The Alison's cat sleep in the kitchen: On the acquisition of English *'s* Genitive Constructions by native speakers of Italian*

ELISA DI DOMENICO
University of Siena
didomenico@unisi.it

ELISA BENNATI
University of Siena
elisabennati@unisi.it

This work deals with the acquisition of L2 English *'s* Genitive Constructions with Bare Proper Name possessors by native speakers of Italian. We investigated original L2 English data collected through a written elicitation test from a group of 94 Italian teen-agers learning L2 English in a formal environment.
Results indicate that both Universal Grammar and transfer from the L1 are implied in the acquisition of these structures.
In Section 1 we compare Italian and English Possessive Constructions in the light of a model of possessive DPs; in Section 2 we present the experimental design and the results, which will be discussed in Section 3.

1. *'s* Genitive Constructions and their acquisition

1.1 Possessive Constructions in English and Italian

This section is devoted to the analysis of *'s* Genitive Constructions and to their comparison with other possessive constructions attested in English and Italian.
First of all let us compare English and Italian Possessive Constructions:

* This work was presented among the CISCL Research Seminars (Siena, Italy, 28 November 2006), at IGG XXXIII (Bologna, Italy, 1-3 March 2007) and at the IV Encuentro de Gramática Generativa (Mendoza, Argentina, 26-28 July 2007). We thank the organizers and the audience. In particular, we thank Adriana Alvarez, Adriana Belletti, Valentina Bianchi, José Camacho, Giuliana Giusti, Andrea Gualmini, Luigi Rizzi and Marit Westergaard for helpful comments. Special thanks are due to Simona Matteini and to the Scuola Media 'B.Bonfigli' of Corciano (Italy). All errors and omissions are of course our own. For the specific concerns of the Italian Academy, Elisa Di Domenico is responsible for Section 1 and 3, Elisa Bennati for Section 2. This work is dedicated to the memory of Marica De Vincenzi.

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

(1) a. Peter's friend
b. My friend
c. * A/the Peter's friend
d. * A/ the my friend

English *'s* Genitive Constructions are illustrated in (1.a). The possessor (in this case the Bare Proper Name *Peter*) precedes the head noun, i.e. the possessee (*friend*) and is marked with *'s*. In case of a pronominal possessor, as shown in (1.b), we have a similar situation as far as the relative position of the head noun and the possessor is concerned: the possessor precedes the head noun; in this case, however, the possessor is not marked with *'s*. Another similarity between nominal and pronominal possessors in English is that they are both incompatible with the head noun determiner, be it definite or indefinite, as shown in (1.c) and (1.d).

The interpretation of the structures in (1.a) and (1.b) is only definite. If an indefinite meaning is to be conveyed, the available structures in English are the so called Elliptical Constructions shown in (2.a) and (2.b):

(2) a. A friend of Peter 's
b. A friend of mine

In Italian, Bare Proper Name Possessors do not precede the possessee, as shown in (3.a). They only occur post-nominally introduced by the preposition *di* (*of*), in the so called Analytic Construction. Possessive pronouns, on the contrary, can occur pre- or post-nominally, as shown in (3.b) and (3.c):

(3) a. Un/l' amico di Peter
a/the friend of Peter

b. Un/il mio amico
a/the my friend

c. Un/l'amico mio
a/the friend my

Both pronominal and nominal possessors in Italian are compatible with the possessee's determiner, which can be either definite or indefinite, as shown in (3) above.
Analytic Constructions are attested in English in the cases illustrated in (4), i.e. with an inanimate possessor (4.a) or when an animate possessor is to be modified, e.g. by a relative clause (4.b):[1]

[1] (4.b) is taken from Fodor (2007). In this work the author investigates cross-linguistic attachment preferences of relative clauses in complex NPs such as Possessive Constructions. From our point of view it is interesting to note that, as far as Analytic Constructions are concerned, while in Italian attachment of the relative clause to the possessee is favoured, in English attachment of the relative clause to the possessor is favoured. This is probably due, according to Fodor, to the fact that in 's Genitive Construction only attachment to the possessee is possible:
(i) The actress' servant who was on the balcony
In a construction like (i), the relative clause can only modify *the servant* and not *the actress*. We conclude therefore that when the possessor is to be modified, by e.g. a relative clause, the Analytic Construction is the only possible structure in English.

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

(4) a. The leg of the table
b. The servant of the actress who was on the balcony

1.2 Possessive Constructions and the internal structure of Determiner Phrases

We now analyze possessive constructions in English and Italian in the light of recent work on the internal structure of Determiner Phrases. Drawing on work by Abney (1987), Szabolcsi (1987) and (1992), Delsing (1998) and Haegeman (2004), we adopt for Determiner Phrases a structure like (5):

DP Layer *Inflectional Layer* *Lexical Layer*
(5) $[_{SpecDP}[\ _{D°}\ [_{SpecAgrP}[_{Agr°}[\ _{SpecFP}\ [_{F°}\ [\ _{SpecNP}\ [\ _{N°}\ \ldots.]]]]]$
Poss3 **Poss2** **Poss1**

