**Why Expanded Possessives Are Not Partitives**
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Many quantifiers can appear before of plus a following DP in phrases like
(1) a. Many of several competitors’ bicycles [were destroyed in a fire.]
   b. At least two of most students’ term papers [got an A.]
(2) a. Many of those flights [were canceled because of a blizzard.]
   b. At least two of the five boats [sank in the storm.]
The expressions in (2) are generally analyzed as partitives. The superficial similarity
of those in (1) may suggest they also are partitives. However, the DP after of in them
is not definite, as Jackendoff (1977) and others have argued partitives require. Are
examples like those in (1) counterexamples to the Partitive Constraint requiring
definites? Or are examples like (1) actually instances of a different construction, and
not partitives at all?

Jackendoff (1977, p. 113) observed that possessives as well as DPs with definite
articles can follow a quantifier plus of, and some subsequent analysts appear to have
regarded examples like
(3) a. Many of these competitors’ bicycles [were destroyed in a fire.]
   b. At least two of the students’ term papers [got an A.]
as acceptable on account of the possessive DP following of in them being definite.
Nevertheless, all acknowledge that
(4) a. #Many of several bicycles [were destroyed in a fire.]
   b. #At least two of most term papers [got an A.]
are not acceptable in English, which indeed constitutes the primary evidence for the
Partitive Constraint. Does the acceptability of (1) then show that all possessives are
definite? Some linguists (e.g. those cited in Abbott 2004) seem to suggest that all
are. Others (including Jackendoff 1968) aver that the possessive DPs in (1) inherit
the non-definiteness of their possessor phrases, rendering their acceptability quite
problematic if they are partitives.

The most straightforward resolution of the conflict would be to recognize
equivalent for an expanded prenominal possessive construction.
In expanded possessives, the quantifier preceding of ranges over the domain of
possessions. Such a semantic rule gives expanded prenominal possessives like those
in (1) exactly the meaning speakers feel they have. It also avoids imposing
contradictory requirements on the partitive construction. But what about examples
like (3)? With a definite possessive DP after of, these could be analyzed either as
expanded prenominal possessives or as partitives. In fact, both analyses assign the
same meaning for examples like (3), although it arises via different semantic rules.

The different rules assign distinct meanings in more complex examples like
(5) Two of the ten boys’ books are missing.
When the possessor phrase is the ten boys (rather than two of the ten boys), two
quantifies over books. In this case the partitive rule makes (5) say two books are
missing. However, the expanded possessive rule makes (5) say that two books are
missing for each of the ten boys – up to twenty books altogether. The three-way
ambiguity of (5) confirms that examples like (1) are not partitives at all.
References


