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Conceptual Categories in Contact: Predicative Possession in Irish English

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Abstract:	<p>The conceptual and formal linguistic differences between Irish and English with regards to predicative possession have arguably had an effect on the grammar of the contact-induced English variety of Irish English (IrE). An analysis of IrE and British English (BrE) data shows variation in the range of meanings conveyed by the construction [NP1 have (got) NP2] – variation that is even more significant between standard IrE and traditional rural IrE. Considering the different degrees of Irish language influence on each dataset, this variation is explored in the context of the original historical acquisition of English by Irish speakers and the various cognitive processes involved in it: the role played by prototypes in the perception and reproduction of English possessives by Irish speakers, and the effects of the saliency and frequency of the English input on the emergent Irish English.</p>
Keywords:	Predicative possession - Varieties of English - Irish English - cognitive linguistics - prototype categories
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Abstract

The conceptual and formal linguistic differences between Irish and English with regards to predicative possession have arguably had an effect on the grammar of the contact-induced English variety of Irish English (IrE). An analysis of IrE and British English (BrE) data shows variation in the range of meanings conveyed by the construction [NP1 *have (got)* NP2] – variation that is even more significant between standard IrE and traditional rural IrE. Considering the different degrees of Irish language influence on each dataset, this variation is explored in the context of the original historical acquisition of English by Irish speakers and the various cognitive processes involved in it: the role played by prototypes in the perception and reproduction of English possessives by Irish speakers, and the effects of the saliency and frequency of the English input on the emergent Irish English.

Keywords

Predicative possession – Varieties of English – Irish English – cognitive linguistics – prototype categories

1. Introduction

To say that possession is a complicated matter would certainly be an understatement. While it is claimed that “[e]very language has a mechanism for expressing possession” (Aikhenvald 2013: 1), there is no complete consensus in the literature on what possession actually is – neither as a linguistic category or a conceptual one. As far as English is concerned, predicative possession is often described in terms of the semantic concepts that the form [NP1 *have (got)* NP2] encodes; in this sense, the notions *I have a car* and *I have a headache* belong to the same category. But such a definition cannot be applied cross-linguistically – especially for languages that do not have a *have*-like verb; yet many cross-linguistic studies attempt “to provide an intentional definition of possession a priori which fits the entire distributional profile of the constructions under scrutiny ideally” (Stolz et al. 2008: 19). The result of such endeavours is often an outline of possession as a cross-linguistic category that is in fact mostly based on what the *have* construction conveys in English. This approach is most likely rooted in the assumption that all humans conceptualize possession in the same way, using similar cross-cultural metaphors; and it furthermore presupposes the existence of possession as “an overarching category which has various subtypes, when in fact no such category exists from a cognitive point of view” (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2019: 226).

With possession being a term that is at best controversial, if not describing an altogether non-existent category, researchers such as Goddard & Wierzbicka (2019: 226) approach the matter from a semantic perspective by treating possession as “a network or set of interrelated cognitive/semantic schemas”, with relations of ownership, kinship and parts of the body lying at the heart of this network. A similar interpretation is provided by Taylor (1995: 202), who maintains that “possession is not a semantic primitive” but rather a set of relations that arise from the interaction of specific properties, with some relations constituting more prototypical cases of

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4 possession than others. Yet the question remains whether the set of relations that constitute
5 ‘possession’ in one language (such as English) is exactly the same in a typologically different
6 language (such as Irish) – especially when the formal structures that are used to express these
7 relations in both languages are entirely different.
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10 The idea that possession is a cross-linguistic comparative concept is challenged in this
11 paper based on evidence from Irish English (IrE) – an English variety that emerged in Ireland
12 from the contact between Irish and English speakers. A corpus-based analysis of data from IrE
13 shows differences in the linguistic expression of possessive concepts in this variety compared to
14 British English (BrE),¹ with IrE speakers using the *have* construction much less and in fewer
15 contexts than BrE speakers. I argue that this reflects a difference in the categorization of
16 possessive concepts between speakers of the two varieties, and that this conceptual difference
17 stems from the Irish-English language contact and the influence of Irish on IrE. The
18 categorization of possessive concepts in Irish is therefore examined here in detail, and the
19 underlying influence of IrE is explored based on two sets of IrE data, each reflecting a different
20 degree of intensity of the contact with Irish. An account of the mechanism of contact is then
21 proposed, focusing on the cognitive processes that took place during the acquisition of English
22 by Irish speakers, and the factors that produced the variation in the IrE category of possession.
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28 **2. Background**

