

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**THE ENGLISH GENITIVE CHOICES OF ESTONIAN  
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

**BA thesis**

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**TARTU**

**2020**

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is to give an overview of the terminology and a summary of studies that have been done on genitive alteration. Both native and non-native English will be covered. The thesis features a forced choice questionnaire that was carried out with Estonian high school students to see their genitive choice. The results of the questionnaire are compared to the results of the same questionnaire carried out with native speakers of English.

The first part of the thesis will introduce important terminology. Previous studies on genitive alteration with both native and non-native speakers will be analysed. The empirical part contains the forced choice questionnaire where the method is described and results are given as graphs. The third part will be the discussion of the results of the questionnaire, followed by the conclusion of this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are two ways of using genitive in English: the *s*-genitive (*the kid's toy*) and the *of*-genitive (*the toy of the kid*). The choice between these two is referred to as genitive variation. Genitive in the English language is a broad topic; many studies have been conducted, but most of these are based on corpora collected from native English speakers. This bachelor's thesis gives an overview of previous research on the topic of genitive variation, but instead of using existing corpora, a questionnaire was given to Estonian high school students to see how non-native English speakers choose genitives. Although there are various factors to observe when studying genitive variation (these are mentioned in section one), this study focuses mainly on three. Rosenbach (2005) concentrates on animacy (shows whether the possessor is animate or inanimate) and weight (the length of the possessor) in her study, these factors are observed in this present study as well. Additionally, the factor of previous context (either the *s*- or *of*-genitive has appeared in the text before the forced choice gap) is studied and discussed in this paper.

The study with non-native speakers was conducted to see whether their choices follow the same patterns as those of native speakers. The forced choice questionnaire used was the same as in Rosenbach's (2005) study on genitive variation, where the participants were native English speakers. A bachelor's thesis by Tera (2018) features this same questionnaire, but the participants were Estonian university students in the field of English philology. For this paper, high school students were given the forced choice questionnaire and their answers were analysed and compared to the groups in the two previous studies. Non-native English speaking high school students were chosen to answer the questionnaire because of the fact that they might not be as

familiar with the rules of choosing genitives as university level English students nor would they choose the genitives inherently as native speakers do. In addition, the category of previous context was examined. There are various other factors that might influence a person's genitive choice, but in this bachelor's thesis previous context was chosen. The goal was to compare the results of Rosenbach (2005), Tera (2018) and this thesis, in order to see which groups made similar genitive choices and to offer possible explanations as to why they might have done so.

Section 1 of the thesis describes the studies done on genitive variation, defines important terminology, summarises some important studies done on these topics, also giving more specific details about the studies important to this thesis. The introduction to the forced choice questionnaire of this thesis is in section 2. This section is divided into subsections, 2.1 covering how the questionnaire was carried out and 2.2 presenting the results for each of the categories that were researched. Section 3 is for the discussion of the results. This is followed by the conclusion.

## 1. GENTIVE ALTERATION IN ENGLISH

Genitive variation is a topic that has been studied in the English language for centuries. Today, there are two main genitive constructions: the *s*-genitive (*the boy's eyes, the chair's frame*) where the possessor (*the boy, the chair*) comes before the possessum (*eyes, frame*), also referred to as 'head', and the *of*-genitive (*the eyes of the boy, the frame of the chair*) where the possessor (*the boy, the chair*) follows the possessum (*the eyes, the frame*). There are many difficulties that researchers face when trying to study this topic as there are various ways to approach it, each with their own nuances. In her article, Rosenbach (2014: 215) lists these studies and shows what they have discovered but also their limitations.

In order to have a better understanding of the present study, some terminology should be discussed:

1) **Animacy** shows whether the possessor is animate (*the boy, Mary*) or inanimate (*the chair, the hotel*).

2) **Weight** is the length of the possessor. There are many ways to measure weight but in this bachelor's thesis it will be counted word-by-word (e.g. *the dark man's hand* – 3-word possessor).

To get a better idea of the genitive, one should see how it was used in the past.

Historically, there used to be more ways to express genitive; while the *s*-genitive had been present earlier, the *of*-genitive only emerged when Old English was developing into Middle English (Horobin, Smith 2002: 93). The *of*-genitive quickly replaced the *s*-genitive and there was suspicion that it might replace the latter entirely; this never came to be, only the usage of each genitive varied throughout time (Rosenbach 2014: 235). Therefore, knowing that the *of*-genitive was the preferred one

in the past, what could this mean for today? Rosenbach (2014: 235) mentions that in Early Modern English the usage of the *s*-genitive for inanimate nouns has increased and continues to do so today. What could be the cause for these new trends?

It is assumed that the borders between animacy and weight became blurred in the past and the rules were no longer as strict; however, Rosenbach (2014: 236) also notes that even though there are changes in genitive variation today, the genitives were used similarly in the past. This means that even though the preferred genitive changes, the trend towards opting for the *s*-genitive in the case of animate possessors and the *of*-genitive for inanimate remains, but the frequency of how many times they are chosen shifts.

Even though it was previously stated that only two genitive forms remain in English, there are other ways of expressing it that do not directly fall under the genitive label. When looking at genitive variation between the *of*- and *s*-genitives, these were excluded. One group to be excluded are noun modifiers; they work similarly to genitives, meaning that the first word gives more meaning to the second one (the head), such as *dog food* or *cottage door* (Rosenbach 2014: 222). Likewise, expressions that require a certain genitive (e.g. *the Bank of England*) are not considered when looking at genitive variation (Rosenbach 2014: 223). It is also impossible for phrases with determiners that are not to be included in genitive variation studies (e.g. *this boy's toy*, *any chair's leg*, *some hotel's lobby*) as these cases would likely yield different meanings (Rosenbach 2014: 224). Overall, it is important for researchers to keep in mind that in order to study genitive variation, it is required that both *s*- and *of*-genitive constructions be possible for the same phrase.

## 1.1 Previous Studies of Native Language Speakers

There are many perspectives to be considered when researching genitive variation. In her article, Rosenbach (2014: 216) talks briefly of older research done about the Middle English period when the *of*-genitive emerged, but gives more credit to newer research that involves the use of corpus. Because there exist various corpora that contain real-life examples of written and spoken English, researchers can conduct studies on a larger scale compared to the past. These are referred to as ‘quantitative’ methods where the corpus is studied with the means of computers because of the large sample size of genitives (Rosenbach 2014: 216). An example of a corpus-based study is Jahr Sorheim’s work (1980) that compared the British English LOB corpus to the American English Brown corpus which had the goal of comparing two varieties of English overtime and seeing how they changed; Hundt’s studies (1997, 1998) that bring in the English of New Zealand and Australia are an extension to Jahr Sorheim’s (1980) study. It can be seen in these studies that different variants of English do not have the same way of choosing between genitives.

