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Saxon Genitive

Structure of the Saxon Genitive

A linguistic unit¹ is a stretch of language activity which is the carrier of a pattern of a particular kind. One of the properties of a unit is that it itself consists of "simpler" units and, in its turn, is an element of structure of another, more "comprehensive" unit which is immediately above it on the hierarchical scale of ranks of units. (This is the reason why phonemes, which comprise no lower-rank units, are not included among the units.)

The unit "word" consists of one obligatory free morpheme and an indefinite number of non-obligatory free or bound morphemes. Words can be classified into classes according to elements of various group structures at which they operate. Thus, there are classes of words which expound various modifiers in the structure of the nominal group.¹ The word "good"

¹ The linguistic theory adopted here is the one proposed by the London school, in particular M. A. K. Halliday and J. McH. Sinclair, because of its taxonomic quality. For our purposes, it suffices to say that language units are arranged in a hierarchical scale of ranks, where each higher rank includes one or more units of the rank immediately below. The ranks are: morpheme, word, group, clause, and sentence. Units show a definite structure. The structure of the nominal group, the unit in which we are interested, typically contains an obligatory element called the head(word), which in most cases is a noun or a pronoun; an indefinite number of non-obligatory modifiers, which precede the head; and an indefinite number of non-obligatory qualifiers, which follow the head. The nominal group "the ten fine stone houses which I saw yesterday" contains the modifiers "the", "ten", "fine", and "stone"; the head "houses"; and the qualifier "which I saw yesterday". The modifiers fall into four classes (with a number of subclasses) comprising determiners (*both, all, half, double, a, the, this, that, my, etc.*), ordinator (*one, two, third, etc.*), epithets (*fine, old, black, American, etc.*), and nominators (attributive nouns). The qualifier element is quite frequently rank shifted. This term is used to describe a situation in which the upward movement of the units is reversed and a unit of a

for example, consists of the free morpheme {good}, it is the epithet element in the structure of the nominal group "the good man", and belongs to the class of epithets.

The Saxon Genitive (SG) characteristically operates as the modifier element in the structure of the nominal group, as in

my father's house

what do you call him's son.

Modifier elements of nominal group structure are typically words while the qualifier elements are frequently downshifted groups or clauses (downshifted group: "the book *on the table*"; downshifted clause "the man *who arrived yesterday*"). As any modifier or qualifier is optional while the head is obligatory, this means that each modifier, or qualifier, must stand in a certain direct structural relation to its headword as its appearance depends on the existence of the headword, and that any one of them can be left out without impairing the structure of the group as a whole.² Thus we can say

all houses, the houses, ten houses, fine houses, stone houses

all the houses, all ten houses, all fine houses, all stone houses

all the ten houses, all the fine houses, all the stone houses

all the ten fine old stone houses (the maximally modified nominal group according to A. A. Hill)

Such direct connection of modifiers with the headword does not exist when the so-called specifying SG functions as a modifier. In "my father's house" *my* obviously is not directly related

higher rank functions as an element of the structure of a lower rank unit, as in the nominal group "the tree *in the garden*" the prepositional group "in the garden", which characteristically expounds the adjunct element of clause structure ("He went for a walk *in the garden*"), expounds the qualifier element of the nominal group.

² Although any modifier, or all of them, can be left out, not all modifiers can be used with all other modifiers. Restrictions here are mostly of a semantic nature. We can say "all the ten houses", but instead of "all" we cannot use "both", although "all" and "both" belong to the same subclass of determiners. The reason for this restriction is that what is described as existing as two cannot be described as existing as ten. But the restriction is purely semantic and as soon as the semantics changes "both" can be used with ordinals (numerals). It would probably not be too far-fetched to say "both eleven players" when referring to two teams of soccer players. Some modifiers of the determiner class are obligatory with singular count nouns in most environments. The nominal group "the green door" can be reduced to "the door", but not to "door", as the sentence *"Door is open" is not grammatical (although it is possible to say "He went from door to door"). The obligatory modifiers belong to the subclass of determiners containing such modifiers as "the", "a(n)", "this", "these", "that", "those", possessive adjectives, the Saxon Genitive, and others. The ordering of modifiers is rather fixed, with very little variation, even if we accept those variations which entail a change of meaning.

to the headword *house*. Its relation is to the genitive *father's*. This is even more obvious with "*what do you call him's son*" where no individual element of the "group genitive"³ *what do you call him's* can be combined with the head *son*, and the presence of all the elements is obligatory.

