

## GENITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH

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### **Abstract**

This research deals with English genitive structures. It defines genitive case elaborately in term of forms, functions, meanings, usage, types, conditions and its analysis by grammarians. It contains the conclusions that have been reached.

At the end of the research, there is a bibliography of the references consulted.

### **1. Introduction**

This research, which is entitled '**Genitive Constructions in English**', deals with English genitive structures.

### **2. Definition of 'genitive'**

Lyons (1971: 290) states that '**genitive**' is the case of possession. According to **Case Filter**, as cited by Gorrell (1995:22), a lexical NP must have (abstract case), and any genitive phrase represents an NP, and is assigned the **Genitive Case**.

Huddleston and Pullum. (2005:300) define '**genitive**' as "an inflectional case of the noun whose primary use is to mark an NP as determiner within the structure of a larger NP". "For example, **Smith's house**. Some pronouns have two genitive forms: dependent genitive (e.g. **my**) and independent genitive (e.g. **mine**)

Booij (2005:106) states that '**genitive**' is the case of marking relations between nouns.

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Leech et al. (2006: 66- 67, 75, 115) define the ‘**genitive phrase**’ as one of the oddest constructions in English. The ‘**genitive marker**’, which is spelt ‘**s**’ or ‘**’**’, and which behaves more like a suffix than a separate word, is added to the end of the genitive phrase. Genitive phrases are like NPs except that they end with the particle ‘**s**’ in the singular (e.g. **the boy’s**) and with the apostrophe ‘**’**’ in the plural (e.g. **the boys’**). Genitive phrases function as premodifiers (e.g. **These are the student’s books**), or as heads in NPs (e. g. **These books are the student’s**). The genitive phrase may be regarded as an NP subordinated within a word (a determiner). It may be thought of as an NP with an extra particle or marker added to it.

Matthews (2007: 157) cites that ‘**genitive**’ is the case whose basic role is to mark NPs which are dependents of other NPs. Thus, the constructions marked by the clitic ‘**s**’ (**Ann’s pen**) or by **of** (**the door of the house**) are regarded as ‘**Genitives**’.

### **3. Genitive formation**

As cited by Biber et al. (1999:292-293), **genitives** may take the following forms:

1. The genitive of singular nouns and irregular plural nouns is marked by the addition of ‘**s**’, which varies in pronunciation in the same way as the plural ending.

/ s / after voiceless consonants except / s , ʃ , t / (e.g. **cat’s** , **Dick’s**)

/ z / after vowels and voiced consonants except / z , ʒ ,

dʒ / (e.g. **boy’s**, **men’s**)

/ ɪz / after / s , z , ʃ , ʒ , tʃ , / (e.g. **Leech’s**, **judge’s**, **geese’s**)

2. The genitive of regular plural nouns is marked by the addition of an apostrophe ‘**’**’ (e.g. **girls’** , **sons’**).

3. The genitive of animate and inanimate nouns may be marked by **of**. (e.g. **the brother of Eva**, **the door of the house**)

#### **4. Genitive functions**

The basic functions of genitives, as cited by Biber et al. (1999:294-295), may be as follows:

##### **1. Specifying:**

Specifying genitives may specify the reference of the NP of which it is a part, just like a determiner.

**(1) After an hour, the bird's owner left.**

In (1), the reference is to the owner of a specific bird.

##### **2. Classifying:**

Some genitives may have a classifying rather than a specifying function. They are commonly used with personal nouns, especially when they are plural (e.g. **pupils' camp**).

**(2) Her hair looked like a bird's nest.**

In (2), the genitive serves to classify the type of nest.

#### **5. Genitive meanings (uses)**

As stated by Quirk et al. (1985:321-322), and Greenbaum and Quirk (1990:103-104), and Aarts (2001:28), the meanings (uses) expressed by the **genitives** include:

1. Possessive genitive: Ann's hat - The hat of Ann's  
It usually, though not exclusively, indicates possession.
2. Subjective genitive: The sister's remark - The remark of the sister
3. Objective genitive: The man's imprisonment - The imprisonment of the man
4. Partitive genitive: The child's hands - The hands of the child
5. Descriptive genitive: Girls' shirts - The shirts of girls.
6. Genitive of attribute: The girl's beauty - The beauty of the girl
7. Genitive of origin: Iraq's oil - The oil of Iraq

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8. Genitive of measure(time): Two weeks' presence – The presence of two weeks
  9. Genitive of apposition: Baghdad's fair city - The fair city of Baghdad
  10. Genitive of denoting family relationships: Ann's Henry- Henry of Ann

Moreover, there is a tendency for s –genitives to be taken as subjective, and for of – genitives to be taken as objective.