29 **2.1 Possession: Category and Prototypes**

30 Possession is often treated in the literature as a complex category made up of several semantic
31 relations that hold between two entities (cf. “possessive notions”, Heine 1997). Many agree that
32 one relation in particular, ownership, is the prototypical case or the most central member of the
33 possession category: it profiles a typically human entity (‘possessor’) that exerts control over a
34 typically inanimate concrete object (‘possessee’), both being in close physical proximity² (Seiler
35 1983; Taylor 1995: 202; Heine 1997; Herslund & Baron 2001; Stolz et al. 2008: 19 – *inter alia*).
36 This prototype encapsulates several key properties, such as the possessor’s agentive control and
37 animacy; the possessee’s concreteness; and the spatial and temporal aspects of their relationship.
38 Other possessive relations are therefore graded and judged as more or less prototypical based on
39 their degree of deviation from this prototype (Taylor 1995; Stassen 2009; Langacker 2009).
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46 In English, the ownership prototype – or ‘true possession’, as it is sometimes called – is
47 associated with the formal linguistic structure [NP1 *have (got)* NP2],³ in which the verb *have*
48 originates from a Proto-Indo-European verb **kap* ‘grasp’ (as is the case for many other
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52 ¹ In the context of this study, ‘British English’ refers to a random collection of dialects from England and Scotland
53 as represented by the British National Corpus; see section 4 below.

54 ² Beyond the legal sense of the term, the ‘ownership’ prototype is also used in the literature in reference to cases of
55 mere ‘control’ – a difference which some have tried to capture through the parameter of temporality (e.g.
56 ‘temporary’ and ‘permanent possession’ in Heine 1997; see also Stassen 2009). In order to avoid adding
57 unnecessary terminology I will continue to refer to this relation as ownership or ownership/control.

58 ³ I use the notation [NP1 *have (got)* NP2] in order to refer to both the basic construction [NP1 *have* NP2] and the
59 *have-got* construction. Arguably the two vary both in meanings and in their distribution across varieties of English –
60 with the *have-got* construction being much more widespread in BrE than in IrE (Kirk & Kallen 2009).
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4 languages whose *have*-like verbs develop from verbs meaning ‘seize, hold, take, get’;
5 Aikhenvald 2013: 28). Having undergone a process of grammaticalization, the form [NP1 *have*
6 (*got*) NP2] no longer denotes a transitive action – despite retaining its formal structure and some
7 of the key semantic properties of transitive constructions (where “the prototypical possessor
8 tends to display properties of an ACTOR whereas the prototypical possessee has more features in
9 common with an UNDERGOER”; Stolz et al. 2008: 20). In addition to the ownership sense, the
10 *have* construction also encodes two other semantic relations that are considered “core types” of
11 possession (Aikhenvald 2013: 3) or “possessive archetypes” (Langacker 2009: 83), viz. parthood
12 (specifically the relation between a human entity and his or her body parts) and kinship. Unlike
13 ownership, these relations are “intrinsic, intimate, and obligatory” in nature (Aikhenvald 2013:
14 4), and, crucially, lack the element of the possessor’s control over the possessee. Despite the
15 significant semantic differences between ‘inalienable’ and ‘alienable’ relations, they are all
16 considered members of the possession category in English – alongside other ‘possessive’
17 concepts such as experience (*I have a headache*) and ‘inanimate possession’ (*Their house has*
18 *four bedrooms*). In fact, Langacker (2009: 103ff.) interprets these different possessive relations
19 as successive stages in an overall grammaticization process, in which the possessor’s degree of
20 agentive control gradually decreases, until it becomes “only marginally an experiencer” in
21 addition to being “a spatial reference point indicating where the object can be found”. At the
22 extreme end of this process is inanimate possession, by which point “the possessor is completely
23 passive, serving only a reference point function” (Langacker 2009: 104). The membership of
24 inanimate relations in the possession category is considered controversial by some (see, for
25 example, Stassen 2009: 17, footnote 13), as even Heine remarks:

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34 One may wonder why [*cases of inanimate possession*] should be subsumed under the
35 label ‘possession’ [...] The main reason for treating them all as possessive notions is that
36 in many languages they are expressed in the same way as prototypical instances of
37 possession (Heine 1997: 36).
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40 It is true that for many English speakers, the same construction that expresses the
41 ownership relation, i.e., [NP1 *have (got)* NP2], also expresses a number of other stative relations
42 between two entities that are less-than-prototypical. But this is certainly not the case for all
43 languages; we will see that Irish, for example, uses different formal means to encode the notion
44 of ownership and the notion of inanimate part-whole relations.
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47 If in a given language not all ‘possessive’ concepts are in fact expressed by a ‘possessive’
48 construction, one truly begins to question the definition of possession and whether it really is a
49 comparative concept that can be applied cross-linguistically. Goddard & Wierzbicka (2019: 226)
50 go so far as to argue that from a cognitive perspective, ‘possession’ as a category does not exist,
51 but rather “what linguists term ‘possession’ is better conceptualised as a network or set of
52 interrelated cognitive/semantic schemas.” They agree that using the term is helpful for
53 comparative cross-linguistic analyses, but propose narrowing down the scope of this misnamed
54 category: “When discussing conceptual distinctions it would be much better to speak instead
55 about ‘ownership, body and kin’ relationships. These are, after all, widely agreed to be the three
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major divisions that are relevant for cross-linguistic comparison” (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2019: 232).