Since the genitive choice is likely to be influenced by various factors, it is necessary for researchers to adhere to a few certain aspects when they are going to be conducting research on genitive variation. Choosing a certain genitive may be caused by different factors, so the question of how this should be approached remains. Rosenbach (2014: 216-217) praises Altenberg’s work (1982) on genitive variation for being the first of its kind and setting an example. In his studies, Altenberg (1982) faces the problem of having many factors influence genitive choice, but chooses to look at them one at a time. Following his example, future researchers, when studying different factors of genitive variation, tend to focus on one single or few factors and analyse them closely rather than take on several and give an unconsidered conclusion.



Studies have been conducted on Middle English (Thomas 1931) and contemporary English (Rosenbach 2005), different dialects have been examined (Hundt 1998) and factors involving written or oral language (Seppänen 1997) have been considered as influences over genitive variation. These studies showed how genitive variation has changed over time, but also how other dialects and variants of English might choose genitives differently.

In this bachelor's thesis, an empirical study was conducted (see Section 2) and the results were compared to those of Rosenbach's study (2005). Following the example set by Altenberg (1982), each factor that could contribute to genitive choice was analysed separately. Rosenbach (2014) has made a list of some of these factors; a short overview will be given of those in order to better understand what these factors are. First of all, usually the genitive does not change the meaning of a phrase, so in most cases it is grammatically correct to choose either the *s-* or *of-*genitive, depending on one's own intuition which is referred to as 'sameness' (Rosenbach 2014: 220-221).

Having studied the excluded situations, the factors that influence genitive variation can be examined. To recap, animacy and weight are major influences. When it comes to weight, however, there are different possibilities of measuring it; this depends on the researcher but the goal remains the same, to see how a longer possessor might change someone's genitive choice (Rosenbach 2014: 227-228). The factor of rhythm is said to be a newer factor to be researched (Schlüter 2005) as its influence is seen as lesser, though it may be greater in the case of spoken language (Rosenbach 2014: 228).

Rosenbach (2014: 228-229) talks about 'givenness' which is a term she uses for the situation when the possessor has previously been mentioned in the text/conversation that precedes the genitive construction. In this bachelor's thesis,

previous context has also been studied, but instead of the possessor, *s-* and *of-*genitives have been chosen, as non-native speakers might not want to repeat the constructions therefore choosing the other genitive form to avoid repetition. In Rosenbach's (2014: 228) case, however, the more recently the possessor appeared, the more likely it was to influence the choice of genitive. Likewise, Szmrecsanyi (2005: 140) claims that previous context ('persistence' in his work) would rather have the person repeat the construction they used. It was also revealed that the gender and age of a person could influence whether they choose different or same items (Szmrecsanyi 2005: 140). Because of Szmrecsanyi having researched the topic of persistence thoroughly, his hypothesis of repeating constructions will be the basis for the discussion of previous context (see section 3).

Lastly, the category of semantic relation is concerned with the meaning between possessor and head. This being a category which is also said to be the hardest to study, according to Rosenbach (2014: 229-230); semantic relation is examined by choosing certain types of head words (e.g. *eyes* to represent body parts, *parents* for kin relations, etc.), reviewing corpora and seeing what possessors accompany them. There will likely always be factors that appear simultaneously, but it is previous studies done on this topic that have led to proficient research methods, thanks to which multiple factors influencing genitive variation can be studied separately (Rosenbach 2014: 230).

In this bachelor's thesis, the main focus will be on Rosenbach's study (2005) because the same methodology was used to conduct an empirical study for this paper. Rosenbach (2005: 614) focuses on how animacy and weight influence the choice of which genitive form to use. Animacy means that the word in question refers to a living being (e.g. *man*, *child*, *Tom*), weight being the number of words that are used in

one phrase (e.g. *the young constable's face/the face of the young constable*) (Rosenbach 2005: 614). The central question is whether one category outweighs the other. One of the more widespread ways of choosing between the genitive forms falls under the category of animacy: the *s*-genitive is more often used with animate objects, while inanimate objects prefer the *of*-genitive (Rosenbach 2005: 614). However, short possessors often go together with the *s*-genitive, so it could be argued that instead it is weight that influences this decision (Rosenbach 2005: 614). Both animacy and weight have an equally important role, but it varies depending on the possessors.

Animate possessors would mostly be associated with the *s*-genitive, but there are temporal, geographical, and collective nouns, which often take the same genitive form, even though they are inanimate (Rosenbach 2005: 615). Another factor is ‘topicworthiness’, which means that the *s*-genitive is used to highlight the first word, since it is more topical in said case; however, it is unclear whether animacy or topicality has a bigger influence on the possessor (Rosenbach 2005: 615). At the same time, weight is something that is looked at in connection to the *of*-genitive. This is the case when the possessor is unusually long, making it difficult or impossible to use the *s*-genitive (*the lobby of the grand old medieval style hotel*) (Rosenbach 2005: 616). The head (in this case, *the lobby*) should be mentioned before the longer phrase, so that information would be available first to the reader (Rosenbach 2005: 616). It is also preferred that the *s*-genitive be used when the constituent is short (*the hotel's massive elegant lobby*) (Rosenbach 2005: 617). It is shown that the longer constituent is preferably in the second half of the genitive phrase (postmodification); this applies for some animate constituents as well (Rosenbach 2005: 617).

Rosenbach carried out an empirical study where thirty-nine monolingual American English speakers were presented with short sections from novels: their task

was to choose either the *s*- or *of*-genitive and fill in the gap with what they believed to be the correct choice (Rosenbach 2005: 619). Two predictions were made. First, that animacy and weight being independent from one another, would result in more *s*-genitives being used for human possessors (*the boy's eyes*) compared to inanimate ones (*the chair's frame*) (Rosenbach 2005: 620). Secondly, in the case of weight being more important than animacy, the *s*-genitive would be used more with the inanimate short/long condition (*the hotel's elegant lobby*) (Rosenbach 2005: 620).

The results show that animacy did influence the choice in the neutral condition, as the animate version *the boy's eyes* was picked by most of the participants, while the inanimate *the chair's frame* was chosen by about a quarter (see Figure 1) (Rosenbach 2005: 621). However, when the possessor was longer (*the dark man's hand/the hand of the dark man*), only a little over half of the participants preferred the *s*-genitive while a considerable amount picked the *of*-genitive (Rosenbach 2005: 621). Even though the *s*-genitive was the predominant choice, weight influences animate phrases. This shows that weight and animacy are distinct and not dependent on one another (Rosenbach 2005: 621).

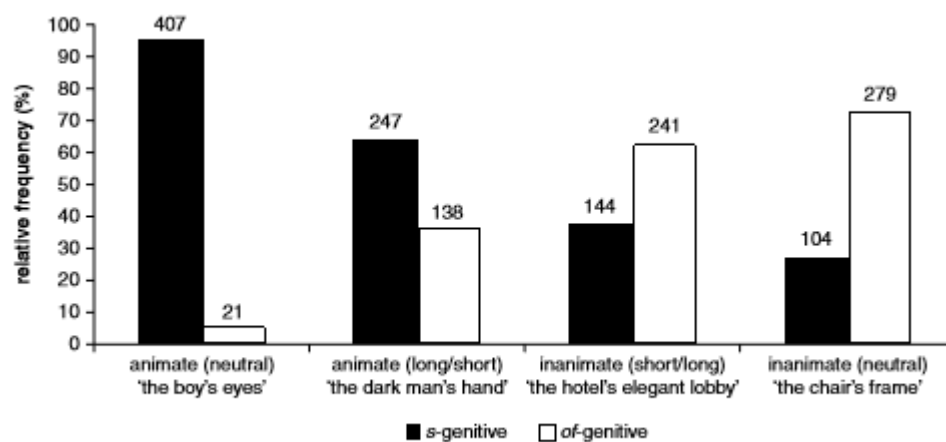


Figure 1. Results of Rosenbach's (2005: 621) forced choice questionnaire

Rosenbach (2005) compared the results of the forced choice task to the results of a corpus analysis based on the International Corpus of English. There are over a million words both of spoken and written English in this corpus that was collected between 1990 and 1993; only the British component was used (but there should be no difference for American and British English speakers when it comes to animacy) (Rosenbach 2005: 622). There were various uses of genitives in the corpus that needed to be narrowed down: only the genitive constructions with definite possessors were taken, fixed expressions/collocations and set phrases were not included (Rosenbach 2005: 623). The remaining genitive constructions were sorted into six categories: human, animal, collective noun, geographical noun, temporal noun and inanimate (Rosenbach 2005: 623). Weight was measured by counting the number of words (the determiner *the* was not counted) (Rosenbach 2005: 623). Looking at the experimental results and comparing them to the corpus can show how weight and animacy influence the genitive choice.

Concerning weight, Rosenbach (2005) made two predictions. First, that possessors consisting of multiple words would prefer the *of*-genitive. Another prediction was that if an animate possessor is longer than one or two words (e.g. *the little boy's eyes/the eyes of the little cunning fair-haired boy*) then the *s*-genitive would be less likely. The analysis shows that the weight of the possessor does indeed influence the genitive choice. It is also confirmed that the *s*-genitive is used less when the possessor consists of several words.

The hypothesis that animate possessors occur more often with the *s*-genitive is shown to be true; weight does influence this choice, as the *of*-genitive is also chosen more in the cases of a longer possessor (Rosenbach 2005: 229). Nonetheless, the *s*-genitive remains the more popular choice. It could even be said that animacy

outweighs weight and has a larger part in genitive choice when the possessor is human (Rosenbach 2005: 229). In the case of inanimate possessors, there is a clear trend of language users opting for the *of*-genitive (Rosenbach 2005: 229). Possessors that have many premodifiers take the *of*-genitive, even when the possessor is animate, but these do not occur that often. (Rosenbach 2005: 627) From analysing the corpus, Rosenbach was able to deduce that the *s*-genitive occurs more with long human possessors compared to short inanimate possessors (Rosenbach 2005: 230). Therefore, animacy is more significant when opting for the *s*-genitive than weight (Rosenbach 2005: 230). The goal of this bachelor's thesis is to see whether the results of Rosenbach's (2005) native speakers are also present in that of learner English.

## **1.2 Previous Studies of Non-Native English**

Genitive alteration has been studied quite a lot and there are studies about older and newer variants of English. However, learner English is something that has not been looked at as much. The work of Gries and Wulff (2013) is one of these few. In their study, the International Corpus of Learner English was used to get a random sample of 1,000 uses of genitive produced by Chinese and German English learners (Gries, Wulff 2013: 336). For comparison, samples were also taken from the British component of the International Corpus of English (Gries, Wulff 2013: 336). The most significant finding in their work was that 'segment alteration' influenced all three groups in their genitive choice (Gries, Wulff 2013: 347). By segment alteration it is meant that the combination of consonant-vowel would be better than two consonants (e.g. the calf **of** Anna would be preferred compared to Anna's calf) (Gries, Wulff 2013: 335).

When it came to differences between the three groups, it could be seen that the results of the Chinese were more similar to native English speakers compared to

Germans (Gries, Wulff 2013: 349). This is because Germans overused the *s*-genitive compared to the Chinese; the Chinese language was said to have similar structure to English (e.g. they have something similar to the *of*-genitive) while Germans might try to find similarities from their own language (Gries, Wulff 2013: 350). Even though German has constructions where the possessor and head change places, they are a lot more restricted grammatically than in English; therefore, German English learners might choose the simpler version with the *s*-genitive since they might not have that choice in their own language (Gries, Wulff 2013: 350-351). This is something to be considered when looking at Estonian English learners as well, since there is only one way to express genitive in Estonian, and it is more similar to the *s*-genitive.

The only study that has been done on Estonian English learners is the bachelor's thesis of Helina Tera (2018). The aim of Tera's (2018) thesis was to see whether the way native and non-native speakers of English choose genitives similarly (Tera 2018: 19). She also discusses the topics of weight and animacy, following the example of Rosenbach (2005), to see if one outweighs the other in importance and whether both, one or none of these factors influence genitive choice (Tera 2018: 19). The non-native English speakers who answered the questionnaire were university students studying English language and literature during their 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year (Tera 2018: 18). There were conclusive results for the questions relating to animacy and weight; the difference between native and non-native English speakers' genitive choices were not very different (Tera 2018: 26-27). Whether this is because university students have a good understanding of the language cannot be said as there are various factors that may influence one's genitive choice (Tera 2018: 28). Compared to Tera's thesis (2018), the goal of this bachelor's thesis is to observe younger learners of English and see how they compare to university level learners.

