The form of the pronoun preceding the verbal gerund: Possessive or objective?[1]

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1 Introduction

This paper concerns a much discussed usage issue in English, namely the variation between the possessive and the objective form of a pronoun preceding a verbal gerund. The construction is illustrated with examples (1a) and (1b) below:[2]

(1a) I don't like ***his*** *singing in the shower.*
(1b) I don't like ***him*** *singing in the shower.*

Ever since the first grammarians of English set out to describe the syntax of the language in the 18th century, it has been debated whether it is acceptable or grammatically wrong to use the objective form as in (1b), instead of the possessive determiner as in (1a). The present paper sets out to study the two forms across four text categories, and aims to relate corpus findings to the information and usage recommendations found in grammars and handbooks of today. It will be suggested that, although both constructions are considered acceptable today, there is an evident difference in usage between the text categories under study.

The paper is divided into two main parts. Firstly, the term *verbal gerund* will be defined, and the notion of *choice contexts* will be explained. I will also give a brief background to the debate of the usage issue under study. Secondly, I will go on to present the results of a study of the two forms carried out on a subset of the British National Corpus (BNC).

2 Preliminaries: Definition of the terms verbal gerund and choice contexts

In this paper, we are only interested in those instances of verbal gerunds with subject where there is a *choice* of form, i.e. whether a possessive determiner can be replaced with an objective pronoun and vice versa. Rosenbach (2003: 381ff.)

states that an important part of variationist studies is to distinguish these *choice contexts* from *categorical contexts*, i.e. contexts where only one form is possible. In order to define what choice contexts of the construction we are dealing with in the present paper, we need to make an important distinction between two *ing*-forms, one verbal and one nominal. Consider the following examples:

Verbal -*ing*, both options possible:
(2a) I do not approve of *your climbing ladders*. (BNC: CK0 3295)
(2b) I do not approve of *you climbing ladders*.

Nominal -*ing*, possessive required:
(3a) I do not approve of *your climbing* ***of*** *ladders.*
(3b) *I do not approve of *you climbing* ***of*** *ladders.*

The fact that *climbing* in (2) is verbal and not nominal is seen in that it takes a direct object, namely *ladders*. In contrast, *climbing* in (3) is nominal, since *climbing* is followed by a postmodifying prepositional phrase, *of ladders*. In other words, nominal gerunds can take modifiers, just as any noun. Hence, the only option in (3) is the possessive form, which will then function as a premodifier to the NP head *climbing* (Nunnally 1991: 362f). This shows that it is the verbal *ing*-form that is our relevant choice context here, and hence the construction we will be dealing with. Regarding terminology, different authors have suggested different sets of terms for the two forms. For example, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1187) calls the verbal form a *gerund-participle* form and the nominal form a *gerundial noun*[3], and Nunnally (1991) holds that they are *verbal-force* and *noun-force* gerunds, respectively. A third terminology is found in Hudson (2003), who distinguishes between *verbal gerunds* and *nominalizations*. *Verbal gerund* is the term used in the present paper, and I will also term the preceding pronoun the *subject* of the verbal gerund clause, following Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1189f.).

Quite naturally, the subject of a verbal gerund clause does not have to be a single pronoun. It can have the form of any NP, for example *London*, *the woman I saw in the street*, *one of them*. In the study of NPs other than pronouns, the issue would be whether the NP in question can be inflected with an *s*-genitive or not before the verbal gerund. However, this study will focus on pronouns only.

3 Historical background and previous research

Having defined the syntactic properties of the construction under study, I proceed to discuss *why* the variation between possessive and objective is of interest. In the more recent standard grammars of English, such as Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1194) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1192), it is stated that both the possessive and the objective form before the verbal gerund are correct and acceptable, but that the possessive is used in more formal contexts. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1192) note that "modern usage manuals generally do not condemn non-genitives altogether [...], though they vary in tolerance of them, the more conservative ones advocating a genitive except where it sounds awkward, stilted, or pedantic [...]".

