

THE "YOUR GUYS'S" POSSESSIVE AND THE STRUCTURE OF DP

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Many dialects of English have a complex second person plural pronoun: *you all*, *you guys*, or a similar form. In this paper I discuss the possessive form of such pronouns, particularly cases in which there appears to be double possessive marking: *youR guys'S* in the title or the parallel *youR all'S*. The structure of Determiner Phrases (DPs) containing these double possessive forms presents interesting problems of analysis; I argue that for speakers who use these, the plural pronoun is not simply a compound word, but a phrase with internal syntactic structure.

I begin by briefly sketching the usage of the doubly possessive-marked forms, then turn to their analysis, and finally consider a number of related puzzles.

1. Who Says *Your Guys's*

In varieties of English with colloquial second person plural pronoun *you guys*, speakers form the possessive in several ways. "Is this your (plural) car?" can take any of the forms in (1):

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1.a. Is this you guys' car? | |
| b. Is this you guys's car? | |
| c. Is this your guys' car? | "the your guys's |
| d. Is this your guys's car? | construction" |

These differ both in the form of the possessive ending on *guy* (apostrophe vs. apostrophe-s; phonetically \emptyset vs. [əz]), and in *you* (often pronounced [yə] vs. *your*). The first difference, though interesting, is irrelevant to the point of this paper; it is common to all words ending in sibilants, and has no bearing on the structure of possessive DP. I refer to both type (1c) and (1d) as "the your guys's construction", ignoring the difference in phonetic realization and spelling of the final affix. The focus of this paper is on explaining the distinction between (1a,b), the *you guys'* construction, on the one hand, and (1c,d), the *your guys's* construction, on the other.

The *your guys's* construction first came to my attention in the speech of northeast Nebraska children, where it is extremely common. Most of the spontaneous tokens of *your guys's* I have collected are from children. The examples in (2a,b) are typical. However, the construction is not simply a stage in children's acquisition of the possessive; adults use it too, though perhaps less frequently. A few adult examples are given in (2c-e).

- 2.a. Are those **your guys's** toys? (E.V., 4 years old, Nebraska)

- b. Can I come to **your guys's** house? (Z.A., 8, Nebraska)
- c. I'll write down **your guys's** names. (T.R., 20-ish, Nebraska)
- d. **Your guys's** input is very important to us in making the best decision. (M.M., 30-ish, Kansas)
- e. Is that **your guys's** map? (S.G., 40-ish, Minnesota)

The geographical extent of *your guys's* is not clear to me, but I have heard the construction from speakers raised in Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota, and received indirect reports of its occurrence in Missouri, California, and Texas. On the other hand, "you guys" speakers from Wisconsin, Indiana, and Ohio do not, in my experience, use the *your guys's* construction; instead, they use possessives of type (1a) or (b). Two examples are shown in (3), one spoken and one from dialog in a recent novel.¹

- 3.a. So, how was **you guys's** day? (C.R., 40-ish, Wisconsin)
- b. Who handled **you guys'** divorce, Carla? (A.W. Gray, *Bino's Blues*, 214)

In an attempt to discover the status of the *your guys's* construction, I surveyed a group of fifty undergraduates at Wayne State College (the northeast Nebraska college at which I teach, with a student population primarily from Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota). The results, summarized in (4), showed that more than half found the *your guys's* form natural in informal speech, and one quarter considered it to be correct in formal English.

4. Survey of 50 Wayne State College undergraduates:

Given the four choices in example (1) above,

A. Which one would you most naturally use in informal speech?

a (you guys') = 5	c (your guys') = 15	
b (you guys's) = 21	d (your guys's) = 14	
a/b total: 26	c/d total: 29	TOTAL: 55*

B. Which one do you think is considered to be correct?

a (you guys') = 13	c (your guys') = 12	
b (you guys's) = 8	d (your guys's) = 2	
a/b total: 21	c/d total: 14	TOTAL: 35#

*higher than 50 because some respondents gave more than one answer.

#lower than 50 because many said NONE; only "your" is correct.

Several respondents noted they have been taught "s's" is never right, only "s'" is: a/c total in B is 25, vs. b/d total 10.

¹Although data are lacking, it is likely that the construction's extent is more social than strictly geographical. One *your guys's* speaker suggested to me that the construction may be linked to Italian and/or Irish ethnic speech in the St. Louis area, but this is not true among the Nebraska speakers with whom I am most familiar. I do not know A. W. Gray's background.

