

Own and Possess—A Corpus Analysis

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Abstract

This study is a corpus-based analysis of the verbs *own* and *possess*, which are two of the verbs that are used to express possession and ownership in English. The results show that there are areas of overlapping use as well as areas where only one of the two is a valid option. It has also been shown that *own* has a legal feature at its core and is predominantly used to express ownership. The most frequent usage of *possess*, on the other hand, is that of describing that someone or something has a quality or property of some kind. This difference also has consequences for what kinds of entities appear as the subject and object arguments of the verbs.

Key words: own, possess, corpus linguistics, semantics, possession

1. Introduction

Ownership has played an important role in the lives of human beings ever since the Neolithic Revolution started some 12,000 years ago. The concept of ‘possession’, however, has existed in our predecessors’ mental world long before they settled down as farmers. Archaeological excavations and anthropological research have shown that even people living in so-called primitive societies make a difference between what’s owned in common and what’s private property (Dowling 1968: 504; Hoebel 1972: 270; Hann 1998: 11). Furthermore, research shows that all languages studied so far have some way of expressing possession, even if the rules and traditions surrounding the concept might differ between societies (Langacker 1994: 43-44; Heine 1997: 225).

In English, there are three¹ main verbs to express possession and ownership—*have*, *own* and *possess*. This paper investigates the use of

¹ There are also other verbs that can express the same concepts, e.g. *hold*, but the use of them as verbs of possession is fairly restricted and will not be treated here.

two² of them, *own* and *possess*, as evidenced in the *British National Corpus (BNC)*. Based on corpus data, the study aims at providing new information about the character of the verbs not previously accounted for in dictionaries. Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976: 563) maintain that *have* (in particular) and *possess* show a high degree of flexibility in that they can express all of the three senses of possession, that is, inherent possession, accidental (or temporary) possession and physical possession, but also kinship and part-whole relations. *Own*, on the other hand, can only express inherent possession, that is, ownership. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, “the principal current sense” of *own* is now

- (a) to have or hold as one’s own; to have belonging to one, be the proprietor of, possess

In figurative and extended use, however, *own* can also mean:

- (b) to have control over or direction of (a person or thing)
- (c) to be or feel responsible for considering or solving (a problem, issue, task, etc.)
- (d) to call (a person or thing) one’s own; to acknowledge as belonging to oneself, esp. in respect of kinship or authorship (*OED*)

In (b) through to (d) what must be considered as the core meaning of *own*, its legal feature, has been lost and it is no longer possible to reason in terms of ownership. It could in fact be argued that it is not even proper to speak of possession at all. However, following Taylor (1989, 1996, 2003) this could be seen as non-prototypical possession. Moreover, as a further extension of (b) one can hear, especially in everyday talk among young people, expressions such as *I own you in basketball* meaning ‘I’m better than you in basketball’ (Eble) and *I own you bitches* meaning ‘to be superior to the others in a group, to be in control, to be the boss’ (*Urban Dictionary*). In these examples, there is also the prosody to

² *Have* has been thoroughly investigated and analysed by Brugman (1988) and will therefore only be discussed in comparison with *own* and *possess*.

consider as *own* is heavily stressed. It thus seems that even though Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976) are partly correct in their claim, they overgeneralise. In some of its meaning extensions *own* can be used to express also other aspects of possession than ownership. That this is the case is also substantiated by findings in the *BNC* (see section 3 below). *Own* can thus be considered to constitute a prototype category (see, among others, Rosch 1978) with ‘ownership’ as the prototypical sense around which other, less prototypical senses are arranged. The prototype category for *own* can schematically be represented as in Figure 1.

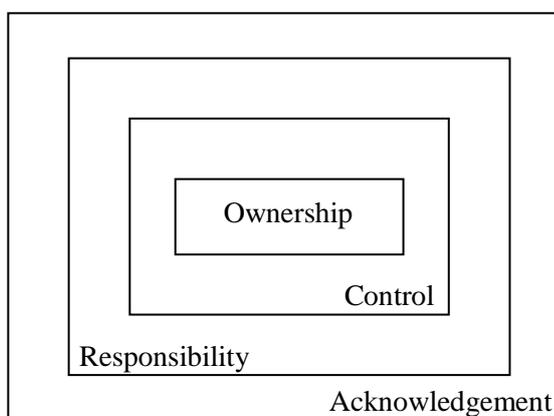


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the prototype category for *own*

The dictionary entry for *possess*, on the other hand, gives evidence of the verb's flexibility as claimed by Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976). Among the different senses still in use are

- (e) to hold as property; to have belonging to one, as wealth or material objects; to own
- (f) to have possession of, as distinct from ownership
- (g) to have as a faculty, adjunct, attribute, quality, condition, etc. (Often meaning no more than the simple *have*.)
- (h) to have knowledge of or acquaintance with; to be master of, or conversant with (a language, etc.)