### **6. Choice between s- genitives and of – phrases**

As viewed by Biber et al. (1999:300- 301), s- genitives and of – phrases often compete.

The choice between these two forms depends on six factors:

#### **1. Register:**

Registers vary in the distribution of the two forms. The excluded of – phrases that cannot be used as alternatives to s-genitives include: phrases governed by preceding verbs or adjectives (e.g. **accused of, afraid of**); examples with fixed of – expressions (e.g. **in front of, because of**);and of- phrases preceded by numerals, quantifying determiners, quantifying nouns ,unit nouns ,collective nouns ,or species nouns (e.g. **one of , some of , a box of ,a piece of , a herd of , types of**).

#### **2.Type of dependent noun:**

Nouns with human / personal reference, especially proper nouns tend to occur with 's – genitive rather than an of – phrase.

As cited by Quirk et al. (1985:324), the s -genitive is further used with certain kinds of inanimate nouns, such as: **geographical names (e.g. Europe's future); locative nouns(e.g. the world's economy); temporal nouns (e.g. today's paper ); and nouns**

**related to human activity (e.g. the brain's weight, the body's needs).**

Nouns with inanimate concrete reference and abstract impersonal nouns tend to occur in an **of** -phrase rather than the **s**-genitive.

Plural nouns are more likely to occur in **of** - phrases than singular nouns.

### **3. Semantic relations between head and dependent phrase:**

Both forms express a wide range of meanings. Each expresses some preferred relations.

Some preferred relations expressed by **s** - genitives include: subjective, possessive, attribute, measure, and origin genitives .

Other preferred relations expressed by **of** – genitives involve: objective, partitive, and after quantifying and species nouns.

The preferred uses of both forms occur where they are both present in the same NP, as in **The king's denial of the need for election was surprising;**

### **4. The complexity of the dependent phrase:**

**S**- genitives are preferred for short dependent phrases, but **of** – phrases are preferred for longer ones.

### **5. The information status of the dependent phrase:**

**S**- genitives are preferred for presenting given (old) information, but **of** – phrases are preferred for presenting new information.

### **6. Specific collocations:**

Collocations are common with **s** - genitives. The head noun **sake** is productive in collocations with **s** - genitives, as in: **for God's sake, for heaven's sake, for goodness's sake, for pity's sake, for old times' sake.**

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### **7. Types of genitive constructions**

Lyons (1986: 123-143) cites two types of genitive constructions in English:

#### **1.Type 1 : Preposed :**

**(3) Ann's pen....**

**(4) My car...**

#### **2.Type 2 : Postposed :**

**(5) A pen of Ann's....**

**(6) A (This) car of mine....**

In both types, there is an NP, with a head N (**pen, car**) modified by a genitive phrase (**Ann's, my, mine**). This genitive phrase is itself an NP in the **Genitive Case**, and is marked by the clitic **'s**, which is attached directly at the end of the phrase, or by possessive pronouns, like **my, mine**, etc.

The two types, as stated by Lyons (1986: 123 – 143), have the following structural differences:

1. In the preposed type, the genitive phrase precedes the head N in Determiner position.

**(7) Jack's coat....**

In the postposed type, the genitive phrase follows the head N and is itself preceded by **of** in Complement position.

**(8) A coat of Jack's....**

2. In the preposed type, the NP cannot have Determiners **the, a, an, this, and that** since the genitive phrase is itself in Determiner position. The NP is definite. Also, this type does not occur with a post-head restrictive modifier (e.g.10).

