

# IRISH GENITIVE PHRASES THE PSEUDO-CONSTRUCT STATE

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**Abstract:** *In this paper we argue that previous analyses of Irish complex genitive noun phrases (GNPs henceforth) as structurally identical to Semitic construct state nominals (CSNs) cannot be correct. First, we expand the empirical picture: we show that some GNPs, namely attributive genitive phrases and genitive phrases with demonstratives can occur with a pronominal determiner. Second, we highlight fundamental differences between Semitic CSNs and Irish GNPs further confirming that the two cannot be analysed on a par. Finally, we show that a unified account for possessive and attributive genitives can be achieved by assuming a relational phrase (after Adger, 2012).*

**Keywords:** *genitive noun phrases, possessors, construct state nominal, demonstratives*

## 1. Background

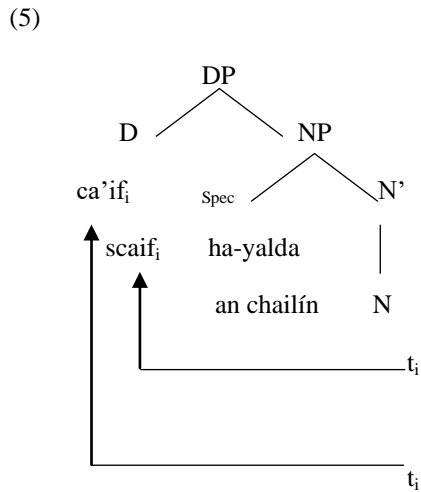
The Irish Genitive Noun Phrase (GNP henceforth), see (1) has featured prominently in the literature because it shares some distributional properties with an apparently similar possessor phrase in Semitic languages such as Hebrew, the so-called ‘construct-state nominal’ or CSN as in (2):

- |     |                           |     |                           |
|-----|---------------------------|-----|---------------------------|
| (1) | scaif an chailín          | (2) | ca’if ha-yalda            |
|     | <i>scarf the girl-GEN</i> |     | <i>scarf the-girl-GEN</i> |
|     | ‘the girl’s scarf’        |     | ‘the girl’s scarf’        |

The two constructions both exhibit the same possessed-possessor word order and genitive case marking on their possessor. Crucially also, the head noun cannot host the definite article when followed by the post nominal genitive in both Irish (3) and Hebrew (4) even though these languages have obligatory definite articles on canonical definite DPs:

- (3) \*an scaif an chailín                      (4) \*ha-ca'if                      ha-yalda  
*the scarf the girl-GEN*                      *the-scarf*                      *the-girl-GEN*

These two properties have prompted an ‘N to D’ analysis of Irish, involving movement of the head noun to D, (Guilfoyle, 1988; Sproat and Shih, 1991 and Duffield, 1995). These analyses are largely based on similar proposals for Semitic languages (Ritter, 1988; Mohammad, 1988 and Borer 1999). A typical derivation is seen below:



Movement of N to D, motivated by genitive case assignment successfully accounts for the word order and the disallowance of the definite article. This is why such analyses have persisted for a long time in the literature in one guise or another.

## 2. The problem: Irish vs. Semitic

Although the analysis outlined above successfully accounts for the properties that the Irish GNP shares with Semitic CSN, there are other properties of the Irish GNP which distinguish it from the Semitic CSN. The defining properties of the Semitic CSN (adapted

from Borer 1999) that are not directly applicable to Irish are summarised in Table 1 below:

CSN defining property of Semitic	Semitic CSN	Irish GNP
Head first, NSO word order	✓	✓
No modification of head by determiner or adjective	✓	✓ (determiners) ✗ (adjectives)
±DEF value of head spreads to non-head	✓	✗
APs appear on right of possessor	✓	✗
Multiple Ns are nested	✓	✗
CSN strategy for compound formation	✓	✗ ✓ (in restricted cases)

Table 1: Properties of Semitic CSN vs. Irish GNP

This shows clearly that the Semitic CSN and the Irish GNP essentially only share word order and the disallowance of the determiner. We will argue however, that these are superficial properties that can be accounted for in a different way (see section 4). Independent of the facts outlined above, we will present a fuller empirical picture for Irish genitive phrases that will show even more clearly that the two constructions are distinct and that an ‘N to D’ analysis cannot be maintained for Irish. We now move on to present the extended empirical domain of our paper.