In the present paper I pursue this point even further by arguing that what may be relevant cross-linguistically (or at least for the case of English, Irish, and IrE) is, in fact, animacy: the distinction between relations that pertain to animate entities (thus including Goddard & Wierzbicka’s ‘ownership, body and kin’ or ‘OBK’ relationships), and those that pertain to inanimate ones. This is explored in the following section, where I examine whether possession as defined here based on English really does apply to Irish.

2.2 Possession as a Category in Irish

Though Irish does not have a *have*-like verb, its speakers are certainly capable of expressing ownership, kinship and the rest of the semantic relations that constitute the possession category in English. But in the absence of a formal structure that uniquely expresses ‘possessive’ concepts (as the *have* construction does in English), I see no justification in using the term ‘possession’ with respect to Irish. Furthermore, the expression of ‘true possession’ (ownership) developed in Irish from a conceptual source different to that of English; and while ownership is considered the core of the possession category in English, I argue that this is not the case for Irish. In fact, the most basic meaning of the Irish syntactic structure that expresses ownership, i.e. [*bí* NP2 preposition NP1] (where *bí* is a substantive verb (‘be’), followed by the grammatical subject (NP2) and a prepositional phrase which includes the ‘location’ NP1) is locative, expressing the relationship between objects and their spatial-physical location (1).

(1)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>leabhar</i>	<i>ar</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>mbord</i>
	be.PRS	book	on	the	table
	‘There is a book on the table / The table has a book on it’				

This structure encodes a wide variety of additional meanings through different prepositions and depending on the semantic profiles of the participants. These include relations of existence/location with the preposition *ag* (‘at, by’) when the NP1 is inanimate (2), and relations of ownership/control and kinship with *ag* (‘at, by’) when the NP1 is animate (3 and 4), as well as some cases of animate part-whole relations (5). The preposition *ar* (‘on’) encodes relations between humans and their abstract emotions (6), and part-whole relations in both animates and inanimates (7 and 8).⁴ The preposition *i* (‘in’) encodes a more abstract part-whole relation between an animate whole and his or her qualities (9),⁵ as well as other part-whole relations in inanimates (10 and 11).

(2)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>duine</i>	<i>ag</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>doras</i>
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⁴ The *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*’s (FGB) definition for the preposition *ar* specifies its use “[i]n reference to outer parts of body or thing, regardless of position” (definition II, 1(a) of the preposition *ar*). I am unable to determine what conditions the choice of either preposition.

⁵ This quality relation is discussed by Francez & Koontz-Garboden (2017: 41, note 7), who point out that “humans conceive of qualities as integral parts of the individuals that have them.”

	be.PRS	person	at	the	door
	'There's somebody at the door'				

(3)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>leabhar</i>	<i>ag</i>	<i>Seán</i>	
	be.PRS	book	at	John	
	'John has a book'				

(4)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>beirt</i>	<i>mhac</i>	<i>ag</i>	<i>Seán</i>
	be.PRS	two	son	at	John
	'John has two sons'				

(5)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>súile</i>	<i>donna</i>	<i>aici</i>	
	be.PRS	eyes	brown	at-3SG.FEM	
	'She has brown eyes' (FGB)				

(6)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>brón</i>	<i>orm</i>		
	be.PRS	sorrow	on-1SG		
	'I am sorry'				

(7)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>droim</i>	<i>fadaithe</i>	<i>ar</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>gcathaoir</i>
	be.PRS	back	elongated	on	the	chair
	'The chair has an elongated back' (New English-Irish Dictionary)					

(8)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>gruaig</i>	<i>ghairid</i>	<i>rua</i>	<i>air</i>
	be.PRS	hair	short	red	on-3SG.MASC
	'He has short red hair' (New English-Irish Dictionary)				

(9)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>urra</i>	<i>mór</i>	<i>ann</i>	
	be.PRS	strength	big	in-3SG.MASC	
	'He has great strength' (FGB)				

(10)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>céad</i>	<i>leathanach</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>leabhar</i>
	be.PRS	100	page	in+the	book
	'There are a hundred pages in the book' (FGB)				

(11)	<i>Tá</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>cruas</i>	<i>san</i>	<i>iarann</i>
	be.PRS	the	hardness	in+the	iron
	'Iron has the quality of hardness' (FGB)				

This is by no means a definitive inventory of every relation expressed by the construction [bí NP2 preposition NP1] in Irish, but it does illustrate that this language has some animacy-