It may strike the modern reader as rather implausible that the objective form should *not* be acceptable, and it is interesting to ask *why* the choice of pronoun form has become an issue of debate in the first place. According to Peters (2004: 229), the issue goes back as far as to prescriptivists of the 1700s, who claimed that the possessive was the only correct form, and contended that the objective should be banned. However, these prescriptive views were later criticised in the scholarly grammars of the 20th century. For example, Kruisinga (1932: 460) stated that schoolchildren were taught to use the possessive form by teachers who used Latin grammar as a model for the English grammar, and that this was a severe mistake. The Danish grammarian Otto Jespersen also took the liberal standpoint. In the years 1925–1926, Jespersen and the notorious prescriptivist H. W. Fowler argued over the matter in *S.P.E. Tracts*. Fowler (1925: 44) held that the objective construction was "indefensible", and Jespersen (1926: 148, 150) fought back, calling Fowler an "instinctive grammatical moralizer" and that "each language surely has a right to be judged on its own merits".

As many readers will recognise, the usage issue has lived on into the 21st century. In the linguistic literature, a great deal has been published on the syntactic problems connected with the construction. Many authors have suggested different analyses and interpretations. However, to my knowledge, a very limited amount of research has been carried out so far on the aspect of variation across different genres, and this is where my research is intended to fill a gap. There is one very recent study by Heyvaert *et al.* (2005), which is carried out on two parts of the COBUILD corpus, spoken language and newspaper texts. The present study contrasts that of Heyvaert *et al.* by including four text categories instead of only two, and it might therefore give a more nuanced picture of how pronoun form before verbal gerunds varies across text categories. Also, Heyvaert *et al.*'s two subcorpora are dissimilar in size, whereas my subcorpora all consist of one million words, thus making direct comparisons between the cate-

gories simpler. Throughout the following sections, I will refer back to Heyvaert *et al.*'s study where applicable.

4 Material and method

As already stated, it is widely claimed that grade of formality affects the choice between the possessive and the objective. Peters (2004: 229) says "The choice of the possessive makes the sentence rather formal, while the use of the object pronoun is acceptable in most everyday kinds of writing". Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1194) mean that the possessive form "is often felt to be awkward or stilted". In the light of these statements, I now move on to investigate the distribution of the possessive and the objective forms in present-day English across four text categories. The main question to be answered is: to what extent is the possessive still used? For example, is the possessive form used at all in spontaneous, spoken conversation?

The material used is a four-million-word subset of the British National Corpus, called the BNC Baby.[4] This corpus is divided into four text categories, each containing one million words: Academic Prose, Fiction, Newspaper Texts and Spontaneous Conversation. These text categories follow the genre classification scheme developed for the BNC by David Lee (2001). The text categories chosen to be included in the BNC Baby are the same as those used by Biber *et al.* in the *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (1999), and the student version of this work from 2002. The BNC Baby was, in fact, designed to match the student grammar and its workbook.

The phrases searched for were possessive determiners and objective pronouns immediately preceding an *ing*-form, according to Figure 1:

Possessive determiners		**Objective pronouns**	
my		me	
your	V-*ing*	you	V-*ing*
his		him	
her		her	
its		it	
our		us	
their		them	

Figure 1: Items searched for in the BNC Baby

Searches for these pronouns immediately followed by an *ing*-form entailed two methodological problems. Firstly, verbal gerunds and nominal gerunds are not necessarily tagged differently in the BNC. Secondly, a rather high error rate in the tagging was noticed. Due to these facts, all *ing*-forms were included as to make sure that no pronoun + verbal gerund was overlooked. Naturally, this led to the searches yielding a large number of irrelevant examples, which had to be deleted from the material. These instances, of mainly six types, are exemplified in (4)–(9):

(4) trouble sort of thing, but er <pause> I don't know whether they bought it thinking they'll have all this money or what but er
KD8 6601 (conv.)

(5) I can see him playing an anchor role in midfield.
K4S 1172 (news)

(6) He was still in his riding clothes, well-cut jodhpurs and an old tweed jacket.
J54 1035 (fict.)

(7) In Dr Johnson's all too familiar phrase, opera is an exotic and irrational entertainment. Is it becoming more irrational and exotic than it can handle?
AJF 113 (news)

(8) But then your implying something aren't you
KD0 692 (conv.)