- (i) to have sexual intercourse with (a woman)
- (j) of a demon or spirit (usually evil): to occupy and dominate, control, or actuate
- (k) of an idea, a mental condition, or the like: to take or have hold of (a person); to hold, dominate, actuate; to affect or influence strongly and persistently (*OED*)

Of these senses, only the first two, (e) and (f), reflect what would generally be regarded as possession in proper terms, while the others, (g) through to (k), can be seen as meaning extensions from a central core. What this central core consists of is not as easy to establish as it is for *own*, since the original meaning of *possess* (see (l) below), as attested by the earliest records in the *OED*,³ does not seem to have included possession of material objects at all, nor was ownership an obligatory element:

- (l) I: of a person or body of persons: to hold, occupy (a place or territory); to reside or be stationed in; to inhabit (with or without ownership)

II: of a thing: to occupy, take up (a space or region); to be situated at, on, or in

In so far as these senses are still in use they have now merged with (e) and (f). Judging by the records in the *OED*, however, it seems that (e) gained ground quite early (earliest record 1500-20), closely followed by (g) and (k) (1576 and 1591, respectively). Considering these senses put together and keeping the original sense in (l) in mind, it seems safe to draw the conclusion that the core meaning of *possess* contains an element of control; an element which does not, however, constitute a sense of its own but is explicitly or implicitly present in the different meanings of the verb. Figure 2 is a schematic image of how, based on the frequencies of different senses found in the *BNC*, *possess* could be represented visually.⁴

³ The earliest record in the *OED* for sense (l:I) dates from 1483.

⁴ The lines in Figure 2 have been broken in order to save space.

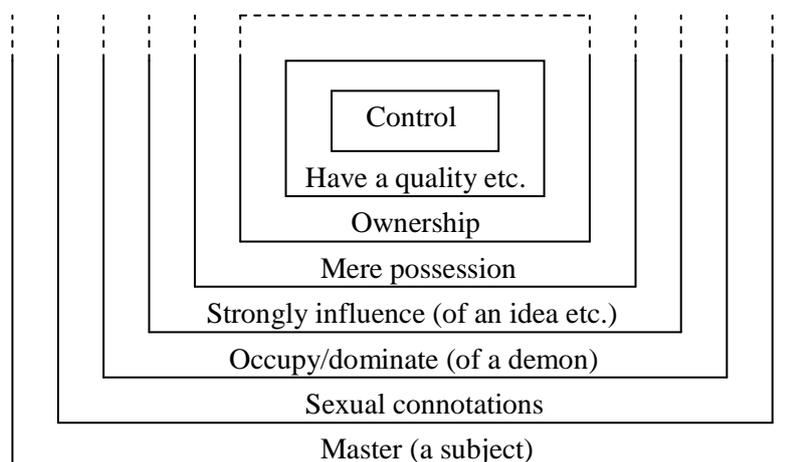


Figure 2. Schematic representation of the senses of *possess*

Admittedly, without psycho-linguist testing it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions as regards what sense constitutes the most prototypical one in speakers' minds. However, frequency is often used as a criterion for establishing the core meaning of a word (see, e.g. Williams 1992; Gries 2006).

2. Method and material

In order to establish how *own* and *possess* are used and to detect and examine possible differences between them a subset of the *BNC*, the A-files⁵ containing approximately 14.6 million words, was used. This corpus, which was compiled between 1991 and 1994, is one of the largest language corpora presently available to the general public. It

⁵ The *BNC* is delivered in compressed format as ten separate files or subdirectories (A through to K, excluding I). The files can either be unpacked into a single hierarchy or searched alone as separate files.

contains approximately 100 million words, from both spoken (10%) and written (90%) British English, the latter representing a wide variety of text genres. One advantage of using the *BNC* is that it is fixed and stable. It is thus possible to search for and retrieve exactly the same material even after a lapse of several years. Still, not even a corpus of the size of the *BNC* can be exhaustive. It only represents the language produced during a specific period of time and it might be biased towards one specific register. In the case of the *BNC*, for example, it is possible that the predominance of written language in the corpus may influence the results achieved. As Roland and Jurafsky (1998, 2002) have observed, there is much variation between corpora as regards the frequencies of usages as well as the usages which are found. It should also be remembered that even if a corpus does not contain any evidence of, for example, a certain verb usage, this can only be taken as an indication that the usage is rare, not as proof that it does not exist. Bearing these limitations in mind, using the *BNC* nevertheless provides a comprehensive and varied working material.

The importance of studying language actually produced by people is emphasised by, for example, Sinclair who states that “human intuition about language is highly specific, and not at all a good guide to what actually happens when the same people actually use the language” (1991: 4). Kemmer and Barlow (2000: xv) stress the importance of usage-based analyses, that is, analyses of data retrieved from corpora, and maintain that the linguist’s primary object of study should be language in use. Using corpus data for linguistic analyses has several advantages compared to other approaches, such as the use of elicited or introspective data. Gries and Divjak list the following advantages:

- corpora provide many instances rather than a few isolated judgments
- corpora provide data from natural settings rather than ‘armchair’ judgments or responses that potentially reflect experimentally-induced biases
- corpora provide co-occurrence data of many different kinds
- corpora allow for bottom-up identification of relevant distinctions as well as for a more comprehensive description than is typically provided (Gries & Divjak forthcoming)

Corpora have become important tools for linguistic analysis. The approach adopted here is thus in line with the most recent developments within the field.

