

# Kvantifikator för en Dag

*Essays dedicated to Dag Westerståhl on his sixtieth birthday*





# A Puzzle about Dag's Book

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## 1. The interpretation of possessive phrases

Consider the noun phrase *Dag's book*. It can be used to refer to a lot of different books, e.g. a book owned by Dag, a book written by Dag, a book offered to Dag. The genitive *Dag's* thus introduces a number of possible relations.<sup>1</sup> The intended interpretation of an utterance of the phrase presumably depends on the context of use and which relation the speaker has in mind. Peters & Westerstahl refer to this relation as *the possessor relation* (chapter 7.6). It is sometimes claimed that we need to make a distinction between inherent possessive relations, e.g. in the case of relational nouns such as *parents*. For instance, *John's parents* typically refers to the pair of people who are the parents of John. However, even with relational nouns, it is quite possible that a prenominal genitive invokes a context dependent relation.<sup>2</sup> Suppose a teacher utters *John's parents asked a lot of questions* in the staff room after a parents' evening. The most likely relation then is the relation of being a parent of a pupil in John's class. Peters & Westerstahl summarize the interpretational possibilities as follows and comment that this seems to be the accepted view for prenominal possessives:

(Free3) For any possessive NP, however predictable and semantically describable its *usual* possessor relation is, circumstances can always be found where the same possessive NP is used with another possessor relation, not derivable from grammatical or lexical information, but provided only by the context of utterance. (Peters & Westerstahl 2006:364f.)

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<sup>1</sup> Since I want to be able to distinguish between the form of the possessor phrase and its possible interpretations, I will use the term *genitive* for a prenominal phrase ending with an apostrophe 's in English and a bare *s* in Swedish.

<sup>2</sup> As noted in Stockwell, Schachter & Partee 1973. See also Partee 1997 and Jensen & Vikner 2002.

Although *Dag's* book on most occasions will be used to refer to books owned or written by Dag, there may be occasions when it is used to refer to, for instance, the book that he is now standing on (cf. Peters & Westerståhl 2006:363f.). Consequently Peters & Westerståhl let the account of the truth conditions of possessive determiners use a free parameter for the possessor relation and impose no restrictions on how the value of the parameter gets fixed. This division of labour between semantics and pragmatics seems attractive. Nevertheless there are certain restrictions on when a prenominal genitive phrase can be used.

## 2. Nouns of creation

Let us look closer at a certain type of nouns, viz. nouns that involve a conscious act of creation. These are nouns like *book*, *film*, *picture*, *painting* and *portrait*. They denote objects which would not exist, were it not for a human creator or originator.<sup>3</sup> The creator can be expressed by a prenominal genitive phrase, as in (1) or by a postnominal prepositional phrase (PP) as in (2).

- (1) a. Dag's new book just appeared.  
b. Dags nya bok har just kommit ut.
- (2) a. Have you seen the new film *by* Bergman?  
b. Har du sett den nya filmen *av* Bergman?

The prenominal genitives in (1) can be interpreted in many ways. In the case of nouns of creation, a salient relation is the one of being the creator or the originator of the artefact, but other interpretations are available, as discussed above. The interpretation of the postnominal PPs in (2), on the other hand, is more restricted. PPs headed by *by* in English or *av* in Swedish, following a noun of creation, are interpreted as denoting the person(s) who is responsible for bringing about that object. This is why the NPs in (3) sound strange.

- (3) a. ?a dog *by* John  
b. ?a lake *by* Mary

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<sup>3</sup> Jensen & Vikner (2002), using Pustejovsky's qualia structure, refer to this as the *agentive* relation.

c ?en hund av John

d ?en sjö av Mary

In order to make sense of these NPs, we have to imagine a context in which John is responsible for the existence of the dog – maybe he is a dog breeder – and Mary is in some sense responsible for the existence of the lake – maybe she is a landscape architect. Compared with prenominal genitives, the interpretations of postnominal *by* and *av* phrases thus seem restricted to one relation, the one of originator.

### 3. The Puzzle

The puzzling fact is that a NP which has both a prenominal genitive and a postnominal *by* phrase is ungrammatical, as shown in (4).<sup>4</sup>

- (4) a \**My book by Dag* is on the table  
b \**Min bok av Dag* ligger på bordet

From the previous discussion, we know that *book by Dag* denotes the set of books that Dag has created, presumably the books that he has written. We also know that the prenominal genitive *my* can be interpreted in many ways, one of which being the relation of ownership. So it ought to be possible to interpret (4a) as meaning *the book by Dag that I own* (*den bok av Dag som jag äger*). But the NPs in (4) don't have this interpretation. In fact, they are perceived as ungrammatical.

Could it be that nouns of creation are somehow restricted with respect to the types of determiners they can combine with? As (5) and (6) show, this is not the case.

- (5) a most films by Bergman  
b some films by Bergman  
c no film by Bergman  
d at least three films by Bergman  
e \*John's film by Bergman

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<sup>4</sup> I first became aware of this puzzle during a discussion with Paul Kiparsky in Edinburgh around 1989.

- (6) a de flesta filmer av Bergman  
b någon film av Bergman  
c ingen film av Bergman  
d åtminstone tre filmer av Bergman  
e \*Johns film av Bergman

Nouns of creation occur with all kinds of determiners with the exception of genitives. In order to express the intended interpretations of (5e) and (6e) we have to use expressions like in (7) which avoid the prenominal genitive.

- (7) a the film by Bergman that John owns  
b den film av Bergman som John äger

Another option is to use a compound, as in (8).

- (8) a John's Bergman film  
b Johns Bergmanfilm

Here it is possible to interpret the NP as denoting a film made by Bergman and owned by John. However, in a noun noun compound, the role of the first noun (in this case *Bergman*) is not restricted to being the role of originator. The NPs in (8) could equally well denote a film about Bergman that John owns, or one that he has inherited from Bergman etc.

Note that the restriction on the prenominal genitive only applies to NPs with a postnominal PP that picks out the originator. Nouns of creation are often construed with PPs which denote other semantic roles associated with the particular head noun. For instance, books and films are often said to be *about* something, where the *about*-phrase denotes the content of the created item. Such NPs felicitously combine with prenominal genitive phrases.

- (9) a Dag's book about quantifiers  
b Dags book om kvantorer

Just as we would expect, the prenominal genitive *Dag's* in (9) may denote a variety of possessor relations, e.g. ownership or authorship.

The puzzling restriction thus seems to be limited to NPs which introduce the originator role in a postnominal PP. Here Swedish provides an interesting test case. As we have seen, the originator role is expressed using a PP headed by *av* (cognate with English *of*). However, certain nouns of creation also employ the preposition *av* for the created item. The noun *porträtt* ('portrait') can be used as an example. (10) is ambiguous between a creator reading and a created item reading.

- (10) ett porträtt av Lionardo  
a portrait of Lionardo

The portrait in (10) can either be painted by Lionardo or represent Lionardo. World knowledge or contextual knowledge is required in order to determine the intended interpretation. (11) on the other hand is unambiguous.

- (11) Johns porträtt av Lionardo

The NP in (11) can only be used to refer to a portrait representing Lionardo that John stands in a possessor relation to, not a portrait painted by Lionardo. On the other hand, there is no restriction against having two *av*-phrases, as shown in (12).

- (12) ett porträtt av en ung kvinna av Lionardo  
a portrait of a young woman by Lionardo

#### 4. Concluding remarks

We have seen that nouns of creation with an overt originator PP occur with all kinds of determiners with the exception of genitive phrases. Despite the fact that prenominal

genitives can be interpreted in a variety of ways – ownership being one of the most common – a NP with both a prenominal genitive and an explicit originator PP is ill-formed. The impression is that the presence of the prenominal genitive somehow blocks the originator interpretation of the postnominal PP (compare e.g. (10) and (11)). Why should this be? The reason does not seem to be semantic; after all it is possible to express the intended meaning, as in (7). Nor is the reason straightforwardly syntactic; other NPs with a similar structure are well-formed (compare (9) and (11)). Rather the puzzling restriction seems to have to do with the way the formal side of language, i.e. syntax and morphology, interacts with the way we interpret expressions, i.e. semantics. I don't have an easy solution to this puzzle – I doubt that there is one – but I think that this puzzle sheds some light on the interaction between syntax and semantics in natural language, an interaction that is worth reflecting on. Many happy reflections, Dag!

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