

# THE GENITIVE CASE

## *The Formation of the Genitive*

The genitive case is formed by means of the inflection -'s which is added to singular nouns and to irregular plural nouns. It is pronounced as [S] after any voiceless sound except a sibilant: *student's, Nick's*, [z] after any voiced sound except a sibilant: *friend's, Mary's, children's* and [iz] after a sibilant: *witch's, George's* .

The apostrophe is added only to regular plural nouns (*boys'*, *soldiers'*) and to Greek names in -s of more than one syllable: *Archimedes'* [a:kimi:di:z] *Law*, *Sophocles' tragedies*, *Euripides' plays*.

With other proper names ending in -s there is vacillation both in pronunciation and spelling, but most commonly the spelling is the apostrophe only while the pronunciation is [iz]. Thus, *Burns'* (or less commonly, *Burns's*) is pronounced [-ziz]. Cf. also *Dickens' novels*, *Jones' house* etc. where the pronunciation is [ziz].

With compounds, the inflection -'s is added to the final element: my *brother-in-law's children*, my *brothers-in-law's children*.

# *The Use of the Genitive*

- The genitive case is used to express a variety of ideas: possession, relationship, physical features and characteristics, non-physical qualities and measurements.
- The -'s genitive mainly occurs with animate nouns denoting personal names (*Jane's brother, Mr Wilson's library, George Washington's statue*), personal nouns (*the student's answer, the girl's letter*) and animals with personal gender characteristics mostly domestic, or those that are credited with some intelligence (*the dog's tail, the cat's paw, the elephant's trunk*).

The -'s genitive is not normally used with inanimate nouns. Instead, the noun is modified by an **of-phrase**: *the colour of the dress, the leg of the chair*, etc. However, some nouns denoting lifeless objects regularly occur with the -'s genitive and there is a tendency to use the -'s forms even more extensively.

The -'s genitive is optional with collective nouns that refer to a group of people: *the government's policy, the team's victory, the committee's meeting, the nation's social security*, etc.; with geographical and institutional names: *Africa's future, Moscow's traffic, America's resources, the school's history, the university's buildings* etc.; with nouns considered to be of special interest to human activity: *the earth's surface, the sun's rays, science's influence, the mind's general development*, etc.

The -'s genitive tends to be obligatory with temporal nouns that refer to the length of duration of an event, and some substantivized adverbs:

*a moment's thought, a week's holiday, a day's rest, a year's work, today's business, yesterday's news, an hour and a half's drive, a month or two's time.*

- Note the parallel structures: -
  - *I've got three weeks' holiday in August.*
  - *I've got a three week holiday in August.*
- 
- *I need eight hours' sleep every night.*
  - *I need an eight hour sleep every night.*

- The -'s genitive is also common with nouns denoting distance and measure and also some miscellaneous nouns: *a mile's distance, a shilling's worth, a room's interior, a book's title, the work's popularity, the engine's overhaul life, etc.*
- Some freely formed phrases seem to prove that it is not absolutely necessary for a noun to denote a living being in order to be capable of having an -'s form. There is a considerable number of fixed expressions in which all kinds of nouns occur in the -'s genitive: *the ship's crew, the ship's doctor, a needle's point, keep someone at arm's length, keep out of harm's way, do something to one's heart's content, be only a stone's throw away, be at one's wit's end, for goodness' sake, etc.*



- With some nouns, both the -'s genitive and the of-phrase are used to express possession:
- *the Earth's gravity - the gravity of the Earth*
- *the Queen's arrival - the arrival of the Queen*
- *the plan's importance - the importance of the plan*
- *Syria's history - the history of Syria.*

- The -'s genitive is generally used to talk about parts of people's or animals' bodies: *a man's hand, a cat's tail*. But to talk about parts of non-living things, the *noun + noun* structure or the **of-phrase** is used: *the car door, a table leg, the roof of the house*. Note that for words like *top, bottom, front, back, side, edge, inside, outside, beginning, middle, end, part*, the of-structure is usually preferred: *the top of the hill, the end of the book, the bottom of the glass*. There are, however, a number of common exceptions: *the water's edge, the mountain top*, etc.
- The of-structure can refer to something that is used by a person or animal; the first noun refers to the user: *children's clothes, women's magazines, a bird's nest*. British and American English sometimes differ. Cf.:

## **British English:**

*a baby's bottle*

*a doll's house*

*a baby's pram*

## **American English:**

*a baby bottle,*

*a doll house*

*a baby carriage*

The -'s genitive is also used for products from living animals: *cow's milk, lamb's wool, sheep's wool, a bird's egg* (but: *camel hair*).

Note that when the animal is killed to provide something, the *noun + noun* structure is generally used: *calf skin, fox fur, chicken soup, tortoise shell*.

The *noun + noun* structure is normally used to describe what objects are made of:

*a silk scarf,*

*a stone bridge,*

*an iron rod,*

*a gold ring.*

# *The Group Genitive*

The inflection -'s may be added not only to a single noun but also to a whole group of words if it forms a close semantic unit. Various patterns can be found in this construction. Thus, in *Smith and Brown's office* not only Brown, whose name is immediately connected with the -'s, but also Smith is included into the possessive relation. Cf. also: *Jack and Jill's wedding, Mr and Mrs Carter's house, Mary and John's children.*

Other examples include:

*the Chancellor of Exchequer's speech, the  
Oxford professor of  
poetry's lecture,*

where the -'s inflection is added to the final  
element

*someone else's house, somebody else's  
turn, nobody else's business;*

- *an hour and a half's break, a week or so's  
sunshine* where coordinators {*and, or*) are involved.