

**The “Case” Study of Subjects in Nominal V-ing Clauses:
A Corpus-Based Research**

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Introduction

In nominal -ing clauses with subjects, subjects are realized sometimes by the genitive case of nouns or pronouns (e.g. I object to John's/his receiving an invitation.), and sometimes by the common case of nouns or objective case of pronouns (e.g. I object to John/him receiving an invitation.).

I decided to choose this grammatical construction as the theme of this paper because it shows us an interesting ambiguity between *noun-ness* and *verb-ness* of the nominal V-ing form, which is sometimes called a "gerund". If the genitive case is used for the preceding noun or pronoun, the V-ing form is felt to be more like a noun, while it is felt to be more like a present participle of a verb if the preceding noun or pronoun is in common/objective case.

In this paper, I would like to refer to the explanations in Quirk et al. (1985), and Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), and evaluate their validity comparing them to the statistical data obtained from *the British National Corpus Sampler CD-ROM* (1999).

Explanations by Quirk et al. (1985), and Greenbaum and Quirk (1990)

In their explanations of this grammatical construction, Quirk et al. (1985: 1063-1064) and Greenbaum & Quirk (1990: 312-313) alike, claim the following points about the preference for either the genitive case or the objective/common case as follows:

- (1) The genitive case is preferred if the subject is a pronoun while the common case is preferred for nouns.
- (2) Nouns with personal reference tend to be used in the genitive case.
- (3) The genitive case is preferred in the formal style.
- (4) The genitive case is preferred if the item is in sentence-initial position.
- (5) The genitive case is avoided when the noun phrase is lengthy and requires the group genitive. (e.g. "...the students and teachers() protesting...")

In this short paper, however, I would like to address only the first three claims (1), (2) and (3).

About the data

As a source of data, I used *the British National Corpus Sampler CD-ROM* (1999) because, as is the case with the full set of the BNC, data was collected from a wide range of genres and styles containing approximately the same number of words in the spoken section and the written section (about 1,000,000 words for each). I decided to use *the Sampler* rather than the full set because it might be impossible to examine the quality of the result of search if it was too large.

As typical nominal -ing clause constructions, I decided to consider the next

two:

(A) preposition + pronoun / noun(phrase) + V-ing

(e.g. I object to the students drinking on campus.)

(B) remember + pronoun / noun(phrase) + V-ing

(e.g. I remember John talking about his trip to China.)

In the case of (A), I excluded the preposition "of" because there might be numerous problematic cases such as "some of them having..." or "two of us doing...". As "noun(phrase)", I included a single noun and a noun preceded by articles ("a" and "the") assuming that frequency of noun phrases longer than that would be considerably low.

Using the Word Smith concordance tool, I tried to count the number of the following four cases for each type of the constructions above: (1) genitive case of pronoun (2) objective case of pronoun (3) genitive case of noun (phrase) (4) common case of noun (phrase). (There is a problem with a feminine third-person singular pronoun "her", which cannot be distinguished between genitive and objective in form. However, in the BNC Sampler data, it is tagged as either genitive or objective, and its appearance itself is not so frequent. Therefore, I decided to follow the BNC tagging this time. The combinations of tags I used for the search is attached as Appendix.) I also classified the data according to the text type (written or spoken) assuming that the written language roughly corresponds to formal style and the spoken language to informal style.

I had to abandon the data for the objective case of pronouns and the common case of nouns in the type (A) construction because it was difficult to exclude such problematic examples of non-nominal use of V-ing as "He turned on the radio looking at ..." or "Why did you lie to me saying that you were...?". The number of appearance of each case is summarized in table 1 and table 2 below.

	all	written	spoken
pron.gen.	25	21	4
pron.obj.			
noun.gen.	6	5	1
noun.com.			

Table 1. (after preposition)

	all	written	spoken
pron.gen.	0	0	0
pron.obj.	12	1	11
noun.gen.	0	0	0
noun.com.	2	1	1

Table 2. (after "remember")

Although I had to discard the data for the objective case of pronouns and the common case of nouns in table 1 for the reason stated above, it might be helpful to

mention that they seem to be considerably large in number (87 for *pron.obj.* and more than 450 for *noun.com.* including, of course, numerous erroneous data).

Evaluation of the claims of Quirk et al. (1985) etc.

Having obtained the statistical data shown in the table 1 and 2, I would like to evaluate the claims (1), (2) and (3) made by Quirk et al. (1985) etc. in the light of them.

Evaluation of claim (1)

As for the claim (1), that is, the preference for genitive as case for pronouns, we cannot say anything from table 1 because we do not have reliable data for the objective case and common case. However, it was quite striking that we did not find a single example of genitive pronouns in table 2 while there were twelve examples of objective pronouns. This result seems to contradict the explanation by Quirk et al. (1985).

Evaluation of claim (2)

Concerning the claim (2), that is, the preference for genitive case for nouns with personal reference, we have to analyze the individual examples obtained for *noun.gen* in table 1. They are presented below:

- a) ...all the incidents that led to *Britten's* choosing George...
- b) ...and er the need for the *foundation's* fundraising will ...
- c) ...irman of ICL Plc through the *firm's* gathering financial...
- d) ...What did Drew think about *Karen's* stealing the ne...
- e) ...s has been eased by *Euro Disney's* deferring its...
- f) ...Melodramatic examples, like *Peter's* clawing up to...