The SG is by no means the only type of modifier that shows a structure consisting of more than one obligatory element. A similar type of structure is seen also in the modifier "pay-as-you-go" of the nominal group "the pay-as-you-go policy". As units at each rank contain an obligatory element, the modifiers of the type "pay-as-you-go", "what do you call him", where all the elements are obligatory, must be units in themselves.

They obviously belong to ranks higher than that of the word, which means that their use at the group rank is untypical.

The nominal group occurring as the SG modifier in another nominal group differs from the above downshifted clause or sentence rank units in that it can occur as a single word, thus resembling typical nominal group modifiers of the word rank, and this is probably the reason why nominal groups are much more frequent as Saxon Genitives than other units.

The conclusion is that the SG is a unit different from the word and that even in cases where the SC actually consists of only one word, as in "John's father", that word actually belongs to a rank higher than the word. This is shown by the fact that this nominal group can be expanded in two different ways — either the SG is expanded:

good John's father

or the whole nominal group is expanded:

John's good father;

both SG and the nominal group containing it can be expanded by modifiers of the same class:

good John's good father.

On the other hand, the SG has as an element of its structure the bound morpheme $\{Z_2\}$, or "apostrophe s", and bound morphemes are characteristically elements of word structure.

³ This is a term commonly used when the apostrophe *s* connects more than one word to the head of the nominal group. As it will be shown later on, even in cases where the SG consists of only one word, a group is actually involved. Multiple-head genitive, where two nominal groups share one apostrophe *s*, is possible, as in "my father and mother's Bible". In addition to the apostrophe *s* both secondary heads share the modifier "my". This SG should be distinguished from coordinated SG where there is no apostrophe *s* sharing, as in "my father's and my mother's birthdays". In this case, there is no sharing of "my" and the primary head is in the plural.

We have said that the structure of a unit of the word rank characteristically consists of an obligatory free morpheme and one or more non-obligatory bound or free morphemes. To parallel the structure of the nominal group, we could say that the word consists of a non-obligatory modifier or modifiers, which can be free or bound morphemes; an obligatory head, which is always a free morpheme; and a non-obligatory qualifier or qualifiers, which are always bound morphemes, like this

([Mf/b]_n) Hf (Qb_n)

The structure of a word like "went" is basically the same (Hf "go" + Qb {D₁}), only with some rather complicated phonological and sequential relations.

Every Mf is a potential word, as "hair" in "hairpin".⁴

The structure of the SG shares with the word structure the Qb element, called in the case of the SC the "apostrophe s". In some cases, as in "John's", there seems to be an Hf element (*John*); in "what do you call him's", the whole string "what do you call him" acts as the Hf element. As we have shown, even in cases like "John's" where there seems to be a free morpheme head, the head really belongs to a nominal group as shown by the possible modification of "John's", as in "good John's father". The structure of the SG as a nominal group modifier consists, therefore, of two obligatory elements: a unit and the morpheme "apostrophe s".⁵ A unit can enter the

⁴ There are instances where a "word" consists of a free morpheme followed by a bound morpheme and this structure is again followed by a free and a bound morpheme. Such a word is "men-servants". Although it is useful to treat such words as single lexical entries, in fact they are two words in apposition, as shown by the fact that they have the same collocational ranges:

the man is tall (honest, faithful, etc.)

the servant is tall (honest, faithful, etc.).

(But not:

the hair is blond [curly, lank, etc.]

*the pin is blond [curly, lank, etc.]

As well as by concord:

the men-servants are here — the men are here — the servants are here

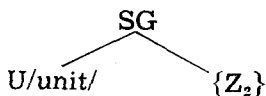
(But not:

the hairpins are on the table — *the hair are on the table — the pins are on the table).

⁵ In certain phonetic environments, the apostrophe s takes the form of zero, as in "Cassius' dagger". Zero is the rule with plural nouns forming their plurals by means of a sequential morpheme: "my aunts' husbands".

The SG is not the only nominal group modifier which is a nominal group in itself. A very frequent type of such modifiers are the so-called "attributive nouns" as in "a corner house". In "a first rate player" the attributive noun "rate" has "first" as a modifier of its own.

