

“There’s no point in our wasting any more time – or us wasting?”
Variation between genitive and non-genitive subjects of verbal gerunds in Present-Day English.

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The paper reports on a PhD project dealing with verbal gerund clauses with internal subject, and the variation between genitive and non-genitive forms of this subject. The paper discusses both personal pronouns, possessive and objective, such as (1), and noun phrases other than personal pronouns, with variation between the genitive and the common case, as exemplified in (2):

- (1) The whole point of *his* [*him*] *being* there was because of his condition.
- (2) Spanish police had been asked to find Ms Gibson to tell her about *her daughter’s* [*her daughter*] *being* taken into care.

A traditional, prescriptive rule maintains that the genitive is the only grammatically correct form. However, according to modern grammars and usage handbooks, the non-genitive forms are considered standard in contemporary language, with the genitive being regarded as a formal variant (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985:1194, Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1192). With this in mind, the main research question addressed is: In what contexts is the genitive subject still found in Present-Day English?

Previous studies have discussed personal pronouns (Heyvaert et al. 2005, Lyne 2006) and other NPs (Lyne, forthcoming) separately, however, this paper aims to bring together and compare the two types as regards the distribution and use of genitive and non-genitive forms.

The material used is drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC). A 16-million-word subcorpus was randomly sampled, representing the genres Academic Prose, Fiction, News, and Conversation. Results show that the possessive pronoun is the dominating form in Academic Prose, whereas there are no NPs in the genitive found in the Conversation genre. In addition, the paper discusses a few linguistic factors, such as phonology and type of NP (e.g. Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1192), which are found to influence the choice of form.

References

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