English Focus Constructions in Forensic Authorship Attribution

I am not currently registered as a graduate student. I intend to undertake doctoral studies in Linguistics at the University of Toronto beginning in September 2009, as that department has strengths in both theoretical linguistics and language variation, both of which are relevant to my intended research program.

My Master's research at the University of Calgary investigated a little-studied English possessive construction, the double genitive. This construction incorporates both the preposition *of* and possessive marking on the possessor noun (e.g., indefinites like '**a** friend of John's', definites like '**the** friend of John's that we met', and demonstratives like '**that** friend of John's!'). In my thesis (Abel 2002), *That Crazy Idea of Jen's: The English Double Genitive as Focus Construction*, and the article based on it (Abel 2006), I suggested that rather than being primarily partitive in function (i.e., picking out one possessed item from a group of possessed items), as had previously been suggested (Jackendoff 1968, Barker 1998), the primary role of the double genitive is to impart focus to the possessed noun, with a secondary partitive meaning in its indefinite (*a*) and definite (*the*) varieties. My analysis adds the double genitive to the larger inventory of English focalizing constructions, which also includes topicalized sentences (e.g., 'That man, I like.'), cleft sentences (e.g., 'It was the hobbit who slew the troll.'), and relative clauses (e.g., 'The hobbit **that we met** slew a troll.'). Focus structures indicate that to which "the speaker intends to direct the attention of his/her hearer(s)" (Erteschik-Shir 1997: 11), and allow a speaker to introduce previously unused conversational options (whether known to both speaker and hearer or only to the speaker; cf. Gundel et al. (1993), Lambrecht (1994), Prince (1981)) into a discourse context. These are sometimes called 'informational' or 'presentational' foci (Erteschik-Shir 2007: 29) to distinguish them from 'contrastive' foci, which pick between a set of alternatives (e.g., 'Is that a troll or a hobbit?' 'It's a **HOBBIT**.').

My proposed doctoral research will continue the research into focus that I began in my Master's thesis, and will determine if practical use can be made of focus constructions in the emerging discipline of forensic linguistics. This field examines the role that language plays in the development, understanding and application of the law, and applies linguistic theory and analysis to questions and problems in those areas. In particular, I suspect that focus constructions could be of use in the area of authorship attribution. As I learned at the 8th edition of the International Summer School in Forensic Linguistic Analysis in 2008, questions of authorship can be of two types: (1) investigative (profiling), where, given a text/utterance of unknown origin and nothing of known origin against which to compare it, the forensic linguist is asked to identify distinctive features which could point to characteristics of the author; and (2) evidential (identification), in which the linguist must compare texts of known authorship with one or more of unknown authorship, and determine whether one author is responsible for both sets of texts. In both of these contexts, the forensic linguist takes the position that "every native speaker has their own distinct and individual version of the language they speak and write, their own *idiolect*, and [assumes] that this *idiolect* will manifest itself through distinctive and idiosyncratic choices in texts" (Coulthard 2004: 431-432; italics original). A number of factors can influence idiolectal variation (Kredens 2008), including 'Biological' and 'Social' factors (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, religion, social status, education, occupation, geographical origin), and 'Interactional' factors (social context, topic, and "characteristics of interactant(s) other than the speaker").

To begin, I intend to test the prediction that focus constructions should share certain characteristics; one of these, I anticipate, is that they will be relatively infrequent in discourse. As part of my Master's research, I collected a small corpus of double genitive examples from spontaneous conversation and from records of Canadian Parliamentary proceedings publicly available through the Parliamentary Internet Search Engine. While it is inaccurate to say that the double genitive is a rarely used construction, my research showed that it is noticeably less frequently used than the other English possessive forms. More extensive corpus research using larger corpora can determine (1) if this apparent difference in frequency between double genitives and other possessives is borne out, and (2) if other focus constructions are similarly less common in discourse than non-focus constructions. If it is true that the selection of a focus construction in a particular discourse context is a conversational choice on the part of the speaker, then a difference in frequency between focal and non-focal structures would be expected, as focus constructions are the marked (less common) discourse option.

A second common characteristic of focus constructions is the placement of phonetic stress (a pitch accent) on "that part of the underlying sentence which determines the function of the resultant construction" (Schachter 1973: 44): e.g., 'that **FRIEND** of John's!'; 'It was the **HOBBIT** who slew the troll.'; 'The **HOBBIT** that we met slew the troll.' In Abel (2002, 2006), I suggested that further research would be necessary to determine if the indefinite (*a*) double genitive has the same stress pattern as the demonstrative (*this/that*) and definite (*the*) double genitive, as additional acoustic prominence is not necessarily expected in an indefinite construction. I also think it is important to determine if the pitch accent in double genitives is phonetically similar to that in other focus constructions.

If focus constructions are indeed marked, their value in answering questions of authorship can be determined. Using corpora and/or sociolinguistic interviews, the possibility of idiolectal variation in focus construction use can be explored. It is possible that any of the factors suggested by Kredens (2008) could be found to influence a particular speaker's choice to use one or more of the available focus structures in a particular discourse context. Not only could this be of interest to researchers on focus, particularly those who share Erteschik-Shir's view that "valuable insights are to be gained from the whole spectrum of theories that deal with the issue" (2007: 79), but it could also add a new tool to the set available to forensic linguists. If focus constructions, as a whole or individually, are in general used more frequently by speakers/authors with certain backgrounds or in certain contexts, then the use of such a structure in a text/utterance would allow for a more detailed profile of an author to be created (in investigative cases) or to select or deselect a particular author as the possible author of a questioned text/utterance (in evidential cases).

I also believe that an examination of the acoustic characteristics of focus constructions in general could potentially be useful in forensic linguistics. Work by Elizabeth Selkirk (e.g., Selkirk 2002) has explored the prosody of focus; however, as most forensic audio analysis deals with lower-level phonetic details, I believe that a phonetic description of focus-related prominence would also be helpful. For example, if the pitch accent patterning does not conform to that in spontaneously-produced focus constructions, it could suggest that a recorded speaker is reading from a written document, speaking under duress, or attempting some type of voice disguise.

The outcome of my proposed research will thus be twofold: (1) to increase the number and variety of tools available to those engaging in forensic linguistic analysis, and (2) to shed further light upon the characteristics of focus constructions in English.

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