

Genitives and the creolization question¹

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In a recent squib published in this journal, Juhani Klemola notes that

there is ample and well-documented evidence for the loss of the genitive inflection in twentieth-century Northern dialect data as well as in early Modern English and Middle English documents representing Northern dialects. (1997: 352)

Klemola draws attention to the importance of evidence from non-standard dialects in historical research. In particular, my categorical statement that ‘there is not a shred of evidence that the genitive inflection was ever endangered in any dialect’ (1997a: 86–7) does not address the frequent, sometimes regular, use of noninflected forms for possessive nouns in some dialects.

I agree that there can be no doubt of the importance of evidence from nonstandard dialects. Such evidence is particularly relevant when we are considering the question of the possible creole origins of Middle English, since it has been argued (e.g. by Poussa, 1982) that Modern Standard English is essentially the result of the imposition of standard features on an Anglo-Danish creole which was by definition nonstandard.² Klemola explicitly states (p. 352) that he does not wish to enter the debate on the role of language contact in the history of English. However, the facts which Klemola mentions are clearly of great relevance to this question and in this note I would like to address the question of how the *s*-less genitive bears on the hypothesis that Middle English developed from a creole.

My admittedly over-categorical and rather ill-phrased statement was intended to point out that the retention of the genitive as a *category* in Middle English militates against the creole hypothesis. It is unfortunate that I used the word ‘inflection’ because it is essential here to make a distinction between form and category.

From the available data, the loss of the genitive *-s* in twentieth-century Northern³ English does not represent the loss of the genitive as a category. As Klemola notes in footnote 4 (p. 351), Wright (1905: 109–10) notes that the *-s* is only lost when the possessive modifies an expressed noun (e.g. *mi faðə buits* ‘my father’s boots’); it is not lost when there is no following noun, i.e. when the genitive is ‘independent’

¹ I am grateful to David Denison and two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier version of this squib. I have also profited from correspondence with Juhani Klemola concerning some points in the paper.

² Poussa’s article offers an unusually detailed scenario of creolization. She suggests that an Anglo-Danish creole arose in the East Midlands when there was intermarriage of the local women with Danish soldiers and there was diglossia, with the creole being used for speech and the West-Saxon standard used for writing. There was then ‘hybridization’ (i.e. decreolization) with West Saxon and Mercian dialects.

³ Not all northern areas show the loss of *-s* but the shorthand ‘Northern English’ will suffice here.

(predicative or with no expressed head) (*ðem buits ə mi faðəz* ‘those boots are my father’s’) or part of a ‘double genitive’ (*tbuits ə tlad faðəz* ‘the boots of the boy’s father’). I believe that this situation is not an expected one in a ‘true’ creole; we expect rather that periphrastic constructions will be used when mere juxtaposition will not serve to signal possession, such as ‘these boots belong to my father’. If the twentieth-century situation is a development from an Anglo-Danish creole in which all inflection was simply stripped off, then it must be the result of the adding back in from the standard written language and from ‘uncreolized’ dialects of the *-s* in the situations where it is most useful.

Klemola (p. 351) notes that dialect features are often of considerable antiquity and that the uninflected possessive is well attested in older English documents. He suggests that this type of possessive might go back to Early Middle English. Of course, uninflected possessives actually go back to Old English since certain nouns such as *father* did not have a specifically genitive inflection, but the question is whether the increased use of the uninflected possessive in Northern English goes back to the period of contact with Scandinavian.

Let us now consider how the evidence from the available Northern Middle English texts bears on this question. Unfortunately, texts written in Northern dialects in the Early Middle English period are extremely scanty and not of sufficient length to make it possible to draw any firm conclusions about the state of the genitive inflection.⁴ But it is possible to learn something about the progress of the uninflected possessive from Northern texts available from later Middle English. I have examined three Late Middle English texts⁵ of Northern origin. In all of these

⁴ However, it is worth noting that the inflected genitive was certainly used, at least in writing, in the thirteenth century. Brown (1932) edits three short poems (his numbers 65, 67 and 68) from Northern manuscripts of the mid-to-late thirteenth century and altogether they contain three inflected genitives (*sunes*, *cristes*, and *godes*). The only uninflected genitive found in these pieces, *moder*, was also uninflected in Old English. For a list of texts which can be tentatively localized in the Northern area between c. 1150 and c. 1200, see Laing (1991).

