

# Weight as a Linguistic Variable in “*a/an X of Y(s)*” Constructions

Eung-Cheon Hah

We investigate how the complement of a preposition can vary in such a complicated but interesting area of research as possessive genitive constructions of the “*a/an X of Y(s)*” type and what are the factors to determine such variations. It is interesting to note that while such constructions as *a friend of Einstein*, *a friend of Einstein's* are possible, the pronominalization of *Einstein*—not of *Einstein's*—in those constructions results in ungrammaticality, as seen in *\*a friend of him*, *a friend of his*. Furthermore, there is a pair of constructions like *\*a book of my father*, *a book of my father's*, which shows contrast with the pair of *a friend of Einstein*, *a friend of Einstein's*. Although this array of data seems quite irregular at first sight, this paper demonstrates that they are in fact never unpredictable, by claiming that ‘weight’ as a linguistic variable is a working factor in those constructions. Crucially, we assume that the absolute genitive is required when a strict sense of possession is involved. To be brief, this paper tries to give a unified and principled account for some apparent irregularities in natural language.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we will investigate how the complement of a preposition can vary in such a complicated but interesting area of research as possessive genitive constructions of the “*a/an X of Y(s)*” type<sup>1</sup> and show what are the factors to determine such variations. To be specific, we will demonstrate that ‘weight’ as a linguistic variable is a crucial factor with special reference to the choice of *Y*.

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<sup>1</sup>Most of the core data are from LINGUIST List: Vol-10-1239. Specifically, we are grateful to Tong Zhimin for posting to the List a valuable summary of linguists’ responses on some possessive genitive constructions. From now on, the data from Zhimin’s report will be marked with Zhimin at the end of the sentence.

Combinations such as *a his...* were frequent in former times. In current English, by contrast, such juxtapositions of determiners are rare (Jespersen (1909-1949; part III)). When it is conceptually needed to make a contiguous use of two determiners, the double genitive in the form of *a/an... of his* is adopted instead. As shown in the following data, however, double genitive forms are not always necessary in similar situations.

- (1) a. My father was a close friend of Einstein. (*Zhimin*)  
 b. My father was a close friend of Einstein's. (*Zhimin*)

Note incidentally that in (1a) *Einstein*, though it lacks morphological manifestation, takes objective case while in (1b) it takes absolute genitive.

Interestingly, the pronominalization of *Einstein* results in one of these two sentences being unacceptable, as can be seen below.

- (2) a. \*My father was a close friend of him. (*Zhimin*)  
 b. My father was a close friend of his. (*Zhimin*)

While pronominalization has no grammatical effect when the target is an absolute genitive as in (2b), it makes difference when the target is an objective as in (2a).

Then, what is the factor responsible for the grammatical change of this sort triggered by pronominalization? In what follows, this will be the topic to be discussed in some detail. For convenience of exposition, we will develop the whole discussion in four separate sections. Section 2 will be given to the basic assumptions on which the whole discussion will develop. Section 3 will show how the core data can be explained on those assumptions. This section is divided into two subsections: In the first subsection, it will be shown how our claim can be instantiated with appropriate data; and, in the second it will be shown how the weight of a linguistic element can be influenced by its associated non-overt elements. Section 4 examines some apparent counterexamples, suggesting that they, in fact, are not against our line of reasoning. Section 5, the last section, will be devoted to a summary and conclusion of the whole discussion.

## 2. Basic Assumptions

As mentioned above, the major concern of this paper is to demonstrate that the choice of the complement of the preposition in possessive genitive

constructions of the "a/an X of Y('s)" type could be given a principled account if we take weight as a linguistic variable. The discussion, however, will be based on a follow-up but never trivial assumption such that the absolute genitive is required in those constructions especially when the strict sense of possession<sup>2</sup> is implied. Hereafter, this assumption will often be called a genitive hypothesis.

As seen in the examples given below, "there is a strong tendency to employ the genitive where the strict sense of possession is implied" (Jespersen (1909-1949; part III)).