**(9)\* The Jack's coat....**

**(10)\* Jack's coat that you sewed....**

In the postposed type, the NP can have Determiners **some, a, an, this,** and **that**. The NP is indefinite. Also, this type can only occur with **the** if followed by a restrictive modifier (e.g.12), as well as with a bare plural (e.g.13).

- (11) **An apple of Jane's....**
- (12) **The coat of Jack's that you sewed....**
- (13) **(Some) pens of Rose's....**

To show the phrase structure of these constructions, it is assumed that NP, the maximal projection of N, is **N**. The terms used are: **Spec(ifier)** for the pre-head position daughter to **N**; **Mod(ifier)** for the next lower pre-head position; and **Compl(ement)**, which is daughter to N for post-head constituents. This structure is shown schematically in (14):

(14)

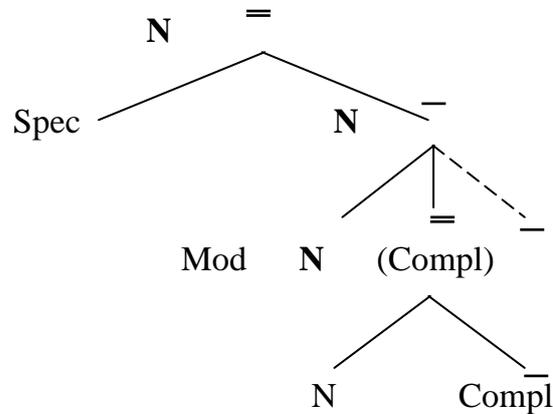


Figure (1):  
**THE PHRASE STRUCTURE OF ENGLISH GENITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS**

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3. In the preposed type, the genitive phrase is generated as an NP in Specifier position within the containing NP: [<sub>NP</sub> <sup>NP</sup> N], and is assigned **Genitive Case** via this position. This agrees with Chomsky's view.

- (15): NP  
Nancy's cat : Nancy's is an NP within the containing NP Nancy's cat. Nancy's is the genitive phrase.  
NP= genitive  
Phrase

In the postposed type, the postposed construction is generated as a PP in which the genitive phrase is in the Specifier position of an NP with empty head. This agrees with Jackendoff, who states that NP = N, and that a postposed genitive is a partitive construction.

- (16) a / this sister of theirs / Oliver's

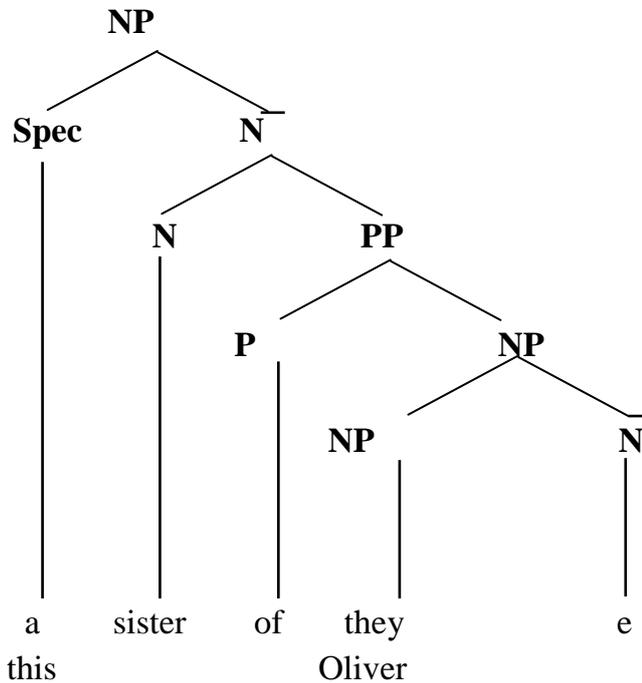


Figure (2):

**JACKENDOFF'S ANALYSIS OF POSTPOSED GENITIVES**  
**a /this sister of theirs / Oliver's**

**8. Lyons's objections to Jackendoff's analysis of postposed genitives:**

As mentioned by Lyons (1986:123-143), five objections can be raised against Jackendoff's analysis of postposed genitives:

Firstly, all nouns can occur as head of the containing NP of the postposed genitive construction, as in **four books of Jack's**, in which the head is an ordinary noun rather than a group noun.

In partitives, the containing NP almost always has an empty head (PRO for Jackendoff), the exception being that group nouns<sup>(1)</sup> can occur, as in **a group of the linguists**.

So, the postposed genitive construction is different from the partitives regarding heads of the containing NP and of the NP Complement of the PP.

Secondly, the partitives introduced by demonstratives should involve relative clauses, but this restriction does not apply to the postposed genitives.

(17) a. **.Those of the books that were bought are expensive.**

b. **\*Those of the books are expensive.**

(18) a. **Those books of Ann's (hers) that were bought are expensive.**

b. **Those books of Ann's (hers) are expensive.**

Thirdly, the PP of the partitives can be preposed, but that of the postposed genitive constructions cannot.

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(<sup>1</sup>) Group nouns are a very special type of noun, selecting a subset from the set designated by the **of** phrase, as in **a gallon of the oil** and **a group of the pupils**.

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(19) a. **Of the pupils, many are clever.**

b. **Of her books, one is bulky.**

(20) a. **\*Of Ann's, some pupils left.**

b. **\*Of ours, a friend arrived.**

Fourthly, semantically, the partitives do not have the meaning of the postposed genitives.

(21) **I shall teach one of my friends. (partitive)**

(22) **I shall teach a friend of mine (genitive).**

The sentences (21) and (22) are not synonymous: (21) implies that I have more than one friend, while (22) does not imply so – I may have more than one friend or only one.

Fifthly, semantically, when the postposed genitives are introduced by demonstratives, the entity or set denoted by the NP is not part of a larger set. The phrase that sister of theirs is not partitive in meaning.

### 9. Lyons's analysis of postposed genitives

Lyons (1986:123-143) analyses postposed genitives as follows:

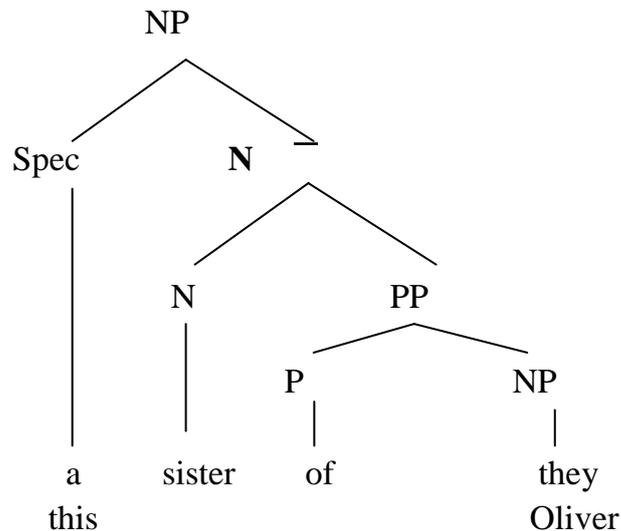


Figure (3):

**LYONS'S ANALYSIS OF POSTPOSED GENITIVES**

a/ this sister of theirs/ Oliver's

The **Genitive Case** assignment is applied to the NP after possessive **of**, as well as in Specifier position. This is an example of **of** assigning **Genitive Case** via possessive **of** as well as **Accusative Case** via preposition **of**. This analysis may be syntactically and semantically unobjectionable.

It is worth citing that **Genitive Case** is assigned only after possessive **of**, not the **of** in the Complement of derived nominals, as in \***the destruction of the city's**.

Besides, **Genitive Case** assignment to the lower NP (i.e., [NP, PP]) is rather optional. For example:

(23) **This boy is a son of Henry's.**

(24) **This boy is a son of Henry.**

Both (23) and (24) are equally acceptable and quite synonymous.

This supports Lyons's analysis. The only difference is that **Genitive Case Rule** is applied in (23), and not in (24).

**10. Genitive readings**

In Lyons's view (1986:123-143), the genitive does not simply express 'possession'. For instance, **Renaldo's team** may mean **the team that he owns, plays in, supports, etc.** The only generalization about the readings of the genitive is that it expresses one argument of a relation in **o-theory**. Fromkin et al. (2003:591) cite that the thematic role of the NP to whom something belongs is **possessor**. However, genitive readings may be of two kinds:

1. **Free R (Relation):** the relation is decided by contextual factors.
2. **Inherent R (Relation):** the relation is decided by the head N.

