The discourse status of verbal gerunds

There are two verbal gerunds in English: **POSS-*ing*** (1) and **ACC-*ing*** (2).

(1) Clay's/his winning the game

(2) Clay/him winning the game

There is debate about whether the subject of POSS-*ing*, assigned genitive case, is semantically a possessor. This study attempts to see whether they tend to have different discourse status due to POSS-*ing* being a possessive structure and ACC-*ing* not.

   In the semantic literature on English gerunds, it has been claimed that POSS-*ing* is definite and ACC-*ing* indefinite (Portner 1992). It follows that POSS-*ing* should be familiar in the discourse. In the literature on possessives, however, there are contradictory predictions as to whether possessee referents should be given. A corpus study by Willemse et al. (2009) shows that the discourse status of possessive structures ranges from given to brand new, with most of the event nominals being brand new in the discourse.

   I collected a sample of 205 cases from all the POSS-*ing* from a dependency parsed version of the British National Corpus (2007), and took the first 200 cases of ACC-*ing* from the same corpus. I annotated the verbal gerunds with a scheme based on Baumann & Riester (2012): referential givenness of the event described by the gerund, and both referential and lexical givenness of the subject and object of the gerund. I also annotated for whether the gerund refers to an event type or a token (see Grimm & McNally 2015). Below is an example:

(3) [...] "Naylor tells me you're one of the best executives in your particular line," Cicely Hepwood, a neat and gentle woman, remarked at one point during the meal.
Leith shot a glance at Naylor, seated next to her, who wasn't even a tinge pink around the ears at his aunt's revealing what, since there were others in her particular line who were far more senior, must surely be a lie.

Type/token	Gerund r-givenness	Subj r-givenness	Subj l-givenness	Obj r-givenness	Obj l-givenness	Pred r-givenness
token	token-text	given	new	given	new	accessible-other

The results show that POSS-*ing* (100/205 not new) occurs more in context where it is given in some ways than ACC-*ing* (61/200 not new). However, in more than half of the cases (105/205), POSS-*ing* is still hardly inferrable from the context. Among the discourse new cases, more POSS-*ing* contain given elements (object or predicate) than ACC-*ing* and slightly fewer POSS-*ing* cases are entirely new. Most POSS-*ing* have a given subject (196/205), implying that it relies on its possessor as an anchor to introduce new information, while ACC-*ing* has much fewer given subjects (104/200). ACC-*ing* when selected by *with* mostly introduces new information and holds an Elaboration relation to its matrix clause.

   The discourse status of POSS-ing and ACC-ing only show a tendency, not a categorical distinction. In comparison to Willemse et al. (2009), it seems that verbal gerunds are more likely to be given than deverbal nominalizations, which is an unintuitive result. I would like to compare the discourse function of verbal gerunds with that of deverbal nouns and nominal gerunds (*Clay's winning of the game*) in future research.

References

Baumann, S., & Riester, A. (2012). Referential and lexical givenness: Semantic, prosodic and cognitive aspects. In G. Elordieta & P. Prieto (Eds.), *Prosody and meaning* (pp. 119-162). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

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.

Portner, P. (1992). *Situation Theory and the semantics of propositional expressions* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Amherst, MA.

The British National Corpus, version 3 (BNC XML Edition). (2007). Distributed by Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, on behalf of the BNC Consortium, URL http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/.

Willemse, P., Davidse, K., & Heyvaert, L. (2009). English possessives as reference-point constructions and their function in the discourse. In W. B. McGregor (Ed.), *The expression of possession*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton