

## Possessive marking in nominal/verbal contexts in Oceanic languages

Category: oral/poster

Possessive marking is a prototypically ‘nominal’ feature, used in referential phrases headed by a thing- or person-denoting word. However, possessive marking also occurs in non-prototypical ‘nominal’ constructions like action nominalizations (referential phrases headed by an action-denoting word), as well as in main clauses (predicative phrases headed by an action-denoting word) instead of a distinct ‘verbal’ paradigm for dependent marking (Siewierska 1998; Croft 2001).

We study the distribution of possessive marking over the three construction types mentioned above, in 25 Oceanic languages of various sub-families. We focus on Oceanic languages for two reasons: First, they display multiple possessive marking strategies, associated with various degrees of (in)alienability (Lynch et al. 2002: 40; Lichtenberk 2009). Second, they are typologically remarkable in terms of lexical classes, specifically regarding the distinction between nouns and verbs: both referential phrases and predicative phrases accommodate thing/person-denoting words (semantic nouns) and action-denoting words (semantic verbs) without any difference in function-marking morpho-syntax. However, despite this so-called *lexical flexibility* (Rijkhoff & Van Lier 2013), we expect restrictions on the use of ‘nominal’ features like possessive markers in (functionally defined, formally unmarked) action nominalizations and in main clauses, compared to prototypical ‘nominal’ constructions.

The aim of our paper is therefore to determine how (i) the semantic class of the head (actions versus things/persons, but also finer sub-distinctions such as kin term/body part/other object; intransitive/transitive; active/stative) and (ii) the pragmatic function of the phrase (reference versus predication) contribute to the choice of (possessive) dependent marking strategy in Oceanic languages. In addition, we assess the influence of possessive splits and clausal alignment patterns as attested in individual languages.

We show that the possibilities for possessive dependent marking indeed decrease when the relevant constructions involve less prototypically ‘nominal’ combinations of semantic head and pragmatic function. Referential phrases, whether headed by a semantic noun or a semantic verb, display both alienable and inalienable markers, whereas main predicate phrases employ alienable markers only. The use of possessive (as opposed to ‘verbal’) morphology for subject agreement in main clauses – a cross-linguistically rare phenomenon – ties in with lexical flexibility: it developed out of action nominalizations, which are relatively frequently used in languages with a weak lexical noun/verb distinction (cf. Palmer 2011). Finally, we find that the choice of possessive strategy is largely lexically specified with semantic nouns, while with semantic verbs it is more strongly determined by syntactic considerations, independently of clausal alignment patterns.

### References

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