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## Register specificity in the English genitive alternation. Do variable cues reflect different grammars?

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We examine variability in the genitive alternation (*the president's decision* vs. *the decision of the president*) across five written registers of 20<sup>th</sup> century American English, focusing on quantitative differences in the constraints on writers' deployment of this variable in different stylistic contexts. We argue that variation in written registers of this kind is a clear example of complex 'style switching' (Rickford, 2014), and discuss how our findings speak to the relationship between grammatical representation and quantitative variability in constraints across styles.

We draw on data from the Brown and Frown corpora, sampling a subset of registers in the early 1960s (Brown) and 1990s (Frown): Press reportage, Non-fiction (memoirs), Learned, General fiction, and Adventure fiction. We extracted 5098 genitive tokens from the two corpora (Brown  $N = 2497$ ; Frown  $N = 2601$ ), annotating for factors known to condition the choice of genitive variant (see e.g. Grafmiller, 2014). Such factors include: the length (in words) of both constituents; the semantic relation between possessor and possessum; the presence of a final sibilant on the possessor; and the animacy, frequency, givenness, and NP type (common vs. proper) of the possessor. Data were analyzed using mixed-effects logistic regression.

We find sizable differences among registers in the influence of possessor animacy, which has a significantly weaker effect in Press than in other registers. Additionally, the relative ranking of this constraint is lower in Press than in other registers, and in general, the relative constraint rankings vary noticeably across registers. Within registers, there is little intra-author variability in the constraint effects, however, inter-author rates of genitive use vary considerably across the registers. Fiction writers vary the most, while journalists vary the least.

We interpret these patterns in Press writing as reflections of journalists' semi-conscious move toward more economical and colloquial modes of expression (Biber, 2003). But does the variability we observe imply that we are dealing with distinct, register-specific grammars, a la Guy (2015)? We believe that

within an experience-based, probabilistic approach to grammar, the multiple-grammar model is ill-defined, and argue instead for an alternative model in which situational/stylistic cues can directly shape the influence of internal constraints within a single ‘grammar’.

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