In a syntactic quandary
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1. You can't always say what you want to say straightforwardly; sometimes, none of the possible modes of expression will quite do. In a syntactic quandary, you're stuck cobbling together something for the moment.

    Case in point: the possessive of certain coordinate NPs, in particular with a 1sg pronoun in coordination with a 3sg non-pronoun: *my and Kim's friends*? *Kim and mine's friends*? Or what?

    Turns out there are at least 16 attested resolutions of this particular combination, each with something to say on its behalf and each with something working against it.

2. Background:

AZ, 10/12/08: Coordinate possessives:
 http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=706

[from this posting]
What happens with coordinate NPs X *and* Y of this sort, for example *Kim and Sandy*, would seem, at first glance to be a simple matter of "logic":

> If the referents of X and Y are understood as forming a unit semantically (e.g. Kim and Sandy in concert), then the syntax should reflect that, with PS attached to the last word of the coordination: *Kim and Sandy's cars* 'cars associated with Kim and Sandy jointly'.

> But if the referents are understood as separately associated, semantically, with the referent of the modified head, then the syntax should reflect that, with PS "distributed over" the conjuncts, attached to each of the conjuncts: *Kim's and Sandy's cars* 'car(s) associated with Kim and car(s) associated with Sandy'.

In this view, "holistic" syntax is associated with holistic semantics, and "distributed" syntax with distributed semantics. A pretty picture — but it's not quite the world we live in.

As far as I can tell, people's preferences are to match holistic with holistic and distributed with distributed, but it's easy to find the crossed matchings ... The thing is, the holistic syntax is somewhat simpler (Brevity!), while the distributed syntax is somewhat more parallel (Symmetry!), so people are sometimes willing to sacrifice a clean syntax-semantics matching in favor of getting a satisying syntactic structure. That's the way of the world: you can't always get everything you want.

3. Two kinds of possessive marking:

     a. possessive pronouns: e.g. Dep(endent) *my*, Ind(ependent) *mine*, parallel to Nom(inative) *I* and Acc(usative) *me* (and the compound Refl(exive) pronoun *myself*)

     b. constituents marked with the PS suffix (in orthography, *'s*): *Kim's* (and in "group genitives" like *a friend of mine's bear* and *Kim and Sandy's house*)

(Note: these two schemes are significantly parallel in some ways, but also distinguishable. And there's no guarantee that all the uses of PS fall under a single generalization; they almost surely don't. In this paper I'll sidestep these issues.)

4. Favored resolutions (with *Kim* standing for a non-pronominal NP) from earlier Language Log discussions (comments on Mark Liberman's "Left dislocation" posting of 9/24/08 -- http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=629):

     (3) *me and Kim's* Nom [perhaps the most frequent, and recommended on some usage sites]

     Its me and my wife's first visit to the OBGYN this afternoon, what can I expect?

     [or the variant] (4) *Kim and me's* Nom

     a big thanks goes out for duane for being my wife and me's guide.

     (5) *my and Kim's* Nom

     Well here are my and my wife's cats.

     (6) *Kim's and my* Nom [my personal favorite]

     The closest I came was getting my third daughter to wrestle and pillow-fight on my wife's and my bed.

     (8) *mine and Kim's* Nom

     The photo board for LASC 2000-01 is done. Currently it is being displayed at mine and Tami's desk in the cave, but will be more widely available in a few days.

     (13) *Kim and my* Nom

     Dear Jerry, I wanted you to know how much I appreciated Betty and your presence at the services for Pat.

But there are at least 11 other attested resolutions.

5. The principles in conflict include two having directly to do with the morphosyntax-semantics interface:

  Match syntax to semantics: use holistic syntax for holistic interpretations, distributed syntax for distributed interpretations.

  Consistency: Use the possessive suffix PS consistently to mark possession on NPs, whatever their internal composition. [favors end-marking]

    And two opposed principles affecting the form of the coordinate NP:

  Brevity: Choose shorter expressions.

  Symmetry: Choose parallel syntax. [opposes both *I and Kim's* Nom and *Kim and I's* Nom]

    And two opposed principles having to do with ordering:

  Salience: Put 1sg pronoun first in a coordination.

  Politeness: Put 1sg pronoun second in a coordination.

    And two having to do with avoiding disfavored sequences:

  *Double Marking: Avoid 1sg+PS forms (*I's*, *me's*, *my's*, *mine's*), because they look like mistakes for possessive 1sg *my*. [opposes *Kim('s) and my's* Nom and *Kim('s) and mine's* Nom and their reverses, and more]

  *me and Johnny: Avoid *me* in non-object coordination. [opposes *me and Kim's* Nom and *Kim and me's* Nom]

    And, finally, two favoring particular classes of pronouns:

  Independent: Use Ind pronouns (like *mine)* in coordination, so that they will be accented (and to avoid disfavored *me* or *I*). [favors *Kim's and mine* Nom and *mine and Kim's* Nom]

  Reflexive: Use Refl pronouns (like *myself*) in coordination, so that they will be accented (and to avoid disfavored *me* or *I*). [favors *Kim('s) and myself's* Nom and *myself('s) and Kim's* Nom]

6. [from the LLog posting:]

... when you try to coordinate possessives and use the result attributively, you're in some trouble, at least if you're going for the holistic interpretation. None of the possibilities — and at least 16 are attested — is entirely satisfactory. There is, in a very real sense, a gap in your (internal) grammar, which you have to cope with my patching, as best as you can. Some people choose one variant and run with it; many people dither (and, often, comment on their perplexity). Meanwhile, you have to speak, or write, SOMETHING.

The gap phenomenon has been noted explicitly for some time; my own recognition of it came from Chuck Fillmore, at least thirty years ago (I am not attributing priority to him, only saying that this is where I got the idea.) In any case, gaps provide yet another source of variability in language.

A crucial point here is that though each variety of a language does exhibit great systematicity in many respects, it's also a kluge (nod to Gary Marcus's recent book *Kluge* here), of regularities from here and there, pasted together. Sometimes these conflict with each other, sometimes there are cases not covered by any of the regularities.

This HAS to be the case. There is no Great Programmer of Language L who writes the code for L, debugs it, and checks to make sure it covers all the eventualities. Even if there were, how could people access the code? Instead, what people have to do is discern, as best they can, regularities in the language around them from what they hear and read. This is piecemeal process, and it works differently for different people (because they have different experiences and because no one has, or could have, a panoptic view of the whole business).

7. It's not that certain content is inexpressible; it's just that there's no perfect solution to expression via a particular bit of structure (in this case, coordinate possessive determiners). There are ways around the problem by recasting the material entirely – but in speech and in informal writing, this strategy isn't easily available: you get embarked on a structural choice and can't easily do a large-scale revision. So you cope as best you can.

8. Another case: agreement with disjunctive subjects:
> Neither Barbara nor I ?*am* ?*is* ?*are* able to …
> If you or I ?*am* ?*are* there, …

Agreement with disjunctive subjects 4/4/09:
  http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1293
More variation than expected 4/5/09:
  http://arnoldzwicky.wordpress.com/2009/04/05/more-variation-than-expected/
He or she are 4/6/09:
  http://arnoldzwicky.wordpress.com/2009/04/06/he-or-she-are/
sg *or* sg = pl 10/24/11:
  http://arnoldzwicky.wordpress.com/2011/10/24/sg-or-sg-pl/