⁵ I have checked the first two volumes (12,558 lines) of the British Library MS Cotton Vespasian A iii version (dated c. 1350) of the *Cursor Mundi* (ed. Morris 1874–5) and a selection of works in two manuscripts associated with Richard Rolle de Hampole. These manuscripts, British Library MS Harley 1022 and Bodleian MS Rawlinson C 285, are edited by Horstmann (1895). The Harley manuscript is from the end of the fourteenth century or the early fifteenth century and the language belongs to the West Riding of Yorkshire according to the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Middle English (LALME)*. The pieces which I read are printed by Horstmann pp. 158–61, 162–72 and 186–91. The Rawlinson manuscript is from the fifteenth century and according to the *LALME* cannot be more precisely characterized as to dialect than ‘Northern Middle English’. I also checked the *Mirror of St Edmund* (ed. Horstmann pp. 219–40), which is from the Thornton MS of the Lincoln Cathedral Library (MS 91) and the pieces found in the same manuscript which were edited by Perry (1866). The Thornton MS dates 1430–1440 and the language is characterized as Northern by Allen (1966[1927]) and Horstmann, but an anonymous reviewer points out that the *LALME* says that the language is that of Lincolnshire. It is interesting to note that the pieces which appear in the Thornton and the indisputably Northern manuscripts show very little difference in the use of inflected versus uninflected genitives; for example the *Mirror* has uninflected *neighboure* and the same word appears uninflected in Harley 1022. In these three manuscripts, as in the *Cursor Mundi*, inflection for the genitive is the rule, other than for proper

we find some examples of the uninflected possessive, especially with proper nouns, but it is only in the *Cursor Mundi* of the fourteenth century that a reasonable number of examples can be found and so my remarks will pertain mostly to the portion of that work which I examined.

In the *Cursor Mundi*, we find a relatively frequent use of the uninflected possessive in the Vespasian MS, which distinguishes this manuscript from the Midland (Staffordshire) Trinity MS (although all four manuscripts in the edition show frequent lack of inflection with proper nouns⁶). Other than with proper nouns and nouns like *mother* which were not inflected for the genitive in Old English, inflection is generally more common than noninflection, but some nouns are more likely to be found in an uninflected form than others are.⁷ For example, *God* is the noun which occurs most often as an adnominal possessive in volume I of the *Cursor*⁸ and it is always inflected (sixteen examples). I did not count all the examples of inflected and uninflected nouns in volume II (although I did look for any examples not conforming to the patterns found in volume I), but I noted that *God* is always inflected for the genitive in this volume also and examples are numerous. In volume I, I found eleven examples of *man* inflected for the genitive but no uninflected possessive forms. On the other hand, I found seven examples of possessive *king* and three of these were uninflected (*þe king stiward*, l. 4243, *to king red*, l. 4550, and *þe king tresur*, l. 4902). It appears that inflection of the genitive is lexically variable, with the class of nouns that can occur in the uninflected form in the possessive greatly increased from Old English. The Northern texts are similar to the twentieth-century Northern dialects in using only the inflected form in 'independent' positions, although it should be noted that relevant examples are not frequent. The genitive *-s* ending shows some expansion from Old English in that forms like *ours* and *þairs* are found in 'independent' positions.

The situation in the Northern texts does not suggest any loss of category and is completely compatible with a simple broadened use of a strategy which already existed in Old English, where some nouns had no inflection for the genitive category.

nouns and nouns which were not inflected for the genitive in Old English, although there is at least one exception in each manuscript in the pieces I read.

⁶ Endingless genitives were already sometimes found with proper nouns in Old English (especially those of Greek or Latin origin; see for example Herold (1968: 32)) and noninflection of proper nouns seems to have increased in Middle English in more southerly dialects also, although this increase was much greater in the north.