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4 based distinction which affects the interpretation of this construction: with animate entities, the
5 preposition *ag* encodes ownership/control (3), but with inanimate entities it encodes location (2).
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8 The case of Irish demonstrates that while the concept of ownership/control is perceived
9 as a primary and prototypical example of ‘possession’ in languages such as English, it is likely
10 that in Irish it is rather a metaphorical extension of the concept of location. Given that “humans
11 regularly extend their understanding of physical-spatial relations and entities to non-physical
12 domains” (Tyler & Evans 2003: 28), we can assume that the concept of spatial proximity became
13 correlated with the possibility of access or control (“it is generally by virtue of something being
14 close to us spatially that we are able to use it or experience it”; Langacker 2009: 106). In addition
15 to the different conceptual sources from which ownership/control developed in Irish and in
16 English, there are no formal or conceptual criteria in Irish that distinguish the relations which in
17 English constitute the possession category – not even the parameters of [\pm alienable], [\pm concrete],
18 [\pm temporary], or [\pm animate] (cf. Heine 1997: 39, and Stassen 2009: 17). In this sense, the view
19 that “possession is a kind of ‘sophisticated’ Location” (Herslund & Baron 2001: 5; see also
20 Freeze 1992 – among many others) certainly applies to Irish – if ‘possession’ is inferred strictly
21 as ownership/control. It is hard to say, however, that this conclusion applies to English, where
22 the ‘localist hypothesis’ conflicts with the diachronic development of the *have* construction
23 (Langacker 2009: 103).
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30 Having outlined the conceptual and formal differences between Irish and English with
31 regards to ‘possession’ and its validity as a category, I now turn to consider the contact between
32 these two languages and its effect on the grammar of IrE with regards to predicative possession.
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34 35 **3. Irish English as a Contact-Induced Variety**

36 The English language in Ireland has a complex history that dates back to the Middle Ages with
37 the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. Over the centuries, the native Irish-speaking population came
38 into contact with speakers of different varieties of English from Britain (Filppula 1999:17ff.). As
39 a result, an Irish variety of English emerged through a process of language shift, by which Irish
40 speakers gradually stopped using Irish as an everyday language in the home or the community,
41 and switched to English. This fairly rapid shift took place mostly during the early 19th century in
42 the wake of a much longer period of Irish-English bilingualism, which began with the intensive
43 colonization of Ireland in the 1600’s (Filppula 1999: 6ff.) The language shift did not occur across
44 Ireland simultaneously, but rather originated in the towns – the locus of greater interaction
45 between Irish and English speakers through commerce, government and education – and only
46 later spread to the countryside (Kallen 1997: 22). The effects of this pattern of progress in the
47 spread of English are well attested in IrE, with a recognizable “‘dialect continuum’ with respect
48 to the strength of influence from Irish” (Filppula 1999: 39), stretching from the varieties of
49 Dublin and the east of Ireland, to the more Irish-influenced varieties of the west and south west –
50 where Irish continued to be spoken in rural communities for a longer period of time. Irish was
51 also spoken to various degrees across the northern province of Ulster, but fell into sharp decline
52 as it did throughout Ireland – especially in the wake of the Great Famine of the late 1840’s,
53 which led to a significant decline in the population of Irish speakers.
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4 The bilingualism that spread throughout Ireland developed as the adult Irish-speaking
5 population acquired English as a second language in a ‘non-prescriptive’ and ‘uncontrolled’
6 environment (Hickey 2007: 125)⁶ – a process that is not unique to IrE, and has a profound effect
7 on the grammar of the acquired language. Odlin et al. explain:
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10 [...] the effects of transfer seen in the second language acquisition of early generations
11 often linger well beyond the period when the bilinguals can be viewed as non-native
12 speakers of one of the languages in the contact situation; indeed, the effects can linger
13 into a period where the bilingualism disappears, and the shift to a monolingual
14 community has been completed (Odlin et al. 2005: 86)
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18 The English variety that emerged in Ireland indeed exhibits a considerable amount of
19 grammatical variation that is the result of the ‘lingering effects of transfer’ from Irish, alongside
20 variation that is rooted in the contact situation itself. This scenario is crucial to the discussion of
21 possession in IrE, which does have a valid conceptual category of possession despite the
22 unquestionable influence of Irish. Still, the evidence presented in the remainder of this paper
23 suggests that the possession category in IrE differs from that of BrE, mostly in its treatment of
24 inanimate relations as a possessive concept.
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27 **4. Data, methods and results**