### 2.1 Adjective placement

Modifying adjectives in Irish appear adjacent to the head noun in its surface, initial position:

- (6) scaif aláinn                      an              chailín  
*scarf beautiful*                      *the*              *girl-GEN*  
 ‘The girl’s beautiful scarf’

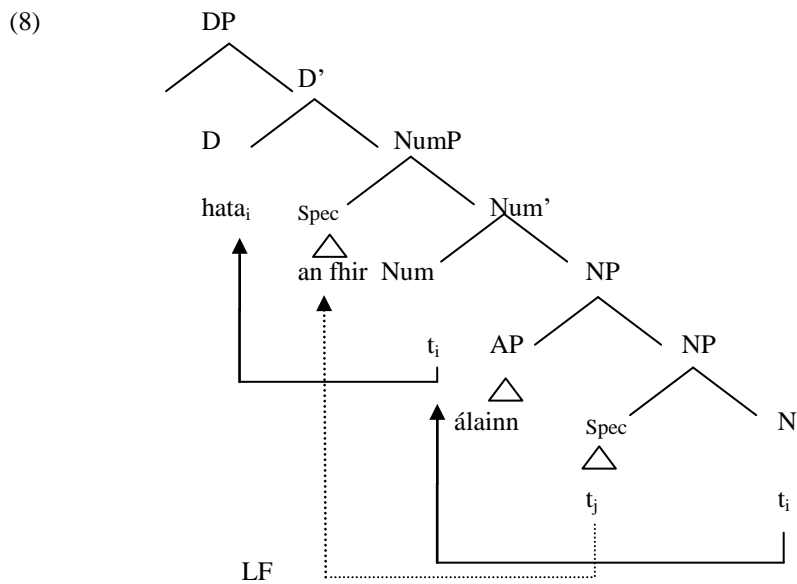
In contrast, the adjective in Semitic appears adjacent to the possessor as in the Hebrew example below:

- (7) dirat                      ha-sar                      ha-gdola  
*apartment*                      *the minister*                      *the big*  
 ‘the minister’s big apartment’

Shlonsky (2004:1467)

A noun-raising analysis accounts for the attested word order in (3). However, (6) shows that the derivation of Irish GNPs cannot be explained by a simple head movement operation: to derive (7), the adjective would have to move past the possessor, an operation not possible under classic head movement analyses (Travis (1984))<sup>1</sup>. Duffield (1995) reviews these facts but maintains the parallel derivation of possessor phrases in Irish and Semitic by proposing that in Irish the possessor NP also moves (into SpecNumP) at LF.

This is schematized below where the possessor NP *an fhir* remains in situ at PF but moves at LF. According to Duffield, the contrast in adjective placement between the two languages is essentially attributed to a difference in the timing of specifier movement:



Despite the fact that there has been an attempt to explain the Irish adjective placement within a head-movement analysis, we will not adopt it here. The key empirical arguments for this are presented in the following section.

### 2.2 Definiteness spreading

In Semitic genitive phrases, the  $\pm$ DEF value of the head obligatorily spreads to the non-head (Borer 1999)<sup>2</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> An alternative possibility would be to derive the observed pattern via a low genitive, generated in NP, which moves to a higher functional projection in order to get abstract genitive case, parallel to the subject in the clause.

<sup>2</sup> Another similarity between Semitic and Irish seen in (9) and (11) respectively is that they both lack an overt indefinite determiner: indefinite noun phrases appear bare.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>(9)    beit    more</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;"><i>house   teacher</i></p> <p>      ‘a house of a teacher’</p> | <p>(10)   beit ha-more</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;"><i>house the-teacher</i></p> <p>      ‘the house of the teacher’</p> <p>      *‘a house of the teacher’</p> |
|---|--|

In Irish however, even when the possessor is indefinite, the interpretation of the head is obligatorily definite, exhibiting a mismatch between the definiteness values of the head and the genitive:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>(11)   teach múinteora</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;"><i>house teacher-GEN</i></p> <p>      ‘the house of a teacher’</p> | <p>(12)   teach an mhúinteora</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;"><i>house the teacher-GEN</i></p> <p>      ‘the house of the teacher’</p> |
|--|--|

In order for the interpretation of the head to be indefinite, the possessor must be contained within a prepositional phrase:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>(13)   teach de chuid múinteora</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;"><i>house of portion teacher-GEN</i></p> <p>      ‘a house of a teacher’</p> | <p>(14)   teach de chuid an mhúinteora</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;"><i>house of portion the teacher-GEN</i></p> <p>      ‘a house of the teacher’</p> |
|--|--|

### 2.3 Modification of the head by a demonstrative

Further evidence against an ‘N to D’ style analysis in Irish comes from the appearance of a D-element in the proposed “moved” position of N in a GNP containing a demonstrative. Irish demonstratives are bipartite: they are made up of a locative element that obligatorily co-occurs with a definite determiner (Kane 2015):

- (15)   An       scaif    sin
- The     scarf    Locative*
- ‘This scarf’

When the head noun of a genitive phrase is modified by the locative element (henceforth glossed as DEM), D is occupied obligatorily by a definite determiner<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>3</sup> In order for the demonstrative to modify the head noun, the demonstrative must appear directly adjacent to the head. When the demonstrative appears at the end of the construction ‘scaif an chailín sin’, the demonstrative is obligatorily associated with the (non-head) possessor.

- (16) \*(an) scaif sin an chailín  
*(the) scarf DEM the girl-GEN*  
 ‘that scarf (of the girl)’

This construction, which is a productive environment for the demonstrative to appear, cannot be accounted for under an N to D approach since D appears to be hosting the definite article.

#### 2.4 Attributive genitives

When the genitive complement represents an attribute or property of N, as opposed to representing a possessor like we have seen so far, the head can indeed be introduced with the definite article. In fact, the definite article is obligatory to achieve a definite interpretation of the whole phrase as in (17). Absence of the definite article on the head leads to an indefinite interpretation, see(18):

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>(17) An captaen na loinge<br/> <i>the captain the ship-GEN</i><br/>         ‘the captain of the ship’</p> | <p>(18) captaen na loinge<br/> <i>captain the ship-GEN</i><br/>         ‘a captain of the ship’</p> |
|--|---|

Again, the appearance of the definite article in (17) shows that N cannot have moved to D in this type of GNP.

In sections 2.1-2.4 we presented four independent arguments that show that an ‘N to D’ analysis cannot account for all of possible instantiations of Irish GNPs. In the next section we present an alternative analysis that accounts both for the appearance of the article in examples like (16) and (17) above, as well as its disallowance in genitive possessor phrases such as (3).

### 3. Relational phrases and an alternative to ‘N to D’ for Scottish Gaelic

In order to account for the Irish data above, we will look at another Celtic language that patterns closely with Irish in the formation of GNPs, Scottish Gaelic. Adger (2012) argues against an ‘N to D’ analysis for this construction in Scottish Gaelic (Adger 2012:93-99). In Adger’s proposal, possession relations in Scottish Gaelic is mediated in the same way as relational nouns in English. We review his system below.

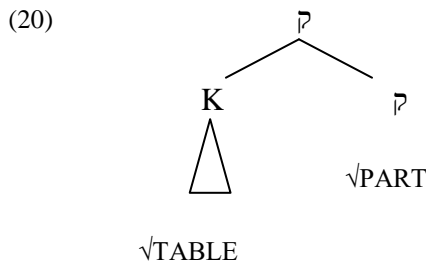
#### 3.1 Generating relations: Flavours of $\bar{r}$

According to Adger (2012), relational nouns have no argument structure as nouns themselves only can only denote an atomic property or concept. Nouns inherit relational interpretations through the structure they appear in, specifically by a root from the lexicon equivalent to a light noun. The root projects a relational syntactic category  $\bar{r}$  into the syntax. Under Adger’s approach, syntactic structure is built from lexical roots via merge

operations. Specific to relational nouns, the relation associated with the syntactic category that is projected depends on the type or ‘flavour’ of the root that merges. For example, the root  $\sqrt{\text{PART}}$  projects a syntactic category  $\bar{\rho}$  that encodes the relation outlined in (19) below:

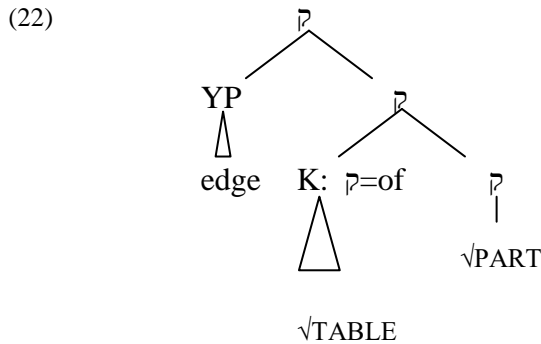
(19)  $\lambda y \lambda x. \text{part}(x,y)$

The relational syntactic category  $\bar{\rho}$  then self-merges and combines with a specifier, for example *the table* to give a relation modifier-like structure:



A further  $\bar{\rho}$  is projected, creating the outer specifier position where the relational noun phrase (for example *edge*) combines with the modifier-like structure via predicate modification.  $\bar{\rho}$  is assumed to value the case feature on *the table*, realised in English via the preposition *of*:

(21) Edge of the table



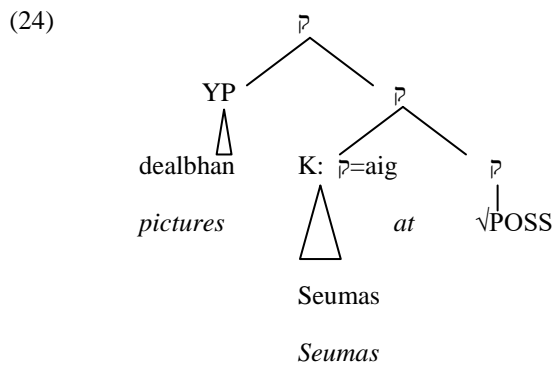
Adger (2012:68)

Adger (2012) proposes that possessor relations are also mediated with a possessive functional category referred to as  $\bar{\rho}_{\text{poss}}$  which is formed by the self merge of the possessive root  $\sqrt{\text{POSS}}$ . The possessor is generated as the internal specifier in the same position as the relational noun above. The possessor remains in this position and its K category (case)<sup>4</sup> is

<sup>4</sup> Adger assumes that the uppermost category of the nominal phrase is case related K, following a long literature that included Lamontagne & Travis (1986) and Kayne (1994).

valued by  $\bar{r}_{\text{poss}}$  as before. Case valued by  $\bar{r}_{\text{poss}}$  is realized as the preposition *aig* as schematised below<sup>5</sup>:

- (23) na dealbhan aig Seumas  
*the pictures at Seumas*  
 ‘Seumas’ pictures’



#### 4. Towards an analysis: A relational phrase in the Irish DP

Adopting a similar idea for Irish, we propose that both components of the GNP are generated within a relational phrase  $\bar{r}$ . Within this relational phrase, one possible relation between the head and the genitive is mediated by  $\bar{r}_{\text{poss}}$ , just as proposed by Adger for Scottish Gaelic. Recall the disallowance of the article on the head of a GNP, repeated as (25):

- (25) \*an scaif an chailín  
*the scarf the girl-GEN*

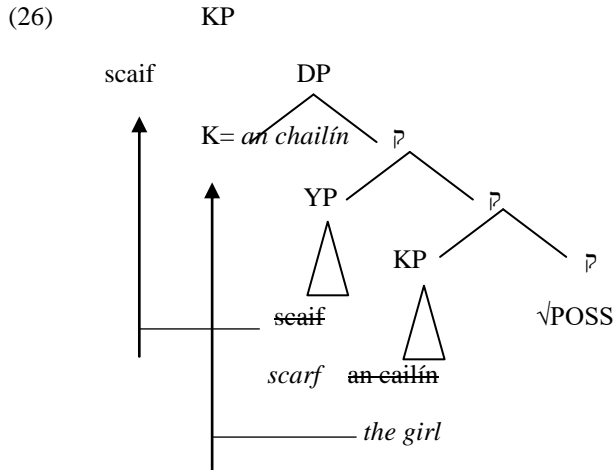
We propose that just like in Scottish Gaelic, the head and possessor are generated in  $\bar{r}_{\text{poss}}$ . In Irish the possessor phrase moves to SpecDP where it assigns reference to D via Spec-head agreement, and also assigns it a definite interpretation in D<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the parallel possessive construction with the preposition *ag* (at) is not available in Irish. There is however a possessive construction containing a preposition but it can only appear when the possessor is pronominal. We will not get into this here for reasons of space.

<sup>6</sup> This is parallel to the definite interpretation assigned to the possessed noun in English. ‘The girl’s scarf’ is typically interpreted in English as ‘the scarf of the girl’ and not ‘a scarf of the girl’.



This operation subsequently blocks the merge of the definite article in D:



Note also that the YP containing the head noun moves into SpecKP which derives the head-genitive word order and assigns a unique interpretation to the head<sup>7</sup>. Let us now return to the data from section 2, and show how they can be accounted for under our proposed analysis.