(9) He wants to know, for example, the risk among 100 people aged over 80 of any of them needing care over the next five years – because a carer dies, they have a stroke, or they develop dementia.
FT1 1224 (acad.)

First, in (4) and (5), the *ing*-form is a present participle, not a gerund. In (5), we have a construction found with certain complex-transitive verbs such as *see*, *hear*, *catch*, and *find*. These verbs take a direct object, in this case *him*, and *playing* is then the object complement (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1192). *Riding* in (6) is a part of the compound *riding clothes*. Quite a number of hits had to be deleted due to inverted word order in questions such as (7), or because the transcriber has mistakenly written *your* instead of the contraction *you're*, as in example (8). Here, the tag question *aren't you* following the utterance should have given the transcriber a hint that the wording should have been *you are*. See

further Berglund (2005: 51f.) for a fuller account on problems with the word *your* in transcriptions of spoken English. Finally, (9) is an example of a pronoun being a part of a longer NP, and since this study looks at single pronouns only, constructions like (9) will not be considered here.

5 Results: Pronoun variation across text categories

With all the irrelevant instances deleted, the searches of the four-million-word corpus had yielded a total of 300 verbal gerund clauses with pronominal subject: 65 with the possessive form and 235 with the objective form. Table 1 shows the distribution of *possessive determiners* preceding verbal gerunds:

Table 1: Possessive determiners preceding verbal gerunds (raw frequencies)

POSS.	*my*	*your*	*his*	*its*	*our*	*their*	*Total*	
Acad.	2	1	7	9	1	7	27	41.54%
Fiction	7	2	9	0	0	3	21	32.31%
News	3	1	5	2	1	4	16	24.62%
Conv.	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1.54%
Total	13	4	21	11	2	14	65	100.0%

65 examples of a possessive determiner followed by a verbal gerund were found. The construction is mostly used in the Academic Prose category, followed by Fiction and News. Only one out of the 65 examples is found in Spoken Conversation. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1194) note that non-personal pronouns rarely take the possessive, but we actually note a high frequency of *its* in Academic Prose, which is most probably due to the technical, non-personal character of the texts in this category.

The information in Table 1 can now be compared to that in Table 2, which shows the distribution across text categories of *objective pronouns* preceding a verbal gerund:

Table 2: Objective pronouns preceding verbal gerunds (raw frequencies)

OBJ.	*me*	*you*	*him*	*it*	*us*	*them*	*Total*	
Acad.	2	2	4	0	0	5	13	5.5%
Fiction	22	18	24	8	4	6	82	34.9%
News	2	3	13	7	6	8	39	16.6%
Conv.	23	29	17	10	5	17	101	43.0%
Total	49	52	58	25	15	36	235	100.0%

Comparing Tables 1 and 2, we see that the objective construction is much more common overall – the corpus contains 235 instances of objective pronouns + verbal gerunds, and 65 instances of possessive determiners in the same construction. This finding tallies well with the results of Heyvaert *et al.* (2005: 77). However, Heyvaert *et al.* (2005: 79) suggest that possessive determiners do *not* predominate in formal language, but as can be seen in the tables, Academic Prose is a text category where we find more possessive than objective constructions. This hints that several text categories (that is, more than just two) should be examined in order to get a full picture of the usage of this construction.

Moreover, the distribution of verbal gerund clauses across text categories is completely different with possessive as compared to objective forms. Regarding the objective pronouns, spoken language is the category where most objective constructions are found – in as many as 43 per cent of the examples. Fiction comes second, with 82 instances (35%), then News, and Academic Prose is far behind in this respect.

6 Summary of basic findings

Results suggest that the possessive form is favoured in Academic Prose, but in other text categories, the objective form is preferred. The findings tally well with the points brought up by the grammars or handbooks consulted for this study, which tend to take a rather liberal standpoint regarding pronoun variation with verbal gerunds. None of them explicitly forbids the usage of the objective form, although they mention that the possessive is more formally correct.

