

A Note about “Everything of Mary’s”, “What of Mary’s”^{*}
A note and query to share with my LING 310 class and with colleagues.

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The March 6, 2006 lecture in my LING 310 course in Christchurch was about the difference between Jensen and Vikner’s analysis of possessives and the “old Partee” analysis (Lecture notes here: http://people.umass.edu/partee/NZ_2006/NZ5genitivesI.pdf). While I was reviewing arguments in favor of J&V’s analysis, in which prenominal and postnominal possessives uniformly apply to “relational (transitive) common noun phrases”, and when there is just a plain 1-place common noun phrase for them to apply to, it is coerced to a relational interpretation, Kate Kearns asked what about expressions like those in (1) as in the sentences in (2).

- (1) a. what of Mary’s
 b. everything/nothing/something of Mary’s
- (2) a. What of Mary’s is left to pack?
 b. I have everything/nothing/something of Mary’s in this suitcase.

I think this is a really interesting question, and I am curious to know how many languages freely allow such expressions, because I suspect that for English and for other languages that allow them, they constitute an additional argument for retaining a “predicative possessive” (as argued in (Partee and Borschev 2001, Partee and Borschev 2003)) alongside Jensen and Vikner’s analysis.

VB and I argued that in at least some languages there really is a true predicative possessive (a possessive that itself incorporates a free relation expressing some appropriate ‘possession relation’, and which itself has the type of a one-place predicate, like an intersective adjective) in addition to a J&V-type possessive. We argued that an ambiguity analysis is required for those languages which permit possessives in predicate position that are not interpreted as elliptical full NPs; examples include possessive pronouns with meanings like *mine*, *yours*, *his* in at least German, Polish, and Russian. See examples and arguments in the two cited papers.

Now I’m curious to know what languages do and don’t allow constructions like *what of Mary’s*, *everything of Mary’s*, *nothing of Mary’s*, *something of Mary’s*, and whether that correlates with the distribution of predicative possessives of the kind described in our papers.

Why I think that those phrases must involve predicate possessives and not the J&V kind (which are in effect type-lifted arguments of a two-place relation) is this:

1. Typical relational nouns that combine with animate possessors are kinship terms like *mother*, *brother* and nouns like *friend*, *enemy*, *roommate*, *neighbor*. These can never show up in answers to questions about *what of Mary’s* nor are they quantified over by expressions like *nothing of Mary’s*. Perhaps that’s only because of animacy; but if one tries to replace the given expressions by *who of Mary’s*, *everyone of Mary’s*, *no one of Mary’s*, *someone of Mary’s*, those all just sound ill-formed, and even if you can process them, it seems to me it sounds like you’re talking about slaves or servants or employees, people owned or ‘controlled’ by Mary, and *not* about relatives, friends, enemies, neighbors or any of the common relational-noun relations.

^{*} Thanks to Kate Kearns for raising the question and for subsequent discussion.

2. The interpretation of ‘of Mary’s’ in *what of Mary’s*, *everything of Mary’s*, etc., seems to me perfectly parallel to the interpretation of predicate possessives in sentences like (3a-b)

- (3) a. This is Mary’s
 b. Everything here is Mary’s.

These latter were discussed in the two papers mentioned above. It was stated in those papers that the arguments concerning English predicate possessives did not seem nearly as clear-cut and persuasive as the arguments from languages like German and Polish and Dutch that distinguish morphosyntactically between predicate possessives that are interpreted as independent one-place predicates and predicate possessives that are interpreted as elliptical full NPs. But it now seems to me that the combination of the existence of sentences like (3a-b) and expressions like those in (1) used as in the sentences in (2) does constitute good evidence for the inclusion of real predicative (<e,t>-type) possessives in English and in any language that has such constructions. Further, for any languages that distinguish formally between what I will for simplicity call argument possessives (those which fit the J&V analysis) and predicate possessives, I would predict that only the forms used for predicate possessives could occur in expressions like (1). (That’s not so clear for the ones in (3a-b), which is part of why I don’t consider (3a-b) very strong evidence by itself.)

Prediction with request for data.

Any language (or type of possessive/genitive construction within a language) that allows¹ “*what of Mary’s*” will also allow true predicate possessives.

So there could be languages (or constructions within languages²) of type A below, “Jensen and Vikner languages” with argument possessives only: these should disallow *what of Mary’s* as well as disallowing true predicate possessives. There could also be languages of type B below, allowing both. And there could be languages of type C with predicate possessives but which happen to lack the *what of Mary’s* construction. But none of type D, with *what of Mary’s* but without true predicate possessives.

Type A: J&V ‘argument’ possessives only. No *what of Mary’s*, no true predicate possessives

Allow:

(i) *Mary’s team*, *Mary’s friend*, *a team of Mary’s*, *a friend of Mary’s* (not necessarily expressed as in English, of course).

Disallow

(ii) *what of Mary’s*, *everything/nothing/something of Mary’s*.

As for predicate possessives, they should occur only as elliptical NPs with a contextually understood relational noun.

¹ Of course this requires figuring out what construction(s) in a given language do or don’t correspond to *what of Mary’s* in English. I haven’t tried to spell out explicitly the crucial properties, and wouldn’t try to without knowing more about candidate analogs in other languages.

² This caveat is needed because of languages like Russian with morphological genitives and also a denominal possessive adjective form with a different distribution. I will stop repeating this caveat just for brevity, but wherever I speak of language types here it should be understood with this caveat.

(iii) *That country was once Mary's*: should only allow a reading equivalent to *That country was once Mary's country*, e.g. citizenship, homeland relation – that was her home country until she emigrated – not a simple “possession” relation, meaning e.g. that she had conquered it and it belonged to her until someone else conquered it and took it over.

Type B: Two kinds of possessives. Allow all of the above, with both kinds of interpretations for predicate possessives, possibly with different constructions.

Type C: Allow true predicate possessives, but for some independent reason don't happen to allow the *what of Mary's* construction in (ii).

Expect no type D, with “mismatched” distribution the opposite of that in C.

An example of a type D language would be one in which the constructions in (ii) are disallowed, but there are true predicate possessives as in type B.

Request: I would love to know about other languages, supporting or challenging the predicted correlation above. I gather that Danish may be a Type A language, and the Russian morphological genitive seems to have (mostly, not quite totally) type A properties, whereas Russian possessive pronoun and adjectival possessives like *Mašin* ‘Masha's’ have type B properties. I realize that my descriptions of constructions have been rather fuzzy – any relevant comments would be welcome. I'm not currently planning to write another paper on this topic, and would be glad to share whatever I find out with anyone who is, though I'm not promising I wouldn't ever write a paper or squib related to this material.

Partee, Barbara H., and Borschev, Vladimir. 2001. Some puzzles of predicate possessives. In *Perspectives on Semantics, Pragmatics and Discourse. A Festschrift for Ferenc Kiefer.*, eds. István Kenesei and Robert M. Harnish, 91-117. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Reprinted in Partee, Barbara H. 2004. *Compositionality in Formal Semantics: Selected Papers by Barbara H. Partee.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 292-315.

Partee, Barbara H., and Borschev, Vladimir. 2003. Genitives, relational nouns, and argument-modifier ambiguity. In *Modifying Adjuncts*, eds. E. Lang, C. Maienborn and C. Fabricius-Hansen, 67-112. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.