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(25) <b><u>Free R</u></b>	<b><u>Inherent R</u></b>
<b>Ziko's team</b>	<b>Ziko's sister</b>
<b>a team of Ziko's</b>	<b>a sister of Ziko's</b>

In accordance with these two readings, two basic genitive constructions can be set:

1. **Predicative: it is related to Free R.**
2. **Adnominal: it is related to Inherent R.**

The postposed genitive is obligatory in the Free R type (e.g **a team of Ziko's**, **\*a team of Ziko**), but it is optional in the Inherent R type (e.g **a sister of Ziko's** , **a sister of Ziko**).

Moreover, both readings are possible with some nouns, like **picture** and **portrait**.

(26) <b><u>Free R</u></b>	<b><u>Inherent R</u></b>
<b>Eva's picture</b>	<b>Eva's picture</b>
<b>a picture of Eva's</b>	<b>a picture of</b>
<b>Eva</b>	

### **11. Some conditions regarding genitives**

Lyons (1986: 123-143) pinpoints some conditions regarding genitives:

1. Both preposed and postposed genitives are possible with relational nouns (e.g. **Rose's sister** and **the sister of Rose**). Both nouns are [Human/Animate], and either word –order is possible. With non- relational nouns, preposed genitives are possible, but postposed ones are not (e.g. **Rose's doctor** and **\*the doctor of Rose**)
2. With body-part terms used metaphorically, postposed genitives, unlike preposed ones, are possible (e.g **?the river's**

**mouth** and **the mouth of the river**) .The word **mouth** is [Human / Animate] and so precedes the [Non – human/Inanimate] **river**.

3. Derived nominals and nouns functioning like them cannot be deleted. They precede postposed genitives (e.g. **the destruction of the city** and **?the city’s destruction**)

4. Any analysis of genitives should not be restricted to definite NPs, and the structure in which a genitive follows **of** must not be ignored.

[{the} N of NP’s ]

a

## 12. Possibilities (Distributions) of genitives

Lyons (1986:123-143) mentions three possibilities (distributions) of genitives:

1. **Frame (i): Preposed genitive:** [NP’s N] : Ann’s pen
2. **Frame (ii): Postposed possessive without genitive:** [(Det) N of NP]: a pen of Ann
3. **Frame (iii): Postposed genitive:** [(Det) N of NP’s]: a pen of Ann’s

a. In cases of **Free R (Relation)** readings, including possession, the structural **Frame (ii)** does not occur, but **Frames (i and iii)** do freely.

- (27) (i) Jill’s shirt  
(ii) \* the shirt of Jill  
(iii) a shirt of Jill’s

b. **This** remains the case if the noun in the N slot is human, but not inherently relational.

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- (28) (i) **Jill's teacher**  
(ii)\* **the teacher of Jill**  
(iii) **a teacher of Jill's**

c. **This** also remains the case with picture – type nouns (e.g. **picture, portrait**). The NP **Jill** has an agent reading.

- (29) (i) **Jill's portrait (of Jane )**  
(ii) \* **the portrait of Jill of Jane**  
(iii) **a portrait of Jane of Jill's**

d. Derived nominals have a different pattern. The transitive ones allow **Frame (i)** only.

- (30) (i) **Jill's destruction of her house**  
(ii)\* **The destruction of Jill of her house**  
(iii)\* ? **That destruction of Jill's of her house**

The intransitive ones allow the three frames, except that **Frame (ii)** is impossible with a pronoun in the NP slot.

- (31) (i) **Jack's plea to be released**  
(ii) **The plea of Jack to be released, but \*The plea of**  
**of**  
**him to be released**  
(iii) **That plea of Jack's to be released**

e. Relational nouns, like **brother** and **sister**, differ from non-relational nouns which give a **Free R reading**, in that they allow **Frame (ii)** with a full NP and not with a pronoun.

- (32) (ii) **the sister of Jack**, but not, **\*the sister of him**

This possibility is found also with body parts.

