Coding asymmetry between independent and dependent pronominal possessors: A cross-linguistic study

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This study carries out a typological survey of independent and dependent pronominal possessor forms, showing that although there are different types of coding in different languages, it seems to be a universal tendency that independent pronominal possessor forms are either longer than or identical in length with dependent forms. This universal tendency is illustrated by the following examples:

1.  
   **wò -làà**  
   **wò -de'-y**  
   *2PL.POSS-village 2PL.POSS-Substativizer*  
   ‘your village’ ‘yours’  
   Zialo (Babaev 2010: 158, 65)

2.  
   **o-u**  
   **vae o-u**  
   *POSS-2SG leg  POSS-2SG*  
   ‘your leg’ ‘yours’  
   Vaeakau-Taumako  
   (Naess & Hovdhaugen 2011:329, 392)

According to my investigation of more than 30 languages from different language families, the above-mentioned universal tendency holds true no matter these pronominal possessor forms are full pronouns or person indexes.

The diachronic source of independent pronominal possessors can shed light on the coding asymmetry between independent pronominal possessors and dependent ones. The independent pronominal possessor is mostly formed either by adding a substantivizer to the dependent one or by the dependent form itself. Consequently, the form of independent possessor is either longer or identical to the dependent one. The reason why the dependent possessor was not further reduced when expressed independently lies in the fact that the reduced form is not informative enough to show the possessive relation.

The above-mentioned universal tendency can also be explained by the form-frequency correspondence proposed by Haspelmath (2008). Since the usage of independent pronominal possessors is mostly restricted to certain constructions, for instance comparative constructions (‘Yours is bigger than mine’) and
equative constructions (‘It is yours’), they are less frequent than dependent pronominal possessors, which can occur as a part of noun phrases in most syntactic positions. This leads to the result that the independent pronominal possessors are never shorter than the more frequent forms of dependent pronominal possessors.