the subcategorization for a noun argument and topicworthiness are orthogonal characteristics of a reference point.
It seems that a more precisely defined topicworthiness condition could yield greater explanatory adequacy within T’s analysis. Let’s assume the functional definition of topic as a referent that is presumed to exist, at least in the hearer’s mind at the time of an utterance (Lambrecht 1994: 195; Lambrecht and Polinsky 1997). This implies that the referent of the topic is within the scope of the pragmatic presupposition of existence (Lambrecht 1994: Ch. 4). The presupposition of existence is also one of the salient features characterizing a prototypical Agent (Dowty 1991: 572-3). It is possible that topicworthiness of a reference point possessor is secondary to its characterization as an agentic participant.

There is ample cross-linguistic evidence linking possessors to agents, for example in Mayan (DuBois 1987), in Greenlandic (Fortescue 1984), in Indo-European (Benveniste 1960). More importantly, further evidence that agentic properties can contribute the reference point properties of the possessor comes from T’s own results on nominalizations.

T’s analysis brings up two mutually related constraints on nominalization: the Affectedness constraint and the Experiencer constraint. The Affectedness constraint states that only participants in an event that are affected in some way by the event can serve as possessors. Thus we have John’s avoidance of the cliff but not #the cliff’s avoidance by John:3 avoiding the cliff makes a difference to John, but doesn’t affect the cliff at all. T suggests that this asymmetry follows from his principle of cue validity: our descriptive goal is to bring the listener into mental contact with a specific avoidance event. John is a better reference point, to the extent that we can potentially discern the effects of the event in question by examining John (he’s not bruised or disheveled, so he must have avoided the cliff). In contrast, examining the cliff gives us no clue whatsoever to the occurrence of any avoidance events. Affectedness is hardly a deciding factor—in an encounter between John and a paper clip, the paper clip would certainly suffer, but the #the paper clip’s avoidance by John remains infelicitous. It is, therefore, possible that affectedness is a conversational implicate and that the relevant factor here is sentience. Likewise, the Experiencer constraint is specifically associated with verbs like fear or love that are said to take an Experiencer argument and a Stimulus argument. As a result of the Experiencer constraint, John’s fear can refer only to the fear John feels as an experiencer, and never to the fear that John causes as a stimulus. Again, the Experiencer constraint can be easily accounted for assuming the sentience of the possessor.

Research on factors determining the accessibility of a reference point is in its incipient stages, and more work (including serious cross-linguistic work, as for example, in O’Connor 1996) is needed here. However, if our alternative to T’s analysis is correct, we believe that the analysis could become

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3Here and below, we use # to indicate infelicitous examples and reserve the star sign for ungrammatical ones.
more parsimonious, by establishing agentive properties of the possessor as the determining factor. Such an analysis would also simplify the problem of definiteness to which we will now turn.

T is (rightly) skeptical of the claims of Lyons and Woisetschlaeger that possessives are inherently definite. Yet neither is T able to endorse a position that he associates with Jackendoff (1968), which says that a possessive inherits the definiteness or indefiniteness of its possessor phrase (see also Hawkins 1978; 1991). T’s compromise is to commit to only half of Jackendoff’s biconditional, asserting only that “The possessee may not be lower on the scale of definiteness than the possessor” (p. 192). He does somewhat grudgingly admit that “there are no grounds for excluding in principle the possibility that prenominal possessives may have indefinite, non-specific reference” (p. 184), yet in many places throughout the book he emphasizes that possessives are “generally definite” (p. 15), that the possessive “provides a special device for ensuring that definite reference” (page 16), and that almost every type of possessive is “nearly always compatible with definite reference” (p. 184). This leads T to assert that “[t]here could be grounds for claiming that possessives are always compatible with definiteness” (p. 191)—even possessives whose possessor phrases are indefinite.

We suspect that Jackendoff’s inheritance principle is a better approximation of the empirical facts. T makes it clear why the possibility of indefinite possessives troubles him: “since these kinds of nominals are likely to be low in topicality, possessives within definite or non-specific possessors will constitute somewhat marginal examples of the [prenominal possessive] construction” (p. 294). That is, if the whole raison d’être of the possessive construction is to use a familiar object to get at more remote object, how could an indefinite possessor phrase (and hence a non-specific or at least indeterminate referent) possibly be of any use in helping the listener establish mental contact with the intended possessum? T considers some plausible answers to this question on page 138 and again on pages 187 ff., but he clearly would much rather that indefinite possessives did not exist.

Unfortunately, they do exist and to such an extent that T’s claim that possessives are “overwhelmingly definite” (p. 212) probably needs to be modified. T bases his assertion on evidence from corpus studies. T’s extensive use of attested examples is admirable, and enhances the persuasiveness of many of his points, but the generality of some of his conclusions suffers somewhat from small corpus sizes (33 thousand words in one study, 50 pages in another, a single novel in a third). As a comparison, we sifted 5 million words of randomly selected Usenet news postings for 6 August 1997 for an indefinite determiner followed by a word ending in the possessive clitic ‘s. We found 85 tokens of this pattern, including the following:

(3) Come visit a fan’s personal shrine dedicated to one of the most successful NHL teams of all time, the New York Islanders.
(4) I bought them at a doctor’s estate auction...
(5) I’m writing to you on a friend’s account.
(6) One night while I was at a friend’s house, this guy pushed my car under an apple tree and filled it with apples.