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29 The different forms of the original English input, the varying degrees of Irish substratum
30 influence, and the rural/urban divide (Filppula 1999: 32-33) are some of the factors that have
31 contributed to phonological and grammatical variation within IrE. This paper examines yet
32 another dimension of variation by focusing on the distinction between a local traditional IrE
33 dialect and a more standard ‘supraregional’ form of IrE (Hickey 2007: 26). This examination
34 draws on data from two different IrE corpora. One is the Irish component of the International
35 Corpus of English (ICE-Ireland), which represents the Irish variety of Standard English used by
36 educated speakers across Ireland in both public and private domains (Kirk 2011). Although this
37 variety of IrE “most strongly suppresses variation”, the study of ICE-Ireland in comparison with
38 other ICE corpora reveals its particular Irishness (or ‘Celticity’, as recognized by Kirk & Kallen
39 [2007: 270]) – the set of non-standard features that can be attributed to the influence of the Irish
40 language. Nevertheless, the occurrence of these non-standard features in ICE-Ireland is “muted
41 relative to the material found in a dialect or sociolinguistic study” (Kirk 2011: 35-36). This data
42 is therefore complemented by data from the West Clare corpus (abbreviated WCC), which
43 represents the traditional dialect of a rural area heavily influenced by the long-term contact with
44 Irish. The corpus represents the speech of 8 speakers (6 male, 2 female), born in the western part
45 of Co. Clare between 1898 and 1918. These speakers spent their lives in rural communities
46 where Irish was still spoken in the home and the community, and where older Irish monoglots
47 were still living alongside a majority population of English speakers of varying degrees of
48 competency (see Fig. 1 for a map of speakers locations). While some of the informants are first
49 or second generation Irish-English bilinguals, others are monolingual English speakers.
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58 ⁶ The acquisition of English by Irish-speaking children within the National Schools system from 1831 onwards is
59 assumed to have had a marginal effect on the spread of English during the crucial period of the language shift
60 (Filppula 1999: 19f.)
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4 Nevertheless, the English spoken in West Clare at the turn of the 20th century onwards was very
5 different from any standard variety of English: as reported by the WCC speakers themselves,⁷
6 these communities remained relatively isolated throughout most of the century, with speakers of
7 this particular generation minimally exposed to any non-local varieties of English or to any
8 outside linguistic pressure towards standardization during their lifetime.
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11 (Fig.1 here)
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13 For the purposes of this study, the data from IrE is put into context by comparing it with
14 BrE data drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC). The BNC texts selected for the purpose
15 of this study record speakers from various British English dialect areas (i.e., North-East England,
16 East Anglia, Home Counties, and Scotland), who are, most crucially, speakers of a non-contact
17 variety of English whose ‘possession’ category comfortably fits the descriptions of English in the
18 literature (as surveyed in section 2.1 above). This allows for a comparison that has the potential
19 to highlight the effects of language contact on the expression of possession in each variety of
20 English under examination.
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23 The texts selected for analysis from the ICE-Ireland corpus and the BNC represent
24 spoken face-to-face interactions in a naturally-occurring setting (all transcribed from audio
25 recordings and converted into machine-readable format). The texts that make up the WCC, on
26 the other hand, are transcribed interviews that were conducted between 1977-1983 by folklore
27 collector Tom Munnely, and are now stored in the archives of the National Folklore Collection
28 in University College Dublin.⁸ While from a methodological perspective, the language produced
29 in these interviews is not ‘naturally-occurring’ in the same sense as the language recorded in the
30 other two corpora, it is nevertheless sufficiently colloquial and informal. Any effects related to a
31 potential ‘observer’s paradox’ on the data are reduced by the nature of the topics discussed in
32 these interviews (personal and local history, farming practices, etc., rather than the speakers’
33 own language), as well as by the informal and often close relationship which Munnely
34 developed with many of his interviewees / neighbors (having moved from Dublin to Clare in the
35 late 1970’s).
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42 The concordance software AntConc (Anthony 2018) was used to search the WCC and
43 ICE-Ireland for all occurrences of the verb *have*, which were then sorted and disambiguated
44 manually, focusing on possessive *have* and disregarding other highly grammaticalized *have*
45 constructions.⁹ The BNC texts (compiled into a POS tagged sub-corpus) were queried using the
46 BNCweb interface (CQP edition), focusing on the headword *have*. The results were then sorted
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51 ⁷ Some of the speakers never travelled outside of the county, and had acquired electricity (and with it, a radio) only
52 in the late 1970’s.

53 ⁸ The archives of the National Folklore Collection hold both the audio tapes and Munnely’s own transcriptions of
54 each recording. For the purpose of creating the WCC I transcribed the interviews directly from the digitized audio
55 recordings. Examples cited from the WCC therefore reference the number of the tape produced by Munnely,
56 preceded by the speaker’s initials.

57 ⁹ These include the *have* perfect (*I’ve seen so many people do it*; BNC KB7 4137), the modal *have-to* construction (*I*
58 *know what I’ve got to do*; BNC KB7 12683), the *had-better* construction (*You’d better open it*; BNC KB7 15124),
59 and idiomatic expressions like *what have you* (*Those orange drinks [...] there’s always some additives and what*
60 *have you*; BNC KB7 6798).
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and disambiguated manually. In addition to the basic structure (as outlined in section 2.1 above), forms of the type [NP1 *have (got)* NP2 (X)] are also included in the count. They denote inanimate alienable possession (e.g. *My study has a lot of books in it*), as well as several other meanings that are essentially based on possessive relations and encode an entity that either exerts agentive control or is otherwise an experiencer (Gilquin 2010: 283; Diamant 2021): the experiencer *have* construction (12) and different types of causative *have* constructions (13 and 14). I also include ‘dynamic’ cases of the *have* construction (15) due to their interpretation as a type of experiencer construction (cf. Wierzbicka 1982).