- (3) a. my neighbor's garden  
 b. John's stick  
 c. his stick

More specifically, the -'s genitive is generally favored for 'personal' nouns—in particular, those referring to human beings and higher animals—and collective nouns with personal gender characteristics (Quirk et al. (1985)). Taking this fact as a starting point, we will assume that when the strict sense of possession is implied, the absolute genitive is required in the possessive genitive constructions of the "a/an X of Y('s)" type, *a/an X of Y's* being the right form.

Also, we will employ the term "End Weight" as a term covering the end-focus and the end-weight.<sup>3</sup> The end-focus and the end-weight are, in a strict sense, two distinct principles, each focusing on the semantic weight and on the constructional weight of a linguistic element. More specifically, the end-focus refers to a principle that places new information or an element of high information value at the end of an information unit, whereas the end-weight refers to a principle that places a longer or more complex structure at the end of an information unit. Note that a longer or more complex structure and new information or an element of high information value can translate, respectively, into an element that is heavier, constructionally and into an element that is heavier, semantically. After all, the end-focus as well as the end-weight is, in a broad sense, a principle

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<sup>2</sup>By 'possession' in "the strict sense of possession" is meant the relationship that Y has to X in the relevant constructions.

<sup>3</sup>See Kuno (1987), Park (1985, 1989) and Quirk et al. (1985), among others, for further information of the end-focus and the end-weight principle.

that postpones heavier elements to the end of an information unit. For ease of exposition and because of our discussion involving no conflict between them, the two principles are therefore integrated into End Weight, by which we mean a principle that postpones an element which is heavier in terms either of constructional weight or of semantic weight.

### 3. Analysis of the Core Data

In this section, we will show that the constructions in which the paper is interested can be given an appropriate account if we take weight as a linguistic variable along with the genitive hypothesis. For ease of exposition, the discussion will be developed in two subsections. Section 3.1. deals with objective complements and absolute genitive complements with special reference to the End Weight and section 3.2. provides a supplement to the discussion of the preceding section 3.1.

#### 3.1. Objective vs. Absolute Genitive Complement

Let us now examine the contrast observed in the following examples that were given in (1) in the previous section.

- (4) a. My father was a close friend of Einstein.  
 b. My father was a close friend of Einstein's.

As will become clear later in this section, the choice of a proper noun in the complement slot of the preposition is in accordance with the End Weight. The genitive hypothesis given above appears to fail in these examples, however. Suppose both sentences are interpreted to involve the strict sense of possession. The objective *Einstein* would then not be allowed contrary to fact.

But the relationship between X and Y seems dubious where as in (4) the 'possessed' and the 'possessor' are both people. Importantly, it seems that if the focus is on X, the sense of possession is relatively weak, whereas if the focus is on Y, the sense of possession is strong. We assume in this connection that the presence or absence of the strict sense of possession finds expression in the form of Y. To be more specific, when the intended meaning involves the strict sense of possession, the absolute genitive form

is chosen as in (4b); when the sense of possession is relatively weak, the simple objective form is chosen as in (4a).

Indeed, there are a large number of linguists, including Otto Jespersen, who notice the focal difference between the two sentences above. According to them, (4a) emphasizes *father* while (4b) stresses *Einstein*, their implication being "*my father liked Einstein*" and "*Einstein liked my father*," respectively. This seems to guarantee the claim that the strict sense of possession is implied in (4b) while in (4a) this sense is somewhat weak.<sup>4</sup> After all, the sentences in (4) do meet the genitive hypothesis as well as the End Weight.

That our line of reasoning is on the right track is attested by data such as the following:

- (5) a. ??\*This is a book of my father. (*Zhimin*)  
 b. This is a book of my father's. (*Zhimin*)

Note that the relationship Y has to X in (5) is obviously 'strict' possession. This is, as expected, reflected in the use of an absolute genitive *my father's* in (5b). Sentence (5a) is no different from (5b) in that the strict sense of possession is implied. Nevertheless, the sentence involves *my father* as complement instead of the absolute genitive *my father's*, which, on the genitive hypothesis, accounts for the ungrammaticality of (5a).

Basically, the same explanation carries over to the following examples, previously given in (2), which involve pronominalization of *Einstein('s)*.

- (6) a. \*My father was a close friend of him.  
 b. My father was a close friend of his.