For each verb, the data retrieved from the *BNC* is analysed as regards different usages as well as regards what kind of entities occur together with the verbs as their subject and object arguments. Throughout the analyses the terms *Subject* and *Object* are used in the presentation and discussion of the results. The term *Subject* refers to the noun phrases constituting the syntactic subjects of active sentences as well as the agents of passive sentences, whereas *Object* refers to all the clause elements that are either owned or possessed. The survey of Subjects and Objects is made because the interpretation of a verb is to a very large extent dependent on its arguments. This is also the outcome of psycholinguistic experiments on the interpretation of polysemous verbs (Gibbs & Matlock 2001). Objects, in particular, are generally of decisive importance for how a verb is interpreted (Ide & Véronis 1998: 20; Pickering & Frisson 2001: 557). Furthermore, an analysis of the Objects could also reveal semantic patterns that might otherwise remain undetected.

3. *Own and Possess in the BNC*

The study is limited to simple verbs only. Thus, neither the adjectival and pronominal uses of *own*, nor the use of *possessing* and *possessed* as adjectives, nor any phrasal verbs were considered in the analyses. In the corpus material, there are a total of 1,089 instances of *own*, *owns*, *owning* and *owned*, whereas the number for *possess*, *possesses*, *possessing* and *possessed* is 462.

3.1 *Own*

3.1.1 Senses of *own*

As mentioned above, *own* seems to have a legal feature at its core, as exemplified by:

- (1) Volvo now owns 20 percent of Renault's car division [...]
- (2) Who owns the land affects the use to which the land is put [...]

There are examples where it is difficult to maintain that it is still a question of legal ownership and where *own* is used rather in one of its

extended senses: the control, the responsibility and the acknowledgement senses (see (b) through to (d) above). The total distribution of senses found in the material is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Senses of *own*

| Sense | Number of tokens | Percentage |
|-----------------|------------------|------------|
| Legal ownership | 1,060 | 97.34 |
| Control | 24 | 2.20 |
| Responsibility | 3 | 0.28 |
| Acknowledgement | 2 | 0.18 |
| Total | 1,089 | 100.00 |

The figures in Table 1 clearly show that the legal sense has by far the largest number of tokens, a fact that strengthens the claim that this is the core meaning of *own*. Among the examples with extended use, however, most of them can be referred to the verb's control sense:

- (3) In the first day of the war, the Americans and their allies had flown hundreds of sorties against Iraq, dropped thousands of pounds of bombs and met virtually no resistance. "We" owned the skies.
- (4) Atari is now Nintendo's arch-rival, but 10 years ago, it owned the video games market.

In examples (3) and (4) above, it is obvious that what is intended is not legal ownership but rather control and dominance of the Object in question. The control sense of *own* is also applicable to sentences (5) through to (8) below:

- (5) You may have paid for me but you don't own me.
- (6) He might think and act as though he owned her, but he didn't. Nobody did.
- (7) The clubs have that much power over players it's as if they own them [...]
- (8) Until recent times women were more or less owned by men – not allowed to vote or to own property [...]

Since the Objects in all these examples are human beings, an interpretation in these cases of *own* as implying legal ownership must be questioned.⁶ Yet, in addition to the control sense of *own* it is possible to claim that the Subjects' actions or the description of their actions in the examples above, i.e. the way they behave towards the Objects, show that they in fact consider themselves to be in a position similar to that of a legal owner. Sentence (7), in particular, is a good example of this attitude and it could even be argued that *own* in this sentence should be interpreted as the legal sense only. Admittedly, players are bought and sold by clubs just as any another sort of merchandise. However, the use of the conditional *as if* in the sentence shows that legal ownership was not intended by the speaker/writer. Indications of the same kind are also found in (6) and (8), where the phrases *as though* and *more or less* are used.

In addition to the control sense of *own* there are some instances in the data where *own* actually appears together with the verb *control*:

- (9) I am so pissed off with being told how men own and control the world.
- (10) We also want to help more leaseholders to own and control the management of their property.
- (11) [...] the lack of accountability to the resident community of the relatively small set of people who own and control the land has very important lessons for every country.

Using tautology in this way might seem somewhat superfluous, but as a collocation, *own and control* is not uncommon. As regards (9), an additional reason for using this phrase might be a wish to hint at the fact that men actually appear in leading positions in all domains throughout the world more often than women. This use of *own* can also be viewed as an example of metaphorical owning or controlling since *the world* as such cannot really be either owned or controlled. In fact, it could be

⁶ There are two examples in the material where the Objects are human beings and the sense of *own* must be interpreted as the legal sense. In both these examples, however, the Object in question is a slave and is, as such, considered no different than any other merchandise that can be legally bought and sold.

argued that the only sentence in examples (9) through to (11) where the Object could actually be owned in the legal sense of the verb is (11).

There are only three instances in the corpus which can be allocated to the responsibility sense. They are here presented as examples (12) through to (14):

(12) The “form” was linked to real people, not distant “researchers”, and the whole project was owned by everyone involved.

(13) We are seeking to find out what local people want, because they must own the work themselves.

(14) This is a very important issue for us in politics. We own this agenda.

These examples, however, could also be analysed as a mix of the control and the responsibility senses: the Subjects are in control of the Objects, but they also have a responsibility to achieve the fulfilment and the successful end of it. It is the Subjects who must ascertain that development moves forward and that the wanted result is reached.

In the material there are further two examples where *own* is used in the extended sense of acknowledgement:

(15) He’s only a pauper that nobody owns.

(16) [...] a harsh, flogging father, who for years “never spoke to me nor owned me” [...]

In these sentences, the legal aspect of *own* is not a possible interpretation. Rather, the use of *own* here suggests that the Subjects do not acknowledge having any kinship relations to the Objects in question.