Britten, Karen and *Peter* in examples a), d) and f) are proper nouns for persons, so unarguably have human reference. In addition, *foundation, firm* and *Euro Disney (Land)* in other examples are all some kind of organizations composed of humans, therefore having human reference in some way. In this case, the explanation by Quirk etc. seems to be plausible.

Evaluation of claim (3)

Finally, we have to consider the claim (3) in relation to style. According to Quirk et al. (1985) and Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), genitive case is preferred for formal style, and objective/common case is preferred in informal style. In order to evaluate their claim, I classified the data into written language and spoken language. There can be, of course, written informal style and spoken formal style. Generally speaking, however, it seems plausible to assume that written language corresponds to formal style and spoken language corresponds to informal style.

Looking at table 1, we notice that genitive case appears more frequently in written language than in spoken language for both pronouns and nouns. Unfortunately, however, we cannot compare this result with objective/common case due to the lack of reliable data.

On the other hand, objective case appears considerably more frequently in spoken language than in written language for pronominal subjects in table 2. In this case again, we cannot compare this result with genitive case because there were no examples. As for common case of nouns, we have only two examples, one in written language and the other in spoken language. We cannot say anything from such small data.

Although our data might be imperfect as evidence, it seems to indicate the plausibility of the claim made by Quirk etc. concerning the relationship between the choice of case for subjects of nominal V-ing clauses and formal/informal style.

Summary and conclusion

We can now summarize the result of this research. As for the claim (1) of Quirk etc., our data showed evidence against it while it provided the supporting evidence for the claim (2) and (3).

As Quirk et al. (1985:1064) state, the use of genitive case for the subjects of nominal V-ing construction has been a traditional stipulation. It seems to be the reason why genitive case is preferred in formal (written) style. However, as our data summarized in table 2 shows, the use of the genitive case seems to be surprisingly less frequent than this stipulation demands even in the case of pronouns, which have been thought to be more likely to be used in genitive case. Quirk et al. (ibid.) claim that the stipulation demanding the use of genitive case is based on the assumption that V-ing form in such constructions is a "verbal noun", but that this assumption is wrong. They argue against this assumption on the ground that such V-ing form can have a direct object following it, which is a

characteristic of a verb. They also assert that it is the use of genitive case for the preceding noun/pronoun that provides the V-ing form with the characteristic of a noun. They seem to be claiming that this traditional stipulation is artificial. In other words, Quirk et al. (ibid.) seem to provide the reason why their own claim (1) contradicts our data. It might be possible to hypothesize that the influence of this traditional, but artificial stipulation for the use of genitive case has declined as time passed considering the relatively new data contained in the BNC. However, we might have to analyze older corpus data to verify this hypothesis.

This research was my first attempt to utilize corpus data for analysis of a particular grammatical construction. I found that corpus data could be a very useful tool to look at the actual use of a grammatical construction in the real world, which might contradict statements by grammarians. However, I have to admit that this research is incomplete in the following points:

(1) Not all the data as had originally been planned was available due to a technical problem.

As I mentioned above, I had to abandon the data for the objective case of pronouns and the common case of nouns in table 1 because the combination of tags which I used to extract this construction (see Appendix) was not be able to exclude examples of non-nominal use of V-ing forms efficiently.

(2) Size of the corpus was not large enough to obtain the necessary data.

In this research, I used the BNC Sampler CD-ROM, not the full set of BNC because I did not want data whose size is unmanageably large. However, this choice resulted in scarcity of examples in table 2. Examples for *pro.gen.* and *noun.gen.* might have been found if I had used the full set of BNC.

(3) Consideration of only two types of construction might not have been sufficient.

In this research, I considered the two environments where nominal V-ing forms with subjects appear, that is, after the preposition and after the verb, "remember". However, there might be a possibility that distributional tendency of genitive case and objective/common case for pronouns and nouns differ according to the environment. At least it would be necessary to investigate some other verbs which can have nominal V-ing clauses as objects.

With the constraints stated above, the conclusion of this research has to be provisional one. However, it showed the possibility that the traditional stipulation about this problematic construction is not complied with in real use of English. It also might have shown the potential the efficient use of corpus data has for development of descriptive grammar. Any way, further research based on a larger corpus such as the full set of BNC, utilizing more sophisticated searching techniques would be necessary to verify our provisional conclusion.

Bibliography

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- Greenbaum, S. and R. Quirk. 1990. *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J. Svartvik. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.

Appendix:

Combinations of tags used for search by the Word Smith concordancer

After preposition

pron.gen.

<W II>* <W APPGE*>* <W V?G>*

pron.obj.

<W II>* <W PP*>* <W V?G>*

noun.gen.

<W II>* <W N*>* <W GE>'s <W V?G>*

<W II>* <W AT*>* <W N*>* <W GE>'s <W V?G>*

noun.com.

<W II>* <W N*>* <W V?G>*

<W II>* <W AT*>* <W N*>* <W V?G>*

After "remember"

pron.gen.

<W VV*>REMEMBER* <W APPGE*>* <W V?G>*

pron.obj.

<W VV*>REMEMBER* <W PP*>* <W V?G>*

noun.gen.

<W VV*>REMEMBER* <W N*>* <W GE>'S <W V?G>*

<W VV*>REMEMBER* <W AT*>* <W N*>* <W GE>'s <W V?G>*

noun.com.

<W VV*>REMEMBER* <W N*>* <W V?G>*

<W VV*>REMEMBER* <W AT*>* <W N*>* <W V?G>*