⁷ Also, common nouns which should inflect for the genitive (e.g. *king*) seem particularly likely to drop the *-s* when the next word begins with *s*. Brunner (1963[1962]: 47) notes that some noninflection may be for phonetic reasons but does not say how common it is, only noting that both inflection and noninflection are found in apparently similar circumstances even in the same manuscript. It is likely that the lack of inflection on the single example of possessive *womman* which I found (*Bituix þine and womman sede*, l. 897) stems from the fact that the following word begins with *s*, but it is also clear that noninflection also sometimes occurs in other contexts. The question of how far it is possible to explain the distribution of inflected and uninflected forms is an interesting one but beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸ My remarks here refer only to the Vespasian MS. Different patterns are found in the other manuscripts but in all of them the uninflected possessive is lexically variable.

These same nouns are the ones which occur most frequently without a genitive inflection in the Northern texts, although the inflectionless form is extended to many other (but apparently not all) nouns.

Although we do not need to assume the earlier existence of a genuine creole (in which inflection generally would be stripped off) to explain this situation, it seems highly likely that language contact played a role in the broadened use of this strategy, as I suggested that it did in the general reduction of case marking in my earlier paper. It appears that the simplification of morphology which each generation of speakers seems to attempt is accelerated by contact with other languages, even when the contact is not particularly close, as new variants enter the mix. There was certainly a tendency to regularize the case inflections in all dialects of Old English, with some words of minor classes being treated like members of larger classes. One way to make the genitive easier to use was to extend *-(e)s* to words which historically inflected differently, and this happened in all Middle English dialects. Another was to extend the use of noninflection. The evidence of the written texts suggests that this was done on a word-by-word basis (or on the basis of lexical classes) because some words seem to resist the noninflected use, but it is entirely possible that the strategy was more general in the spoken language. The twentieth-century evidence from Northern dialects indicates that in adnominal positions this strategy became completely (or nearly) general in some areas, but it seems likely to me that this actually represents an increase in this type of genitive from Middle English, since none of the more colloquial texts that we have from Early Modern English show such a wholesale use of the uninflected possessive.

I hope to have demonstrated that there is no necessity of assuming a prior creole and will now argue that the assumption that the uninflected genitive is a reflex of such a creole raises more problems than it solves. Let us first suppose that the scribe of the *Vespasian MS* of the *Cursor Mundi* reflected his inflectional system fairly accurately, that is that the genitive inflection was often optional, although perhaps he used more inflected forms in his writing than he would use in his speech. If this is the case, then the speech of his area showed considerable 'decreolization' (in Poussa's terms, 'hybridization' with the more southerly dialects) in the spoken language because an *-(e)s* genitive is generally possible with all nouns except proper nouns generally and those common nouns which sometimes use an uninflected or otherwise irregular form in more southerly manuscripts. But if the speech of this scribe were decreolized in adding back in the genitive inflection, I think that we would be justified in expecting that the uninflected genitive would be avoided in writing. If the speakers in some northern region were moving towards the more prestigious Midland speech, one would expect that the genitive *-(e)s* would be adopted pretty much wholesale, given that it would have been relatively easy to learn and would have represented a salient difference from the creole. Indeed, one would expect hypercorrection whereby the *-(e)s* was extended to the genitive of nouns like *father* which were still normally uninflected in the southern dialects. But it seems that this scribe had no inhibitions against the uninflected genitive.

The same objection holds even more strongly if we suppose instead that the scribe of the *Cursor Mundi* would not normally have used the inflection in his own speech but used it in writing: if the scribe felt that the uninflected genitive was not proper for writing, why did he use it so often? Why did he not make more use of what he considered to be a more prestigious form? Thus it does not appear that the *s*-less genitive was stigmatized in the north in late Middle English, as we would expect it to be if it had originated as a creole feature. The situation found in the *Cursor Mundi* seems most compatible with a gradual extension of the uninflected genitive in the northern area which was only later reversed under the influence of a standard.