Some examples in the data are difficult to give a clear-cut categorisation:

(17) As it is the ratepayer who funds and owns Council facilities, the DUP believes that any change to Sunday opening of Council provisions should only be undertaken following the test of the electorate’s opinion in a local poll held for that purpose in the district of the council.

(18) One in nine of the women surveyed reckoned that male drivers “think they own the road” [...]

- (19) Both Prince and policeman, their hands clasped confidently behind their backs, move as if they own the world.

In examples (17) through to (19) it is not possible to interpret *own* as implying legal ownership per se, since many aspects of true ownership are lacking (cf. Taylor 1989, 1996, 2003; see also section 1). It is possible, however, to analyse the meaning of *own* in these cases as a variant of the legal sense. In (17), it could be argued that by virtue of the rates citizens pay to the Council they have a legal claim on all Council facilities: they “own” the facilities since they have “bought” them by paying rates. Sentences (18) and (19) are examples of metaphorical owning, a rare phenomenon for *own*. Neither *the road* nor *the world* can be owned in the legal sense of the verb, but the Subjects act as if they were the legal owners of the Objects and thus have precedence over other people as regards the use of them (cf. also the analysis of examples (5) through to (8) above).

Further points of interest in the material analysed are the two examples where *have* and *own* are used together in the same sentence:

- (20) His family owns a bakery and have two shops on the south coast.

- (21) May we reserve our admiration for the qualities people have rather than for what they own.

The reason for choosing *have* as the verb in the second clause of sentence (20) is probably only to avoid repetition. Both *own* and *have* in this sentence must be interpreted as legal ownership. Sentence (21) is different, however. Here, the choice of *have* in the first clause is not because the speaker/writer has tried to avoid repetition. The reason is that *own* is not a possible substitute for *have* in this case: one can have or possess qualities, but they cannot be owned (see also section 3.2.3 below).

There are also a few examples in the material where the legal aspect of *own* is emphasised and contrasted with mere possession:

- (22) Blackadder believed Cropper to have designs on those manuscripts lodged with, but not owned by, the British Library [...]

- (23) [...] two brothers, who had conflicting views on where the relics should be housed and who should own them.

- (24) This unit [a family] is the smallest one which collectively makes decisions about its allocation of labour and other privately controlled resources (though it may not necessarily own them, in the sense implied by private property).

In sentences (22) and (23) the distinction between legal ownership and mere possession is made explicit through the pairs *lodged with/not owned by* and *should be housed/should own*, respectively. It is obvious that possession in these cases does not equal ownership. In (23), however, neither the question of where the relics should be kept nor the question of ownership are finally decided and it is therefore possible that when an agreement has been reached possession and ownership will coincide. Sentence (24) is yet another example of the fact that *own* in its legal sense contains something more than simple control of an Object, this something more being the sanction a society gives to its members to call a thing of some sort their private property. One may have a resource, as in (24), at one's disposal and under one's control, but that does not automatically entail that one owns the resource: ownership cannot exist without social agreement (Snare 1972: 201; Miller & Johnson-Laird 1976: 559).

3.1.2 Subjects of *own*

One interesting finding, which reflects the legal aspect of the verb, is that the Subjects of *own* are almost exclusively humans, either individual persons or groups of people. Many Subjects cannot be regarded as human per se, but rather as standing metonymically for the people they represent. Subjects in this category include, for example, companies, countries, etc.⁷ There are also 26 instances in the data without an explicit Subject but where the contexts make it clear that human Subjects are involved. Table 2 presents the distribution of Subjects of *own*.

⁷ This Subject group is referred to as *metonymy* in this table as well as in Table 6 (see section 3.2.2).

Table 2. Distribution of Subjects in sentences with *own*

| Type of Subject | Number of tokens | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Human | 1,087 | 99.82 |
| - individual or group of people | 732 | 67.22 |
| - metonymy | 355 | 32.60 |
| Non-human (animate) | 2 | 0.18 |
| Total | 1,089 | 100.00 |

A more detailed analysis of the figures in Table 2 shows that male individuals and companies are the two groups which appear more often than any other category as the Subjects of *own*: together they make up almost 48% of the material as a whole (520 tokens out of a total of 1,089).

As mentioned above, Subjects of *own* are almost always human. In the data there are, however, two exceptions to this rule:

- (25) The little mouse lemur of Madagascar lives in small groups in which each female owns a territory and lives in a tree cavity or hole somewhere within it.
- (26) As fewer [gelada baboon] males “owned” harems, the all-male groups had increased in size and contained older males.

The reason why *own* has been used in (25) is probably due to an analogy between human landowners’ legal rights to their land and an animal’s acknowledged right to its territory. In both cases, other members of the society in question have to give their acceptance to the claims on the land/territory laid down by the landowner/animal. In (26), the speaker/writer acknowledges that *own* is used in a rather unusual context by putting it within quotation marks. Yet, it is likely that also in this case the choice of *own* was made analogously to human conditions. In those cultures where men had harems, women did not have equal rights to men and were subjected to male dominance and control in the same way as the herd of gelada baboon females is dominated and controlled by the male. Thus, in both (25) and (26), aspects of human life are thus transferred to and mapped onto aspects of animal society.