As shown in (5), possessors may occur in three distinct positions: Poss1 in the Lexical Layer, Poss2 in the Inflectional Layer and Poss3 in the DP Layer. Following a number of proposals, we assume that possessors are always generated in Poss1 as arguments of the head noun. Poss1 is also the position where possessors surface in the so called Analytic Constructions[2]:

(6) $[_{SpecDP}\ [_{D}$ Un/l' $[_{SpecAgr}\ [_{Agr}\ [_{SpecFP}\ [_{F}$ amico$_i$ $[_{NP}$ t_i $[_{PP}$ di Peter]]]]]]]]
Poss3 Poss2 Poss1

(7) $[_{SpecDP}\ [_{D}$ the $[_{SpecAgr}\ [_{Agr}\ [_{SpecFP}\ [_{F}$ leg$_i$ $[_{NP}$ t_i $[_{PP}$ of the table]]]]]]]]
Poss3 Poss2 Poss1

Poss2 is the position where pronominal possessors may surface in Italian[3]:

(8) $[_{SpecDP}\ [_{D}$ Un/il $[_{SpecAgr}$ mio$_j$ $[_{Agr}\ [_{SpecFP}\ [_{F}$ amico$_i$ $[_{NP}$ t_i t_j]]]]]]]
Poss3 Poss2 Poss1

Poss2 is also the position where pronominal and non- pronominal possessors may surface in Hungarian:

(9) a. $[_{SpecDP}\ [_{D}$ a $[_{SpecAgr}$ Mari$_i$ $[_{Agr}$ kalap-ja$_j$ $[_{NP}$ t_j t_i]]]]] (Hungarian; Szabolcsi 1994)
the MariNOM hat-POSS.3sg
"Mari's hat"

b. $[_{SpecDP}\ [_{D}$ az $[_{SpecAgr}$ én$_i$ $[_{Agr}$ vendég-e-m$_j$ $[_{NP}$ t_j t_i]]]]] (Hungarian; Szabolcsi 1994)
the I guest-POSS-1sg
"my guest"

[2] According to Cinque (1995) possessors are subjects, hence generated in Spec, NP. The order N Poss observed in Analytic Constructions is derived though movement of the possessee to the left of Poss, to a layer of positions which we have called FP (see (6) and (7)). Although not relevant here, we have to assume that the possessee moves higher in Italian than in English, given its position with respect to adjectives (Cfr. *Una penna rossa* vs. *A red pen*).
[3] We assume that post-nominal pronominal possessors in Italian, as in (3.c), occupy Poss1.

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

We assume, following Delsing (1998), that the *'s* Genitive marker is generated in the head position of Poss2 and then moved to (the head position of) Poss3 for definiteness checking requirements.[4]
Finally, Poss3 is the position where possessors surface in English *'s* Genitive Constructions (10) as well as in other languages such as for instance Hungarian (11):

(10) $[_{SpecDP}$ Peter $_i$ $[_D$'s$_j$ $[_{SpecAgr}$ t_i $[_{Agr}$ t_j $[_{SpecFP}$ $[_F$ $[_{NP}$ friend t_i]]]]]]]
Poss3 Poss2 Poss1

(11) $[_{SpecDP}$ Mari-nak$_i$ $[_D$ a $[_{SpecAgr}$ $[_{Agr}$ kalap-ja$_j$ $[_{NP}$ t_j t_i]]]]] (Hungarian; Szabolcsi 1994)
Mari-DAT the hat-POSS.3sg
"Mari's hat"

English pronominal possessors also surface in Poss3:

(12) $[_{SpecDP}$ My$_j$ $[_D$ $[_{SpecAgr}$ t_j $[_{Agr}$ $[_{SpecFP}$ $[_F$ friend$_i$ $[_{NP}$ t_j t_i]]]]]]]
Poss3 Poss2 Poss1

1.3 Some considerations on the acquisition of English 's Genitive Constructions by native speakers of Italian

The different Possessive Constructions attested in English and Italian illustrated in 1.1 and 1.2 can be now discussed in the light of theories of L2 acquisition. The most crucial points of debate concern the role of Universal Grammar (UG) and the presence of transfer from the L1 (see White, 2003). According to the Full Access/ Full Transfer Hypothesis (Schwartz and Sprouse 1996; White 1996) an L2 learner starts with the parametric values of her/his L1 which are changed to the L2 values using her /his UG on the basis of the L2 data which the learner is exposed to.
Assuming this model, in order to acquire English *'s* genitive constructions with BPN possessors, a native speaker of Italian will start with the possibilities instantiated in her/his L1, namely Analytic Constructions (see 3.a). As we have seen, in these constructions the possessor does not move and both a definite and an indefinite interpretation are possible. In the acquisition of the parametric values of English this learner should:

a) discover that BPN possessors move
b) discover where they move
c) discover that *'s* is the morphological realization of both genitive Case and definiteness, generated in the head position of Poss2 and then moved to the head position of Poss3

If the Full Access/ Full Transfer Hypothesis is correct, we predict that the most problematic areas will be related to the points in a), b) and c) above.