(12) *I might like having me botty smacked* (BNC KB7 13255)

(13) *They gotta have an electrician do the job* (BNC KB7 7728)

(14) *I'd like to have my affairs fixed* (WCC JC TM1273)

(15) *He's just gonna have a lie down* (BNC KBH 4410)

Each token of the possessive *have* construction was then analyzed based on the animacy of the subject NP (the ‘possessor’).

TABLE 1 Animacy in possessive *have* constructions

	Total no. of tokens [NP1 <i>have (got)</i> NP2 (X)]	NP1 = inanimate (raw frequencies)
WCC (116,510 words) ¹⁰	1,084	2 (0.2%)
ICE-Ireland (186,266 words)	1,558	61 (3.9%)
BNC (164,049 words)	1,877	72 (3.8%)

The results in Table 1 reveal that in all three datasets, the entities encoded as subjects in the *have* construction are predominantly animate, whereas the proportion of inanimates is remarkably small – only 3.8% of all possessive *have* cases in the BNC, 3.9% in ICE-Ireland, and a mere 0.2% in the WCC (a total of only two cases). These striking differences between the two IrE corpora confirm the observations made by Kirk (2011) regarding the alignment of the ICE-Ireland corpus with other national varieties of English, and its divergence from corpora representing more vernacular varieties (such as the WCC); these results also demonstrate the IrE dialect-continuum recognized by Filppula (1999: 39) based on the degree of influence of the Irish-English contact.

In both the BNC and ICE-Ireland, *have* constructions with inanimate subjects are found encoding a variety of semantic relations (16-19):

(16) *It should have a few more diamonds on it* (ICE S1A-089\$D)

(17) *The old Saab nine hundreds used to have a dummy brake pedal for nervous passengers in the front* (ICE S1A-003\$A)

¹⁰ This figure refers to the speech of the West Clare speakers only, excluding contributions made by Tom Munnely.

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4 (18) *This bedroom's got the bay window* (BNC KB7 1636)
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6 (19) *It's not empty, it's got chocolate still* (BNC KB7 7470)
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8 As for the two examples produced by the West Clare speakers, both of them feature very
9 a-prototypical inanimate entities: in example (20) the subject NP *the frost* is an inanimate natural
10 force that nevertheless exhibits a “self-propulsive nature analogous to human behavior” (Ji &
11 Liang 2018: 76). In example (21) the NP *that ring* is also inanimate, but the speaker attributes
12 causative properties to it that otherwise typically apply to animate entities.
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15 (20) *Jack run up and he opened the door. And who was in it but the man he had the head cut.*
16 ***The frost- the frost had the head stuck on again.*** (WCC JN TM614B)
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19 (21) *You put it around the horn and that ring – 'twas a rubber ring – and it will be squeezing,*
20 *squeezing, squeezing that horn away, till it- knock off the horn. Whatever way **that ring***
21 ***had the power of cutting that,** Tom, I couldn't- could never solve it.* (WCC TL TM618A)
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24 Finally, I note another not-so-prototypical case of animacy from the WCC:

25 (22) *Liscannor had a little steamer coming every... twice a week* (WCC JN TM614B)
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28 In this example, *Liscannor* is the name of a coastal village in West Clare. Though it is
29 technically inanimate, the speaker is more likely referring to the people of Liscannor by
30 metonymy (as discussed, for example, by Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 35ff.). A number of similar
31 metonymic examples were found in the BNC and ICE-Ireland, but for the purposes of this study
32 they are not treated as cases of inanimate entities.
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35 5. Discussion