SG structure with the bare obligatory element of its structure (*John's father*) or the obligatory element accompanied by some non-obligatory element(s) of the structure of the rank-shifted unit concerned (*John's father* → *good John's father*; *the man's son* → *the man I met yesterday's son*). In this way, the structure of the SG can be represented as:

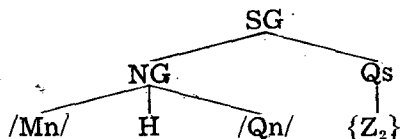


Types of the Saxon Genitive

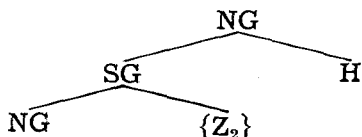
The SG can be, at least potentially, any unit. It seems, however, that the only units occurring in SG with any frequency are the group and the clause. Of these two, the group is the more frequent by far. The SG consisting of a clause is felt as a nonce construction, often with a humorous overtone. Of the groups occurring in the SG construction, the nominal group is the most frequent.

We will concern ourselves only with the SG containing a nominal group.

The structure of the SG having a nominal group at U could be represented like this:

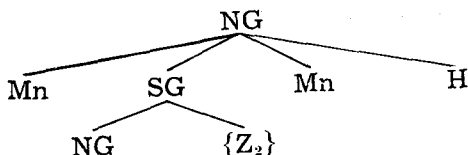


where H stands for an obligatory head [*man*], /Mn/ for an indefinite number of non-obligatory modifiers [*the*]², Q_n for an indefinite number of non-obligatory qualifiers [*I met yesterday*], and Qs for the apostrophe s: *the man I met yesterday's*. A nominal group containing a SG of this type as a modifier can be represented like this:



The higher NG will be called "primary nominal group" and its head the "primary head". The NG of the Saxon Genitive will be called "secondary nominal group" and its head the "secondary head".

Of course, the primary nominal group can have other modifiers in addition to the SG. They can either precede or follow the SG. The tree diagram to represent this would look something like this.



The Saxon Genitive is also an M, but as it differs from other modifiers, it has been assigned the symbol SG to distinguish it from other typical modifiers.

Specifying and Classifying Saxon Genitive. The stress intensity of the head of the SG (secondary head) and of the head of the primary nominal group in which the SG acts as a modifier distinguishes two types of SG. The type having a stronger stress on the primary head is often called “specifying genitive” and the type with a stronger stress on the secondary head or and equal stress on both heads is termed “classifying genitive”.

This distribution of stress intensity is not the only feature that distinguishes these two types of SG. In addition to stress, they show marked differences in their relation to the primary head. There is also a difference in semantic restrictions on the secondary head.

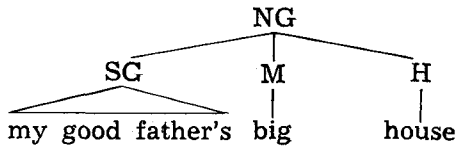
Structural differences. With the specifying genitive, the secondary head can have modifiers of its own and the primary head can have a separate set of modifiers. The modifiers of the secondary head precede the head; the modifiers of the primary head either precede the modifiers of the secondary head or they come after the secondary head. Another possibility is that both heads share a modifier which in this case precedes the secondary head.

Two separate sets of modifiers preceding their respective heads are seen in

my good father’s big house

where “my” and “good” modify “father”, and “big” modifies “house”. Of course, the whole SG phrase “my good father’s” also modifies “house”.

The structure of this nominal group can be shown in a tree diagram like this:

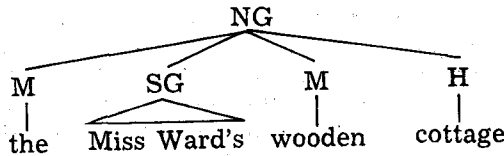


The equivalent group is “the/a big house of my good father”.

The following nominal group illustrates a structure where the modifiers modifying the primary head both precede the SG phrase and come after it:

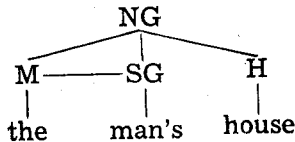
the Miss Ward’s wooden cottage

The structure of this group is



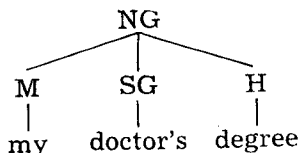
The equivalent group is “the wooden cottage of Miss Ward”.

A case of modifier sharing is seen in “the man’s house” where the definite article belongs to both heads, and the nominal group is equivalent to the group “the house of the man”. The structure of this group could be represented as



Modifier sharing is particularly obvious in cases where both heads stand for a unique referent, as in “the moon’s surface”. Here both nouns obviously take the definite article — “the surface of the moon”.

The relation of the classifying SG to the primary head is markedly different from the relation found with the specifying SG. With the classifying SG all modifiers, including the SG, potentially modify the primary head. In “my doctor’s degree” the modifier “my” modifies the primary head “degree” rather than the secondary head “doctor”, like this



This is not equivalent to the group “the/a degree of my doctor”.

In “my first dóctor’s degree”, “first” modifies “degree” (“first degree” rather than “first doctor”); but in “my first doctor’s hóuse” (specifying) “first” modifies “doctor” (“first doctor” rather than “first house”).

It would probably be more accurate to say that modifiers modify the classifying genitive and the primary head as a whole. It seems more satisfactory to analyze “my dóctor’s degree” as “my” and “doctor’s degree” than as “my degree” and “doctor’s degree”. The classifying genitive seems to be more closely linked to the primary head than the specifying genitive. This is shown by the fact that no modifier can intervene between the classifying genitive and the primary head: **“my dóctor’s honorary degree”* (for “my honorary dóctor’s degree”). All other modifiers must precede the classifying genitive. In this the classifying genitive strongly resembles attributive (juxtaposed) nouns:

an old garden wall → *a garden old wall

a honorary dóctor’s degree → *a dóctor’s honorary degree
Semantic differences. It seems that a wider semantic range is possible at the secondary heads with classifying SG than with specifying SG: “a fox’s táil” is less usual than “a fóx’s tail”.⁶ Similarly, other semantic restrictions on the secondary head of specifying SG are less strict with the classifying SG and it is found with nouns of such lexical sets with which the specifying SG would be very unusual: *a yárd’s distance*, *a dáy’s nóvice*, *a pín’s head*, etc.

Modifier Class of the Saxon Genitive

Specifying Saxon Genitive. The possible modifiers of the nominal group are usefully divided into the following classes:

⁶ Notice that with names of flowers, minerals and others, the SG always occurs in its classifying form: *cát’s-claw*, *cát’s-cradle*, *cát’s-ear*, etc.

Determiners (*the*), Ordinator (*ten*), Epithets (*fine*), and Nominators (*stone*): *the ten fine stone (house)*.

The order of the classes is fixed and the possible combinations of the classes are determined by semantic considerations.

All the classes fall into a number of subclasses. The subclasses of a class follow a fixed order and their combinations are semantically restricted. In the class of determiners the members of the different subclasses show the characteristics of a system in being mutually exclusive. This property is in fact the criterion by means of which the membership of the various subclasses is established. "The" and "my" belong to the same subclass because the combinations "the my father" or "my the father" are ungrammatical.⁷

In the epithet class, there is no mutual exclusiveness of the members of the same subclass, but when they are combined this is done mostly by means of coordination: "a charming and lovely girl".

The specifying SG belongs to the class of determiners. The class of determiners contains two major subclasses which are here given irrespective of other subdivisions due to concord and other considerations:

Subclass 1 is represented by *all*, as in "all houses".

Subclass 2 is represented by *the*, as in "all the houses".

For our purposes, Subclass 2 is particularly interesting. A member of this subclass is obligatory with every singular count noun. The sentence *"House is big" is ungrammatical because the singular count noun "house" is not modified by a modifier of Subclass 2. The sentence becomes grammatical if one of the following modifiers precedes the noun: *the*, *a*, *my*, *this* or *that*. The specifying SG obviously belongs to this subclass of "article equivalents" as its presence makes grammatical the occurrence of a singular count noun: "John's house is big".

If the SG belongs to Subclass 2, it cannot be combined with other modifiers of the same subclass, and a nominal group like "my father's house" should be ungrammatical. This nominal group, however, is grammatical without any doubt. The explanation is that "my" modifies "father" rather than "house". If we want, therefore, to determine the subclass of the specifying SG we must try to combine it with another modifier of the same subclass in such a way that the other modifier can modify only the primary head. This is achieved

⁷ This particular mutual exclusiveness is not characteristic of all languages. In Italian, for instance, in some cases the sequence of the definite article followed by a possessive adjective is possible ("il mio buon padre"). In such languages the definite article and the possessive adjectives belong to different subclasses.

by placing the modifier after the SG: **"My father's the house"*. The negative result should show that these two modifiers belong to the same subclass.