- (33) (ii) **the hand of a boy**, but not, **\*the hand of him**

f. All these noun types allow **Frame (iii)**. But if the NP is heavy, **Frame (iii)** is hardly acceptable.

- (34) (iii) ?? **a friend of the boy I was talking to yesterday's**

**g. Frame (iii)** is impossible with parts of inanimate objects.

(35) **(iii)\*a mouth of a river's** and **\* an arm of a chair's**

**h. Frame (ii)** is preferred to **Frame (i)** with most of the nouns of parts of inanimate objects.

(36) **(i) ? The river's mouth**

**(ii) The mouth of the river**

However, three conclusions can be drawn:

Firstly, **Frame (i)** is almost always possible. The preceding examples prove this fact.

Secondly, **Frames (ii)** and **(iii)** are in complementary distribution or in near- complementary distribution for most types of nouns in the N slot. **Frame (iii)** is preferred to **Frame (ii)** when the NP is animate. **Frame (ii)** is preferred to **Frame (iii)** when the NP is inanimate. Thus, **Frames (ii)** and **(iii)** represent the same construction and they seem to be synonymous. This conclusion is supported by the fact that in those cases when heaviness of an NP makes **Frame (iii)** awkward or impossible, **Frame (ii)** takes its place.

(37) **(ii) This boy is a friend of John.**

**(iii) This boy is a friend of John's.**

Thirdly, **Frame (iii)** is not good with **the** in the Determiner slot, in the absence of a post-head restrictive modifier.

(38) **(iii) The shirt of Ann's that you sewed**

(39) **(iii)?The shirt of Ann's**

### **13. Conclusion**

The following conclusions may be drawn from the research:

1. There are two basic genitive constructions in English: the preposed with **Genitive Case** assignment, and the postposed, sometimes with **Genitive Case** assignment.

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2. The preposed genitive construction is always understood as definite.
3. The two English genitive constructions can be more closely related. In the preposed construction, the subordinate NP is in Specifier position and receives **Genitive Case**. In the postposed construction, the subordinate NP is in Complement position and is assigned **Genitive Case** via the possessive of.
4. The possessive of is not semantically empty, but it indicates ‘**possession**’, and can assign **Genitive Case**. It is the morphological realization of **Genitive Case** in Complement position, rather than being a preposition.
5. As supported by Jacobsen (1978:54), Genitives may be classified into: **Subjective Genitive** (e.g. **The student’s departure amazed me**), and **Objective Genitive** (e.g. **Japan’s defeat by Russia was certain.**)
6. As supported by Jespersen (1933:142), **Genitives** make the meaning of the whole structure definite, as in my cousin’s friend, meaning his only friend or the one friend we were talking about.
7. As agreed by Bloomfield (1933:178) the NP’s is one word since the s-genitive is a bound morpheme (e.g. boy’s).
8. As agreed by Carstairs-McCarthy (2002:38-39), syntactically and semantically, possessive pronouns achieve the same role as NPs with the apostrophe -s. They can be treated as determiners since they have a determiner role.
9. Group genitives concern heads of genitive phrases followed by postmodifiers. The -’s is attached at the end of the phrase, as in father –in- law’s car.
10. The **Double Genitive** is a special structure which enables the same head noun to take a specifying genitive and another determiner. When the of – genitive is joined with an s – genitive

in a construction, it is called ‘**double genitive**’. The noun with **s-**genitive must be definite and personal.

11. As supported by Stageberg (1971:127-128), the general tendency is to use **s-genitives** with animate nouns (e.g. **the dog’s leg**), and **of** – structures with inanimate nouns (e.g **the leg of the chair**).
12. As supported by Lock (1996:138), certain verbs (e.g. **possess, own**) may be used as possessive verbs, as in **Ann owns a blue Mazda.**

### خلاصة البحث

يعالج هذا البحث تراكيب التملك في اللغة الانكليزية. ويتناول تعريف صيغة التملك، صياغتها، وظائفها، معانيها، استعمالاتها، أنواعها، شروطها، وتحليلاتها من قبل النحويين، وكل هذا مذكور بتفصيل وافي. ويضم البحث النتائج التي تم التوصل إليها. وفي الختام ثبت مصادر البحث و مراجعه المستقاة منها المعلومات.

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