36

37 Looking at the BNC, the extremely high rate of occurrence of animates as possessors makes it
38 very likely that any naturalistic learners exposed to this variety would come to recognize
39 ‘possessors’ as prototypically [+animate]. Much research has been done on prototypes in the
40 context of both early language acquisition and naturalistic second language acquisition, where
41 they are shown to be crucial to the learning process by enabling language learners to clearly
42 establish them as a “benchmark against which surrounding, less representative instances are
43 classified” (Ellis 2013: 5). Consequently, the most prototypical examples of a linguistic
44 construction are likely to be learned first, and less prototypical examples are acquired later
45 (Shirai 2002: 457; Ibbotson & Tomasello 2009). But in order for language learners to recognize a
46 linguistic form as a prototype it needs not only to be prototypical in meaning (“appropriately
47 summarizing the most representative attributes of a category”; Ellis 2013: 5), but also to be
48 highly salient (i.e., cognitively prominent). In this case, salience goes hand-in-hand with a high
49 rate of occurrence; as Ellis (2013: 5) notes, “[t]he greater the token frequency of an exemplar, the
50 more it contributes to defining the category, and the greater the likelihood it will be considered
51 the prototype”. Conversely, rare exemplars that are low in salience would be far less perceptible
52 by language learners; they would therefore be considered less prototypical, and their acquisition
53 would be delayed or impaired as a result.
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4 I interpret the data from the IrE corpora as evidence that the original Irish L2 learners
5 recognized the [+animate] property as part of the prototypical *have* construction: the highly
6 frequent and salient possessive *have* constructions with animate subjects would have been
7 interpreted and acquired much more easily. In addition, this was probably reinforced by the
8 prototypical transitive construction, which is similar in form to the *have* construction and in
9 which the subject is also prototypically [+human] (cf. Taylor 1995: 207). The less prototypical
10 inanimate possessives, on the other hand, would have been more difficult to acquire – as
11 indicated by their significantly low rate of occurrence in the traditional IrE data.
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16 A low rate of occurrence in the input variety and less-prototypical meanings of a
17 linguistic form may indeed hinder or impair its acquisition, but not necessarily altogether prevent
18 it. How, then, do we account for the near-absence of inanimate subjects of *have* in the WCC
19 data? While this could be a random phenomenon or the result of possible differences in the
20 composition of each corpus, I tend to regard this as a reflection of the differences between the
21 standard-oriented nature of the language of ICE-Ireland and the vernacular nature of the WCC.
22 As pointed out above, grammatical variation is expected to be much more suppressed in ICE-
23 Ireland, whereas the ‘Celticity’ of the WCC is expected to be much more prominent. Thus, while
24 a relatively low rate of occurrence of inanimate subjects of *have* is found in ICE-Ireland (similar
25 to that of the BNC), it is far more extreme in the WCC – pointing towards the enduring influence
26 of Irish in a variety minimally affected by less vernacular, more standard IrE (or indeed, any
27 other standard English variety).
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32 From a cognitive perspective, the ‘Celticity’ or the strong influence of Irish observed in
33 the traditional IrE variety of the WCC can also be interpreted as indicative of the strong
34 ‘cognitive biases’ of adult English learners towards the categories and constructions of their
35 native Irish. Since “[t]he language foundation of an adult learner is not a tabula rasa, but a *tabula*
36 *repleta*” (Ellis 2008: 238), we can expect that Irish L2 learners appealed to their Irish-based
37 linguistic categorization and intuitions when trying to express semantic concepts whose formal
38 structures were less salient and therefore more difficult to acquire – as in the case of inanimate
39 relations of parthood, quality and location. In the WCC, these semantic relations are not
40 expressed by the *have* construction, but rather by the form [*be* NP2 preposition NP1] – which
41 happens to be a perfectly grammatical way of expressing some of the inanimate possessive
42 concepts in standard varieties of English as well, as illustrated in (23-24).
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47 (23) a. *There is a flaw in the diamond.*

48 (23) b. *The diamond has a flaw in it.* (Lakoff 1987)

49 (24) a. *There is a nest in the tree.*

50 (24) b. *The tree has a nest in it.* (Freeze 1992)
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4 In the WCC, however, inanimate relations of parthood, quality and location were only
5 found with the *be* construction, as illustrated in (25-29). In some of the cases, traces of the
6 underlying Irish are evident through the non-standard prepositional use:¹¹
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- 8
9 (25) *Big strong men that used die in their strength - they'd be a terrible weight in their coffins,*
10 *and it might be an oak coffin as well, d'you see, **there'd be weight in the oak.*** (WCC FK
11 TM633)
12
13 (26) *But the hay that grows here is nice thick, short hay, you know. And **there's great feeding***
14 ***in it.*** (WCC JN TM614B)
15
16 (27) *There is three dogs in the castle.* (WCC DO'C TM615B)
17
18 (28) *But sure the old cradle that time [...] **there's two rockers on that,** and you'd be rocking*
19 *the child.* (WCC TL TM780)
20
21 (29) *The riding whips they had that time [...] **there was brass ferrules on the end of them.***
22 (WCC FK TM623B)
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26 According to Ellis (2008: 238), the 'L1-tuned expectations' of L2 learners interfere with
27 their acquisition of the L2, potentially leading to their failure to acquire forms which they are not
28 predisposed to recognize from their own native language. On the other hand, the acquisition of
29 an L2 form is made easier if it is similar to or recognizable from the L1. In the case of IrE, the
30 acquisition of the English *be* construction would have been much easier than that of the *have*
31 construction due to the structural similarities between the English construction and the already-
32 familiar Irish construction [*bí* NP2 preposition NP1], as described in section 2.2 above: both
33 constructions feature a substantive verb (English *be*, Irish *bí*) and a preposition, and both have
34 the same order of participants. With the unfamiliar *have* construction being more difficult to
35 acquire, then, Irish speakers relied on the *be* construction to express those semantic notions
36 which they perceived as less saliently associated with the *have* construction in the first place.
37 And as Irish speakers were predisposed to formally distinguish between animate and inanimate
38 relations due to their 'L1-tuned expectation', they made use of the availability of both
39 constructions to formally mark this semantic distinction. Thus the apparent division of labor
40 observed in the WCC between the *have* construction and the *be* construction seems to reflect
41 those cognitive biases of the original Irish L2 learners. In addition, the process of matching
42 inanimate relations with the *be* construction and animate relations with the *have* construction
43 may have been further reinforced by an animacy constraint that operates in English. As Freeze
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52 ¹¹ According to Filppula (1999: 224), the particular use of *on* to express "types of possession" is not recognized in the
53 *English Dialect Dictionary* or found in his own BrE dialect corpora, and therefore "it is safe to conclude that the
54 H[iberno] E[nglish] usage has its roots in the corresponding Irish system". Filppula furthermore cites from a corpus
55 of Hebridean English – a variety of English influenced by Scottish Gaelic:
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- 57 (i) *And it was put in a place made like a basket – oh what do you call that – a poitroid, cléibh, and*
58 ***there was two handles on it.*** (Filppula 1999: 225)
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4 (1992: 583) observes, animate entities “prefer the *have* predication over the existential” and are
5 furthermore ungrammatical as ‘locations’ in locative/existential constructions (30):
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7 (30) a. **There is a book with / at / by Lupe.*