It is obvious that the same interpretation as of (4) applies to these sentences, since (4) and (6) are structurally no different. Then what remains to be said of these sentences is why (6a) is not possible.

Recall our claim that the End Weight applies in the constructions on

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<sup>4</sup> "The version with 'Einstein' is completely neutral, whereas with 'Einstein's' there is some implication that you are talking about a set of Einstein's friends, and your father was one of them. Somehow, the focus is drawn more to Einstein, and hence the sentence is less neutral," says Lisa Matthewson, a linguist, in a reply to Zhimin's query.

which this paper focuses. Given the End Weight, the contrast between (4) and (6) is not exceptional. Before addressing this problem, however, it seems more appropriate to examine the relative weight between a pronoun and its source noun on the one hand, and between an objective pronoun and an absolute genitive on the other.

The relative weight between a pronoun and its source noun seems to be not the same, which is demonstrated by the contrast between (7) and (8) below.

- (7) a. She flatly turned Einstein down.  
       b. She flatly turned down Einstein.
- (8) a. She flatly turned him down.  
       b. \*She flatly turned down him.

As is well known, the particle of phrasal verbs like *turn down* can either precede or follow the direct object. If the object gets longer and heavier, the particle tends to precede the object; if the object is a proper noun or if it is not long (e.g., *the offer*), it can precede or follow the particle as shown by (7). However, if the object is a personal pronoun as in (8), its occurrence is restricted to the intermediate position since a pronoun is presumably lighter than the particle (cf. Park (1989)). In brief, a pronoun is lighter than its source noun as well as the particle.

However, pronominalization does not necessarily separate the verb from the particle. The following is a case in point.

- (9) a. Yeah, he flatly turned mine down.  
       b. Yeah, he flatly turned down mine.

These two sentences can both be responses to, say, "Your proposal was rejected, Susan."<sup>5</sup> Considering the contrast in grammaticality observed in (8b) and (9b), we can tentatively conclude that absolute genitives such as *mine*, *hers*, *yours*, *his*, *theirs*, and *ours* are heavier than their equivalent objective pronouns.

With this much in hand, we are now in a position to see how the contrast between (4a) and (6a) on the one hand and between (6a) and (6b)

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<sup>5</sup> If *mine* receives a contrastive focus, however, (9b) will be more appropriate than (9a) in accordance with the principle of End Weight.

on the other can be accounted for in terms of weight.

- (10) a. My father was a close friend of Einstein. (=4a))  
 b. \*My father was a close friend of him. (=6a))  
 c. My father was a close friend of his. (=6b))

Note that in (10a), as previously mentioned, the sense of possession is relatively weak in the intended sense, so that *Einstein* is preferred over *Einstein's*. If so, the same should be true in the case of (10b), too. The fact, however, is that the latter is not possible in sharp contrast with the former. This leads us to infer that the ungrammaticality of (10b) is attributable to the fact that the complement of the preposition is a pronoun that is inherently too light to come last.<sup>6</sup> What about (10a)? Recall we previously mentioned that source nouns are heavier than their equivalent pronouns. In other words, the source nouns are heavy enough to come in such a position as the complement of the preposition in possessive genitive constructions of the "a/an X of Y('s)" type. It is, after all, dictated by the End Weight that (10b) is unacceptable in contrast with (10a) which ends in a proper noun.

What remains to be said then is why (10c) is acceptable even though the complement is still a pronoun. As illustrated above, there are examples like (9) that clearly support the claim that absolute genitives are heavier than objective pronouns. In view of these examples, the fact that (10c) is acceptable in contrast with (10b) is never exceptional, at least from the perspective of the End Weight. In other words, absolute genitives in general are heavy enough to come last in such an information unit as *a close friend of his*.

Up to now, we have investigated how the core data could be explained in terms of weight. Meanwhile, we examined whether or not absolute genitive

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<sup>6</sup> Note however that if the complement of the preposition in such constructions is given a contrastive focus, it might be occupied by a pronoun, as was suggested by a respondent to Zhimin's query.

(i) Jonathan was a friend of ME, but an enemy of YOU. (*It is represented by capitalization that 'me' and 'you' are greatly stressed.*)

This implies that our line of reasoning is on the right track. That is, stressing has the effect to make its target heavy enough to suit the complement position in question.

pronouns are different from objective pronouns in weight, drawing a tentative conclusion that the former are heavier than the latter. The following section will specify in what respect the absolute genitive can be said to be heavier than it appears.

### 3.2. Absolute Genitive Revisited

The thesis that absolute genitive pronouns are heavier than objective pronouns finds support in Park (1997) according to whom the absolute genitive suffix *-s* is often used to help maintain the "territorial integrity" of a noun phrase, as is clear when we compare the two sentences of each pair given below.

- (11) a. This house is *our house*.  
 b. This house is *ours*.
- (12) a. This car is *their car*.  
 b. This car is *theirs*.
- (13) a. Is that computer *your computer*?  
 b. Is that computer *yours*?

Park convincingly argues that the absolute genitive suffix *-s* in the (b) sentences of (11) through (13) serves to compensate for the now deleted head noun of the original noun phrase. This implies that the suffix *-s* stands for the deleted head noun, with the result that the complement does *not get lighter by virtue of pronominalization*.

Despite their apparent morphological difference from *hers*, *yours*, *ours*, and *theirs*, the absolute genitives *his*, *mine* are open to much the same account. We assume that the absolute genitive of *his* consists of adjectival genitive *his* plus the absolute genitive suffix—in this case, zero suffix rather than *-s*—because of there being danger of contiguous repetition of /s/.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As argued by Park (1982, 1983, 1984), proximate repetition of similar elements is maximally constrained in English. This tendency is often reflected by deletion as in the case of absolute genitive *his* or even by insertion of an extra element. The latter case is evidenced, for example, by the presence of a comma and its equivalent *and* in the following data.

With the remaining *mine*, we follow Park in assuming that /n/ serves as the absolute genitive suffix. In either case, the absolute genitive suffix compensates for the territorial space that is lost when the head noun gets deleted. It is thus assumed that absolute genitive pronouns as a whole are heavier than their adjectival counterparts (and their equivalent objectives as well<sup>8</sup>) and capable of serving as the complement of the preposition in the possessive genitive constructions of the "a/an X of Y('s)" type.

If the above discussion is tenable, the fact that (14b) is as acceptable as (14a) receives an appropriate account.

- (14) a. My father was a close friend of Einstein's. (=1b))  
 b. My father was a close friend of his. (=2b))

As mentioned above, (14a) satisfies the End Weight as well as the genitive hypothesis. The same holds true of (14b). Not only does it satisfy the genitive hypothesis, but it meets the End Weight as the absolute genitive suffix, i.e., zero suffix, makes *his* heavy enough to occupy the complement slot of the preposition.

The claim that the absolute genitive *his* gets heavier with the absolute genitive suffix, i.e., zero suffix, added finds support in the tense-lax alternations of the following word pairs.

- (15) a. keep /diyp/ vs. kept /kept/  
 b. deal /diyl/ vs. dealt /delt/  
 c. read /riyd/ vs. read /red+ϕ/(where ϕ represents the zero past suffix.)

Park (1989, 1992, 1995) argued that in (15a,b) the tense vowel of the original verb becomes a lax vowel with the past suffix /t/ being added. Along the same line we can argue that the same is true of (15c) even though the past form of the verb *read* does not appear to involve any past suffix. Note that even the verb *read* shows tense-lax alternation in its

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- (i) a. blue and white sheets; blue, white sheets  
 b. \*blue white sheets (proximate repetition of color terms)  
 (ii) a. cotton and nylon sheets; cotton, nylon sheets  
 b. \*cotton nylon sheets (proximate repetition of material terms)

<sup>8</sup> Note the contrast between (8) and (9).

conjugation, just as do the verbs in (15a,b). This fact leads us to conclude that even though the past form of *read* apparently involves no suffix, there is an invisible morpheme suffixed to the verb. This morpheme is here referred to as a zero suffix, represented by  $\varphi$ . It is assumed that suffix  $\varphi$ , just as /t/ does in (15a,b), conspires with the contiguous consonant to form a heavy consonantal coda,<sup>9</sup> downgrading the originally heavy nucleus to a lax vowel.<sup>10</sup> If this is tenable, it is possible to claim that the now assumed zero suffix of the absolute genitive has an effect on the weight of the coda of the word.

