

The Distinction between Exclusive and Shared Possession in Kupsapiny oral/poster

This study shows that there is a dimension to the distinction of possession made by a language similar to but different from the one in terms of inalienability (Nichols 1988, Chappell & McGregor 1996) by demonstrating that the distinction made with the absence or presence of a clitic in Kupsapiny, the Southern Nilotic language of Uganda, is based on whether the possessum is possessed only by the possessor or is shared by (an)other possessor(s). It also shows that although this distinction is semantically different from the inalienability distinction made in various languages, it shares properties in common with it, and that these two distinctions could be subsumed under a more general possessive distinction.

A number of Nilotic languages have been reported to make the distinction between inalienable and alienable possession morphologically: the juxtaposition of possessum and possessor nouns for inalienable possession vs. the use of the possessive suffix on the possessum noun for alienable possession (e.g. Tucker & Bryan 1966). However, Kupsapiny does not make the inalienability distinction. It does not use the juxtaposition of possessum and possessor nouns to express possession, though it uses the possessive suffix for possession. The distinction that this language makes is between exclusive and shared possession. On the other hand, according to Heine (1997), there are cross-linguistic variations as to exactly what entities count as inalienably or alienably possessed. He argues that inalienability is a morphosyntactic entity, which is difficult to define semantically, and is characterized in terms of such properties as (i) unmarkedness, (ii) less heavy morphological marking, (iii) a historically older construction, (iv) head-marking morphology, and (v) a closed category of possessums. The question is whether the exclusive vs. shared possession distinction in Kupsapiny, which appears to overlap with the inalienability distinction, has any similarity with it.

When the possessor is human, and is expressed with a full noun phrase, Kupsapiny makes a distinction between exclusive and shared possession with the use of the possessive suffix *-ap* alone and the use of the enclitic *=mpo* ‘lit. also, additionally, even’ in addition to the possessive suffix *-ap*, as in (1a) and (1b), respectively, which can both be used as an answer to the question ‘What is that?’.

- (1) a. oteliit-ap ceepet ‘the hotel that Ceepet alone owns’
b. oteliit-ap = mpo ceepet ‘the hotel that Ceepet shares with someone (for example, the hotel that Ceepet and someone own; the hotel where Ceepet is staying/working)’

There are also possessums for which the exclusive possession construction has to be used because they are always exclusively possessed, independent of context. Such possessums include body parts (e.g. ‘eye’, ‘nail’), the exclusively possessed kin in Kupsapiny speakers’ culture (‘wife’), exclusively possessed artifacts (e.g. ‘eyeglasses’, ‘grave’), and actions that are not conducted with another person (e.g. ‘sneeze’, ‘yawn’). Thus, although this distinction overlaps with the inalienability distinction, these distinctions are semantically different.

Nevertheless, the distinction between exclusive and shared possession shares properties in common with that between inalienable and alienable possession. First, exclusive possession is less marked than shared possession. Second, the possession suffix *-ap* is shorter than the shared possession marker complex *-ap = mpo*. Third, unlike the exclusive possession construction with the suffix *-ap*, which also exists in other Nilotic languages, the shared possession construction has not reportedly been found in other Nilotic languages, and could hypothetically be a new addition to Kupsapiny. Fourth, the possessive suffix attaches to possessum nouns (head nouns), rather than possessor nouns (dependent nouns). Finally, although, unlike inalienably possessed nouns, exclusively possessed nouns do not form a more closed category than nouns for shared possessums, possessums that are only exclusively possessable form a closed category. Therefore, despite their semantic difference, the distinction between exclusive and shared possession and that between inalienable and alienable possession have properties in common, and could be subsumed under a superordinate possessive distinction.

In sum, Kupsapiny makes the distinction between exclusive and shared possession with the absence and presence of the clitic *=mpo*. Although this distinction is semantically different from the inalienability distinction, it shares several properties in common with it.