I will briefly comment on the ambiguous pronoun *her.* Pronouns with female reference have the same form – *her* – for both the possessive determiner and the objective pronoun, and this form is therefore difficult to consider in studies on

pronoun variation such as the present one. Interestingly, however, it can be noticed that *her* is a very infrequent pronoun, with only 30 instances altogether. This can be compared to a total of 80 *his* and *him*, and there are more *his*/*him* than *her* in all text categories. Regarding the News category, this finding can be related to other studies, e.g. Caldas-Coulthard (1995: 232), who finds that in newspapers, men are much more often mentioned and quoted than women.

7 Influencing linguistic factors

Most authors describing the choice of pronoun form with verbal gerunds mention that, when the pronoun stands in initial position, the possessive form is preferred, as in (10) below:[5]

(10) *My leaving them* was similar to their having to let go of their children. My task had been to help these women to realise their own strengths and to speak out for themselves with courage and dignity.
A7Y 404 (news)

In *The new Fowler's dictionary of modern English usage*, Burchfield (1996: 610) maintains: "When the personal pronoun stands in initial position it looks certain that the possessive form will be preferred for a long time to come".

If the pronoun appears in initial position, it can be presumed that the entire verbal gerund clause (*my leaving them*) is the *subject* of its matrix clause. Regarding the suggestion that the position of the pronoun – and therefore, also the function of the verbal gerund clause – could be a determinant of pronoun form, the next step of the present study is to look at the function of each verbal gerund clause occurring in the material. The aim is to see whether further patterns can be discerned which are not generally discussed in grammars. This aspect is also brought up in Heyvaert *et al.*'s study (2005: 76f.), where seven different functions are listed. This set of functions is very similar to the set I found when classifying the instances in the BNC Baby. In my material, I distinguish eight different functions, all of which are exemplified in (10)–(17) (note that (10) has already been discussed):

(10) **Subject**
My leaving them was similar to their having to let go of their children.
A7Y 404 (news)

(11) **Postponed subject**
"Aye, well, I can well believe it. There wasn't much Walter didn't know about machines, and what he didn't know he could learn in five minutes. So *it* didn't make a scrap of difference, *him being backward*, like. He was always in work, right from the day he left school."

H9D 2792 (fict.)

(12) **Direct object**
Catherine: Hello. I hope you don't mind *me phoning you*, but where's the radiator key?

KP5 417 (conv.)

(13) **Prepositional object**
Hinds (1977) bases his paragraph divisions on a similar principle, quoting Grimes as support, and emphasising the significance of "participant orientation" – that is, the unity of a paragraph derives from *its being mainly about a single participant*.

F9V 1614 (acad.)

(14) **Adverbial (prepositional complement)**
It is clear the event has Wilson in its grip, despite *his being associated with it for only two years*. "I will be devastated if we don't win," he admits.

AHC 1730 (news)

(15) **Adjective complement (prepositional complement)**
Neither are West Ham fans likely to agree with his saying: "Our supporters are only interested in *us getting into the next round*."

A8N 609 (news)

(16) **NP postmodifier (prepositional complement)**
The degree of mental stimulation was absent. It was a very distressing time for him. The whole point of *his being there* was because of his condition.

ALP 405 (acad.)

(17) **Elliptic NP postmodifier (complement of excluded preposition)**
McLeish squatted unselfconsciously in the mud. "No point *me being clever*." He walked back along the side of the track and edged down to join the scene-of-crime squad.

AB9 1191 (fict.)

8 Results: Pronoun variation across functions

We now turn to the results of this part of the study. Tables 3 and 4 show the distribution of the above functions across text categories with possessive determiners and objective pronouns, respectively:

Table 3: Functions in matrix clause: possessive determiners

POSSESSIVE	*Acad.*	*Fict.*	*News*	*Conv.*	*Total*	
Subject	1	2	1	0	4	6.2%
Subject (postp.)	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Direct object	0	3	2	0	5	7.7%
Prepos. object	8	3	2	0	13	20.0%
Adverbial	6	4	2	1	13	20.0%
Adjective	2	1	1	0	4	6.2%
Noun phrase	10	8	8	0	26	40.0%
NP (ellipsis)	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
TOTAL	27	21	16	1	65	100.0%

Table 4: Functions in matrix clause: objective pronouns

OBJECTIVE	*Acad.*	*Fict.*	*News*	*Conv.*	*Total*	
Subject	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Subject (postp.)	0	4	0	5	9	3.8%
Direct object	7	44	19	62	132	56.2%
Prepos. object	4	12	6	4	26	11.1%
Adverbial	0	9	3	13	25	10.6%
Adjective	1	3	1	2	7	3.0%
Noun phrase	1	7	10	13	31	13.2%
NP (ellipsis)	0	3	0	2	5	2.1%
TOTAL	13	82	39	101	235	100.0%

Regarding verbal gerund clauses as *subjects* of matrix clauses, all the four clauses found in this function have a possessive determiner, which is an expected result. The *postponed* subjects (seven attested examples), with the anticipatory *it*, however, are only found with the objective form, as in (11) in the previous section:

(11) **Postponed subject**
"Aye, well, I can well believe it. There wasn't much Walter didn't know about machines, and what he didn't know he could learn in five minutes. So *it* didn't make a scrap of difference, *him being backward*, like. He was always in work, right from the day he left school."
H9D 2792 (fict.)

In Heyvaert *et al.*'s study (2005: 76), subjects both with and without anticipatory *it* are analysed as one function. Their searches of the COBUILD Corpus yielded three possessive and no objective instances in *The Times* (News) subcorpus. In their Spoken subcorpus, Heyvaert *et al.* (2005: 81) found seven possessive and as many as 39 objective forms with subject function. The results from the present study, where subjects without anticipatory *it* take the possessive form and postponed subjects take the objective pronoun, suggest that the two types of subjects should be analysed separately, since they do not behave in the same way. As suggested by among others Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1064) and Burchfield (1996: 610), it is the *initial position*, not the subject function, which is crucial.

Figures 2a–d further clarify the concepts of pronoun distribution across functions:

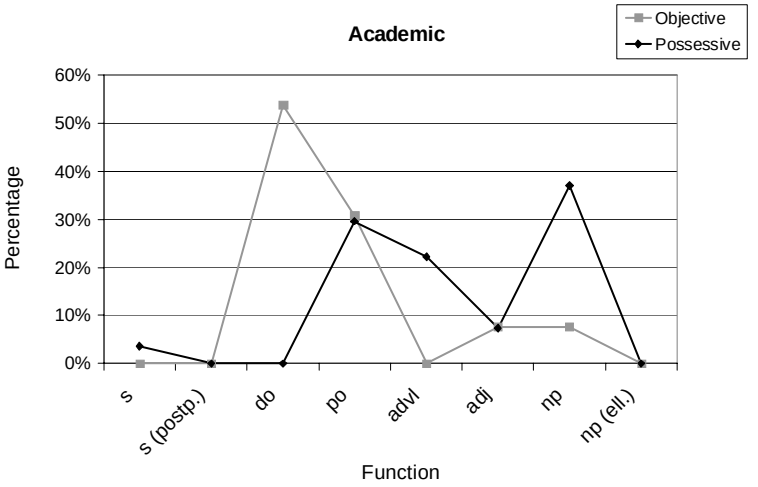

Figure 2a: Objective and possessive forms across syntactic functions: Academic Prose