Another thing to be considered is that different variants of English exist that differ in terms of how close they are to the standard varieties of English, and it is possible that speakers of these different varieties of English do not choose genitives similarly. This is studied in Heller et al. (2017: 6) where they make the claim that different English speakers will pick up language patterns from their surroundings which may influence their genitive choice. As a result, it is more likely for native English varieties (British, New Zealand, Irish, and Canadian English) to use *s*-genitives compared to non-native varieties (Indian, Jamaican, Philippine, Singapore and Hong Kong English); the speakers of the latter varieties prefer the *of*-genitive (Heller et al 2017: 20).

The shift of languages can occur naturally, but it is even more likely when there are multiple languages spoken by a certain people. Rosenbach (2018: 2), for example, compares South African English to Afrikaans in her work to see if Afrikaans has influenced the speakers' genitive choices in English. The result was that it could not be confirmed that Afrikaans has changed the genitive choice (Rosenbach 2018: 16). Estonian English learners have a somewhat different experience as English is not spoken as a national language in Estonia as it is in South Africa, but the influence of one's first language could be a factor here too. Something Rosenbach (2018: 16) mentions is the spread of American English that might have had the effect of *s*-genitives being used more often in the inanimate condition. Because of American media being everywhere, it may be possible that this has in fact had an influence on non-native English learners, since it is the variety of English they come in contact with; however, this will not be the focus in this study as it would have required more information about the participants' background and the type of English they are exposed to in their everyday lives.



## 2. FORCED CHOICE QUESTIONNAIRE

### 2.1 Method

In order to look at the topic of genitive choice, a forced choice questionnaire was conducted. This questionnaire is the same which Rosenbach (2005) and Tera (2018) used in their studies. It consists of 41 sentences with gaps (which are in extracts of literary texts) that had to be filled with either the *s-* or *of-*genitive. An example of the questionnaire is given in Figure 2. The participants of this questionnaire did not study for the task and had to choose the answers that they believed to be more fitting, since both genitives are grammatically correct in all of the contexts. Permission to have the students participate in this study was given by the English teacher of the two groups and also the principal of Viljandi Gymnasium. The questionnaire was given to the participants, who were high school students, by their English teacher and they filled it out in the classroom during an English class. The questionnaire was compiled in Google Forms, so the participants could have access to it online. Two groups of students from Viljandi Gymnasium answered the questionnaire. Two groups were used in order to see whether the students would choose genitives similarly or if them having slightly different backgrounds would change this choice. Prior to completing the forced choice task, they were asked to provide information about their age, gender, native language, both parents' native language and the language spoken at home.

A light went on above her head. One of the french doors opened. Barbara turned to see the small, dark girl who had been laying plates on the table the previous night. She flicked a wedge of ash onto the neat flagstones and when [.....] followed its descent with a thoughtful frown, Barbara slipped one trainer-shod toe over and casually ground the ash to a smudge of grey-black.

the eyes of the small girl

the small girl's eyes

'Have you got a name?' 'Sorry. It's Barbara. I live round the back'. [.....] formed little pouches as she smiled. 'In that sweet little cottage?.....Oh, I wanted us to live there when we first moved here except it's far too small. It's just a playhouse. Can I see it?' 'Sure. Why not? Sometime?'

The girl's cheeks

The cheeks of the girl

Figure 2. A screenshot of the questionnaire in Google Forms. (A list of all of the items used in the questionnaire is given in Rosenbach 2005: 640)

The first group consisted of tenth grade students from the math-physics and natural sciences classes. This is a group consisting of the students who achieved the best results in their basic school English exam. 19 students aged 16 (and one 15-year-old) participated in the questionnaire. There were 13 males, 5 females and 1 person did not specify their gender. All the participants had Estonian as their native language. Everyone's father's and mother's native language was Estonian, with the exception of one student whose mother's native language was Russian. The second group who participated was the twelfth grade foreign languages class with 20 participants between the ages 17 and 19. There were 8 males, 10 females and 2 people who did not want to specify their gender. The twelfth grade group also consisted of students whose native language is Estonian, as are their mother and father tongues. Both groups were also asked what language they speak at home, to which everyone answered Estonian. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, all students are considered native Estonian speakers and there is no reason to exclude anybody from

the data analysis. All the students' answers were included in the data analysis, making it a total of 39 students.

## 2.2 Results

After the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students had answered the forced choice questionnaire, the data had to be analysed. The answers were downloaded and manually coded in Excel, in order to analyse them in detail. The 'pivot table' function was used to generate graphs which display the results. In this section, the data of both groups is displayed: the results of the 10<sup>th</sup> graders' genitive choice is viewed first (section 2.2.1), followed by the 12<sup>th</sup> graders' results (section 2.2.2) and then the results of previous context (section 2.2.3). This is followed by the discussion of the results (section 3) where the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students' results are compared to each other, and also to the results in Rosenbach's (2005) and Tera's (2018) works. The results of previous context will be discussed last.

### 2.2.1 Results of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Students

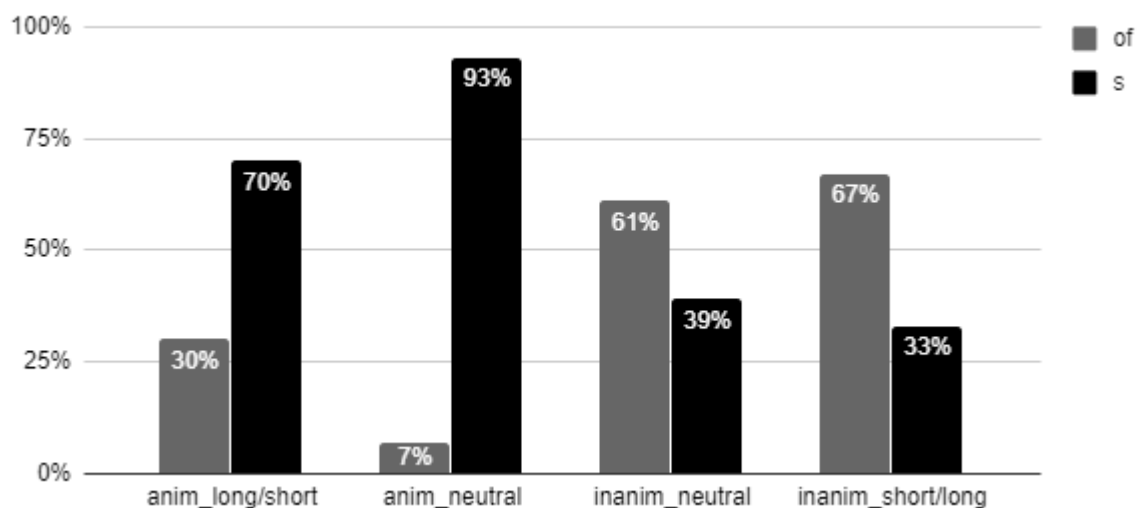


Figure 3. 10<sup>th</sup> grade genitive choices.

The results, seen on Figure 3, show that 10<sup>th</sup> grade students preferred the *s*-genitive for animate possessors (*the boy's eyes*) and the *of*-genitive for the inanimate

(*the frame of the chair*) possessors. In the case of inanimate neutral condition (*the chair's frame*), the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students have preferred the *of*-genitive, while for the animate neutral condition (*the boy's eyes*) the more prominent choice is the *s*-genitive. However, even though both are in the neutral condition, the preference for the *s*-genitive with the animate condition (*the boy's eyes*) is clear, with 93% of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade participants choosing this. At the same time, 61% chose the *of*-genitive for the inanimate neutral condition (*the frame of the chair*). The animate condition with the long possessor and short head (*the dark man's hand*) had a large number of the students opting for the *s*-genitive, with 70% choosing the *s*-genitive and 30% the *of*-genitive. Concurrently, the inanimate condition with the short possessor and long head (*the elegant lobby of the hotel*) had the majority of the students (67%) choosing the *of*-genitive while 33% chose the *s*-genitive. In a way, the long/short animate and short/long inanimate conditions contradict one another, with roughly two thirds of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students choosing the *s*-genitive for the animate condition (*the dark man's hand*) and the *of*-genitive for the inanimate condition (*the elegant lobby of the hotel*).

### 2.2.2 Results of 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Students

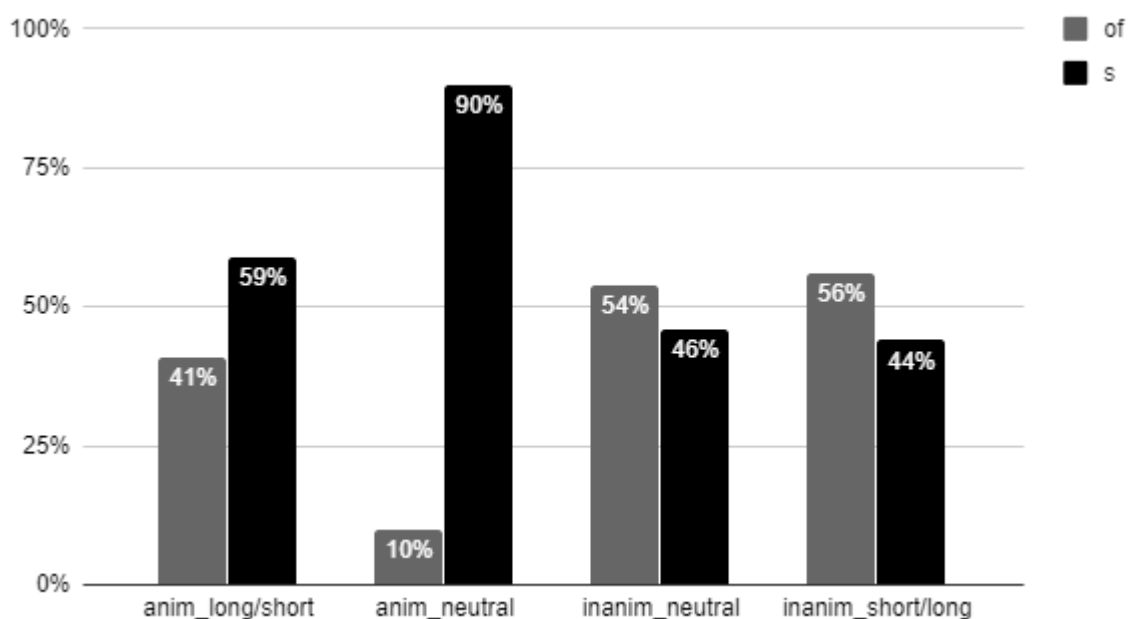


Figure 4. 12<sup>th</sup> grade genitive choices.

Figure 4 shows the results of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. The greatest difference was once again in the case of the animate neutral condition with 90% choosing the *s*-genitive. The animate condition with the long possessor (*the dark man's hand*) had the *s*-genitive as the preferred choice, although the percentage for this was only 59%. Meanwhile, the inanimate conditions show similar results percentage wise. In both cases, the *of*-genitive was the preferred choice: for the short possessor/long head 56% and for the neutral condition 54%. A discussion of these results will continue in section 3.

### 2.2.3 Previous Context Results

Figure 5 shows all the participants' choices taking into consideration previous context. This means that if a paragraph had a genitive structure before the gap, it might have influenced the students' choices. A lack of previous genitives in a paragraph is presented on the graph as 'no'. One experimental item from the total of 41 was also left out from this data because it was the second half of a two-part question, allowing the student to pick either the *s*- or the *of*-genitive for the first gap. Therefore, it cannot be added to any of the existing categories, also leaving it separately would not benefit this analysis as the previous context is not the same for all students. The remaining two choices on the graph are for the experimental items where there was either the *of*- or the *s*-genitive before the gap.

In the case of there being no previous genitive before the gap, the students have preferred the *s*-genitive, with 60% choosing this instead of the *of*-genitive. When the *of*-genitive had previously been mentioned, slightly more people chose the *s*-genitive. Yet the difference was very small with the majority here being 51%. For the previously occurring *s*-genitive, there is a greater difference as 71% of the choices

were the *s*-genitive and only 29% the *of*-genitive. The reasoning behind these results will be discussed further in section 3.