3.1.3 Objects of *own*

The Objects of *own* are most commonly an asset of some sort, tangible or intangible. There is a predilection for using *own* together with more valuable assets such as shares, land, works of art, racehorses and cars, etc. A subjective division of the Objects according to value is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of Objects of *own* according to value

| Value of Object | Number of tokens | Percentage |
|-----------------|------------------|------------|
| High | 954 | 87.60 |
| Low | 96 | 8.82 |
| Uncertain | 39 | 3.58 |
| Total | 1,089 | 100.00 |

As shown in the table above, there are 954 instances where the Object of *own* can be considered as an asset of higher value and only 96 instances with a lesser-value Object. In another 39 cases, it is difficult to decide how to categorise the Object—valuable or less valuable. In most of these cases, however, *own* is not used in its core meaning, the legal sense, but rather in one of its meaning extensions, the control, responsibility and acknowledgement senses (cf. (b) through to (d) above and section 3.1.1). Again, these observations are reflections of the legal feature of *own*. Since replacing (if possible) a high-value asset would entail a substantial financial investment it is more important to emphasise one's ownership of such an asset. Hence, possessions of high value are more likely to appear as Objects of *own* than are possessions of lesser value.

As mentioned above, Objects of *own* are either concrete or abstract. However, most of them are concrete—1,050 out of a total number of 1,089 (just above 96%). The overall distribution of Objects is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of Objects in sentences with *own*

| Type of Object | Number of tokens | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------------|------------|
| Concrete | 1,050 | 96.42 |
| - concrete entity | 1,035 | 94.99 |
| - human | 15 | 1.43 |
| Abstract | 39 | 3.58 |
| Total | 1,050 | 100.00 |

If the data behind the figures in Table 4 is studied in more detail, it gives further support to the claim that high-value assets are more likely to appear as the Objects of *own* than assets of lower value: the top three assets are businesses, land and buildings, together representing almost 60% (629 tokens) of the total. A bit surprisingly perhaps, dogs have quite a high number of tokens and come in fourth place.⁸ The reason is that in the majority of the cases—80 out of a total number of 88—the examples are gathered from reports of dog shows, which include results, participants, owners' names, etc. It is, thus, a question of pedigree dogs of high value.

Noteworthy is also the fact that money is not among the most frequent Objects. There are only two examples in the data which refer to the lexemes *money* or *fortune*:

(27) American retailer Sam Walton, who drove a battered pick-up truck to work all his life despite owning a fortune, estimated at \$24 billion, has died of cancer aged 74.

(28) It is easy to believe that owning money brings happiness.

The reason why there are no other examples than these two referring to money or fortunes could be an indication that money and fortunes as such are not generally looked upon as something one owns, that is, has

⁸ It cannot be completely ruled out that a search of the *BNC* as a whole would have yielded a slightly different result, with a lower overall frequency for dogs (cf. the discussion on corpus design in section 2).

legal ownership of. Money and fortunes are, of course, valuable assets, but it is likely that they are rather seen as a means to acquire other assets.

Abstract (intangible) Objects constitute a rather heterogeneous category and, as is shown in Table 4, they are not as common together with *own* as their concrete counterparts. Furthermore, not all abstract-Object tokens can be considered as examples of the legal sense of *own*: in many cases *own* is used in its control sense (see section 3.1.1 for examples).

3.2 *Possess*

3.2.1 Senses of *possess*

Possess is a verb with quite a wide range of senses (at least seven according to definitions in the *OED*; cf. section 1 above) and in the data analysed examples of six of them have been found. No examples of definition (h) above were found. The distribution of the senses is illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. Senses of *possess*

| Sense | Number of tokens | Percentage |
|----------------------|------------------|------------|
| have a quality, etc. | 302 | 65.36 |
| ownership | 91 | 19.70 |
| mere possession | 42 | 9.10 |
| strongly influence | 12 | 2.60 |
| occupy/dominate | 9 | 1.95 |
| sexual connotations | 6 | 1.29 |
| Total | 462 | 100.00 |

As is clearly shown in the table above, the overwhelming majority of the examples—almost two-thirds of the data—belong to the have-a-quality sense. To determine to which of the other senses an example should be referred is, however, not always easy or self-evident from the context; to decide between ownership and mere possession is particularly difficult. Less than a third of the Objects in the data refer to external Objects (see section 3.2.2 below), that is, concrete entities, and not all of them can be categorised as ownership. Instead, many of the external Objects must be

analysed as pertaining to the mere-possession sense—to have something at one’s disposal without necessarily claiming ownership of the Object in question. Sentences that have been judged as belonging to this latter sense are, for example, those excerpted from reports of court proceedings (30 out of 42 sentences for the mere-possession sense are of this type; for examples, see (54) and (55) below). Not only is it indictable simply to carry drugs or a firearm without a permit, but those brought to court for these crimes often claim their innocence by refusing to accept any ownership whatsoever of the unlawful items in question.

Other examples assigned to the mere-possession sense are:

- (29) [...] the general once boasted that he possessed information that would prove highly embarrassing to President Bush.
- (30) [...] called at the station asking for the duplicate set of keys to his house which he thought the police would routinely possess for the residents’ benefit [...]
- (31) [...] but for me it was a magical moment; to possess, momentarily, such a beautiful, wild creature.

