POSS-*ing* and ACC-*ing* in discourse

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POSS-*ing*: John's/his singing the song
ACC-*ing*: John/him singing the song
How do they differ in their interpretation?

Counterexample with *prevent*:
(3) Unfortunately, his position as high sheriff of Hull prevented his leaving the town and the expedition was abandoned. [BNC]
Counterexample with indefinites:
(4) The experts can tell us that a child's being snatched by a stranger is rare and that these kinds of kidnappings are not on the increase. [COCA]

1. Possessive Existential Import?

POSS-*ing*, but not ACC-*ing*, seems to entail the existence of a token event:
(1) John being a scammer would disappoint his mother. ⇸ John is a scammer
(2) John's being a scammer would disappoint his mother. → John is a scammer
Grimm & McNally (2015) argue that VP-*ing* denote **event kinds**. While ACC-*ing* creates a **subkind** with the ACC subject, POSS-*ing* carries Possessive Existential Import (PEI, [2]): it introduces a POSS relation interpreting the possessor DP as a participant of the event, thus facilitating the inference of an **event token**.
However, PEI does not explain why the POSS relation forces the existence of token, as opposed to merely kind-level, events. Also there are counterexamples:
⟵ When POSS-*ing* appears as the object of a preventing verb (*prevent, avoid, prohibit*) or describes an abstract entity (such as *idea, possibility, unlikely event*), or when the possessor DP is non-specific, there is no entailment of token events.

2. Different discourse functions

Portner (1992): **POSS-*ing* gerunds are definite, ACC-*ing* gerunds are indefinite**.
Following this idea, POSS-*ing* and ACC-*ing* are expected to have different discourse functions:
- POSS-*ing*, like definite descriptions, should meet the requirement of **weak familiarity** [4]. It can be generic (with an indefinite possessor; see example ↖) or strongly familiar (see (5) ⟶) or weakly familiar: it may be entailed in the context (see (6) ⟶). Gerunds, as relational nouns, can also introduce new referents via the POSS relation [5].
- ACC-*ing* is predicted to be non-anaphoric; it describes novel event subkinds.
An alternative explanation for the contrast between (1) and (2) ↗: ACC-*ing*, being non-anaphoric, is temporally anchored to the main clause and thus hypothetical in (1). POSS-*ing* inherits the temporal trace of its antecedent, which can be a type or a token. Since ACC-*ing* has a more restricted interpretation, it is inferred that by using POSS-*ing* in (2), the subject is not hypothetical.

POSS-*ing* in context:

(5) Yet a kind of relief now at writing all this down. Yesterday I couldn't have done it. Couldn't have picked up the pen [...]. Does my writing this down now mean that I am a little bit reconciled to myself? [BNC]
(6) The presentation was to have included village litter warden James Budd, but a family bereavement prevented his attending the reception. [BNC]

Hypotheses:

(i) When there is a salient token event antecedent, ACC-*ing* should be infelicitous.
(ii) When there is no salient event type or token antecedent, POSS-*ing* should be infelicitous.
(iii) POSS-*ing* should be possible if an antecedent can be accommodated due to general knowledge or facilitation by the Question Under Discussion.

3. Data annotation

I will collect POSS-*ing* and ACC-*ing* cases from the COCA corpus with a 200-word or larger window on the left, and have them annotated, first to identify in each case (i) whether there is an overt antecedent in the context and (ii) the Question Under Discussion before the gerund is used, and then for the following factors:
(i) Does the gerund imply an event token?
(ii) If there is an overt antecedent, is it an event type or token?
(iii) What relation does the antecedent hold with the gerund (hypernym, hyponym, etc.)?
(iv) If the possessor is indefinite, is the gerund used in a generic context?

4. What's next?

↑ The hypotheses will be tested using the annotated corpus data. Any observed contrast between POSS-*ing* and ACC-*ing* will offer evidence against theories that treat them as semantically identical [6]. This work will eventually contribute to resolving the long-standing problem in natural language ontology regarding -*ing* nominalizations.

References: [1] Grimm, S., & McNally, L. (2015). The -ing dynasty: Rebuilding the semantics of nominalizations. In S. D'Antonio, M. Moroney, & C. R. Little (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 25th Semantics and Linguistic Theory conference (SALT)* (Vol. 25, pp. 82-102). Ithaca, NY: LSA and CLC Publications. [2] Peters, S., & Westerståhl, D. (2013). The semantics of possessives. *Language*, 89, 713-759. [3] Portner, P. (1992). *Situation Theory and the Semantics of Propositional Expressions* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Amherst, MA. [4] Roberts, C. (2003). Uniqueness in definite noun phrases. *Linguistics and philosophy*, 26(3), 287-350. [5] Barker, C. (2000). Definite possessives and discourse novelty. *Theoretical Linguistics*, 26(3), 211-228. [6] Hamm, F., & van Lambalgen, M. (2002). Formal foundations for semantic theories of nominalisation. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*(27), 1-21.

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