[4] One striking reason to treat *'s* as a head and not as a suffix is that it follows the so called Group Genitives as shown below:
(i) Peter and John's book

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

2. The L2 acquisition of *'s* Genitive Constructions by native speakers of Italian: some experimental data

2.1 The experiment: subjects materials and procedure

We designed an experiment to examine the acquisition of English *'s* Genitive Constructions with BPN possessors by a group of 94 Italian speakers aged 11-14 learning English only in a formal environment, Scuola Media.
Subjects belonged to three levels: 1st Graders (30), 2nd Graders(25) and 3rd Graders (39) according to their grade of school attendance.
Subjects had to accomplish two written tasks: an Error Detection Task and a Translation Task. In the Error Detection Task (henceforth EDT), subjects were asked to detect items containing error of various kinds and eventually provide their correct counterpart.[5] In the Translation Task (henceforth TT) subjects had to translate in English sentences given in Italian.[6] The EDT was preceded by a pre-test consisting of three sentences: two wrong (one corrected for exemplification) and one right.
The EDT was accomplished by 1st, 2nd and 3rd Graders, while the TT by 2nd and 3rd Graders only. EDT consisted of 16 sentences: 8 experimental sentences and 8 fillers.
The experimental sentences consisted of two correct *'s* genitive constructions and six *'s* Genitive Constructions containing errors of various types: lack of possessor movement with or without *'s* genitive marker (*House Peter is near the railway station*; *Car Mary's is red*), presence of a definite determiner preceding the possessee in various environments (*I like Laura's the bag*; *The book Steven's has a blue cover*).
The fillers consisted of 4 right sentences (e.g. *I like those lovely blue jeans*) and 4 wrong sentences containing various kinds or errors: number agreement, *a* vs. *an*, double past (*did* and *–ed*).
The TT included 8 experimental sentences containing possessive constructions. All sentences except one (containing a family name preceded by a possessive pronoun) contained BPN possessors and were of course Analytic Constructions. The eight fillers were sentences of various types.

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Error Detection Task

2nd and 3rd Graders were significantly more successful in the detection of errors than 1st Graders, as illustrated in Table 1 (81% 2nd Graders and 83% 3rd Graders vs. 64% 1st Graders; 1st Graders vs. 2nd Graders. χ^2=11,4548; p=0.0007, and 1st Graders vs. 3rd Graders χ^2=18,4454 p=0.0000):

Table 1. Detection *vs.* Non Detection

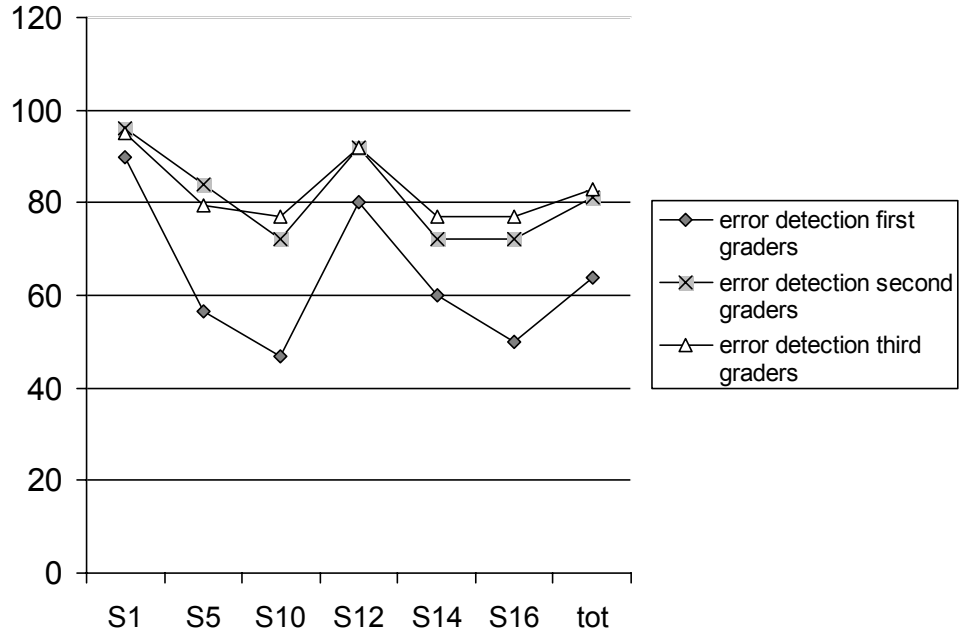
	Occurrences of error detection	Occurrences of non detection
1st Graders (30)	115/180 (64%)	65/180 (36%)
2nd Graders (25)	122/150 (81%)	28/150 (19%)
3rd Graders (39)	194/234 (83%)	40/234 (17%)

[5] A complete list of experimental materials is included in the Appendix.
[6] We chose to administer two different tasks in order to verify whether results were task- dependent. In particular, in the Translation Task we expected more transfer effects given that the source was our subjects' L1.

