

117. Predicative Possession

Leon Stassen

1. Defining the construction

This map illustrates the areal distribution of the various encoding options for **predicative possession**. The data base for this map thus includes sentences in which ownership of a certain object (the possessed item) is predicated of a possessor, in a way that is illustrated by the English sentence *John has a motorcycle*. It should be noted that the scope of this map is restricted by several conditions. First, the map deals only with the encoding of **predicative** possession, as in *John has a motorcycle*; cases of adnominal possession (as in *John's motorcycle*) are not dealt with. Secondly, within predicative possession it often matters whether the noun phrase that indicates the possessed item is **indefinite** or not. English is a language in which this parameter gives rise to two different encoding options (see 1a–b). For the purposes of this map, only constructions in which the possessed NP has an indefinite reading – i.e., only those constructions that are parallel to (1a) – have been taken into account.

- (1) a. *John has a motorcycle.*
 b. *This motorcycle is John's.*

Finally, only those expressions have been sampled which encode the concept of **alienable possession**. Thus, the map concentrates on the encoding of the domain of “ownership” in a narrow juridical or ethical sense; it comprises those cases in which the relation between the possessor and the possessed item can be disrupted, transferred, or given up by acts of stealing, borrowing, or selling. As a result of this restriction, the encodings of other forms of possession (such as inalienable

possession or temporary possession) are not relevant to this map.

2. Major types of predicative possession

Linguists writing on the typology of predicative (alienable) possession (such as Clark 1978; Seiler 1983; Heine 1997; Stassen 2001) agree that there are at least five relatively frequent and easily identifiable encoding strategies. Among these five strategies, one stands apart in that it encodes the possessive relationship between possessor and possessed item in the form of a **transitive construction**. In this **Have-Possessive**, the possessor NP and the possessed NP function respectively as the subject and the direct object of a 'have'-verb, which, in many cases, can be shown to derive from some verb indicating physical control or handling, such as 'take', 'grasp', 'hold', or 'carry'. The English construction presented in (1a) is an instance of the Have-Possessive. Another example is from West Greenlandic (Eskimo); here the possessed item happens to be incorporated into the 'have'-verb.

(2) West Greenlandic (Fortescue 1984: 171)

angut taanna qimmi-qar-puq
 man that dog-have-3SG.IND
 'That man has dogs.'

Opposed to the Have-Possessive, the other four major types employ a strategy which is syntactically intransitive: the possessive construction has the basic form of an **existential sentence**. Thus, all three of these types feature a one-place predicate with a locational or existential meaning; its usual translation can be something like 'to be at', 'to be there', 'to exist'. The difference between these types lies in the encoding of the possessor NP and the possessed NP.

In the **Oblique Possessive**, the possessed NP functions as the grammatical subject of the ‘exist’-predicate, while the possessor NP is construed in some oblique form. The Oblique Possessive has two subtypes. In one, the oblique marking on the possessor NP has as its basic meaning the specification of a locational relation. Depending on the particular type of locational relation selected, it would be possible to further subcategorize this type into Locative Possessive (with the possessor NP being marked by some item meaning ‘at’, ‘on’ or ‘in’) and Dative Possessive (with a marker ‘to’ or ‘for’ on the possessor NP). On this map, however, these differences are ignored, and all instances of locational marking have been brought together under the heading of the **Locational Possessive**. An example of the Locational Possessive comes from Written Mongolian.

- (3) Written Mongolian (Poppe 1954: 147)
na-dur morin bui
 1SG-at horse be.3SG.PRES
 ‘I have a horse.’ (lit. ‘At me is a horse.’)

The second subtype of the Oblique Possessive is the **Genitive Possessive**. Here the possessor NP is marked by an item which typically does not have a locational interpretation; moreover, the possessor NP is commonly (though not necessarily) construed as an adnominal modifier to the possessed NP. The Genitive Possessive is illustrated by an example from Avar (Daghestanian; Caucasus).

- (4) Avar (Kalinina 1993: 97)
dir mašina b-ugo
 1SG.GEN car III-be.PRES
 ‘I have a car.’

The **Topic Possessive** shares with the Locational and the Genitive Possessive the characteristic that the possessed NP is construed as the grammatical subject of the existential predicate. The distinguishing feature of the Topic Possessive lies in the encoding of the possessor NP, which is construed as the **topic** of the sentence. As such, the possessor NP indicates the “setting” or “background” of the sentence, that is, the discourse frame which restricts the truth value of the sentence that follows it. Its function can thus be paraphrased by English phrases such as *given X*, *with regard to X*, *speaking about X*, *as far as X is concerned*, and the like. An example is from Tondano (Austronesian; northern Sulawesi).

- (5) Tondano (Sneddon 1975: 175)

<i>si</i>	<i>tuama</i>	<i>si</i>	<i>wewean</i>	<i>wale</i>	<i>rua</i>
ANIM.SG	man	TOP	exist	house	two

‘The man has two houses.’ (lit. ‘As far as the man is concerned, there are two houses’.)

Like the other intransitive possessive types, the **Conjunctive Possessive** contains an existential predicate. In other respects, however, the Conjunctive Possessive contrasts with both the Oblique Possessive and the Topic Possessive. For a start, the Conjunctive Possessive construes the possessor NP as the grammatical subject. An even more conspicuous feature is the encoding of the possessed NP. In the Conjunctive Possessive this NP is accompanied by, and usually in construction with, a marker which can be analyzed neither as a locational item nor as an indicator of topic. Closer inspection reveals that this marker in all cases originates from an item which is, or at least has been, employed as a means of indicating **simultaneity between clauses**. Thus, we find markers which have their origin in a sentential adverb meaning ‘also’ or ‘too’, or in a subordinating conjunction ‘when/while’, or in a coordinating particle ‘and’. A prominent option within the Conjunctive Possessive is the use

of the comitative marker ‘with’ on the possessed NP, which is why the type is often referred to in the literature as the **WITH-Possessive**. It can be argued, however, that languages which employ this comitative marker on possessed NPs also use this marker as a means to coordinate noun phrases (see Stassen 2000), so that this WITH-strategy can be seen as a special case of a more general conjunctive encoding format. Examples of the Conjunctive Possessive are from Daga (Dagan, Trans-New Guinea; southeastern Papua New Guinea) and Sango (Adamawa-Ubangi; Central African Republic).