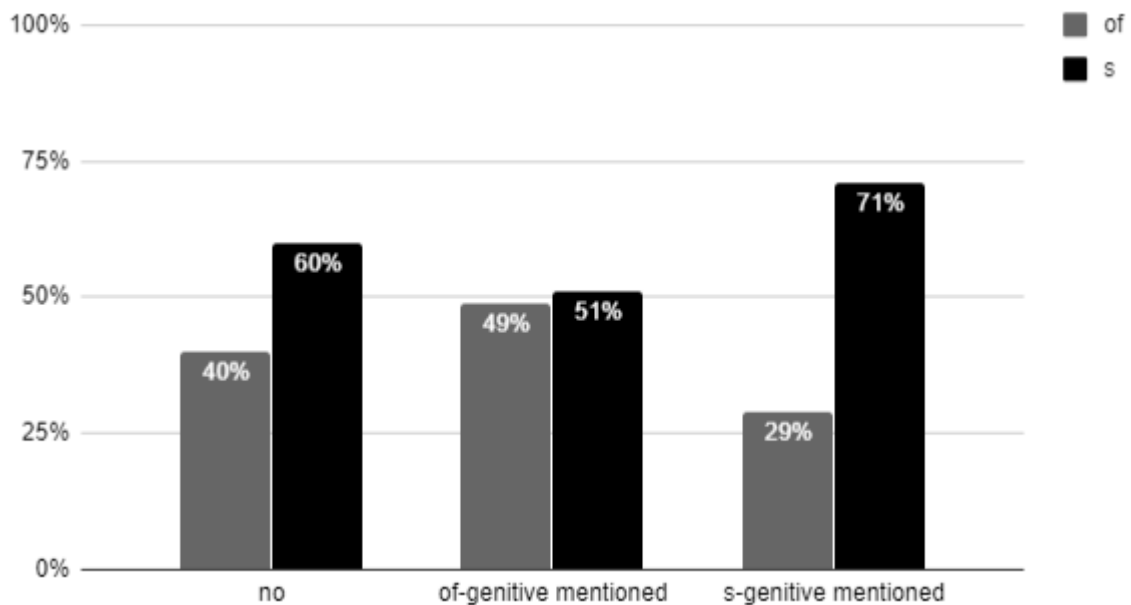


Figure 5. 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students' results based on previous context.

### 3. DISCUSSION

First, the results of both groups of high school students will be compared to Rosenbach's (2005) findings, which is followed by a comparison of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Afterwards, the results of Tera's (2018) work will be given to see if university level non-native speakers' choices are similar to those of high-schoolers. Lastly, the significance of previous context is discussed.

Looking at the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students' force choice task results, there are both similarities and differences compared to Rosenbach's (2005) results. The *s*-genitive is preferred by both groups in the neutral condition (*the boy's eyes*), showing that for

most people, the short animate possessive is a clear indicator for choosing the *s*-genitive. This is not so clear for the inanimate neutral condition (*the chair's frame*). Rosenbach's (2005) results show that about 20-25% of the participants chose the *s*-genitive while in the case of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, the percentage was 39.. A reason for this discrepancy could be the influence of native language. The participants in Rosenbach's (2005) questionnaire were native speakers of English, so we will focus on how the Estonian language might have influenced the genitive choice. In Estonian, there is only one form of genitive, which always has the possessor before the head (*poisi silmad/the boy's eyes*). If a student is not certain which genitive to choose, their default choice could be to base it on Estonian grammar and pick the *s*-genitive, which sounds more familiar. This is also supported by a belief held among teachers that Estonians learning English tend to overuse the *s*-genitive (p.c. Jane Klavan). Nevertheless, the results show that most of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students still preferred the *of*-genitive for inanimate possessors.

For the animate condition with the long possessor and short head (*the dark man's hand*), the results of Rosenbach (2005) and this study seem to be similar. The number of people who chose the *s*-genitive is larger and this is most likely due to the long possessor making the choice more complicated. However, looking at the inanimate condition with the short possessor and long head (*the elegant lobby of the hotel*), Estonian students once again chose the *s*-genitive more often compared to American English speakers. It is necessary to note that the *of*-genitive was still the more popular choice. Yet, it can be seen that Estonian 10<sup>th</sup> graders use the *s*-genitive more with the inanimate condition compared to native speakers in Rosenbach's (2005) study. This pattern could be explained by them basing this choice on their native language which would make the *s*-genitive the default choice. It is also possible that genitives have

been taught to students differently, perhaps some were never taught how to choose between the two.

To examine this point more closely, the results of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade Estonian students will be looked at next and compared to those of the 10<sup>th</sup> graders. Both groups have similar results when it comes to the animate neutral condition, but the same cannot be said about the remaining three conditions. To start off, the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students do not seem to distinguish between the genitives as much as the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. For all but the inanimate conditions there seems to be an almost 50%-50% choice in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade responses (Figure 4) compared to the response of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade (Figure 3). This could mean that many of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students do not know the rules for differentiating between genitives, and as a result they make their choices instinctively. For both inanimate conditions, the 12<sup>th</sup> graders chose the *of*-genitive more often compared to the *s*-genitive, but only by a little (56% for the short/long and 55% for the neutral condition). At the same time, native speakers in Rosenbach's study (2005) had a much greater difference when choosing genitives in the inanimate condition (73% chose the *of*-genitive in the neutral condition and 63% chose the *of*-genitive for the short/long condition). This could mean that Estonian grammar influences the students to pick the choice that is more familiar; however, that is overruled by the fact that the *of*-genitive was chosen more often for the animate short/long condition by the 12<sup>th</sup> graders (41%) compared to the 10<sup>th</sup> graders (30%).

Looking at these conflicting results, some predictions can be made. There is a chance that the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students put less thought into their answers, and as a result, their answers do not seem to follow the same trend as those of their younger counterparts. However, leaving this aside, there is also a possibility that the students' basic school background influences their choice. 10<sup>th</sup> graders, who had only recently



finished basic school, had more similar genitive choices to native English speakers compared to the 12<sup>th</sup> graders, who are almost finished with high school. Starting off from the earlier influences, the students' different basic school backgrounds could influence their genitive choice: there could be schools where genitive choice is an important topic which is revised often, while some schools perhaps barely mention genitive choice at all; especially considering that both genitives are actually grammatically correct. Even if the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students were to have learned this topic in middle school, they could have forgotten it if this was not revised in high school. Presumably this being the case, why is the topic of genitive choice not revisited in high school? Could the topic be considered unimportant because of there being many grammatically correct genitive choices, or perhaps there is just not enough time in the syllabus for this topic? To find a clear answer to this, the English class syllabus and opinions of English teachers should be examined; further research is required to investigate this claim.

Knowledge of grammar rules is one thing, but could genitive choice be influenced by other factors as well? Estonian language was previously mentioned as a possible influence, with students choosing the *s*-genitive because of its familiarity. With that in mind, it is possible that Estonian native speakers could view the *of*-genitive as more formal or complex since there is no equivalent for it in their own language. It should also be recalled that the forced choice questionnaire consisted of paragraphs from literary texts taken from novels. On one hand, written language is considered more formal than spoken language. On the other hand, some might consider novels informal due to there not being as strict rules as in academic writing. This might be another factor that has influenced the two groups of Estonian students, and also the native speakers in Rosenbach's (2005) research.

