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The typology and formal semantic of adnominal possession

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English summary

This dissertation is a cross-linguistic study of the semantics of adnominal possession. Languages often use multiple constructions to express adnominal possession. Two such constructions in Dutch are shown in (1).

- (1) Le Bruyn and Schoorlemmer (2016: 7)
- a. de auto van Johan
the car of Johan
'Johan's car'
 - b. Johan z'n auto
Johan his car
'Johan's car'

A well-known property of possessive constructions is their interpretative flexibility. A single possessive construction can receive multiple interpretations: the relation between Johan and the car in (1) can be one of ownership, but it can also refer to the racing car on which he made a bet. Still, some interpretations are more easily available than others. Thus, *Leonardo's nose* can, in principle, refer to a nose that Leonardo painted or sculpted, but this reading would require contextual support. By contrast, the reading under which *Leonardo's nose* refers to Leonardo's body part is easily available without any context. The body-part interpretation can therefore be described as the stereotypical relation that holds between a nose and its possessor.

The thesis investigates a large sample of genetically unrelated languages in which there is a correspondence between multiple ways of expressing possession and specific relations between the possessor and the possessed. In chapter 2, I lay out the basic system found in most languages. First, I argue that the meaning-based distinctions in the expression of possession need to be distinguished from the form-based distinctions. In some languages, the choice of a possessive marker is strictly determined by the lexical class of the possessed noun. In this case, the distinction is form based.

In the case that the distinction is meaning based, the same noun can re-

ceive various possessive markings depending on the relation that needs to be expressed between the possessor and the possessed. In order to account for the meaning-based distinction, I define two types of possessive constructions that I call idiosyncratic and non-idiosyncratic strategies. There are three factors that are relevant for this distinction. Idiosyncratic strategies are typically less productive than the non-idiosyncratic strategies. Typically, they involve less morphological material to express possession. Crucially, they correspond to stereotypical relations such as the body-part relation for *nose*.

As an example, consider two possessive constructions in Adyghe in (2). In (2a), an idiosyncratic strategy is used to express a body-part relation between a 1st person possessor and a head. In (2b), the non-idiosyncratic strategy is used to express an ownership relation between a 1st person possessor and a head. The strategy in (2a) is less productive than the strategy in (2b). It is only available for a small class of nouns that include some body parts and some kinship terms. In terms of formal marking, in (2a), possession is marked by *s* ‘1sg’, while in (2b) possession is marked by a combination of *s* ‘1sg’ and *-je* ‘poss’. Thus, the idiosyncratic strategy in (2a) involves less morphological material than the non-idiosyncratic strategy in (2b).

- (2) Adyghe (Gorbunova 2009: 153-154)
- a. *s-šha*
1SG-head
‘my head’
 - b. *s-jə-šha*
1SG-POSS-head
‘my head’ (said by a zoologist about a dog’s head)

As shown in chapter 2, the exact interpretation of a stereotypical relation is culture specific. For instance, in Tawala, the relation between a person and a village the person is part of is marked idiosyncratically, as shown in (3). However, that doesn’t mean that this relation will be stereotypical for the noun ‘person’ in other languages, like Adyghe. For each language, stereotypical relations have to be determined separately, although relations like body-part and kinship commonly occur across languages.

- (3) Tawala (Ezard 1997: 98)
- meyagi lawa-hi*
village person-3pl
‘people of the village’

I propose an analysis that is abstract enough to allow for these kinds of language-specific distinctions. If an idiosyncratic and non-idiosyncratic strategy are both available for the same noun, as in, for instance, *šha* ‘head’ in the Adyghe example in (2), the choice between them is determined by a pragmatic principle, Maximize Presupposition (Heim 1991) that is formulated in (4).

- (4) Make your contribution presuppose as much as possible!

The intuition behind this principle is that in case there is competition between an expression with a specific meaning and an expression with an underspecified meaning, the choice of the underspecified expression gives rise to an inference that the more specific one does not hold. When there is competition between idiosyncratic and non-idiosyncratic possessive strategies *Maximize Presupposition* predicts that idiosyncratic strategies will be used for stereotypical relations and non-idiosyncratic strategies for other, contextually-determined relations. The use of the non-idiosyncratic strategy for a noun like *sha* ‘head’ in Adyghe example (2) is predicted to give rise to an inference that the relation between the possessor and the possessed is not a body-part relation. The intended relation, such as ownership in (2b), can be derived from the context.

In the rest of the thesis, I address the question of to what extent the proposed analysis is applicable to languages that make use of more than two morphological means to mark possession. In chapter 3, I show how the analysis can be extended to languages that make use of so-called “possessive classifiers”. Specifically, I look at “possessive modifiers”, that is “possessive classifiers” that modify the relation between the possessor and the possessed. An example is shown in (5); the possessive modifier is a noun-like element, *u*, ‘food’ which combines with the possessive marker *-n* and expresses a food relation between the ‘1sg’ possessor and the possessed item ‘manioc’.

- (5) Panare (Payne and Payne 2013)

y-u-n uto’
 1sg-food-poss manioc
 ‘my manioc (for eating)’

Some languages only have possessive modifiers, and lack an opposition between idiosyncratic strategies and non-idiosyncratic strategies. In other languages, there is an interaction between possessive modifiers, idiosyncratic and non-idiosyncratic strategies. For instance, there are languages with a three-way distinction, meaning that in addition to the opposition between idiosyncratic and non-idiosyncratic strategies, some relations are explicitly specified by possessive modifiers.

In chapter 4, I discuss other languages with numerous marking strategies to express possession. I show that the distinction between form-based distinctions and meaning-based distinctions allows some superficially complex systems to reduce to an opposition between an idiosyncratic and a non-idiosyncratic strategy. Finally, I show that an opposition between idiosyncratic and non-idiosyncratic strategies can coexist with other strategies to express possession, which can be orthogonal to the first distinction. For instance, the possessive interpretation can be provided by the relational possessed noun, so that no possessive marker is required. Superficially, the meaning effects look quite similar. Therefore, I conclude that it is important for a cross-linguistic analysis

to carefully control for various semantic factors. Finally, chapter 5 provides an overview of the various results of the dissertation, and a discussion of a number of open cases.