

A Framework for Using the Preposition *Of*

by Philip Suarez

When first learning their native language, English speakers internalize categories of meaning that govern the correct use of prepositions. At the elementary level, students who learn English as a foreign language are presented with prepositions and expressions in the student's native language that are roughly analogous to English prepositions. However, the lack of genuine one-to-one correspondence between English prepositions and prepositions in other languages creates a significant obstacle to learning. Moreover, gaps exist where an English preposition may have no equivalent in the student's native language. These problems suggest that ESL instruction should include some explanation of the semantic categories that native speakers acquire when they first learn a given preposition. With this in mind, this article attempts to do the following:

1. Present a number of semantic categories to guide students in the use of the preposition *of*
2. Provide a useful framework for determining the use of the preposition *of* versus the Saxon genitive (possessive constructions containing apostrophes)
3. Use the semantic categories noted above to better understand the lexical foundation of many common compound nouns.

General Guideline for Possession or Relation

The preposition *of*, when performing its most common function, indicates possession or relation. This possessive function is also served by the Saxon genitive, derived from Old English (Anglo-Saxon), which takes the form of the suffix *-s* (or adding an apostrophe to an existing *s*). Clearly, ESL students need to know which semantic categories are used with each of these two methods. A tentative general guideline requires the Saxon genitive when the noun that shows possession refers to a person or animal, as shown in the following examples:

- (1) my brother's car, Mary's father, my friend's problems, the dog's collar

Native English speakers generally avoid using the preposition *of* with nouns that refer to a person or animal (e.g., *the car of my brother* and *the father of Mary*). The examples in (1) illustrate how the possessive relationship can signify either ownership or more figurative connections. *My brother's car* signifies actual ownership. *Mary's father* describes a family relationship. *My friend's problems* uses the possessive relationship in a figurative sense.

The general guideline allows both the Saxon genitive and the preposition *of* in the case of geopolitical nouns (e.g., names of countries, cities and divisions of land):

- (2) Italy's capital/the capital of Italy
Chicago's history/the history of Chicago
the world's population/the population of the world
America's future/the future of America

Either possessive form can also be used with collective nouns for people or animals (e.g., companies, organizations, and animals that live in groups):

- (3) the company's profits/the profits of the company
NATO's membership/the membership of NATO
the wolf pack's territory/the territory of the wolf pack

In some environments, the proposed general rule would, in most cases, require the preposition *of*. This occurs when the noun after the preposition refers to an inanimate object, concept or event, and this noun is related to the noun before the preposition, as shown in the examples below.

- (4) Inanimate object: the side of the building, the top of the flagpole, the weight of the package, the color of the sky
- (5) Concept: the benefits of education, termination of employment, the secret of success, the dangers of smoking
- (6) Event: the end of the movie, the topic of the debate, the highlight of the performance, the time of the eclipse

Composition, Contents or Characteristic

In the general guideline above, the noun after the preposition *of* shows possession. In the examples below, the noun after the preposition *of* describes the material that the first noun is composed of, the contents of the first noun or some characteristic of the first noun.

- (7) Composition: a roof of thatched straw, a heart of gold, a house of cards, a time of change
- (8) Contents: a bag of potatoes, a book of quotations, a box of chocolates, a field of wildflowers
- (9) Characteristic: a soldier of courage, a show of force, a child of keen intelligence, a writer of great renown

Reference Between Two Nouns

The preposition *of* is used when indicating reference to a specific example within a group or category:

(10) the summer of 2016, the city of Chicago, thoughts of home, an act of rebellion

Distance or direction from a location is another type of reference the preposition *of* can illustrate:

(11) north of Boston, within one mile of school, west of the railroad tracks

Expressions of Quantity

The preposition *of* is used in phrases that contain units of measure:

(12a) three cups of coffee

(12b) eight hours of sleep

In another context involving quantity, note the difference in meaning between the two constructions in (13) below. In (13a), where the preposition *of* plus the definite article is used, the underlined expression refers to a quantity within some specific part of a general category. In (13b), where the preposition *of* plus the definite article is not used, the underlined expression refers to a quantity of the entire category.

(13a) Most of the students at our school have trouble organizing their time. (This refers to the majority of a specific group of students.)

(13b) Most students have trouble organizing their time. (This refers to a majority of students in general)

The semantic logic that determines the choice of (13a) or (13b) also applies to many other quantity expressions that can be used either with or without the preposition *of* plus the definite article:

all (of the), each (of the), a few (of the), many (of the), one (of the), two (of the), several (of the), some (of the), etc.

In addition, some quantity expressions must be followed by the preposition *of*:

dozens of (the), hundreds of (the), a majority of (the), a minority of (the), a number of (the), a lot of (the), none of the, half of the, etc.