Taking a look at the least varying genitive choice, the animate neutral condition (*the boy's eyes*), we can see that there is a very small minority that has preferred the version *the eyes of the boy*, even though it goes against the two main results found by Rosenbach (2005): first, that the animate possessors prefer the *s*-genitive, and second, that shorter possessors are also likely to go with the *s*-genitive. Because of this, it is possible that a novel, being an artistic form of literature, offers more freedom with language. Some might choose the *s*-genitive for it being informal (or following the rules of weight and animacy), while others might find the *of*-genitive more artistic or complex, making it fitting for a novel.

The results of Tera's work (2018) could be studied here as to see how similar they are compared to that of native speakers in order to have a better understanding how close native speakers and university level non-native speakers are compared to high school students. Overall there is very little difference between the results of the university students in Tera's work (2018) and those of Rosenbach's (2005) native speakers'. The animate neutral condition is the same (90% choosing the *s*-genitive). The animate long/short condition and both inanimate conditions have very similar results with the differences being 1% or 2%. It can be observed that the 10<sup>th</sup> grade has much more similar choices to university students. In the animate condition, a greater majority has preferred the *s*-genitive in the neutral condition (*the boy's eyes*) and the difference does not reflect that well (*s*-genitive: university students 95%, 10<sup>th</sup> grade 93%, 12<sup>th</sup> grade 90%). This can, however, be seen in the animate long/short condition (*the dark man's hand*) where 65% of the university students chose the *s*-genitive, while more 10<sup>th</sup> grade students (70%) and less 12<sup>th</sup> grade students (59%) opted for the *s*-genitive. This could be seen as an example of 12<sup>th</sup> graders relying less on animacy and more on the length of the possessor; therefore, they could not be taking into

account animacy as much and focusing on weight. It can be noted that 12<sup>th</sup> graders chose the *s*-genitive more often for the inanimate short/long condition (*the hotel's elegant lobby*) compared to university students (35%) and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students (33%). The rule would have been to prefer the *of*-genitive since it is both inanimate and long, but it could also be seen that 12<sup>th</sup> graders prefer to leave the longer part to the end (*the hand of the dark man/the hotel's elegant lobby*) which could show that they do rely on intuition more than any grammar rules. All groups have also preferred the *of*-genitive for the inanimate neutral condition (*the chair's leg*), with university students choosing it the most (70%), 10<sup>th</sup> graders in the middle (61%) and 12<sup>th</sup> graders as the lowest (54%).

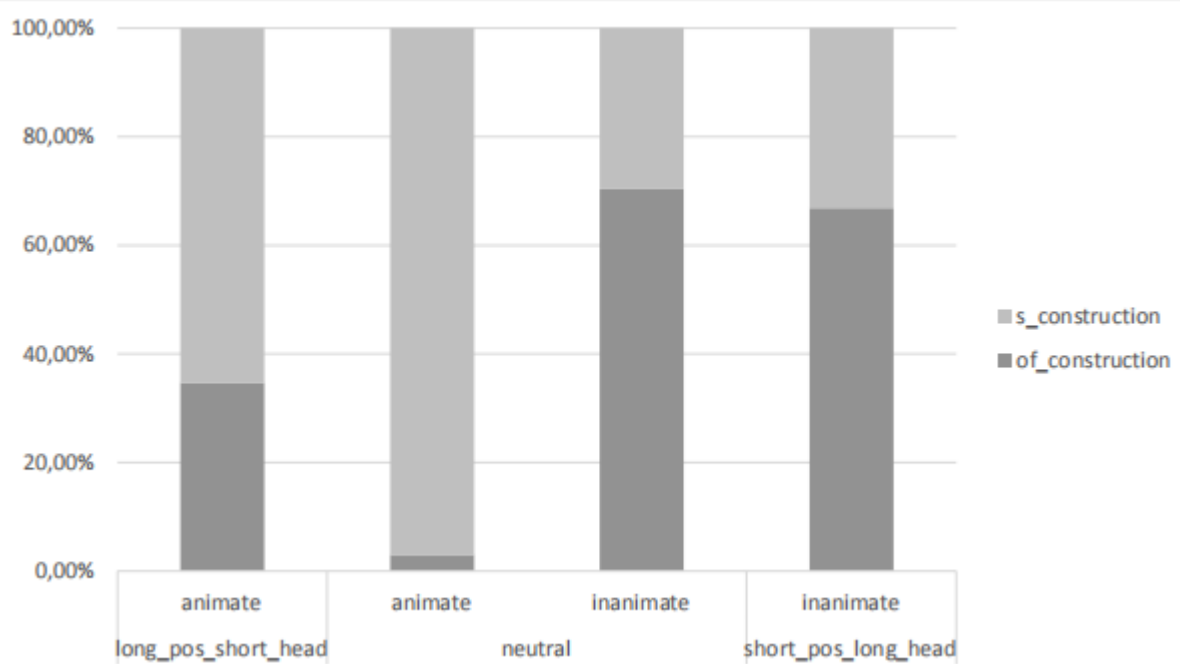


Figure 6. Results of Tera's (2018: 25) questionnaire.

All groups preferred the *s*-genitive in the animate condition and the *of*-genitive in the inanimate condition. The greatest difference can be seen in the animate long/short condition (*the dark man's hand*) where even more 10<sup>th</sup> graders chose the *s*-genitive compared to advanced groups. This could mean that the youngest group relies more on animacy than other factors when choosing genitives. In the neutral conditions, the

12<sup>th</sup> grade group, although preferring the *of*-genitive, did not seem as confident in their choice because of it being near 50% in both the neutral and short/long condition. Simultaneously, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade group preferred the *of*-genitive more in the inanimate short/long condition than the groups of university students and native speakers .

When looking at the groups of university and high school students, it can be seen that university students and native speakers seem to prefer the *of*-genitive in the inanimate condition. Whether this is because of their higher language level and therefore better intuition or them being better at distinguishing animate and inanimate possessors compared to the younger counterparts is unclear without more background information on the participants. Yet, the conclusion could be made that a better understanding of a language makes it easier to choose between genitives, considering animacy and inanimacy. The case of high school students choosing the *of*-genitive for the animate neutral condition more often compared to the advanced groups is peculiar. Previously the claim was made that Estonians might find the *of*-genitive more difficult, so it would make sense for the younger students to opt for the *s*-genitive due to familiarity.

