Russian second genitive: partitive or not?
a corpus study

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As other case-inflecting Indo-European languages, Russian has a high degree of homophony between various case forms that may be distinguished only through comparing them across inflection types. Thus, zero marking is used on nominative and accusative singular as well as genitive plural. Some case syncretisms may be explained in functional terms: accusative may be identical to the nominative or genitive depending on the animacy. Some cases exist for a small subclass of nouns only (cf. Zalizniak 1967, Corbett 2008). Thus, second locative is only distinct from the regular locative (prepositional) case on some locational nouns, and the new (truncated) vocative exists for human nouns in the first declension. These ‘secondary’ cases have been analyzed in e.g. (Plungian 2002) and (Daniel 2009).

Second genitive, or partitive, is not only a secondary case in this sense, but is also always identical to the dative. It is typical for mass nouns of the second declension (чай ‘tea’, суп ‘soup’). The form occurs in those contexts in which one would expect an accusative (which, for these nouns, is identical to the nominative) or a genitive. As noted in (Zalizniak 1967), second genitive may be substituted by the genitive in virtually all contexts, similarly to the new vocative (which may be substituted by a nominative form) but unlike the second locative (changing second locative to regular locative / prepositional case creates clear stylistic and semantic contrasts).

An established fact about the second genitive is that its scope decreases over time, not only in terms of nouns on which it occurs but probably also in terms of syntactic/semantic contexts where it appears; this is similar to what happens to the second locative but different from the new vocative which is an innovation that quickly expands. The present research will focus on residual second genitive and its dynamics in the Russian literary texts. It is a micro-historical research in terms of (Plungian 2009) and is based on considering the distribution of the second genitive in the Russian National Corpus (www.ruscorpora.ru). The study considers the distribution of the three competing forms (accusative / genitive / second genitive) for various nouns and in different constructions (direct object vs. measure constructions vs. etc), tracing where the form is being preserved and where it is being lost.

A rough classification of the contextual functions of the second genitive includes adnominal uses in measuring contexts (два бутылки лимонаду ‘two bottles of lemonade’), direct object in mass-noun or similar contexts, quantified or not (я не собирался пить ни коньяку, ни шампанского ‘I was not going to drink either brandy or champagne’, добавили немного сахара ‘they added some sugar’), or subject, typically quantified (полно песку в волосах ‘plenty of sand in the hair’). In addition to these clearly partitive contexts, the same form is used in prepositional contexts (ушла из дома дочь ‘his daughter left them’), or some more specific uses such as descriptive (высокого роста ‘tall’, lit. ‘of a high tallness’) and various idioms (без толку ‘without sense, purposeless’). These functions are summarized in the following table:
| **adnominal** | with a quantifier |
| **direct object** | contrasted with accusative |
| **subject** | negated or quantified |
| **idioms** | often, semantically partitive |
| **prepositional** | all kinds of prepositions, including spatial contexts |
| **descriptive** | with a number of nouns depicting human features, both external and internal |

While the first four functions are typical of partitives, the last two are not connected to them. Judging from the data in the Russian National Corpus, the share of prepositional uses is so high that, according to sample counts, they alone account for more than one third of the occurrences. May this category be called a partitive? According to the observed change in statistics of the usage between two time cuts (the last third of the 19th century vs. from 1980 to the present), the partitive uses of the second genitive fall down (except idioms and direct object functions), while the share of the prepositional uses increase, from approx 27 to over 35%. More generally, the frequency of the second genitive seems to decrease gradually in the Russian National Corpus from 615 words per million in 1866-1900 to 362 words per million in 2001-to-the-present fiction and 232 words per million in 1990-to-the-present press. In other words, according to these calculations, the category is in decline, and its uses in the partitive domain fall quicker than in the genitive domain.

Another important trend that is shown by the statistics is a gradual idiomatization of the category. While in the 1866-1900 period the second genitive occurs on 63 different lexical items, in the 1980-to-the-present subcorpus the number of the lexical items involved into second genitive formation falls to 24, yielding a mid-occurrence-per-item value increase from 1.6 to 4.1. Parallelly to this 'lexical idiomatization', the idiomatic expressions are the only category outside prepositional contexts whose share in the overall use of the second genitive increases over time.

To sum up all these statistics, the second genitive is both going own and becoming less partitive over time, the only relatively stable partitive function being the direct object position. In the same time, the category is being idiomatized in certain expressions and around certain lexical items, and especially under certain prepositions. All three clues indicate a possible trend from free variation between the regular and the second genitive to their complimentary distribution.
References:


