Descriptive Genitives as Denominal Adjectives: A Cross-Linguistic Perspective

In the literature, genitive nouns have been distinguished into two types: possessive and descriptive genitives. These two types differ in syntactic behavior. Possessive genitives cannot occur with other determiners but descriptive genitives can, as shown in (1). The former must precede the latter and the alternation of the order results in ungrammaticality, as shown in (2). Furthermore, the examples given in (3) indicate that possessive genitives are referential while descriptive genitives have no referentiality. Plausibly, these different syntactic behaviors imply that possessive and descriptive genitives have different syntactic status. Interestingly, descriptive genitives behave like adjectives. For example, they function as direct modifiers. According to Baker’s (2003) theory of lexical categories, adjectives can, but nouns cannot, qualify as direct modifiers because of their theta-theoretic properties. Direct modifiers are characterized by their ordering restrictions and lack of predicative usage, which are illustrated in (4a) and (4b), respectively. These characteristics can be also found in descriptive genitives, as shown in (5). Given these considerations, this talk proposes that possessive genitives are true determiners while descriptive genitives are denominal adjectives with the genitive marker ’s as an adjectival suffix.

The syntactic behaviors observed in (1)-(3) naturally follow from our proposal. Since possessive genitives head DPs, they cannot occur with other determiners. On the other hand, because of the status as adjuncts to nouns, descriptive genitives are compatible with determiners. Possessive genitives, i.e. functional heads, are structurally higher than descriptive genitives, i.e. adjuncts. Their order reflects their different structural positions. The possessive marker ’s is a case inflection of nouns, which does not affect their inherent properties at all. Therefore, it is natural that possessive genitives are referential in the same way that normal nouns are. On the other hand, the non-referentiality of descriptive genitives comes from the fact that they are not nouns but adjectives. Note also that base nouns of denominal adjectives are deprived of their referentiality, as shown in (6), because of so-called anaphoric island constraint, which states that word-internal constituents cannot participate in anaphoric relations with word-external ones.

Our proposal is further motivated by cross-linguistic observation. In Japanese, genitives are marked with the particle -no. Possessive genitives in Japanese are exemplified by John-no isu ‘John’s chair.’ According to Watanabe (2012), Japanese lacks a set of denominal adjectives called relational adjectives (RAdjs), e.g. wooden, and instead uses genitives with -no, e.g. ki-no isu ‘lit. wood’s chair= wooden chair.’ These genitives can be identified as descriptive. The data in (7) concerning word order and referentiality show that Japanese possessive and descriptive genitives behave in a parallel fashion to English possessive and descriptive genitives. Also, Watanabe (2012) notes that Japanese descriptive genitives, corresponding to RAdjs in English, can serve as direct modifiers. Their status as direct modifiers is confirmed by their ordering restrictions and lack of predicative usage, which are illustrated in (8a) and (8b), respectively. Relying on Baker’s (2003) theory of lexical categories, Nagano and Shimada (2013) point out that the Japanese genitives involving direct modification can be best analyzed as adjectives.

To sum up, cross-linguistically, genitive nouns come into possessive and descriptive genitives, and the latter are identified as denominal adjectives.
(1) a. *the John’s books on the table (Alexiadou et al. (2007: 549))
b. these woman’s magazines (Shimamura (2014: 102))

(2) a. Mary’s woman’s magazines b. * woman’s Mary’s magazines

(3) a. John’s body shook. He covered his face with his hands. (Colleen Lumadue, The Top of the Octagon, my underlines and indexes)
b. *I have a women’s bicycle for sale. They can’t ride it any longer. (Anderson (2013: 214))

(4) a. {small green Chinese/*green Chinese small} vase (Sproat and Shih (1991: 565))
b. *The box is wooden. (Taishukan’s Dictionary, s.v. wooden)

(5) a. {a new bird’s nest/*a bird’s new nest} (Biber et al. (1999: 295))
b. *That hat is a woman’s. (Rijkhoff (2009: 64))


(7) a. {Jon-no ki-no/*ki-no John-no} isu ‘John’s wooden chair’
b. *Watasi-wa ki-no isu-o kat-ta. Sore-wa’ taki. I-Top wooden chair buy-Past it-Top high-priced
   ‘I bought a wooden chair. It is high-priced.’

(8) a. {tiisana tyuugoku-no/*tyuugoku-no tiisana} kabin
   small China-Gen China-Gen small vase
   ‘small Chinese vase’ (Watanabe (2012: 507))
b. ??Kono kabin-ga tyuugoku(-no)-da.
   this vase-Nom China-Cop(-Gen)-Pre.
   ‘This vase is from China.’

References
Taishukan’s Unabridged Genius English-Japanese Dictionary (Taishukan’s Dictionary), Taishukan, Tokyo.