The fact that as in examples like (16) below, the adverb *enough* is always placed after the adjective it modifies receives a proper account, given the claim that weight is affected by non-overt elements. This also supports, though indirectly, the thesis that *his* as an absolute genitive is heavier than that as an adjectival genitive.

- (16) a. \*Mr. Yassin is enough tall.  
 b. Mr. Yassin is tall enough.

While adverbs of degree usually precede the adjective/adverb that they refer to, *enough* is always placed after the adjective/adverb, as can be seen in

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<sup>9</sup> Evidence for the argument that non-overt elements behave as if they were overt can be obtained in the *wanna* contraction such as the following.

- (i) a. \*Who do you wanna visit him?  
 b. Who do you wanna visit?

As is well known, the contrast is, in a sense, due to the presence or absence of the trace of the *wh*-element. It is obvious that with (ia), the *wh*-trace, a structural case assignee, exists between *want* and *to*, the contraction being impossible. In the case of (ib), however, there is also something covert between the two, which is called PRO, an inherent case assignee, in generative grammar (in particular, the GB theory). That the grammatical status is nevertheless different is attributable to the difference of *wh*-trace and PRO. Aoun (1982) notes that structural case is a phonological feature and is the criterion for 'visibility.' If so, the contrast will not be unpredictable.

<sup>10</sup> It is one of the attributes of the English language (or, it may be a language universal attribute) that "proximate repetition of similar elements is maximally constrained on all levels of linguistic structure" (Park (1984)). For example, the combination of nucleus and coda must follow this rule by getting the nucleus lighter as the coda gets heavier.

(16).<sup>11</sup> Why is this so? Our claim is that weight as a linguistic variable is at work here, too. Assume that the adverb *enough* has "enough + [ \_\_ to infinitive]" as its sub-categorization frame, just as, for example, *eat* has "*eat* + [ \_\_ NP]" as its sub-categorization frame. To put it another way, the adverb *enough* is immediately followed by an understood *to*-infinitive phrase, with its constructional weight thereby being increased. After all, *enough*, as far as it means "to a necessary or satisfactory degree," is heavy enough to follow the element it modifies.

The claim that weight is affected by what is missing is also supported by the distributive pattern of adjectives in the following sentences.

- (17) a. The agreement was signed by the leaders *present*.  
 b. My *present* contract ends in September.
- (18) a. The person *responsible* should be punished.  
 b. *Responsible* parents do not let a child play with matches.
- (19) a. Further information will be sent to teachers *concerned*.  
 b. A number of *concerned* parents wanted to know why the syllabus had been changed.
- (20) a. Both of the drivers *involved* managed to escape unhurt.  
 b. His new novel has a typically *involved* plot.

Each pair of the sentences of (17) through (20) involves one and the same adjective occurring in two different positions; and, given weight as a linguistic variable, the different positions in which the relevant adjective appears are quite predictable. When appearing post-nominally but not pre-nominally as in the (a) sentences, the adjectives may be said to have as their sub-categorization frame a phonologically null prepositional phrase as follows:

- (21) a. present + [ \_\_ at some place] (*in attendance*)  
 b. responsible + [ \_\_ for something] (*expected or obliged to account*)

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<sup>11</sup> Except in literary styles, *enough* normally precedes the noun it modifies. In this usage, it is a determiner like *some*, *any*, etc. For further information, see Swan (1980).

- c. concerned + [ \_ with something] (*involved*)  
 d. involved + [ \_ in something] (*implicated*)

These sub-categorized prepositional phrases in the above examples, we claim, are “visible” enough to affect the relative position of the adjective. That is, the relevant adjectives, even when connected with such phonologically null phrases, become so heavy as to come after the noun phrases it modifies. This fact is basically in line with our treatment of the absolute genitive *his* as heavier than the adjectival genitive and than the objective.

#### 4. Apparent Problems

In the previous section, it was argued that the choice of the complement of the preposition in possessive genitive constructions of the “*a/an X of Y(s)*” type could be given a principled account if we take weight as a linguistic variable along with the genitive hypothesis. This claim, however, is likely to be seriously challenged by the presence of the following examples.