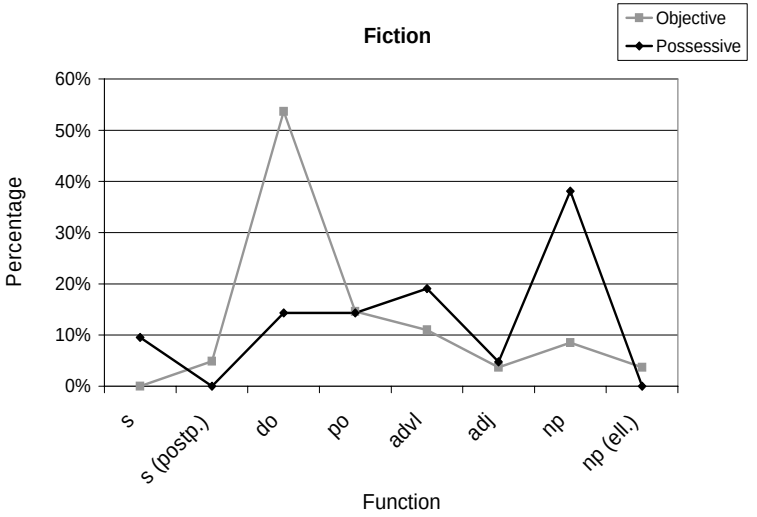

Figure 2b: Objective and possessive forms across syntactic functions: Fiction

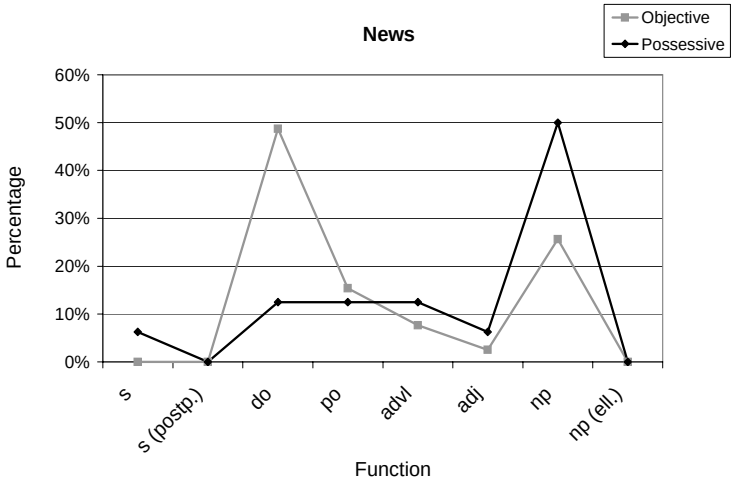

Figure 2c: Objective and possessive forms across syntactic functions: News

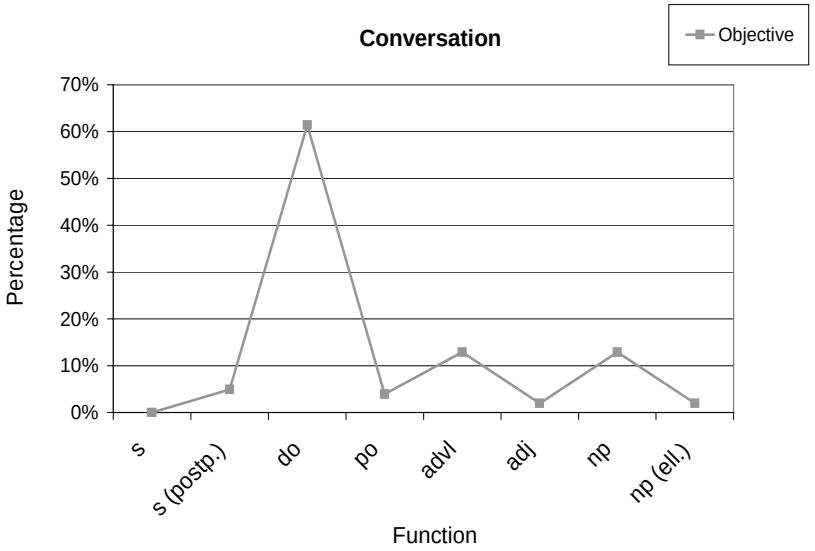

Figure 2d: Objective and possessive forms across syntactic functions: Conversation[6]

Figures 2a–d show that the distribution of the possessive and the objective form across different functions varies significantly. If we observe the lighter-coloured lines indicating objective forms, we find a peak at the point of the direct object function in all text categories. As for the possessive determiners (darker-coloured lines), the peaks are instead found at the point of the noun phrase, i.e. the instances of verbal gerund clauses which function as complements to prepositions in postmodifiers. Recall example (16), where *point* is the NP head and the PP *of his being there* the postmodifier:

(16) **NP postmodifier (prepositional complement)**
The degree of mental stimulation was absent. It was a very distressing time for him. The whole point of *his being there* was because of his condition.

ALP 405 (acad.)