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

We performed an analysis per sentence, the results of which are summarized in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Error Detection per sentence in the three groups[7]



Interestingly, we find an analogous pattern in the three groups. Sentence 1 is recognized as wrong at the highest rate (90% 1st Graders; 95% 2nd and 3rd Graders) and the difference in the detection of wrongness between S1 and the other items is statistically significant, except for S12 (which is recognized as wrong at a high rate as well. 80% 1st Graders; 92% 2nd and 3rd Graders).
Among detected items, the patterns emerged are summarized in Table 2 and Figure 2:

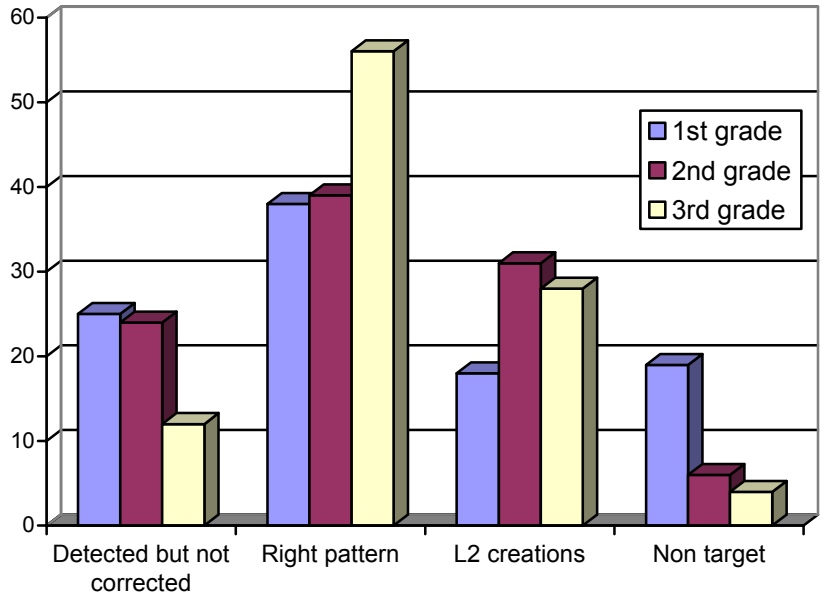
Table 2. Patterns in detected items[8]

Experimental subjects	Error detection without corrections	Right pattern	L2 creations	Non target
1st Graders	29/115 (25%)	44/115 (38%)	20/115 (18%)	22/115 (19%)
2nd Graders	29/122 (24%)	48/122 (39%)	38/122 (31%)	7/122 (6%)
3rd Graders	23/194 (12%)	108/194 (56%)	55/194 (28%)	8/194 (4%)

[7] S1= I like Laura's the bag ; S5= I love cat's John; S10= House Peter is near the railway station; S12= Car Mary's is red; S14= The dog Robert barks a lot; S16= The book Steven's has a blue cover
[8] We included in 'Non Target' productions all patterns which were not possessive constructions, as in (i):
(i) I like Laura in the bag

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

Figure 2. Patterns in detected items in the three groups



3rd Graders made significantly more corrections than 1st and 2nd Graders: sentences detected but not corrected were 25% for 1st Graders and 24% for 2nd Graders vs. 12% for 3rd Graders; the grouping this time is thus 1st and 2nd Graders vs. 3rd Graders, and the difference is statistically significant, χ^2=10.3157 p=0.0013; 3rd Graders produced a significantly higher number of right patterns than 1st and 2nd Graders (56% 3rd Graders vs. 38% 1st Graders and 39% 2nd Graders). Taking again 1st and 2nd Graders vs. 3rd Graders, the difference is statistically significant : χ^2=11.5123; p=0.0007.
2nd and 3rd Graders dared in producing L2 creations significantly more than 1st Graders (31% 2nd Graders and 28% 3rd Graders vs. 18% 1st Graders). This time thus the grouping is 2nd and 3rd Graders vs. 1st Graders, and the difference is statistically significant: χ^2=5.7104; p=0.0169.
Non target answers decreased robustly in 2nd and 3rd Graders (6% 2nd Graders and 4% 3rd Graders vs. 19% 1st Graders. As for the previous point, the grouping is 2nd and 3rd Graders vs. 1st Graders and the difference is statistically significant: χ^2=20.4329; p=0.0000.
Among L2 Creations we found the following patterns:

Table 3. L2 Creations in EDT

	1st Graders	2nd Graders	3rd Graders
1. D-Poss *'s*-N (*the Steven's book*)	8/20(40%)	27/38(71%)	34/55(62%)
2. D-Poss-N (*the Steven book*)	3/20(15%)	2/38(5%)	3/55(5%)
3. Poss-N (*Steven book*)	4/20(20%)	6/38(16%)	6/55(11%)
4. N-Poss (*book Steven)*	2/20(10%)	3/38(8%)	2/55(4%)
5. *of* constructions (*the book of Steven*)	2/20(10%)	0/38(0%)	6/55(11%)
6. Attempts of *of* constructions (*the book de Steven*)	1/20(5%)	0/38(0%)	4/55(7%)

The cases in which possessors occur pre-nominally are numerous in all groups ((75% in 1st Graders, 92% in 2nd Graders and 78% in 3rd Graders).