8
9 (30) b. *Lupe has a book.* (Freeze 1992)

10
11 Since the *be* construction does not encode ownership relations in English (as in 30a), it
12 was not available to Irish speakers as a model for expressing core animate relations. While
13 expressions such as (30a) may have been used in earlier, more ‘basilectal’ varieties of IrE, the
14 WCC shows that like standard English varieties, the *be* construction cannot be used to express
15 animate OBK relationships as, apparently, Irish speakers did learn the semantic constraints of the
16 *be* construction in English.¹²
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20 My conclusions regarding the possession category echo Goddard & Wierzbicka (2019:
21 225), who claim that “the various phenomena typically described by linguists under the heading
22 of “possession” – especially: ownership, body-parts, and kinship relations – do **not** represent any
23 unitary cognitive category in the minds of speakers” (emphasis in the original). As for the
24 validity of ‘possession’ in IrE, data from the WCC suggests that at the very least, speakers
25 recognize a conceptual and linguistic category of ‘[+animate] relations’ which the *have*
26 construction encodes; members of this category are not limited to the OBK relationships, but
27 also include the semantic relation of experience, as illustrated below:
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31 (31) *She has the milk fever. Go for the vet.* (WCC TL TM618B)

32 (32) *When you had TB nobody wanted to come near you.* (WCC CC TM637)

33
34 Even though in Irish the relation that holds between an animate entity and its physical
35 and psychological sensations and feelings is expressed with the preposition *ar* (see example 6 in
36 section 2.2 above), this form was generally not replicated into IrE, where the *have* construction is
37 used.
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41 6. Conclusions

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43 The case of Irish shows that the category of possession – in the sense of ‘semantic relations
44 between entities expressed by the *have* construction’ – is not valid cross-linguistically, and its
45 validity must be examined individually for each language. As for English, it is argued here that
46 there are conceptual and linguistic motivations behind the categorization of a number of
47 semantic concepts as ‘possession’; yet even across English varieties the boundaries of this
48 category are not fixed: the possession category is apparently much more restricted in IrE than it
49 is in BrE, excluding relations pertaining to inanimate ‘possessors’. The data from the WCC and
50 ICE-Ireland show that some IrE speakers do not conceptualize such inanimate relations as
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56 ¹² Filppula et al. (2008: 201ff.) cite some examples from the literature on traditional IrE as well as other Celtic
57 Englishes, including Manx English *There’s a nice car at him* (‘He has a nice car’) and IrE *The money is with them*
58 (glossed ‘They have plenty of money’). Only one such example of the *be* construction denoting control was found in
59 the WCC (*There was a saying like, or... with a lot of people, like*; WCC FK TM610A), but it is nevertheless
60 extremely uncommon in IrE (and perhaps involves some degree of lexicalization).
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4 possession, but rather as existence/location. The differences between the two corpora also show
5 that this tendency is significantly stronger in the traditional dialect, where the influence of Irish
6 has been stronger and the effects of the historical naturalistic, unguided acquisition of English
7 are still evident. The type of contact-related variation described in this paper is hardly a straight-
8 forward case of borrowing, replication, or calquing from Irish, nor is it a case of retention of
9 archaic or vernacular forms of BrE. Rather than using traditional contact linguistics approaches,
10 this phenomenon is best appreciated and explained by taking a cognitive approach to language
11 contact which focuses on the mental processes that take place as individual speakers come into
12 contact, and thus contributes to our understanding of the interaction between cognition and
13 contact-induced variation and change.
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FIGURE 1 A map of speakers locations in West Clare, Ireland.