It could be argued, however, that the group **"my father's the house"* is ungrammatical not because the SG and the definite article are mutually exclusive but because their ordering is wrong. This could resemble the results we would get if we try to combine "all" and "the" in such a way as to make "the" precede "all" — **"the all houses"*; whereas a different ordering gives a perfectly grammatical result — *"all the houses"*. Therefore, for reliable results, it is necessary to try also the reverse order and make the definite article precede the SG. In this case, too, the result is negative — **"the my father's house"*. This conclusively shows that the SG and the definite article belong to the same subclass of determiners. The same results are obtained also with other modifiers of the subclass represented by the definite article — **"that my father's house"*, **"a my father's house"*.⁸

We have said that members of the same subclass of determiners are mutually exclusive. This is true of various sets of members of the subclass. Members of the same set within the subclass are freely combined by means of coordination. Although we cannot say **"this my/my this house"*, it is quite grammatical to say *"this and that house"*.⁹ Due to their specific structural properties, Saxon Genitives differ from other determiners of Subclass 2 also in that they can be combined without coordination — *"John's father's big house"*.

We have shown that a nominal group containing an SG consists of two nominal groups, each with its own head. In *"my father's house"* the heads are "father" (secondary head) and "house" (primary head). Both heads are of the singular count class and they both require a Subclass 2 modifier. Such

⁸ Of course, the nominal group **"ten my father's houses"* is also ungrammatical but for different reasons. Its unacceptability is a consequence of the wrong ordering of classes rather than of mutual exclusiveness of members of the same subclass. As soon as the order of the classes is changed, the group becomes grammatical — *"my father's ten houses"*.

⁹ It seems that, with modifiers, we should distinguish between subclass membership and the membership in various sets within a subclass. Sets seem to be established on a semantic basis. In this way, the criterion of mutual exclusiveness is concerned with the sets within a subclass, it does not concern members of individual sets. This seems to throw an interesting light on the class of epithets. In this class of modifiers, two possibilities seem to be indicated. One is that all members of a subclass belong to the same set and they can all be combined by coordination. The other is that also within different subclasses of epithets there are mutually exclusive sets which have not yet been established.

a modifier of "father" is "my" while "father's" modifies "house" as an article equivalent. This would mean that only the secondary head can select a modifier of Subclass 2, while for the primary head the only modifier of this subclass would be the SG. Consequently, both "the house of my father" and "a house of my father" would result in "my father's house".

Although two modifiers of Subclass 2 cannot be used to modify the same head,⁹ the set of possessives can be combined with other modifiers of Subclass 2 if the possessives follow the head as a qualifying prepositional group:

a house	}	*a my (my a)	house	/ my house (with the
my house				\ deletion of "a")
				a house of mine
				(explicit form with
				both modifiers ex-
				pressed)

The same construction occurs also with the SG:

a house	}	*a fathers (father's a)	house	/ my father's house
father's house				\ a house of my
				father's

The combination "a father's house" is possible, but the indefinite article refers to "father", and the "house" is unmarked as regards definiteness or indefiniteness.

Now it becomes clear that what we described earlier in this paper as "modifier sharing" in fact represents the deletion of the determiner class modifier of the primary head. The nominal group "the man's house", therefore, should not be analyzed as "the man's the house" but as "the man's the/a house", and this nominal group actually has two equivalent groups if the prepositional genitive is used instead of the SG, the equivalents being, "a house of the man" or "the house of the man".

From what has been said, it seems that determiners preceding the specifying SG characteristically refer to the SG, and nominal groups like "the Miss Ward's cottage", with the definite article referring to the primary head, are rare.

In most cases, however, the primary head modified by a SG containing a possessive is interpreted as being definite. Thus the group "my father's house" will in most cases be interpreted to mean "the house of my father" rather than "a house of my father". This is probably the reason why the explicit version with the "double genitive" is more frequent

with the primary head modified by the indefinite article. The explicit form "a house of my father's" is more usual than "the house of my father's", as this latter construction is usually expressed as "my father's house". The double genitive is more frequent with "that" or "this" modifying the primary head ("my father's that house"). This situation shows that the SG comes close to the meaning of the definite article, so much so that the occurrence of the SG and the definite article in the same NG, even at Q, is felt to be tautological (cf. "both [the] boys), but there is no such feeling with other submodifiers of the same subclass. Therefore "that house of John's" is more usual than "the house of John's".¹⁰

The specifying genitive with an indefinite head is unusual, the indefinite article being typically associated with the classifying genitive. A nominal group like "a boy's tóy" is not very usual, and both its explicit forms, with "toy" modified by either of the articles, would be very unusual — "a toy of a boy's", "the toy of a boy's". It seems that a noun cannot be qualified by a prepositional group containing a SG group modified by indefinite article. In such cases the apostrophe 's' is dropped — "a toy of a boy", "the toy of a boy". Another example is "He was a great admirer of Chaucer".

Classifying SG. This SG belongs to a class different from the one containing the specifying SG. This is clearly shown by the positions of these two genitives in respect to the ordinator class modifiers. The specifying genitive precedes the ordinators, that is it occurs in the position characteristic of determiners — "the doctor's two degrés". The classifying genitive follows ordinators — "two dóctors degrés".

The classifying genitive can occur combined with the specifying genitive, with the deletion of the head of the specifying genitive — "John's dóctor's degree". In this case, too, the ordering relative to an ordinator is preserved — "John's two dóctor's degrés."

The place of the classifying genitive after ordinators leaves only two possibilities for the class of the genitive — it could be either an epithet or a nominator. If we try to use a nominator and a classifying genitive in the same nominal group, we see that the SG comes after the nominator, as in "a straw bird's nest".

¹⁰ This is a wider question concerning the type of "definiteness" imparted to a noun by the demonstratives on one hand and the definite article on the other. Essentially, the demonstratives often imply "there are other such that differ from this one in some way" while there is no such implication in the definite article. "That man is good" could imply that there are other men who may not be good. "The man is good" has no such implication.

It also follows all subclasses of epithets:

- a lovely f \acute{o} x's tail
- a lovely big f \acute{o} x's tail
- a lovely big brown f \acute{o} x's tail
- a lovely big brown silken f \acute{o} x's tail

From what has been said, it would seem that the classifying SG forms a class of its own and that the class immediately precedes the primary head of the nominal group.

The places of the two types of genitives could be represented like this:

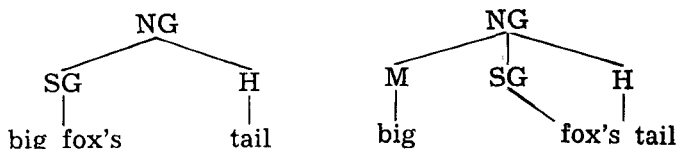
- SG, specifying — Ordinator — Epithets — Nominator —
- SG, classifying — Headword, as in

John's three lovely big yellow silken straw bird's nests.

This genitive is quite usual with the indefinite article, where the article modifies the primary head, while the secondary head is not marked as either definite or indefinite. Also in this respect, the classifying SG resembles attributive nouns with their unmarkedness for definiteness.

Ambiguity

We have seen that the specifying genitive precedes epithets ("the major's stout wife"), while the classifying genitive follows them (a honorary d \acute{o} ctor's degree). Both genitives can have modifiers of their own — "good John's honorary d \acute{o} ctor's degree". With the specifying genitive, modifiers refer to the secondary head (my major's — wife); with the classifying genitive they can be logically connected with the primary head ("my degree" — "doctor's degree" → "my doctor's degree"). These relations are clear with determiners. With epithets, the situation becomes somewhat more complicated. In "the big fox's tail", the epithet "big" makes sense if it is combined with either head — "the big fox" or "the big tail", so that the nominal group can be interpreted as containing a specifying genitive modified by *big*, or a classifying genitive where the primary head is modified by *big*. Like this:



This kind of ambiguity is possible only with modifiers of the epithet class. It occurs only with the SC in the position of the classifying genitive, that is, when it immediately pre-

cedes the primary head. The nominal group "the major's stout wife" is not ambiguous, and the SG occurs in the specifying position. The same nominal group with the SG in the classifying position is ambiguous" "the stout major's wife."

According to my American informant, Mr. W. Browne, and I hope I am quoting him correctly, the nominal group with the SG in the classifying position in ambiguous cases does not show the stress distribution characteristic of the classifying genitive. If this is true, then it would seem that there are in fact three types of the SG instead of two. There is the specifying type ("the major's stout wife") which is not ambiguous. There is the classifying type, usually introduced by the indefinite article, with the genitive immediately preceding the head and with primary stress on the secondary head ("a stout májor's wife"). This type is also unambiguous. There is the third type with the classifying position but with the stress pattern of the specifying genitive ("the stout major's wife"). When an epithet can be logically connected with both heads, either head can be interpreted as being modified by the epithet.