As illustrated by the examples above, sentences expressing mere possession constitute a rather heterogeneous group, but the lexeme *information* is somewhat more frequently occurring than any other individual lexeme. Information is usually not regarded as something one can claim ownership of. It may, of course, be paid for, but the interpretation of *possess* which seems most likely in sentences such as (29), as well as in (30) and (31), is ‘have at one’s disposal, control’.

Together, the senses have a quality, ownership, and mere possession make up close to 95% of the material as a whole. Taking frequency in the corpus into consideration, then, the three remaining senses cannot be said to be very common. They are here exemplified by (32) through to (35):

- (32) [...] he was losing his grip on reality, possessed as he was by the illusion that perestroika was developing widely.
- (33) He wrote: “The gods seem to have possessed my soul and turned it inside out [...].”

- (34) Salim, too, wants to win, and his affair with Yvette is a victory [...] In possessing her, he is both taken out of, and placed in possession of, himself [...]
- (35) The female soil possessed and misused by the masculine force of the Spanish invaders. The Indian Mexico raped and abused by the conquistador yet bearing his bastard child.

Whereas (32) and (33) are examples of someone being strongly influenced by an idea and dominated by gods, respectively, sentences (34) and (35) are clear examples of *possess* meaning ‘to have sexual intercourse with’. Sentence (35) is an example of metaphorical use of *possess*. Even though the entity being submitted to the act is not human the first part of (35) clearly shows that *possess* must be interpreted as having sexual connotations. This view is even more enhanced by the second part where the metaphorical parallel between a woman and pre-Conquest Mexico is taken one step further.

The fact that *possess* and *have* often can be used interchangeably, that is, they have the same usage patterns and take the same kinds of Objects, is evidenced by the following example:

- (36) [...] so a mare or foal may actually possess a deep voice, and a stallion may sometimes have quite a high voice ...

While both *possess* and *have* can take qualities as their Objects, it would have been impossible to use *own* in this case.

3.2.2 Subjects of *possess*

As mentioned earlier (see section 3.1.2), Subjects of *own* are always humans and the Objects are always things. This is not the case for *possess*, a fact which has consequences for the distribution of Subjects of the verb. Depending on what kind of Object a sentence contains, that is, whether the Object can be regarded as being internal or external to the Subject, different kinds of Subjects appear. The distribution of Subjects with regard to what kind of Object they co-occur with is presented in Table 6 (see also section 3.2.3 below for an analysis of the Objects of *possess*).

Table 6. Distribution of Subjects in sentences with *possess*

| Type of Subject | Number of tokens | Percentage of total | Percentage of group |
|---------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| External Objects | 160 | 34.64 | 100.00 |
| Human | 139 | 30.09 | 86.88 |
| - individual or group of people | 109 | 23.59 | 68.13 |
| - metonymy | 30 | 6.50 | 18.75 |
| Inanimate | 21 | 4.55 | 13.12 |
| Internal Objects | 302 | 65.36 | 100.00 |
| Human | 202 | 43.72 | 66.88 |
| - individual or group of people | 171 | 37.01 | 56.62 |
| - metonymy | 31 | 6.71 | 10.26 |
| Non-human (animate) | 16 | 3.46 | 5.30 |
| Inanimate | 42 | 9.09 | 13.91 |
| Abstract | 42 | 9.09 | 13.91 |
| Total | 462 | 100.00 | |

The analysis of the material shows that when the Objects are external, that is, concrete things of which it could be possible to claim ownership, all the Subjects of *possess* are either humans or other entities representing humans. Examples (37) and (38) illustrate this point:

(37) I possess a stone head by Modigliani which I would not part with for a hundred pounds even at this crisis [...]

(38) [...] substantial tin deposits, a resource which Egypt does not seem to have possessed.

The inanimate Subjects of the influence and dominate senses do not fit in exactly in this group, but have nonetheless been assigned to this one since the Objects must be regarded as external. It is not, however, a question of ownership.

In contrast to Subjects with external Objects, Subjects with internal Objects comprise quite a significant number of Subjects which are either non-human (but otherwise animate), inanimate or abstract—100 tokens representing one-third of the group. The reason for this is that Objects of

possess are often qualities, properties or parts, etc., features that also other entities than humans can have. This is exemplified by sentences (39) through to (41):

- (39) These expensive, shrivelled and unappealing tomatoes possess an incredible flavour [...]
- (40) [Vertebrates] possess two pairs of fins or their derivatives [...]
- (41) [...] for a shape to assume constancy it must be closed and possess a skin, or comprehensible boundary.

Furthermore, it is not possible to claim ownership of qualities, properties or parts, nor is it possible to say that one has them at one's disposal (that is, mere possession as opposed to ownership; see also section 3.2.1 above for an analysis of the senses of *possess*). Qualities, properties and parts are usually inalienable (or inherent), but can also be internalised (that is, acquired) or ascribed and in that way regarded as inalienable (see 3.2.3 below for further discussion).

Another fact worth noticing, which emerges when the data is analysed in more detail, is the substantial number of tokens for specific groups of people as Subjects with internal Objects—70 tokens as compared to five tokens among Subjects with external Objects. These Subjects include, among others, *dancers, parents, Marxists, the public* and *Catholics in America*, terms used for collectively ascribing a specific quality, insight, etc. to all the members of a specific part of society. Sentences (42) and (43) exemplify this point:

- (42) Choreographers should, therefore, remember that dancers possess physical and mental abilities of their own [...]
- (43) Marxists have the dogmatic assurance that comes from possessing a world-view that offers total explanations of social and cultural processes [...]