The genitives found in the earlier texts which are from other areas of the Danelaw offer no evidence for a creole as the basis for the extensive reduction of inflection in these areas. The *Ormulum* and the *Peterborough Chronicle* continuations both show considerable Scandinavian influence and greatly reduced inflection. If the loss of such distinctions as dative versus accusative is the reflex of an earlier creole, why do we not also find a loss of the genitive as a case or at least the widespread use of an uninflected genitive? What we find instead is that the *s*-genitive has generalized to most nouns but that many irregular genitives are maintained. There does not appear to be any good reason why the genitive should have been added back into the literary language of these areas when the dative and accusative were not.⁹ The *Lindisfarne Gospels* from the late tenth century show that this generalization of the genitive *-(e)s* was well under way in the far north, as was a good deal of other reduction in inflection. Again, it is difficult to explain how the genitive would have escaped being entirely replaced by either periphrastic or noninflected possessives if a creole was the basis for the reduced inflection, but if creolization is the reason for the reduction of inflection in the Midlands we would want to attribute similar reductions in Northumbria to creolization also.

I have argued in this note that the inflectionless possessives of the twentieth-century Northern dialects do not represent the loss of the genitive as a category. These possessives probably represent a broadening of the inflectionless genitive found in the same areas in Early Middle English, although this is difficult to prove given the lack of records. I continue firm in my view that the apparently uninterrupted existence of the genitive as a category militates against the idea that Middle English developed from a 'full-blown' creole in which all inflection was stripped off, and that the inflection still found in later Middle English was the result of a process of decreolization. On the other hand, it is unlikely to be a coincidence

⁹ It is instructive to compare the genitive inflection in the *Peterborough Chronicle* with the accusative and dative inflections. The author of the First Continuation seems to have made a conscious effort to imitate the West-Saxon *Schriftsprache* in the determiners and made a mess of it with the dative and accusative forms, as I argued in Allen (1997a: 79) (see also Allen, 1995: 175). But the scribe used the old genitive determiner *þes* correctly (when he did not use uninflected *þe* instead) and his use of uninflected genitive nouns is limited to the historically correct nouns, although he is extending the *-(e)s* to a wider class, as was happening elsewhere. This situation does not seem consistent with the idea that the genitive was relearned as a part of decreolization in this area. The use of the genitive was natural to the scribe.

that the inflectionless possessive was so successful in an area of heavy contact and it is entirely likely that it is an instance of contact facilitating the sort of simplification which speakers tend to initiate. The word 'creolization' is sometimes extended to any contact-induced simplification but we need to make it clear just what sort of creolization we are assuming and what sort of mechanisms seem to be involved.

Whether we want to use the term 'creolization' for the arguably contact-induced simplifications of Middle English or not, dialect data are clearly important to our research into the history of English. One difficulty is that these data have often been collected by researchers who have told us a good deal about forms but give us insufficient information about the system involved.¹⁰ Study of the morphosyntax of the nonstandard dialects by researchers sensitive to the need to look at the dialect as a system of its own rather than as a collection of divergences from Standard English should be most rewarding.

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¹⁰ For example, the *Linguistic atlas of England (LAE)* conveys the useful information that both *father* (which was not inflected in the genitive in Old English) and *cow* (which was inflected) are used in an uninflected form in some Northern areas. However, it does not tell us whether these words appear with *-s* in 'independent' positions, nor does it tell us whether there is any area in which all adnominal possessives are uninflected as opposed to being an option which is more frequently used than the inflected one. In fact, the maps given in the *LAE* suggest that there is an area in which *cow* is inflected but *father* is not, and the editors note in their introduction (p. 17) that uninflected *cow* occurs in a 'much narrower band' than uninflected *father*. Because of the way in which the data were collected for the *LAE*, we must be careful about taking this statement at face value, but if the *LAE's* maps reflect true lexical variation in some area concerning the use of possessive *-s*, this is of great interest because one would expect that the *-s* in these dialects represents a clitic, as it does elsewhere in English, and it is surprising if a clitic selects only certain lexical items to attach to. For a discussion of the progress towards clitic status for the genitive marker, see Allen (1997b). Knapp (1902) concentrates almost exclusively on forms. Wright (1892) gives the useful information that the *-s* is used in 'independent' positions, as noted above, but his remarks are brief and the entire system is not sketched out.

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