The quantity expressions in both of the groups above can be used with any countable noun.

Classes of Exceptions

The general guideline in the first section, illustrated in examples (1) through (6), provides a useful starting point for choosing between the preposition *of* and the Saxon genitive in constructions that show possession or relation. However, students need to take note of certain classes of exceptions. The Saxon genitive would normally be used with the nouns *Mary*, *dog* and *brother*, as shown in (1). However, the Saxon genitive would not be used twice in a row in cases where two nouns in a noun phrase both show possession. The preposition *of* is generally used to avoid this double use of the Saxon genitive. Consider the following examples (with phrases that are awkward or unnatural preceded by an asterisk):

(14a) the house of my employer's brother

(14b) *my employer's brother's house

(15a) the constant barking of my neighbor's dog

(15b) *my neighbor's dog's constant barking

In cases where the noun showing possession is a well known person's name that is more than one word, the preposition *of* and the Saxon genitive are both possible, but only the Saxon genitive is used with the name of a person who is not well known or when the name is only one word:

(16a) Mark Twain's writing

(16b) the writing of Mark Twain

(16c) Mary's writing

(16d) *the writing of Mary

(17a) My next-door neighbor is John Doe, and my neighbor across the street is Jane Doe.

John Doe's house is older.

(17b) My next-door neighbor is John Doe, and my neighbor across the street is Jane Doe.

*The house of John Doe is older.

The examples in (18) below introduce another class of exceptions to the general guideline.

(18a) John is a friend of mine./John is a friend of Tom.

(18b) John is my friend./John is Tom's friend.

(18c) John is a buddy of mine./John is a colleague of theirs.

In phrases with the noun *friend*, the use of the preposition *of* followed by a possessive pronoun or a one-word name can be used interchangeably with the possessive adjective and the Saxon genitive, as shown in (18a) and (18b). The preposition *of* followed by a possessive pronoun can also be used this way with a very small class of nouns denoting one among a number of people who have a social bond in the spheres of interpersonal life, work, school or extended family: *buddy*, *pal*, *comrade*, *associate*, *colleague*, *crony*, *schoolmate*, *student*, *cousin*, *uncle*, *aunt*, *niece*, *nephew*, etc., as shown in (18c).

The preposition *of* always follows the noun *acquaintance* rather than using the Saxon genitive:

(19a) John is an acquaintance of mine./John is an acquaintance of Tom.

(19b) *John is my acquaintance./*John is Tom's acquaintance.

A common class of exceptions for nouns referring to inanimate objects uses the Saxon genitive rather than the usual choice of the preposition *of* shown in (4). This occurs when an inanimate object attains topical importance, the so-called thematic genitive, as shown in the following examples:

(20a) The Earth is made up of three layers: the crust, the mantle and the core. The Earth's crust is the thin, hard outer layer.

(20b) This cathedral is a masterpiece of French Gothic art. Notice the cathedral's rose window, which shows the Last Judgment.

However, the Saxon genitive is never used when the following noun is *front, back, side, top* or *bottom*:

(21a) Notre Dame Cathedral is the best known cathedral in Paris.

The front of the cathedral faces the Parvis Notre Dame.

(21b) Notre Dame Cathedral is the best known cathedral in Paris.

*The cathedral's front faces the Parvis Notre Dame.

A similar class of exceptions uses the Saxon genitive for inanimate things—typically abstract concepts—that are either personified or used in a poetic or literary manner, and also for a few fixed expressions, most of which refer to a quantity:

(22a) Nature's embrace

(22b) childhood's joys

(23a) a day's work

(23b) an hour's time

(23c) a stone's throw

(23d) in harm's way

Expressions with *Of* and Compound Nouns as Logical Propositions

The semantic category of possession forms a major part of the guideline for using the preposition *of* that is proposed in this article. A stronger case can be made for this proposed semantic category if evidence from a different grammatical structure supports the same semantic analysis as that given for the preposition *of*. Linguists such as Levi (1978) have analyzed compound nouns as implied propositions, and Levi uses a verb or preposition to describe the missing relationship between the two nouns, which is inferred by the listener or reader.

Of interest here are compound nouns whose implied relationships are either possessive or composition, which Levi describes as the missing predicates *have* and *make* (pp. 76, 281). The possessive and compositional relationships form the basis of the various uses of the preposition *of* and the Saxon genitive that are illustrated in (1) through (7) at the beginning of this article. Consider the following examples:

- (24a) flower basket
- (24b) basket of flowers
- (24c) Proposition: The basket has flowers.

