
Differential possessive marking of arguments in action nominalizations: a typological survey

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Eva van Lier
University of Amsterdam
e.h.vanlier@uva.nl

Marlou van Rijn
University of Amsterdam
m.a.vanrijn@uva.nl

Traditionally, the distribution of alienable versus inalienable possessive marking over the core arguments of action nominalizations is accounted for in terms of the semantic factor of ‘control’: The relationship between agentive (SA and A) arguments coded as possessors and their ‘possessum’ – the event denoted by the verb – is viewed as controlled, and hence the alienable construction is used. By contrast, patientive arguments (SP and P) are viewed as having no control over the relationship to their predicate and are therefore encoded as inalienable possessors (Capell 1949: 172ff; Seiler 1983a: 22, 1983b; Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1993: 210ff; Palmer 2011).

However, early studies on Polynesian languages already show that in many cases agentive arguments of action nominalizations (SA and/or A) can be encoded as inalienable possessors (Chung 1973; Clark 1981). Moreover, in a pilot study on Central-Eastern Oceanic languages, we found that the effect of control on the possessive coding of arguments in nominalizations is relative rather than absolute. It can be described in terms of a hierarchy of argument types, as given in (1) below: If in a particular language an argument on this hierarchy may be encoded with an inalienable possessive construction, then all arguments to its left will either also take inalienable possessive coding or sentential coding, but not alienable coding.

- (1) $P > S_P > S_A > A$

Our account of differential possessive marking in nominalizations implies predictions concerning the issue of coding asymmetries, since it is well-known that alienable possessive marking is cross-linguistically more formally complex than inalienable possessive marking (Haspelmath 2008 and references therein). Therefore, in this presentation, we test:

- (i) whether the generalization in (1) holds for a world-wide sample of ca. 80 languages, using data from relevant WALS chapters (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2013; Nichols & Bickel 2013) and from our own earlier work on

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possessive constructions;

- (ii) whether the data found in (i) are in line with predictions concerning coding asymmetries in possessive constructions with non-derived possessum nouns.

We evaluate the results in light of the various explanations proposed for possessive coding asymmetries. Our data support an account in terms of iconicity, since, arguably, P arguments are in a closer conceptual relation with their verbal predicate than A arguments (cf. Croft 2008). In addition, we will draw attention to the role of transitivity – as the above account of iconicity of distance does not apply to S arguments – and to the fact that many language-specific patterns do not appear to be straightforwardly compatible with the general explanatory principle sketched above; the latter point suggests that while typological generalizations about coding asymmetries can be drawn, this does not necessarily mean that individual patterns are shaped by identical functional factors.

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