On the first question, about naturalness of the various possessive forms of *you guys* in informal speech, 29 out of 50 survey respondents said they would use either (c) or (d), the *your guys'(s)* forms; some said they would also use (a) or (b), so the total responses for this question are 55. On the second question, about which possessive form is "correct," 14 out of 50 chose one of the *your guys'(s)* forms correct; 15 students considered none of the *you guys* options to be correct for formal use, resulting in a total of only 35 for this question.

The results of this survey, while too small and too informally collected to be of statistical significance, do indicate that both *your guys's* and *you guys's* exist as real grammatical possessive forms of *you guys* for different speakers, and that a rather large number in this part of the midwest prefer the *your guys's* construction.

A similar split exists among speakers of *you all* varieties. Some use *your all's* as the possessive (5a), while others use *you all's* (5b). Example (5c), spoken at a faculty meeting by an administrator from the deep south, indicates that some speakers may simply avoid the issue, using neither form, perhaps particularly in formal situations.

- 5.a. If it's ours, or **your all's** ... (D.N., Oklahoma)²
- b. I mean, he did call **you-all's** house three times. (Anne Tyler, *Ladder of Years*, 310 (Maryland)³)
- c. Is my understanding in accord with the understanding of **you all**? (B.C., 50-ish)

2. Analysis

Let us now turn to the analysis of the *your guys's* construction. The interesting feature of this form is its double possessive marking, a pattern that looks like agreement. But assuming it is in fact agreement, it remains to be determined what agrees with what, within what kind of structure. In current theories of syntax, simple pronouns are standardly analyzed as DP (Determiner Phrase) with only the head filled:

- 6. [DP [D you]]

For the complex pronouns, like *you guys* and *you all*, several structures seem possible: they might be D, D+NP complement, or Specifier+D:

- 7.a. [DP [D you guys]]
- b. [DP [D you] [NP guys]]
- c. [DP [SPEC you] [D guys]]

²Example (4a) was produced during a public presentation; I unfortunately did not write down the whole sentence. The speaker confirmed later that he normally says "your all's".

³Tyler's novels are set in Baltimore.

I will suggest that two of these structures exist, for different speakers. *You guys* has structure (7a) for those speakers who use *you guys'(s)* as the possessive; it is simply a compound lexical item. On the other hand, for those who say *your guys'(s)* as the possessive, *you guys* is a phrase with internal syntactic structure, probably of the type shown in (7b).

Let us first consider structure (7a). This structure, with *you guys* treated as a single head, predicts no agreement. Feature percolation does not take place within lexical items as a rule, so for example, a possessive or plural compound noun does not have possessive/plural inflection on both of its parts. Plurals like *three bulldogs* or possessives like *the bull'sdog's collar* simply do not occur.

8. *bulldogs (plural), *bull'sdogs' (possessive)

Some complex pronouns, such as the reflexives in (9), do have an apparent word-internal possessive form. But this differs from the possessive agreement in *your guys's*, in several ways. First, these are frozen forms, part of a paradigm which includes non-possessive forms like *him* and *them* as well as possessive forms like *my* and *our*. Secondly, even though the first segment of the word appears to be possessive, the word as a whole is not, so (9b) is ungrammatical. Thirdly, there is no agreement between parts of the word; no pattern like that in (9c) where either both parts are unmarked (*meself* or perhaps *Iself*) or both inflected (*myself's*). In short, the reflexive pronouns exhibit neither true word-internal inflection nor agreement.

- 9.a. myself, ourselves (but himself, themselves)
- b. *myself car
- c. *meself/*Iself, *myself's

Real inflection does occur internal to certain compound nouns; for instance, the plural marking in *mothers-in-law*. But here again there is no double inflection or agreement among different parts of the word (10a). Possessive marking in such nouns occurs only at the end of the whole complex word, as in (10b).

- 10.a. mothers-in-law (but *mothers-in-laws)
- b. my mother-in-law's car (*mother's-in-law's)

Thus, if *you guys* is a single, syntactically unanalyzable word, we expect no internal possessive marking. Structure (7a) predicts the possessive form *you guys'(s)*, with no possessive inflection on *you*; I take it (7a) is the correct structure for the boldfaced phrase in (1a-b).

Structures (7b) and (c), on the other hand, both motivate "double" possessive marking on both *your* and *guys*. These more syntactically articulated structures allow for agreement between the head and its complement (in (7b)) or specifier and head (in (7c)). Both of these are well known situations. Determiners agree with their NP complements in features such as gender, number, and case in many languages, and Spec-head agreement is pervasive in the theoretical literature, though usually covert. Let's now see how these agreement options would work in a possessive construction.

I assume a structure for possessives in which the possessor DP (pronoun or other) is in the Specifier position of the larger DP headed by the POSS affix, while the possessed NP is its complement, as shown in (11):

- 11.a. [DP [Spec you] [D r] [NP car]]
 b. [DP [Spec the teacher] [D 's] [NP car]]

The internal structure of the specifier component of these is given in (12), where we see once again that the pronoun *you* is in D; a more complex possessor phrase like *the teacher* is a DP with both a head D and a complement, all within Spec:

- 12.a. [Spec [DP [D you]]] (=11a)
 b. [Spec [DP [D the][NP teacher]]] (=11b)

As we have seen, the *you guys's* possessive has the same structure as that of any possessive pronoun; *you guys* is simply a compound pronoun, and it occupies the same structural position as *you*; namely, it fills the head D position of the DP in Spec. Compare (13a) to (12a). The structure of the whole possessive DP is sketched in (13b).

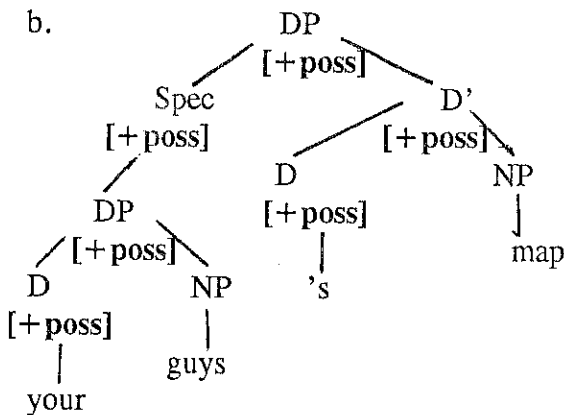
- 13.a. [Spec [DP [D you guys]]] (cf. 12a)
 b. [DP [Spec [DP [D you guys]]] [D 's] [NP car]]

Now, what about the *your guys's* construction? Just as with any possessor DP, *your guys* is in the specifier position of the possessive DP, as in (14).

14. [DP [Spec your guys]] [D 's] [NP car]]

The question is what the internal structure of the material in this specifier is. If it has structure (7b), that is, D+NP, we obtain the more detailed version (15), given in tree as well as linear form for clarity:

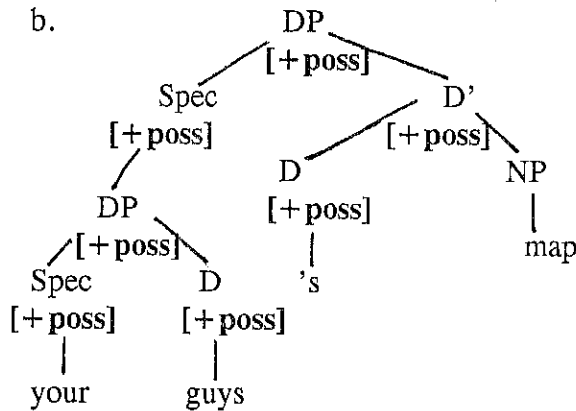
- 15.a. [DP [Spec [DP [D your] [NP guys]]] [D 's] [NP car]]



Arrows in the tree show the path of feature "percolation" or agreement. The DP in specifier position gets marked [+Poss] by Spec-head agreement with the [+Poss] D (possessive affix); the possessive feature then percolates to the head D of the phrase in Spec position, resulting in the possessive form *your*.

If the specifier in (14) has the internal structure (7c) instead of (7b), i.e. Spec+D instead of D+NP, we get the configuration in (16).

16.a. [DP [Spec [DP [Spec your] [D guys]]] [D 's] [NP car]]



Here the DP in Spec position is marked [+Poss] by Spec-head agreement, just as in (15); the possessive feature percolates to the head D, which is now *guys*, and then by Spec-head agreement to the Specifier containing *your*.

Both structures, (15) and (16), motivate the possessive form *your*. But (15) seems preferable, for a couple of reasons. First, *you*, being a pronoun, makes a more expected D constituent than *guys* does; as we saw in (6) and (12a), pronouns are standardly analyzed as D in all sorts of constructions. This structure makes *you guys* parallel to a phrase like *those guys*, which is clearly D+NP. The lack of a possessive form of *those* (or for that matter of *the* in (11b/12b) *the teacher's car*) is simply a morphological gap. Compare with a language like German, in which both the determiner and noun would take genitive case inflection in a phrase like *das Auto deS lehrerS*.

I conclude, then, that the two possessive forms of *you guys* represent two different structural configurations, repeated in (17). *You guys's car* has *you guys* as a single lexical item in D, while *your guys's car* has a more complex phrasal structure with a D and an NP complement.

17.a. [DP [Spec [DP [D you guys]]] [D 's] [NP car]]

b. [DP [Spec [DP [D your] [NP guys]]] [D 's] [NP car]]

Parallel arguments establish that the two possessive forms of *you all* have structures parallel to those in (17); *you all's* has *you all* in D, while *your all's* has a more complex

structure consisting of D plus a complement. The only difference is that *all* is presumably QP, rather than NP, so *your all's* is D+QP instead of D+NP. These structures are shown in (18).

- 18.a. [DP [Spec [DP [D you all]]] [D 's] [NP car]]
 b. [DP [Spec [DP [D your] [QP all]]] [D 's] [NP car]]

3. Related Puzzles

A number of other colloquial possessive usages pose problems which may be related to those discussed in this paper. I do not present anything like a complete treatment of these here, but simply mention several classes of potentially relevant and puzzling data.

First, notice that *guys* can be used with other plural pronouns as well as with *you* (19a), and for some speakers the first person plural pronoun may also occur in a "double" possessive construction (19b). Two audience members at the spoken presentation of this paper (one from Missouri, the other from California) commented that *our guys's* is acceptable for them, particularly in a contrastive or focused context: "Our guys's team is doing fine; it's your guys's team that's in trouble". The third person plural possessive *their guys's*, on the other hand, appears to be marginal if possible at all. It may be relevant here that even the non-possessive-marked third person form in (19a) is much less common and less standard than *you guys*; *them guys* is a stigmatized variant of *those guys*, whose use makes many of us who happily use *you guys* cringe. *Us guys*, while not particularly stigmatized, appears to be less fully grammaticalized than *you guys*, and less commonly used, perhaps because *us* alone is already unambiguously plural, unlike *you*.

- 19.a. us guys, them guys
 b. us guys's car / our guys's car
 c. them guys's car / *?their guys's car

Secondly, there are numerous phrases with *you* followed by a noun, in what at first glance looks identical to a *you guys* construction. Some of these are listed in (20). But to the best of my knowledge no agreeing possessive pronoun ever occurs in these. A phrase like *your folks's car* is of course possible, but it means "the car belonging to the folks who belong to you", not "you folks's car". I assume that these phrases have an appositive epithet structure; DP+DP, instead of D or D+NP.

- 20.a. you people, you folks, you kids
 b. #your people's, #your folks's, #your kids's

Similarly, some phrases with *you* and a quantifier, reminiscent of the *you all* plural, do not occur with possessive *your*. *You two's room* is at least marginally possible, but *your two's room* is not. Like the phrases in (20), these presumably have an appositive structure: DP+QP.

- 21.a. you two, you both
 b. *your two's, *your both's

On the other hand, certain interrogative possessive phrases do display a variety of options for possessive marking reminiscent of the *you guys's/your guys's* distinction.⁴ Some speakers inflect the first element of phrases like those in (22), the question word *whose*. Some use a possessive affix at the end of the phrase. And at least for *who the hell* some speakers accept double possessive marking, resulting in both *whose* and *hell's*, very much like the pattern in the *your guys's* construction.

- 22.a. **Whose else** would it be? **Who else's ... ??Whose else's**
- b. **Whose all** are these? **Who all's ... ??Whose all's ...**
- c. **Whose the hell** idea was this? **Who the hell's ...**
 Whose the hell's idea was this?

Furthermore, possessives of conjoined phrases also show some variability in possessive marking. A colleague of mine referred to a class we were to team teach as *Catherine and I's class*. The possessive form *my* would be more expected than *I's*, but hesitation over whether to also possessive-mark the first conjunct is common.

- 23. Catherine and I's class
 Catherine's and my? Catherine and my?

Finally, I have no concrete information on the possessive-inflected forms of complex second person plural pronouns from other dialects, such as *you'uns*, *youse*, or the gangster-movie *youse guys*. It is, however, harder to imagine these taking an overt possessive marker on the first element than for *you guys* or *you all*, given the cliticized or phonologically fused nature of the following part of the word.

⁴Thanks to Ed Battistella and Russ Rasmussen for these examples.