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

Table 4. Pre- nominal Possessors among L2 creations in EDT

	Pre-nominal Possessors	Post-nominal Possessors
1st Graders	15/20(75%)	5/20(25%)
2nd Graders	35/38(92%)	3/38(8%)
3rd Graders	43/55(78%)	12/55(22%)

Within the cases of pre-nominal possessors we found an interesting interaction with the presence of the *'s* marker (which, on the contrary, is totally absent in the case of post-nominal possessor).
The correlation between the pre-nominal position of the possessor and *'s* insertion, is near the chance level for 1st Graders (53%). Interestingly 2nd and 3rd Graders' performance, on the contrary, shows an association between pre-nominal possessor and *'s* on the possessor: the difference between pre-nominal possessors with or without *'s* is statistically significant (χ^2=17.0000; p=0.0000 in 2nd Graders and χ^2=26.7907; p=0.0000 in 3rd Graders).

Table 5. Patterns with Pre-nominal Possessors in EDT

	1st Graders	2nd Graders	3rd Graders
D-Poss *'s*-N	8/15 (53%)	27/35 (77%)	34/43 (79%)
D-Poss-N	3/15 (20%)	2/35 (6%)	3/43 (7%)
Poss-N	4/15 (27%)	6/35 (17%)	6/43 (14%)

Another statistically significant fact noted is the presence of a determiner with a pre-nominal possessor:(73%, χ^2=4.8000 p=0.0285 in 1st Graders; 83%, χ^2= 26.6571 p=0.0000 in 2nd Graders and 86%, χ^2=41.8605 p=0.0000 in 3rd Graders).

Table 6. Determiner insertion with pre-nominal possessor patterns in EDT

	1st Graders	2nd Graders	3rd Graders
Determiner insertion	11/15 (73%)	29/35 (83%)	37/43 (86%)
No determiner insertion	4/15 (27%)	6/35 (17%)	6/43 (14%)

As we said, part of the experimental material consisted of right sentences. In all Graders right sentences were mostly recognized as right, with no statistically significant difference per sentence.

2.2.2 Translation Task (TT)

As we said, TT was administered only to 2nd and 3rd Graders.
Results show that subjects were mostly able to accomplish the test: the percentage of non accomplished items is very low both in 2nd and 3rd Graders with no significant difference between the two groups:

Table 7. Accomplished vs. non accomplished

	Accomplished	Non accomplished
2nd Graders (25)	188/200 (94 %)	12/200 (6%)
3rd Graders (39)	301/312(96%)	11/312 (4%)

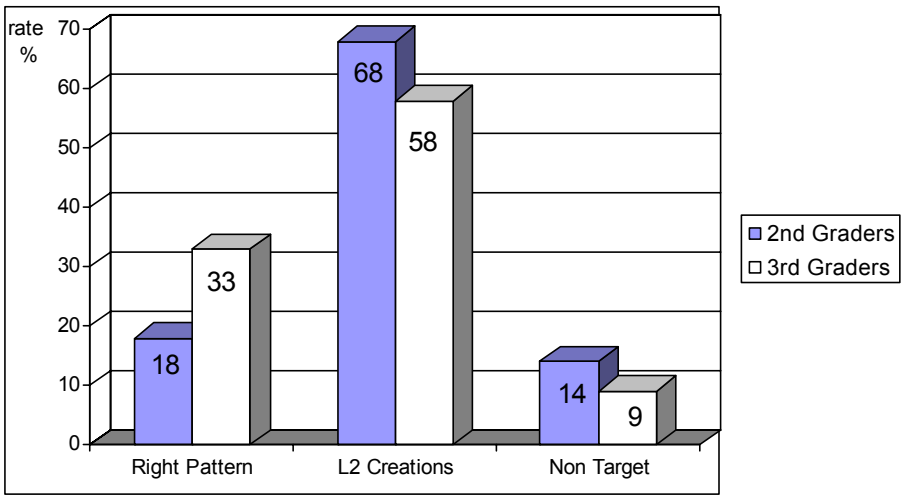
BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

Among accomplished items, the patterns found are summarized in Table 8 and Figure 3:

Table 8. Patterns in accomplished items in TT

	Right pattern Poss 's-N	L2 creations	Non target
2nd graders	34/188 (18%)	128/188 (68%)	26/188 (14%)
3rd graders	99/301 (33%)	175/301 (58%)	27/301 (9%)

Figure 3. Patterns in accomplished items in the two groups



3rd Graders produced a higher percentage of Right patterns than 2nd Graders. The difference between the two groups is statistically significant (33% vs. 18%; χ^2=12.3306; p=0.0004).
2nd Graders resorted to L2 creations significantly more than 3rd Graders (68% vs. 58%; χ^2=4.0229; p=0.0449).The number of Non Target productions is quite low (14% vs. 9%) and the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant.
Among L2 Creations subjects produced a variety of interlanguage patterns analogous (although not numerically) to the one found in EDT as shown in Table 9:

Table 9. L2 Creations in TT

	2nd Graders	3rd Graders
1. D-Poss *'s*-N *(the Alison's cat)*	44/128 (34%)	47/175 (27%)
2. D-Poss-N *(the Alison cat)*	10/128 (8%)	13/175 (7%)
3. Poss-N *(Alison cat)*	8/128 (6%)	4/175 (2%)
4. N-Poss *(cat Alison)*	16/128 (13%)	17/175 (10%)
5. *of* constructions *(the cat of Alison)*	32/128 (25%)	54/175 (31%)
6. Attempts of *of* constructions *(the cat de Alison)*	18/128 (14%)	40/175 (23%)

Pre-nominal possessors are again widespread (48% in 2nd Graders and 36% in 3rd Graders).

