

Why Expanded Possessives Are Not Partitives

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Many quantifiers can appear before *of* plus a following DP in phrases like

- (1) a. Many of several competitors' bicycles [were destroyed in a fire.]
b. At least two of most students' term papers [got an A.]
- (2) a. Many of those flights [were canceled because of a blizzard.]
b. At least two of the five boats [sank in the storm.]

The expressions in (2) are generally analyzed as partitives. The superficial similarity of those in (1) may suggest they also are partitives. However, the DP after *of* in them is not definite, as Jackendoff (1977) and others have argued partitives require. Are examples like those in (1) counterexamples to the Partitive Constraint requiring definites? Or are examples like (1) actually instances of a different construction, and not partitives at all?

Jackendoff (1977, p. 113) observed that possessives as well as DPs with definite articles can follow a quantifier plus *of*, and some subsequent analysts appear to have regarded examples like

- (3) a. Many of these competitors' bicycles [were destroyed in a fire.]
b. At least two of the students' term papers [got an A.]

as acceptable on account of the possessive DP following *of* in them being definite. Nevertheless, all acknowledge that

- (4) a. #Many of several bicycles [were destroyed in a fire.]
b. #At least two of most term papers [got an A.]

are not acceptable in English, which indeed constitutes the primary evidence for the Partitive Constraint. Does the acceptability of (1) then show that all possessives are definite? Some linguists (e.g. those cited in Abbott 2004) seem to suggest that all are. Others (including Jackendoff 1968) aver that the possessive DPs in (1) inherit the non-definiteness of their possessor phrases, rendering their acceptability quite problematic if they are partitives.

The most straightforward resolution of the conflict would be to recognize examples like (1) as evidence for an expanded prenominal possessive construction. In expanded possessives, the quantifier preceding *of* ranges over the domain of possessions. Such a semantic rule gives expanded prenominal possessives like those in (1) exactly the meaning speakers feel they have. It also avoids imposing contradictory requirements on the partitive construction. But what about examples like (3)? With a definite possessive DP after *of*, these could be analyzed either as expanded prenominal possessives or as partitives. In fact, both analyses assign the same meaning for examples like (3), although it arises via different semantic rules.

The different rules assign distinct meanings in more complex examples like

- (5) Two of the ten boys' books are missing.
- When the possessor phrase is *the ten boys* (rather than *two of the ten boys*), *two* quantifies over books. In this case the partitive rule makes (5) say two books are missing. However, the expanded possessive rule makes (5) say that two books are missing for each of the ten boys – up to twenty books altogether. The three-way ambiguity of (5) confirms that examples like (1) are not partitives at all.

References

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