#### 4.1 Adjective placement

Under our proposal, it is the phrase (YP) containing the head noun that moves to SpecKP and not the head noun alone. This YP can contain the head noun but crucially also any adjective that is generated inside the relational phrase  $\bar{\rho}$ . The adjectives are merged internally within the YP<sup>8</sup>. The proposed operation where the adjective moves to SpecKP along with the head noun can successfully account for the observed word order in Irish as adjectives appear directly adjacent to their modifying noun:

- (5) cathaoireacha<sub>i</sub> dathúla<sub>i</sub> an ranga nua  
*chairs-pl colourful the class-GEN new*  
 ‘the colourful chairs of the new class’

<sup>7</sup> Following Vangsnes (2002) who proposes that KP is associated with the property of uniqueness. In fact, the head of a genitive phrase in Irish is interpreted as unique.

<sup>8</sup> For reasons of space we do not discuss the internal structure of the YP that contains the N+A sequence. See Kane (2015) for further discussion.

- (6) \*cathaoireacha<sub>i</sub> an ranga dathúla<sub>i</sub> nua  
*chairs-pl the class-GEN colourful new*  
 ‘the colourful chairs of the new class’

#### 4.2 Definiteness spreading

Recall from above that the interpretation of the head of a genitive possessor phrase is obligatorily definite, regardless of the definiteness value of the genitive:

- |     |                          |     |                              |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|------------------------------|
| (7) | teach múinteora          | (8) | teach an mhúinteora          |
|     | <i>house teacher-GEN</i> |     | <i>house the teacher-GEN</i> |
|     | ‘the house of a teacher’ |     | ‘the house of the teacher’   |

As discussed above, the possessor phrase moves into SpecDP and gets a definite interpretation by assigning reference to D. We have proposed that in all possessive GNPs, the possessor phrase moves into SpecDP, rendering the head in all possessive GNPs definite. Recall that the obligatory definiteness of the head of a genitive phrase is applicable only to possessive GNPs. The requirement that reference be assigned to D by the possessor is restricted to these possessive phrases where the genitive is in fact the referent of N. We will return to non-possessive GNPs in section 4.4.

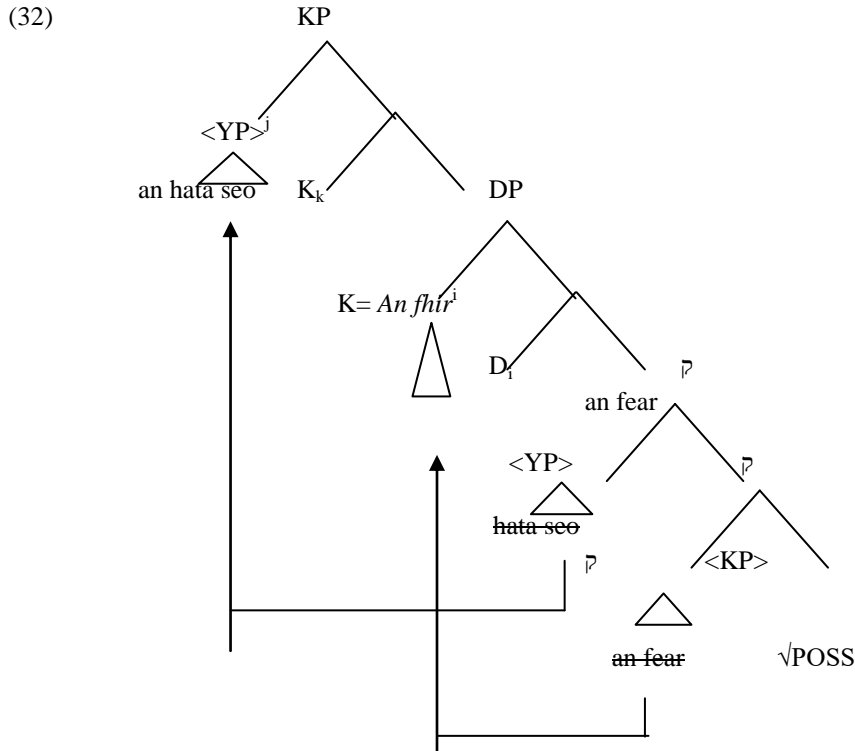
#### 4.3 Modification of the head by a demonstrative

In 2.3 we discussed possessive genitive phrases that also feature a demonstrative. The crucial feature of these constructions is that demonstratives in Irish involve a D and a post-nominal locative element, seen below in a possessor GNP.

- (31) An hata seo an fhir  
*the hat DEM the man-GEN*  
 ‘this hat (of the man)’

According to our proposal, the genitive possessor phrase is assumed to have moved into SpecDP where it assigns reference to D, rendering it definite. The demonstrative in Irish has a requirement to be indexed with an antecedent, it requires reference either in the form of a discourse antecedent or in the context (See Kane 2015 for discussion), which in the case of a simple noun-phrase falls out as the co-occurrence rule outlined above. When N is modified by a demonstrative, the definite article appears obligatorily within the head-containing YP from where it licenses the demonstrative but crucially does not assign reference as a discourse antecedent. Given that the reference is internal, the definite article itself can not in fact assign reference from this position when it appears as the licenser for

the demonstrative. The possessor-containing KP (i.e., the referent of N) again raises to SpecDP where it assigns reference to D, establishing itself as the referent of N. The head-containing YP raises to SpecKP as before and again assigns a unique interpretation to the head. Therefore, when the possessed noun in Irish is modified by a demonstrative, reference is assigned by the possessor-containing KP and never by the definite article itself:



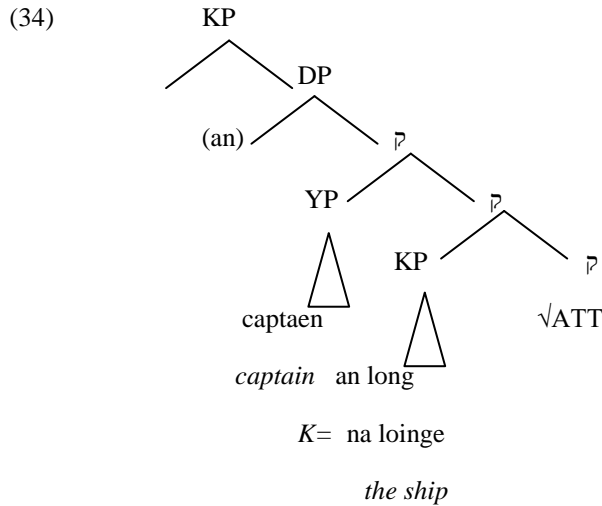
#### 4.4 Attributive Genitives

We have already discussed how possessive relations in the Irish DP are mediated within a relational phrase  $\bar{p}$  and we have shown above that the relation between the head and the genitive is mediated can be possessive ( $\bar{p}_{\text{poss}}$ ). We argue that additionally the relation between the head and genitive can be attributive. In this case we label the relational phrase ( $\bar{p}_{\text{att}}$ ). Recall that in an attributive phrase, the article is permitted to appear on the head:

- (33) An captaen na loinge  
*the captain the ship-GEN*  
 ‘the captain of the ship’

As outlined above, in a possessive genitive phrase, the possessor phase raises to SpecDP in order to assign reference in D. Attributive genitives are also generated within a

relational phrase  $\bar{p}_{att}$ , but unlike possessors, they are non-referential, cannot assign reference from SpecDP and therefore remain in-situ:



The attributive phrase *an long* remains within the relational phrase  $\bar{p}_{att}$  and receives case valuation for K from  $\bar{p}$ . Recall that when reference is assigned in D by the possessor above, the head noun is realised as definite. The non-head component of an attributive genitive phrase never raises to SpecDP. As a consequence of this, the definite article can merge in DP when the interpretation of the phrase is required to be definite.

The structure of both referential (possessive) and attributive genitive phrases is therefore uniform and the appearance or disallowance of the article depends on reference relations and the movement operations that are dictated by these relations, and not by appealing to two distinct structures for these constructions.

### 5. Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed Irish GNPs and have argued for three things:

- (i) that a Semitic-style ‘N to D’ analysis cannot successfully account for the derivation of genitive phrases in Irish, because the two constructions share only superficial similarities;
- (ii) that there are Irish phrases that do allow for an overt D in GNPs;
- (iii) and that an alternative proposal based on Adger’s (2012) relational phrases previously proposed for Scottish Gaelic can account for the observed facts.

Our proposal crucially relies on previously unexplained novel data and allows for a unified treatment of possessive and attributive genitive phrases that differ only in their ability to host a definite article on the head. The syntactic alternation observed in the grammaticality of the definite article is directly attributed to the particular reference requirements depending on the interpretation of the phrase. Reference is always mediated

through D, and in the case of the possessor phrase the referent is the possessor. Conversely under a non-referential interpretation the referent is mediated through D (with the definite article, exactly as with sortal nouns).

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