Although these NPs with indefinite possessors constituted less than one percent of the total number of possessives in our corpus, there is no sense in which they are marginal examples of the possessive construction. Bear in mind that possessives are so common that indefinite possessives can be relatively rare for a possessive and still be a frequently-encountered construction in absolute terms. For instance, we doubt that there could be anywhere near 85 middles in the same corpus, yet providing linguistic analyses of middles is a growth industry.

Because of the resiliency of the notion that possessives are intrinsically definite, we will note here that two of the arguments that T relies on are flawed. One argument that T develops in some detail mistakes the so-called Partitive Constraint for a definiteness effect. The Partitive Constraint (which T does not mention) is a semantic restriction on the type of object that can serve as the denotation of the NP object of the partitive of (see, e.g., Ladusaw 1982; Abbot 1996; Wilkinson 1996). Contra T, the partitive in general is perfectly comfortable with an indefinite object part of a nutritious breakfast though in the count domain it is often necessary to resort to a noun denoting a collective in order to find an indefinite NP that satisfies the Partitive Constraint: We managed to interview all of the first group of immigrants but only half/two/some of a second group that was there that we hadn’t known about in advance. Thus T’s example some of a man’s friends does not show that the possessive a man’s friends can be morphosyntactically definite; rather, it shows that it denotes the kind of entity that satisfies the Partitive Constraint.

The second flawed argument that we will mention here is T’s claim that possessives cannot appear after a predicative copula. But even if she was a farmer’s beautiful daughter deserves the star that T gives it (although we would rather give it a lattice, see fn. 3), she was a protective father’s worst nightmare is unexceptional. If Jackendoff’s inheritance principle were accurate, asks T, why would such a peculiar phenomenon exist? There is an easy answer from the standpoint of encoding: For whatever reason, in general definiteness is obligatorily marked morphologically on English NPs. Thanks to the historical accidents documented in T’s discussion of the diachrony of the prenominal possessive, the prenominal possessor phrase came to occupy determiner position, and now occurs in complementary distribution with the lexical determiners that typically mark definiteness in non-possessive NPs. The most obvious solution (and, from a processing point of view, the most efficient) would be to let the determiner marking the definiteness of the possessor phrase—which already stands at the beginning of the possessive anyway—determine the definiteness of the possessive phrase as a whole.

Note that so far, we have argued with T (and many others) on their own turf, where the underlying assumption is that there must be an inherent
semantic value of the possessive clitic 's, and this value should be constant. This reflects a serious commitment to one of the most foundational principles in CG: the principle of uniformity. Applied literally to the possessive clitic, the principle would determine that all uses of the clitic be subsumed under one general schema. In the CG framework, as presented by T, the principle of uniformity undergoes two significant modifications. First, no distinction is made between the use of an element (its function) and its meaning. The use of an element is supposed to lead directly to its meaning, which is certainly possible but needs to be explicated and argued for. Second, as different meanings are brought together within the single semantic characterization of the possessive, no requirement is upheld that they be identical. Instead, the mere relatedness seems to suffice. This is certainly an interesting possibility, but it then requires that the extent of semantic relatedness be explored, otherwise the analysis may become vacuous. Importantly, this issue is discussed at the theoretical level in Langacker’s work (Langacker 1987, 1990). T’s examination of possessives could have become an interesting pilot study in determining the extent of relatedness of meanings, and he actually covers quite a bit of ground in the book, especially when he looks at the historical facet of the possessive (pp. 126-8, 143), but he does not deliver on the desirable methodology.

In our estimation, T could get away with the abstract characterization of the possessive clitic as a grammatical linking element in a dependency where the syntactic head is the final element (this is in line with Radford’s analysis which T partially supports). In fact, T discusses, albeit briefly, some other possibilities (pp. 292-3), mentioning in particular, the characterization of 's as a “linker” (Croft 1990a: 32). He actually permits this linking element in “semantically bleached possessives” (p. 293) such as Molotov’s cocktail. Possessive markers commonly change into linkers across languages, and incidentally, one group of such languages are Bantu, examples from which are occasionally—and rather arbitrarily—found in T’s book (other languages with linkers diachronically related to possessive are found in the Austronesian and Nakh-Daghestanian language families). Given the morphological poverty of modern English, it is quite possible that the clitic 's now serves a wide variety of functions and that its underlying semantic invariant is no longer available or even desirable. The alternation between 's and zero in child language (Radford 1990) further supports this point, as it is typical of linkers to occur in specified syntactic contexts and to alternate with an empty element. While such a solution strikes one as perfectly plausible in the analysis of various exotic languages, it sounds almost blasphemous for an Indo-European language with a long and well-documented history. But maybe we are simply falling into the “Standard Average European Trap”? Despite the various critical points raised here and despite a number of issues which we felt were missing in the book (the behavior of negative polarity items; the mysterious connection between possessives and weak crossover; the grammar and semantics of inalienability; the status of cross-linguistic comparisons in CG), T certainly accomplishes enough for one book.
Though we hope that this is only the first of many book-length treatments of possessives in English and in other languages, it is an excellent starting point, and one which can lead us further into a much-desired convergence of theoretical frameworks. Many of the intriguing questions concerning possessives may be solved as frameworks developing the syntax-semantics interface mature, and this seems to be a general direction in which many theories are moving.

References