The low number of tokens for this group as regards external Objects is explained by the fact that Subjects of this kind are usually not united by joint ownership but rather by features common to, for example, all dancers.

A further point of interest as regards the Subjects of *possess* is the very low figure for companies—only six tokens (five with external

Objects and one with an internal Object). Again, this can be seen as related to the general nature of the Objects of *possess*, but even more to the fact that *possess* does not have the same strong tendency towards describing legal ownership as *own* has. Hence, it seems as if the most interesting aspect of a company to discuss is what it owns, not which qualities it has.

3.2.3 Objects of *possess*

In contrast to *own*, *possess* generally takes qualities, properties, etc. as Objects; concrete (or external) entities constitute only slightly more than a third of the total number (see Table 7).

Table 7. Distribution of Objects in sentences with *possess*

| Type of Object | Number of tokens | Percentage |
|----------------|------------------|------------|
| Internal | 302 | 65.36 |
| - inherent | 155 | 33.55 |
| - internalised | 91 | 19.70 |
| - ascribed | 56 | 12.11 |
| External | 160 | 34.64 |
| Total | 462 | 100.00 |

The figures in Table 7 give support to the claim made previously that the core sense of *possess* is not likely to be ownership as such but rather control of some sort. Of course, this is not surprising for qualities and properties (internal Objects) since ownership cannot be claimed of them and since what is inside oneself is more easily controlled than what is outside, but it also applies to the category of external Objects (see section 3.2.1 above for further details).

The internal Objects have been divided into three subgroups: inherent, internalised and ascribed Objects. The first subgroup consists of qualities, properties, features, attributes, etc. that can be regarded as innate or characteristic of the Subject in question, for example:

(44) Bats are the only mammals to possess wings and to manage sustained flight.

(45) [...] she had always possessed an unattractive, aggressive, sullen personality [...]

- (46) Perhaps there are special brain cells which we possess that chimpanzees do not.

The Objects in the first subgroup can also be seen as being intimately associated with the Subject or forming a natural part of the Subject which cannot easily be removed:

- (47) Australia, after all, shares the problems of other tropical countries – possessing both tropical forest and semi-arid bush.
- (48) [...] there are fifteenth century references to [the manor house at Cosmeton] having possessed a tower or a corner bastion.

The second subgroup, internalised Objects, contains qualities, properties, etc. which can be regarded as having been in some way acquired by the Subjects and as a result of this acquisition they are now part of the Subjects. Sentences (49) and (50) illustrate this:

- (49) [...] it would require a deeper understanding of the chemistry of proteins than I possess to explain how the energy [...]
- (50) The knowledge which the parents possess will be based on perhaps a superficial understanding built up over many years [...]

The third subgroup, ascribed Objects, consists of qualities, properties, etc. which are not necessarily part of the Subjects but which are interpreted as being so by outside observers. By way of illustration, the following examples may be considered:

- (51) “This Boy Can Wait” was seen in some quarters as possessing a strong gay message [...]
- (52) It was also said to possess curative powers, as did several other plants [...]
- (53) [...] the ability to respond in crisis is one of the skills which all teachers must possess.

The use of words and phrases such as *was seen in some quarters as* (51), *was also said to* (52) and *must* (53) clearly shows the hypothetical nature of the Objects; apart from having relevance in the observer’s mind (or in a particular mental space; cf. Fauconnier [1985] 1994), there might not exist Subjects which have these specific qualities, properties, etc.

External Objects of *possess*, that is, things, constitute a highly diversified group which consists of several unrelated sorts of Objects: more than one-third of the group consists of different kinds of Objects that only appear once or twice in the data. The only Object occurring with any higher frequency in the material analysed is *weapon*. The reason for this is that many of the examples are taken from reports of court proceedings; the same is also the case for drugs:

(54) Finn senior was convicted of criminal damage, wounding and possessing an offensive weapon.

(55) Ms Mitchell was jailed for three years on Wednesday at Cambridge crown court for possessing and supplying cocaine.

Contrary to *own*, high-value assets are not as frequent as Objects of *possess*. Again, this is evidence of the strong legality aspect of *own* which is not present in *possess* to the same extent (see also section 3.1.1 above for a discussion of the senses of *possess*).

Just as was the case with *own*, there are only two examples where the Object refers to the lexeme *money* or other related words:

(56) [...] the music of a leisured rock aristocracy, who possessed the money to lavishly construct a LUXURIOUS palace of sound [...]

(57) The wealth and power he clearly possesses by the time he is reunited with his brother would have been regarded by the writer and the first hearers of the story as clear signs of God's blessing.

Example (56) in particular supports the claim made in section 3.1.2 above that *money* and other related terms are rather regarded as a means to acquire other assets than as valuable assets in their own right. Using intuition only, one would probably say that the phrase *have money* is more frequently used than either *own money* or *possess money* and a quick search in the *BNC A-files* also confirms this; different forms of the construction *have money* occurs 129 times as compared to one token each for *own money* and *possess money*.

3.3 *Own* and *possess*: a comparison

Even though *own* and *possess* have many similarities and traits in common as well as overlapping domains of usage they also differ from each other in many respects. This section will provide a brief comparison between the two verbs.