- (22) a. \*This is a wheel of my car’s. (*Zhimin*)  
 b. \*This is a wheel of its.

In the two sentences above, the complement of the preposition meets the End Weight the way it does in, say, *a close friend of Einstein’s*, *a close friend of his*, as previously mentioned; besides, one might think that the sentences involve the strict sense of possession. They are nevertheless equally ungrammatical. What accounts for their ungrammaticality, then?

It seems however that it should be seriously asked whether there is in fact a strict sense of possession involved in (22). Note that expressions such as *my car’s wheel*, *the house’s window* are given asterisks, though their equivalents *its wheel*, *its window* are possible. And recall that there is a strong tendency to employ the genitive when the strict sense of possession is involved. Then it is inferable that in (22a) *my car* does not qualify as a possessor; the ungrammaticality of (22a) would then be a result of the absolute genitive being used despite the lack of the strict sense of possession.

The same is obviously true of (22b): The strict sense of possession does not seem involved here, either. As mentioned above, the absolute genitive *its* is different from its source noun *my car’s* in distribution. This might lead one to contend that it is quite misleading to depend upon the acceptability of the “adjectival genitive + noun phrase” constructions in order to determine whether the strict sense of possession is involved. A possible speculation on this, however, is that the rule governing the use of -’s genitive is more strictly obeyed in the case of double genitive constructions of this sort and that *its* as an absolute genitive is therefore not appropriate in such a sentence.

As noted above, it seems, inanimate things such as *car* are not appropriate for the role as a possessor. From this we can infer that constructions such as (22), in fact, might not involve the strict sense of possession. The logic seems to be borne out by the reactions that some native speakers of English, whose intuition we depended upon, showed on the following examples.

- (23) a. This is a wheel of my car. (*Zhimin*)  
 b. This is a wheel of it.<sup>12</sup>

They were not very much willing to judge them correct, contrary to Tong Zhimin’s report posted to the LINGUIST List; what was interesting is that they showed the tendency to rewrite the sentences by substituting *from* or *off* for *of*. This implies that the complement in question behaves as a source rather than a possessor.

It is thus plausible to say that examples such as (22), (23) are, in a strict sense, not counterexamples to the present analysis. In other words, they appear to be manifestations of, say, “genitive of origin” constructions rather than those possessive genitive constructions that have been our concern. So, the End Weight is irrelevant in those constructions.

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<sup>12</sup> This sentence may sound strange. But suppose that while searching for a clue for an accident, a police officer comes to see a wheel that he/she suspects is from a certain car here referred to as *it*. In this context, this sentence is okay, as was pointed out to me by some native speakers of English.

## 5. Closing Remarks

We have so far investigated a rather complicated and interesting area of research, i.e., possessive genitive constructions of the “*a/an X of Y('s)*” type. We demonstrated that given the End Weight, those complicated constructions are open to a principled analysis. For our analysis, a crucial assumption was made that the absolute genitive is required when the strict sense of possession is implied.

Following were the core data on which the major part of our discussion focused.

- (24) a. ...a close friend of Einstein  
 b. ...a close friend of Einstein's  
 c. \*...a close friend of him  
 d. ...a close friend of his  
 e. \*...a book of my father  
 f. ...a book of my father's

As mentioned in the course of the discussion, it is interesting to note that pronominalization yields a different result depending upon whether the target is an objective or an absolute genitive, as seen in (24c,d). But as we see in (24a,b), no such different results are reported in pre-nominalization constructions. What is worse, there is a pair of sentences like (24e,f) which shows a contrast to the pair of (24a,b). Although this array of data seems quite irregular at first sight, we have shown that they are never unpredictable, given the End Weight.

Finally, what is significant of this research is that it has tried to give a unified and principled account for some apparently irregular phenomena in natural language. But further research deserves to be conducted in order to see how effective the present analysis will be in treating an extended range of data.

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510-1205 Mok-dong Apt.  
912 Mok-dong, Yangcheon-ku  
Seoul 158-055, Korea  
E-mail : echeon@hananet.net