Given these results, it seems that a preceding preposition (occurring in prepositional objects, adverbials and noun phrases) triggers the possessive form to a greater extent than a verb taking a direct object. Technically speaking, there are both prepositional phrases and verbs which allow both the possessive and the objective forms, but in reality, there is a distinct preference for one or the other case with one or the other clause type. Heyvaert *et al.* (2005: 80f.) also find this striking difference in distribution between different functions, and as I use a different corpus, my results help to further strengthen the suggestion that there is a significant difference in distribution. However, there are a few dissimilarities between the two studies which are worth pointing out. Heyvaert *et al.* (2005: 80) find that for their entire material, when not divided into their two text categories, the proportion of objective and possessive forms are much the same for every function, the objective form occurring in about 80–90 per cent of the attested instances. In my material, this figure varies between 54 per cent and 100 per cent depending on the function – except from the subject function, where all four instances attested have a possessive pronoun. This discrepancy could be due to the BNC Baby material being older than the COBUILD material used in Heyvaert *et al.*'s study.

The finding that variation in pronoun form is not only a matter of register and formality, but also a matter of syntactic function, provides an interesting starting-point for further research on the verbal gerund clause. This study only scratches the surface of the question, and further research is surely needed to make the patterns clearer.

9 Concluding remarks and suggestions for future research

This article has brought up points concerning the present-day usage of the possessive versus the objective form preceding verbal gerunds. The study took its starting-point in the claims made by various grammarians: that the possessive is the more formal of the two, and that prescriptivists of past and present have held that the possessive is the only grammatically correct form. Corpus results from the BNC subset BNC Baby show that verbal gerund with the objective form is indeed the most common construction overall, but that the possessive form is still prevailing in Academic Prose, traditionally viewed as a very formal text type. Conversation and Fiction are the two categories where most examples of the objective form are found. Moreover, there are interesting tendencies to be noticed regarding the *syntactic function* of the verbal gerund clause in a matrix clause. Objective pronouns are undisputedly most frequent when the matrix function is a direct object, whereas possessive determiners are mainly used in NP postmodifiers. Whether this is due to textual characteristics of the different text categories is still to be examined. It is also relevant to ask whether a language change is underway here. Has the distribution always been of the same proportions, more or less, or are verbal gerunds in direct objects losing their ability to take possessive determiners as subjects?

Among other aspects remaining to be investigated is the possible semantic difference between the possessive and the objective form as subjects of verbal gerunds. Consider again the examples from the introduction:

(1a) I don't like ***his*** *singing in the shower.*
(1b) I don't like ***him*** *singing in the shower.*

Peters (2004: 229) recognizes that the two constructions can have slightly different meanings. With the objective pronoun in (1b), the sentence can be interpreted so that it is the singing as such which is not appreciated, and with the possessive determiner in (1a) it is the whole action of *him singing* that annoys me. Furthermore, there is the question about regional difference. This study is limited to British English, but there might be differences in comparison to other varieties. Hudson (2003: 581) notes that "in American English possessives are (apparently) much more normal".

This study was carried out on a small four-million-word corpus, and more material is certainly needed to pin down usage patterns more exactly. There are, surely, still undiscovered patterns of usage regarding the verbal gerunds.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the First International Conference on the Linguistics of Contemporary English (ICLCE) in Edinburgh, June 2005.
2. Throughout the paper, exemplified verbal gerund clauses are put in italics, with the pronoun and the *ing*-form underlined. Bold face is used to accentuate significant differences between similar examples.
3. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1187f.) group together the gerundial form in *There's no point in breaking the seal* and the participle form in *They were entertaining the troops*, and label them *gerund-participle* forms. This study concerns the gerundial form only.
4. The BNC Baby was compiled in 2004 by Martin Wynne and Ylva Berglund at the Oxford Text Archive.
   For information, see http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/babyinfo.html.
5. When the subject of the verbal gerund is a full NP and not only a pronoun, there are other factors such as animacy and length of the NP which are of importance (e.g. Jespersen 1940: 125f.; Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1194).
6. Only the objective forms are attested here, since there was only one example of a possessive form in the Conversation text category.

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