

Possessive Constructions in African Languages

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The goal of this research is to explore how African languages express and conceptualize possessive relationships. Possessive constructions as used here refer to structures that express relationships between an item or entity that is possessed (the possessum) and the person or entity which possesses the item (possessor). Natural languages make available several means of marking possession that are predictably predicative or nominal, but which trigger varied patterns conditioned by morphology, syntax and semantics. There is evidence of morphological marking on either the possessor, or the possessum or on both, juxtaposition of the possessor and possessum, and clausal marking. Although investigations into the nature of possessive constructions is not new in linguistic inquiry (See, for example, Lyons 1977, Seiler 1993, Croft 2002 and Heine (1997), studies that focus exclusively on African languages and which take into account both morphosyntactic and semantic constraints are rare. A study of this nature will evaluate the existence of varied patterns of possession in the target languages, which in turn may result in fine grained descriptions for individual languages, in addition to the possibility of more cross-linguistic tendencies.

In order to capture the intricacies surrounding possessive constructions in African languages, the research will first determine how languages broadly represent possession. Following Heine (1997), two main types of possessive constructions occur across languages. Predicative or verbal possession usually relates to clausal syntax where the possessor and the possessum are both in argument slots. In English this type is typically represented by the verbs 'have' and 'belong' as shown in sentences (1) and (2) respectively.

1. I have a house.
2. The house belongs to me.

Notice however that as much as the possession is clausal the two verbs trigger subtle differences in relation to the argument status of the possessor and possessum, the definiteness of the possessum, and the information status. In (1), the possessor is the external argument whereas the possessum is the internal argument, and is also indefinite, while the possessor is in a theme position. On the other hand, in (2), the possessum is the external argument while the possessor is the internal argument, the possessum is definite, and is in a theme position.

Such a general distinction is not unique to English. Lubukusu (a Bantu language of Western Kenya) has a related distinction shown in parallel sentences in (3) and (4).

3. Wekesa a-li nende e-n-ju
Wekesa c1SM-has with c7-c7-house
Wekesa has a house

4. E-n-ju *(yi-no) (e-li) e-ya Wekesa
C7-c7-house c7-this c7-is c7-AM Wekesa
This house is Wekesa's

Consequently, several aspects will be worth investigating in the target languages. First, there will be need to establish the existence of predicative possession and how it is marked. Once this is done the research will consider several questions that may help unearth language specific characteristics: Is it possible, for example, to change the definiteness? If so what is the effect on the overall meaning? Does the meaning relate to permanent or temporary possession?

The second type of possession relates mainly to nominal or phrasal syntax where the relationship between the possessor and the possessum is established in a NP. Typical examples in English include phrases such as 'my car', 'a tail of a cow' and 'John's book'. In the literature (for example Croft (2002), Heine (1997)) focus has mainly been on how and where the link between the two nominals is established, and the resultant ordering. This research makes an assumption that languages differ in some or all of these aspects. Some involve simple juxtaposition of the two nominals (English), others use morphological marking on either (English, Swahili, Lubukusu) or both. Further still, there are variations in the nature of morphological marking. Different forms can be used in varied contexts conditioned by aspects such as number, gender, person, and position (as prefix or suffix), as in Amharic (see Deal (2012) for a detailed paradigm of the variations). Conversely, the same form can be used in varied circumstances as shown in the English examples in (5).

5. i) The man's shoes
ii) Men's shoes
iii) The shoes of Peter's

It is also notable that even within the same language, there can be variation in the way nominal possession is indicated based on the semantic properties of the head noun. In some languages, kinship nouns select juxtaposition only (Chinese) or in addition to morphological marking or word order change.

After establishing the general trend in possessive constructions, the research will consider additional properties which may have a direct effect on how possession is marked in language, and which in turn may help shed more light on the nature of possessive constructions in natural languages in general and on African languages in particular. First, whether or not possession is alienable or inalienable plays an important role in defining the nature of possessive relations. For example, the nature of the possessor may be restricted to human only and/or to non-human but animate or even to inanimate only. In other cases, morphological distinctions are made between alienable and inalienable, where the latter is typically unmarked (compare ‘papa’ (my father) and ‘bapapa’ (fathers) in Lubukusu), may have a distinct grammatical category (Lubukusu-‘wandase’ (my brother/sister)), and may generally be attributive.

Secondly, contexts where possessives occur in clausal complements may also be a fertile ground for unearthing more properties. In Lubukusu these typically involve infinitives and class 5 nominals (see Baker, et al (2012) and the Afranaph Sister Project on clausal complementation, for details). The third property is coordination where possessives occur as conjoined nominals. In English there are interesting questions that may arise from such contexts, and which can be extended to other languages. Consider the structures below.

6. Peter’s and Hellen’s house (s) Vs Peter and Hellen’s house(s)
7. The car of a friend of mine Vs A friend of mine’s car
8. My daughter in-law’s car Vs My daughters in law’s car(s)
9. Jesus, the forgiver of sins Vs Jesus, the sins’ forgiver

The key variables here include compound nominals, type and place of possessive marking, pluralisation, apposition and pronominalization which may all result in intricate properties when tested in varied languages. A casual test in Lubukusu appears quite promising.

Additional issues that may also be worth investigating include double possessives (A picture of John’s / a picture of John), possessives in addresses (My Lord, Your Lordship), and object marking of possessive constructions which involve the whole NP or one of the nominals.

Lastly, the research will investigate how possessive relations are affected by semantic properties. We focus on how the type of verb and other markers can be used to characterize possessive constructions in what can be termed as ‘semantic fields’. A number of such fields are recognizable: Action (with verbs such as hold, seize, take, grab, and obtain); Locations

(the possessor is the place where the possessum is located as shown through a locative complement marked on the possessor e.g. Tomatoes are at Ken's); Topic (possessor functions as possessive modifier in a topic position with verbs of existence sometimes with topic morphology or phonology); Accompaniment (possessum is a comitative complement to the possessor subject e.g. she is with a dress); Source (the possessor is a complement of verbs of source e.g. medicine comes from plants).

We expect that collaboration with Afranaph will open doors for accessing resources which are instrumental in driving the research to greater heights. In fact, helpful data on possessive constructions already exists on the Afranaph website (see for example IDs 4408, 4409, 4533, 5601).

Although the intention is for this study to be as theoretically neutral as possible, I envisage consequences for Case and Agree relations within Generative grammar. Linguists can however use the data and generalizations therein to follow their own theoretical paths, or even simply make comparisons, and generalizations of their own.

Selected References

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