Table 10. Pre- nominal Possessors among L2 creations in TT

	Pre-nominal Possessors	Post- nominal Possessors
2nd Graders	62/128 (48%)	66/128(52%)
3rd Graders	64/175 (36%)	111/175(64%)

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

Among the cases of pre- nominal possessors, we found an interaction with the presence of the *'s* marker and of the determiner *the* as in EDT:

Table 11. Patterns with pre- nominal possessors in TT

	2nd Graders	3rd Graders
D-Poss *'s*-N	44/62 (70%)	47/64 (73%)
D-Poss-N	10/62 (17%)	13/64 (21%)
Poss-N	8/62 (13%)	4/64 (6%)

Both in 2nd and 3rd Graders the correlation between pre- nominal possessors and *'s* marker is statistically significant (70%, χ^2=18.8852; p=0.0000 in 2nd Graders; 73%, χ^2=26.2813; p=0.0000 in 3rd Graders.

Table 12. Determiner insertion with pre- nominal possessors in TT

	2nd Graders	3rd Graders
Determiner insertion	54/62 (87%)	60/64 (94%)
No determiner insertion	8/62 (13%)	4/64 (6%)

Both in 2nd and 3rd Graders the correlation between pre-nominal possessors and presence of the determiner is robust (87% in 2nd Graders and 94% in 3rd Graders).
As a final remark, we observed that the *'s* genitive marker is present in a high percentage of cases where the 3rd Person Singular Present *–s* marker is absent, as shown in Table 13:

Table 13. *'s* Genitive and *–s* Simple Present

	's genitive; no *–s* simple present marker	's genitive; + *–s* simple present marker
2nd graders	13/17 (76%)	4/17 (24%)
3rd graders	27/28 (96%)	1/28 (4%)

There were two experimental sentences able to show the correlation 3rd Person Singular simple present/ *'s* Genitive Constructions, as shown in the Appendix.[9] When the *'s* Genitive marker is present the *–s* simple present marker is often omitted (76% for 2nd Graders; 96% for 3rd Graders, the difference between 2nd and 3rd Graders not statistically significant). When the *'s* Genitive marker is omitted, the *–s* simple present marker is always omitted.

2.2.3 L2 creations in EDT and TT

As already observed, the general pattern in the variety of L2 Creations is analogous in the two tasks. However, in TT, as opposed to EDT, a widespread production of 'of Constructions' emerged. Considering 2nd and 3rd Graders only (since 1st Graders did not perform TT), in both groups the difference between the occurrences of '*of* Constructions' in EDT and TT is statistically significant; χ^2=10.2169; p=0.0014 2nd Graders, and χ^2=7.6328; p=0.0057 3rd Graders):

[9] Sentence 4 = Il gatto di Alison dorme in cucina ; Sentence 12 = La cugina di Mary scrive poesie

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

Table 14. L2 Creations in EDT and TT

	2nd Graders		3rd Graders	
	EDT	TT	EDT	TT
D-Poss *'s*-N	27/38 (71%)	44/128 (34%)	34/55 (62%)	47/175 (27%)
D-Poss-N	2/38 (5%)	10/128 (8%)	3/55 (5%)	13/175 (7%)
Poss-N	6/38 (16%)	8/128 (6%)	6/55 (11%)	4/175 (2%)
N-Poss	3/38 (8%)	16/128 (13%)	2/55 (4%)	17/175 (10%)
of constructions	0/38 (0%)	32/128 (25%)	6/55 (11%)	54/175 (31%)
Attempts of *of* constructions	0/38 (0%)	18/128 (14%)	4/55 (7%)	40/175 (23%)

As a consequence, the percentage of occurrences of pre- nominal possessors is inferior in TT (48% in 2nd Graders; 36% in 3rd Graders) than in EDT (92% in 2nd Graders; 78% in 3rd Graders).

Table 15. Pre- nominal Possessors in EDT and TT

	EDT	TT
2nd graders	92%	48%
3rd graders	78%	36%

Finally, in both groups, no statistically significant difference per task is found with respect to presence of the *'s* marker and presence of the determiner with pre-nominal possessors:

Table 16. Presence *vs.* absence of *'s* in pre- nominal possessors in EDT and TT

	With *'s*		Without *'s*	
	EDT	TT	EDT	TT
2nd graders	26/34 (76%)	43/61 (70%)	8/34(24%)	18/61(30%)
3rd graders	34/43 (79%)	47/64 (73%)	9/43 (21%)	17/64 (27%)

Table 17. Determiner insertion in pre- nominal possessor patterns in EDT and TT

	EDT	TT
2nd graders	28/34 (82%)	53/61 (87%)
3rd graders	37/43 (86%)	60/64 (94%)

3. Discussion and conclusions

Among theories of L2 acquisition, two main issues are currently under debate: the involvement of Universal Grammar (UG) and the existence of transfer from the L1. Our data are consistent with the idea that both UG and transfer from the L1 are involved in the acquisition of English *'s* Genitive Constructions by native speakers of Italian.