Where the Subjects of the two verbs are concerned *own* and *possess* differ quite substantially from one another. Subjects of *own* are almost exclusively humans or entities standing metonymically for humans, for example, companies, nations and various associations. *Possess*, on the other hand, has quite a significant number of Subjects which are either non-human, inanimate or abstract. This difference between the verbs is explained by the very nature of the verbs themselves: while *own* undoubtedly has a core sense, that of legal ownership, which is strongly predominant among the verb's usages, *possess* lacks the same kind of predilection for stating what belongs to someone from a juridical point of view. The most favoured use for *possess* is instead that of stating that someone/something has a quality, property, attribute, etc. of some sort. Since ownership is a socially sanctioned concept it goes without saying that it can only be found in human contexts, while qualities, properties, etc. can be part of or ascribed to any kind of entity.

As a natural consequence of this difference in the nature of *own* and *possess* they also take different kinds of Objects. Quite naturally, the Objects of *own* are always things, concrete or abstract assets. Objects of *possess*, on the other hand, are predominantly qualities, properties, attributes, etc. (internal Objects), but can also be things (external Objects). Moreover, while the things referred to in sentences using *own* are often high-value assets the same does not apply to the same extent for *possess*. According to Dixon (1991), however, the choice between *own* or *possess* might sometimes be due to emotional or mental factors. In a sentence such as *He doesn't possess a single suit*, Dixon argues, *possess* is chosen "partly to draw attention to what this lack tells about his character" (1991: 117), while the use of *possess* in the second clause of the sentence *His father owns an old sedan but John possesses a fine new red sports car* "implies that John is proud of his car, almost that it is an extension of his personality" (1991: 117).

As has already been mentioned, the dominant sense for *own* is that of legal ownership. There are also some extensions from this core sense, but

in the material analysed they constitute only a minor part. In dictionaries, *possess* has more definitions than *own*, a fact that is also manifested in the corpus data. Just as *own*, *possess* can express legal ownership but also mere possession, that is, having something at one's disposal without claiming ownership to it. This distinction is frequent in law and hence quite common in court proceedings. The major part of the data for *possess*, however, refers to the having-a-quality sense.

4. Conclusion

Even though both *own* and *possess*, as well as *have*, can express the same concept, that is, to be the owner/possessor of something, they cannot always be used interchangeably. While all the three verbs can be used to express legal ownership, only *possess* and *have* can be used in expressions referring to someone/something having a quality, etc. of some sort (see sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 above for examples). Furthermore, only *own* can be used in its meaning extensions, the control, the responsibility and the acknowledgement senses. As regards the mere-possession and the sexual-connotations senses of *possess*, also *have* can be used to express these concepts, while for senses (h), (j) and (k) (see section 1 above) *possess* is the only verb possible. In addition, *have* has uses in which neither *own* nor *possess* can be used as substitutes, for example, when a temporary property is expressed:

(58) I have a headache.

The relationship between the three verbs can schematically be illustrated as in Figure 3.

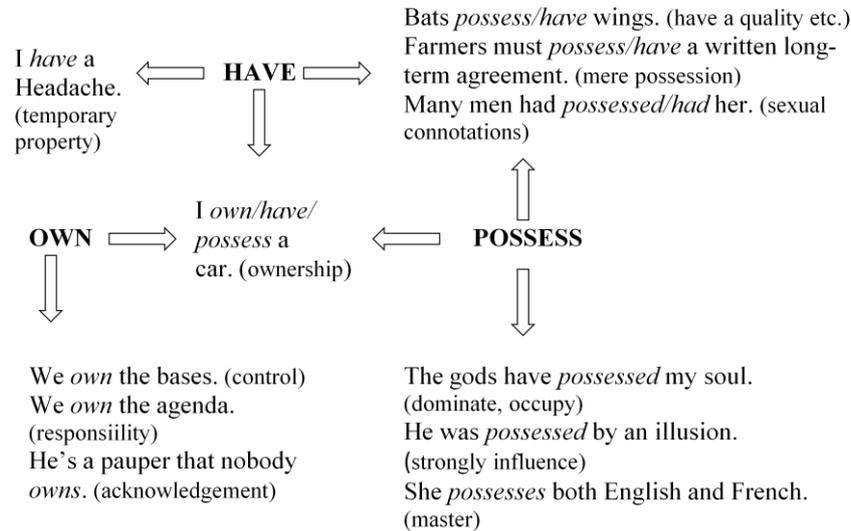


Figure 3. The relationship between *own*, *possess* and *have*

All the three verbs thus have domains where they are the only valid option, but there are also overlapping domains where two or even all three of the verbs may be used.

The result of this study supports and strengthens the information on *own* and *possess* already existing, but it also highlights several points not previously accounted for in dictionaries. It is often the case in dictionaries that a rare usage is given the same weight as the most frequent one. In other words, the imbalance between different usages of a word, which is clearly noticeable in a corpus analysis, is not mentioned. This study has shown that in the overwhelming majority of cases *own* is used in the sense of 'ownership' whereas the frequency of using *possess* to express that someone/something has a quality of some sort is more than three times as high as that of the second most common usage. This might also be seen as pointing towards possible core senses of the two verbs as suggested in the analysis. Furthermore, and related to what has been stated so far, it has been shown that the nature of the two verbs has a considerable influence as regards the character and semantic content of the arguments they take.

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