The compound noun in (24a) can be thought of as an abbreviated form of the proposition in (24c), and the listener or reader understands that the implied relationship between the nouns is possessive. The preposition *of* in (24b) is simply the stated representation of the possessive relationship that is implied in (24a), and the two phrases in (24a) and (24b) have equivalent meanings.

The implied propositions of some compound nouns rely on the same semantic relationship of composition as the examples in (7) do, which use the preposition *of*:

- (25a) stamp collection
- (25b) collection of stamps
- (25c) Proposition: The collection is composed of stamps.

An even stronger argument could be made for analyzing prepositions in terms of semantic categories if corroborating data could be found in other languages that regularly use prepositional phrases rather than compound nouns. Spanish and French provide such data for the preposition *of*. The examples below show English compound nouns, the Spanish and French translations, and the implied propositions, which use the semantic relationships of possessive and composition for inanimate objects that are noted in (4) and (7) above.

Examples (26) and (27) show possession:

- (26a) banana peel
- (26b) Spanish: cáscara de plátano
- (26c) French: pelure de banane
- (26d) Proposition: The banana has a peel.

- (27a) automobile rust
- (27b) Spanish: óxido de automóvil
- (27c) French: rouille de l'automobile
- (27d) Proposition: The automobile has rust.

Examples (28) and (29) show composition:

- (28a) rock garden
- (28b) Spanish: jardín de piedras
- (28c) French: jardin de roches
- (28d) Proposition: The garden is composed of rocks.

- (29a) brick wall
- (29b) Spanish: muro de ladrillo
- (29c) French: mur de briques
- (29d) Proposition: The wall is composed of bricks.

No corresponding compound nouns exist in Spanish and French; instead the translations use the Spanish and French preposition that is analogous to the English preposition *of*, which is *de*.

Summary

Below is a list of semantic categories that illustrate the various uses of the preposition *of* and the Saxon genitive, with examples showing which is required and where both are possible.

- 1a. Person or Animal (General Guideline)
Saxon genitive: *Mary's essay, the dog's collar*
- b. Well Known Person's Name (More Than One Word)
Either Saxon genitive or preposition *of*: *Mark Twain's writing/the writing of Mark Twain*
- c. Person or Animal Preceded by a Second Noun with the Saxon Genitive
Preposition *of*: *the house of my employer's brother, the constant barking of my neighbor's dog*
- d. Nouns Denoting a Social Bond (Interpersonal Life, Work, School or Extended Family)
Either Saxon genitive or preposition *of*: *a friend of mine, John's friend/a friend of John*
Preposition *Of*: *a buddy of mine, a colleague of theirs, a schoolmate of his, a cousin of hers*
- e. The Noun Acquaintance
Preposition *of*: *an acquaintance of mine, an acquaintance of John*
2. Geopolitical Nouns
Either Saxon genitive or preposition *of*: *Italy's capital/the capital of Italy, the world's population/the population of the world*
3. Collective Nouns for People or Animals
Either Saxon genitive or preposition *of*: *the company's profits/the profits of the company, the wolf pack's territory/the territory of the wolf pack*
- 4a. Inanimate Object (General Guideline)
Preposition *of*: *the side of the building, the color of the sky*
- b. Inanimate Object with Topical Importance
Saxon genitive: *the Earth's crust, the cathedral's rose window*
- 5a. Concept
Preposition *of*: *the benefits of education, the dangers of smoking*
- b. Personification, Poetic/Literary Use and Fixed Expressions
Saxon Genitive: *Nature's embrace, childhood's joys, a day's work*

6. Event
Preposition of: *the end of the movie, the topic of the debate*
7. Composition
Preposition of: *a roof of thatched straw, a heart of gold*
8. Contents
Preposition of: *a bag of potatoes, a book of quotations*
9. Characteristic
Preposition of: *a show of force, a writer of great renown*
10. Reference (Specific Example Within a Group or Category)
Preposition of: *the summer of 2016, thoughts of home*
11. Reference (Distance or Direction from a Location)
Preposition of: *north of Boston, within one mile of school*
12. Quantity (Unit of Measure)
Preposition of: *three cups of coffee, eight hours of sleep*
13. Quantity (Within a Specific Part of a General Category)
Preposition of: *most of the students at our school, most of the countries on the list*

The semantic categories outlined in this article offer students some basic guidelines for the most common uses of the preposition *of* and the Saxon genitive along with an explanation of the major classes of exceptions. ESL students often stumble with prepositions because no grammar rules are available to assist them. The only viable option for effective instruction is to include an explanation of the semantic factors that native speakers internalize when they first learn English. The material in this article, as well as a semantic analysis of other prepositions, would begin to address a difficult area of English language learning that can only be made easier through a better knowledge of the semantic component of language.

References

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