First of all, subjects move gradually towards the acquisition of *'s* Genitive Constructions (see Table 1 and Figure 1 for EDT, Table 8 for TT), even though they are intensively trained on *'s* Genitive Constructions only in the first year of Scuola Media. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the gradual achievement of the native-like structure is due to a personal elaboration/process in our subjects' mind and not the direct reflex of intensive training or of mechanical learning.

This suggests in principle an involvement of UG which is confirmed more directly by our subjects' L2 creations: subjects do not produce *any* kind of construction, but their attempts can be brought back to a limited range of variation, namely 6 patterns, which are the same in both tasks (see Tables 3, 9 and 14). Interestingly, we never find a post-

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

nominal possessor with *'s*, nor a possessor with *'s* preceding it, while we find, although not substantially, the pattern N Poss. This suggests that *'s* is correctly analyzed as an independent head and not as a suffix by our subjects. This analysis is confirmed by the fact that the most 'Detected as wrong' sentence is Sentence 1 (*I like Laura's the bag*, see Figure 1) which would be possible with *'s* analyzed as a suffix, as the Hungarian example (11). Furthermore, the second most 'Detected as wrong' sentence is Sentence 12 (*Car Mary's is red*), an example of post- nominal possessor with *'s*, which again would be possible with *'s* analysed as a suffix.

In both tasks there is a substantial amount of pre-nominal possessors.[10] This fact is surely remarkable given that in Italian non pronominal possessors only occur post-nominally. In L2 Creations, we also found a statistically significant correlation between pre-nominal possessors and presence of *'s*, but only for 2nd and 3rd Graders.[11] Taken together these facts suggest that pre-nominal possessors are to be analysed as moved possessors, in a position to the left of the one where *'s* is generated, which we assume to be Poss2 along the lines of Delsing (1998). It is possible that 1st Graders have not yet acquired the relevant morphology to express the agreement relation between the moved possessor and the agreement head: this is why in 1st Graders the correlation between pre-nominal possessors and presence of *'s* is not statistically significant. But in order to see where exactly possessors are moved, we have to take into account another finding, namely that when the possessor is pre-nominal, we often see the presence of the head noun determiner. In L2 Creations, the correlation pre-nominal possessors/determiner insertion is statistically significant in all graders (see Tables 3, 9 and 14). [12]

The presence of an overt definite determiner of the possessee shows on one side that the intrinsic definiteness of English *'s* Genitive Constructions is not acquired by our subjects.[13] Furthermore, it suggests that possessors are not moved to Poss3, but to Poss 2:

(13) $[_{SpecDP}\ [_{D}$ the $[_{SpecAgr}$ Alison$_i$ $[_{Agr}$'s $[_{NP}$ cat $t_i]]]]]$

Poss2 is a position where some possessors move in Italian, namely pronominal possessors. Subjects use as a landing site for moved possessors the position which is active in their language, namely Poss2. In this case, so, we see the effect of transfer from the L1. A study concerning the acquisition of German possessive constructions

[10] In order to evaluate the total amount of pre-nominal possessors we should not only consider those found in L2 creations, but also those consisting in the Right pattern. The total amount of pre-nominal possessors is thus the following: in EDT, 59 in 1st Graders, 83 in 2nd Graders, 151 in 3rd Graders; in TT, 96 in 2nd Graders and 163 in 3rd Graders.

[11] Van de Craats et al. (2000) report that native speakers of Moroccan and Turkish in the acquisition of Dutch Genitive Constructions show a significant correlation between pre- nominal possessors and presence of *'s*.

[12] As for the case of 's with pre-nominal possessors, in this case as well it is interesting to evaluate the phenomenon in all cases of pre-nominal possessors. Items with the determiner of the possessee amount to 19% in 1st Graders (EDT only), to 35% and 56% in 2nd Graders (EDT and TT respectively) and to 25% and 37% in 3rd Graders (EDT and TT respectively). As far the difference between the two tasks is concerned we interpret it as a task complexity effect. The fact that determiners are inserted in 19% of the cases of pre- nominal possessors in 1st Graders can be interpreted as follows. 1st Graders produce a very low number of L2 Creations, so with respect to the baseline the Right Pattern occurrences are more consistent than for the other groups.

[13] As they produce *The Alison's cat* they are expected to be able to produce *An Alison's cat.* Unfortunately our test did not contain items able to induce such productions. We leave the matter to future research. Similarly, we expect our subjects to be able to produce *The/A my cat*.

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

by adult native speakers of Italian (Matteini 2007) reports similar results: learners systematically resort to determiner insertion with a pre-posed non pronominal possessor:

(14) Mario ruft die Giselas Lehrerin an (L2 German, Matteini, 2007)

Movement to Poss2 seems thus a process activated by native speakers of Italian. Movement to Poss2 also shows that there is not a single stage in the acquisition of English *'s* Genitive Constructions but rather there is a dissociation in the checking of two different features, case and definiteness.
Interestingly, the effect of transfer does not lead to a wild output, since in Uralic languages, Poss2 is used as a landing site for both pronominal and non-pronominal possessors, as we saw in (9.a-b) for Hungarian.
Even though transfer is active, our subjects' choices are UG constrained.
Finally, we have observed that the *'s* genitive marker is present in a high percentage of cases where the 3rd Person Singular Present *–s* marker is absent. This is a restatement of a fact noted in early studies on the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes (Brown 1973 for L1 English; Dulay-Burt 1974 for L2 English), namely that the acquisition of the *'s* genitive marker precedes the acquisition of the 3rd Person Singular Present *–s* marker.

References

Abney, S. (1987) *The English Noun Phrase in Its Sentential Aspect*. MIT: Ph.D. Thesis.

Alexiadou, A. and Wilder, C. (Eds.), *Possessors, Predicates and Movement in the Determiner Phrase*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Brown, R. (1973) *A First Language. The Early Stages.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Cardinaletti, A. (1998) On the deficient/strong Opposition in Possessive Systems. In A. Alexiadou and C. Wilder (Eds): 17-53.

Cinque, G. (1995) Genitivo e genitivi pronominali nel DP italiano. In P. Benincà, G. Cinque, T. De Mauro, N. Vincent (Eds.), *Italiano e dialetti nel tempo. Saggi di grammatica per Giulio C. Lepschy,* (pp. 67-84). Roma: Bulzoni.

Craats, I. van de, N. Corver & R. van Hout (2000) Conservation of grammatical knowledge: on the acquisition of possessive noun phrases by Turkish and Moroccan learners of Dutch. *Linguistics* 38, 2, 221-314.

Delsing, L. (1998) Possession in Germanic. In A. Alexiadou and C. Wilder, (Eds.): 87-108.

Dulay, H. and Burt, M. (1974) Natural sequences in child second language acquisition. *Language Learning* 24, 37-53.

Fodor, J.D. (2007) Silent Prosody. Talk given at the University of Siena, 16-5-2007.

Haegeman, L. (2004) DP-Periphery and Clausal Periphery: Possessor Doubling in West Flemish. In D. Adger , C. De Cat and G. Tsoulas (Eds.), *Peripheries, Syntactic Edges and their Effects*, (pp. 211-240). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher.

Matteini, S.(2007) *On the morphosyntactic acquisition of the German DP by Italian adult L2 Learners: Possessive Constructions, Noun Placement, and Inflectional Morphology on Nominal Modifiers.* PhD Dissertation, University of Florence and University of Siena.

Schwartz, B. D. and Sprouse, R. (1996) L2 cognitive states and the full transfer/full access model. *Second Language Research* 12, 40-72.

Szabolcsi, A, (1987) Functional categories in the noun phrase. In I. Kenesei, (Ed), (pp. 167-190). *Approaches to Hungarian.* Jate, Szeged.

Szabolcsi, A. (1994) The Noun Phrase. In F. Kiefer and K.E. Kiss, (Eds.), *The Syntactic Structure of* Hungarian, (pp. 179-274). New York: Academic Press.

White, L. (1996) Universal Grammar and Second Language Acquisition: current trends and new directions, in V. Ritchie and T. Bhatia (Eds), *Handbook of Language Acquisition*, (pp. 85-120). New York: Academic Press.

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)

White, L. (2003) *Second Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix

1. Error Detection Task: Materials

Pre-test
a) My cousin lives at New York
b) Jackie goes to school by bus
c) Paul don't like sweets

Test

1) I like Laura's the bag
2) A gentleman never runs
3) I like those lovely blue jeans
4) Please bring us a orange juice and an tea
5) I love cat's John
6) The pupils didn't listened to the teacher
7) Liz play the cello and Fred play the guitar
8) Speak slowly, please!
9) Mum baked a delicious apple pie
10) House Peter is near the railway station
11) Jack's trousers are black and white
12) Car Mary's is red
13) The doctor examined the X-rays carefully
14) The dog Robert barks a lot
15) Paul's newspaper is on the table
16) The book Steven's has a blue cover

2. Translation task: Materials

1) I biscotti di mia nonna sono squisiti
2) Mi piacciono le scarpe di Susy
3) I negozi sono aperti dalle 9 alle 17
4) Il gatto di Alison dorme in cucina
5) La macchina di John è nuova
6) L'orologio di Sophie è molto piccolo
7) Potresti chiudere la finestra per favore?
8) Spero di rivederti presto
9) Ho trascorso il week-end con la mia famiglia
10) Ho comprato dei fiori al mercato
11) Il treno parte fra un'ora
12) La cugina di Mary scrive poesie
13) Il cane di John è marrone
14) Questo ristorante è molto caro
15) Paul non è ancora arrivato
16) Jack è il cugino di Louis

BDD-A22667 © 2007 Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Cognitivi sul Linguaggio
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:55 UTC)