There might be some aspects the high school students notice more because their knowledge of grammar is not as advanced as that of university students. Examining the forced choice questionnaire, it can be noted that some genitive choices could have been made because of pronunciation difficulties. As an example, *the chair's stuffing* might be difficult to say, therefore *the stuffing of the chair* would be the better option. Likewise, the meaning of words could also have had an influence, such as with *the casket's head*. For students who are not familiar with the multiple meanings of the word *head*, it might seem a strange phrase (they might only connote it with the body part), so they prefer *the head of the casket*.

It can be argued that native English speakers' genitive choices are more correct than non-native speakers'. If this were the case, it can be seen that university students have a higher level of English grammar concerning genitive, since the two groups had similar choices in the forced choice task. It should also be noted that native speakers usually do not need to follow any grammar rules since they rely on intuition. Therefore, the group of university students could be considered the most skilled when it comes to the knowledge of grammar. Perhaps the inanimate short/long condition displays this the best: fewer high school students and native speakers chose the *of*-genitive compared to the university students. Considering Rosenbach's (2005) two rules, it is inanimate and also quite long, so the *of*-genitive should be the one preferred here. This cannot be confirmed since the educational background of native speakers is not as familiar as is that of the non-native participants, so only assumptions can be made about their knowledge of grammar.

In this paper, the idea was also considered whether previous context influences the students' genitive choice. Figure 5 shows the results for this. In cases where the *of*-genitive was previously mentioned, it can be seen that the *s*-genitive was chosen almost as often (51%) as the *of*-genitive (49%). There is no such difference if the *s*-genitive had occurred previously, as the *s*-genitive is still the prevailing choice (79%). This could mean that people are hesitant when writing several *of*-genitives but this does not seem to apply to the *s*-genitive. It can be assumed that the previous *of*-genitives in the forced choice task did influence some students, making their genitive choice slightly impartial. Although it might be impossible to create a situation where a person's genitive choice was uninfluenced by any extraneous factors, it is necessary to study one factor at a time, as was said by Altenberg (1982). The repeated use of *s*-genitives also confirms Szmrecsanyi's (2005) claim that previous

mention might make the person choose it again. The use of the *of*-genitive, however, disputes this as people avoided reusing it. It might be likely that the students did not consider previous context and preferred the *s*-genitive because it was simpler. It would be interesting to see how different gender and age groups answered, as Szmrecsanyi (2005) mentioned this in his work as well, and this could be something to be studied in the future.

Having looked at native speakers', non-native university students' and non-native high school students' genitive choices, there are definitely patterns that every group follows, but with certain differences that were discussed. Ultimately, it is difficult to find conditions where the persons' genitive choice is not influenced by absolutely any other factors beside the one chosen by the researcher. The impact of previous context was considered in this paper, indicating that it might have influenced some people. To fully understand how the participants made their genitive choices, qualitative research should be conducted, so that the previous language level would be known to the researcher. That way it would be possible to know what the participants actually know about English genitives and whether their choice is based on rules, intuition or any other factor.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis gave a short overview of the previous work done on genitive alteration with the aim to see which aspects influence a person's choice. To observe language learners' preferences, a forced choice task was carried out among Estonian high school students. The forced choice task was taken from Rosenbach's work (2005) on native English and it was also used in Tera's bachelor's thesis (2018) on Estonian learner English at the university level. Both of these studies are important as their results are compared to the results of the present thesis. Unlike the two previous studies, this thesis also views the aspect of previous context, whether a genitive variant has been used in a previous sentence, and analyses how this affected the choices made by the students who participated in the questionnaire.

The results of the questionnaire showed that 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students chose genitives very differently from one another. The 10<sup>th</sup> grade group was closer to the native speakers in their genitive choices, while the 12<sup>th</sup> grade made more unclear choices, e.g. in both inanimate cases their answers were almost split 50-50%. High school groups also differed from the university level students, because the results of the latter were extremely similar to those of native speakers.

It can be seen that animacy has had an influence in 10<sup>th</sup> graders' choices. The same cannot be said for 12<sup>th</sup> graders as some of their results show they are influenced by weight while others show animacy effects, overall this group seemed to make less clear choices than the 10<sup>th</sup> grade group. One of the reasons why the results of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade are different is that the students' previous experience with genitives is different as is the time and method they have been taught this topic in school.

The results for previous context showed that for the *s*-genitive, students were more likely to choose it again compared to the *of*-genitive. This could mean that previous context did not influence the students in the way as Szmrecsanyi (2005) claimed. His study made overall claims that if a variant appears, it is likely chosen again. However, these differences may be due to the fact that the two studies have used different methodology.

Although the present thesis shows that there are some clear strategies that the high school students followed when completing the forced choice task, no simple claims can be made as to what is the reason behind their choices. Both groups seem to be influenced by the animacy and weight of the possessor, but the two high school groups made very different genitive choices. If another study was to be conducted with Estonian learners of English, it would be a good idea to find out the background of the participants and their previous knowledge of genitives overall.



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# RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Diana Taal**

**The English Genitive Choices of Estonian Secondary School Students**

**Eesti gümnaasiumi õpilaste inglise keele omastava konstruktsiooni valikud**

bakalaureusetöö

**2020**

Lehekülgede arv: 37

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Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on anda ülevaade genitiivi ehk omamist väljendavata konstruktsioonide varieerumisest inglise keeles, konstruktsioonide omavahelistest erinevustest ning valikute põhjustest. Selle jaoks sai läbi viidud sunnitud valiku katse gümnaasiumi õpilastega.

Töö esimeseks pooleks on teoreetiline osa, kus võetakse kokku omamist väljendavate konstruktsioonide kohta käivad varasemad uurimused. Sellele järgneb kokkuvõtte õppijakeelt puudutavatest uurimustest. Töö teiseks pooleks on empiiriline osa, kus tuuakse välja sunnitud valiku katse tulemused ja hiljem võrreldakse neid emakeelsete kõnelejate vastustega ja mitte-emakeelsete üliõpilaste tulemustega.

Küsitluse analüüsist selgus, et kaks gümnaasiumi gruppi erinesid omamist väljendavate konstruktsioonide valikute põhjal üksteisest olulisel määral ja neil oli vähe ühiseid jooni erinevalt varasemate uuringute küsitlusalustest.

Märksõnad:

Inglise keel, genitiivi kääne, õppijakeel, sunnitud valiku katse

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