- (6) Daga (Murane 1974: 303)
orup da agoe den
 man one slave with/too
 ‘A man had a slave.’

- (7) Sango (Samarin 1967: 95)
lo eke na bongo
 3SG be and/with garment
 ‘She has a garment.’

In accordance with the above discussion, the following values are shown on the map:

@	1. Locational Possessive	48
@	2. Genitive Possessive	22
@	3. Topic Possessive	48
@	4. Conjunctive Possessive	59
@	5. Have-Possessive	63
	total	240

3. Grammaticalized possessive constructions

A number of languages exhibit constructions which cannot be classified straightforwardly in terms of any of the five basic

types. Closer inspection reveals that these cases can be rated as the results of several grammaticalization processes. First, we can note a phenomenon that may be called **Transitivization** or **HAVE-Drift**, as it consists in a process of drifting from one of the other basic types towards a Have-Possessive. Cases of HAVE-Drift from an erstwhile Conjunctional Possessive commonly involve the cliticization or incorporation of the conjunctional marker into the existential predicate; the newly formed predicate then acts as a transitive verb. An example is from Luganda (Bantu; Uganda).

(8) Luganda (Ashton et al. 1954: 234)

o-li-na ekitabo
 2SG-be-with book
 'You have a book.'

HAVE-Drift from Topic Possessives commonly involves the reanalysis of the existential 'be'-item as a transitive verb, and the reanalysis of the possessor NP and possessed NP as the subject and direct object of that verb, respectively. The process is helped along by the fact that, in the typical case, this 'be'-item occupied the canonical position of transitive verbs in the original possessive construction. That the process is gradual and involves various intermediate stages can be seen from sentences from Luiseño (Uto-Aztecan; southern California). Here the reanalysis of the erstwhile topic into subject seems to be under way, but the construction is not yet unequivocally transitive.

(9) Luiseño (Steele 1977: 114, 122)

- a. *noo-p no-toonav qala*
 1SG-TOP my-basket be.INAN.PRES
 'I have a basket.'
- b. *noo-n no-toonav qala*
 1SG-SUBJ my-basket be.INAN.PRES/have

‘I have a basket.’

Instances of HAVE-Drift from Locational Possessives are not very frequent. Comrie (1989: 219–225) reports a case from Maltese (Semitic; Malta) involving an intermediate stage in which the possessor NP is topicalized. A similar process must have taken place in the Celtic language Breton (see Press 1986: 139). On the map, instances of HAVE-Drift have not been marked separately; they are subsumed under their respective source types.

A second instance of grammaticalization of predicative possessive structures might be called **Adjectivalization**. In some linguistic areas, we find possessive constructions in which the possessed NP is construed as the predicate (or part of the predicate) and treated in the same way as predicative adjectives are treated. Thus, depending on whether predicative adjectives are “nouny” or “verby” (Wetzer 1996, Stassen 1997), the possessed noun phrase shows up as (part of) the complement of the copula, or as (the lexical core of) a predicative verb. Examples are from Tiwi (Bathurst Island, northern Australia), Kanuri (Saharan; northern Nigeria), Guajajara (Tupian; Maranhão State, Brazil) and Kolyma Yukaghir (isolate; northeastern Siberia).

(10) Tiwi (Osborne 1974: 60)

ɲawa mantani t̪araka
our friend wallaby
‘Our friend has a wallaby.’

(11) Kanuri (Cyffer 1974: 122)

kâm kúrà-té kúnɲánà-nzə-wà (gənyí)
man big-the money-his-ADJ/with (NEG.COP)
‘The big man has (no) money.’

(12) Guajajara (Bendor-Samuel 1972: 162)

i-mukaw

3SG-gun

‘He has a gun.’

(13) Kolyma Yukaghir (Jochelson 1905: 405)

Met āče-n-je

I reindeer-with-1 SG.PRES.INDEF.INTR

‘I have (a) reindeer.’

Cases like these are probably best viewed as the result of a grammaticalization process by which the possessed noun phrase (together with its marker, if it has one) is gradually reanalyzed as the predicate of the construction. Depending on whether the possessed noun phrase bears a marker or not, the source of such products of adjectivalization can be traced back to a Conjunctional Possessive or a Topic Possessive. Therefore, cases of adjectivalization are not represented separately on the map, but are coded in accordance with their source type.

4. Geographical distribution

As the map demonstrates, the distribution of the various types of predicative possession shows considerable areal effects. Eurasia and North Africa (with the exception of the languages of western Europe) are almost exclusively the domain of the Oblique Possessive. Further areas where this encoding option is found are Polynesia and the northern part of South America. For the Topic Possessive, the major area is East/Southeast Asia (including Indonesia, the Philippines, and parts of New Guinea); the option is also found in many language groups of the Americas, and in some areas in western and northeastern Africa. The Conjunctional Possessive is dominant in sub-Saharan Africa and in Australia and New Guinea, but the option also presents itself all over the Americas. Finally, a core area for the Have-Possessive is western and central Europe; however, we also find

quite a few instances of this option in Africa and in the Americas.