

Workshop: New reflections on possessive constructions cross-linguistically

Thurdsday, May 19th, 2022

Maison de la Recherche, Sorbonne Université

Salle D223

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This workshop aims to bring together linguists working on possessive constructions from different perspectives (language description, typology, historical linguistics), with the goal to address empirical and theoretical questions concerning the encoding of possession in individual languages and recurrent patterns involving possessive constructions cross-linguistically, both from a synchronic and from a diachronic point of view.

10.30 Introduction

10.45 An Van linden (University of Liège/ KU Leuven): *Bound nouns but no alienability split: Assessing the explanatory power of the alienability contrast for Harakmbut*

This paper assesses the explanatory potential of the alienability contrast for Harakmbut (isolate, Peru) by investigating the nature and behaviour of independent, bound and deverbal nouns at various levels of linguistic organization. While the distinction between bound and independent nouns is to a great extent motivated by the conceptual distinction between inalienably and alienably possessed items, the behaviour of bound and independent nouns in adnominal possession is not. Whereas independent (and deverbal) nouns use a genitive-marked two-word construction, bound nouns can use the same one, when keeping their noun prefix, or they can use a genitive-marked one-word construction, in which they drop their prefix. It is argued that this does not amount to an alienability split, which is supported by the finding that bound nouns (unlike independent and deverbal ones) also show the same choice between a two-word and a one-word coding strategy in non-possessive adnominal modification. In noun-noun compounding, the data merely reveal statistical differences between bound and independent nouns in N1 and N2 positions; here deverbal nouns behave identically to bound nouns in dropping their prefix in N2. In noun incorporation, finally, the relevance the alienability contrast is similar to that for the two-way noun class system. Inalienable semantics (and morphological boundness) could be argued to determine the incorporability of nouns, but there are also exceptions.

11.30 Sonia Cristofaro (Sorbonne Université, Paris): *Explaining alienability splits in the use of overt possessive marking: A source-oriented approach*

A well-known pattern in the encoding of adnominal possession cross-linguistically is for overt possessive marking to be used for both alienable and inalienable possession, or alienable possession only, but not for inalienable possession only. This has been explained in terms of iconically or economically motivated language preferences for the use of overt marking for alienable (as opposed to inalienable) possession, and zero marking for inalienable (as opposed to alienable) possession. These preferences, however, have generally been postulated based on the synchronic distribution of overt vs. zero marking across alienable and inalienable possession contexts, rather than actual diachronic phenomena that shape this distribution from one language to another. This paper discusses several developmental processes that have been shown to be at the origin of markers involved in alienability splits cross-linguistically. These processes pose two general challenges for this type of explanations. Individual processes are triggered by the properties of several different source constructions and their contexts of use, independently of general language preferences pertaining to the resulting possessive constructions. The distribution of the resulting possessive markers across alienable and inalienable possession contexts is also ultimately best explained in terms of the distribution of the source constructions that give rise to individual markers, rather than general language preferences for the use of overt vs. zero marking in these contexts. These facts call for a new, source-oriented approach to cross-linguistic alienability splits and recurrent cross-linguistic patterns in general, one where individual patterns are accounted for in terms of the properties of multiple source constructions and diachronic phenomena that shape them over time, rather than the synchronic properties of the pattern in itself.

12.15 Lunch break

14.00 Denis Creissels (DDL-ISH, Lyon): *Predicative possession and have-drift in Arabic dialects*

Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic have a typical oblique-possessor (or locational possessive) construction in which the possessor phrase is flagged by a preposition ('At/to Possessor (is) Possessee'). Most vernacular Arabic varieties have a predicative possession construction originating from the oblique-possessor construction attested in Classical Arabic, in which, however, the preposition flagging the possessor phrase has become a 'pseudo-verb' that cannot be analyzed as a preposition anymore and has acquired some verbal properties. The coding frame of the possessive pseudo-verb resulting from the evolution of a preposition flagging the possessor in an oblique-possessor construction is similar (although not fully identical) to that of a transitive verb. The affinity with the transitive construction is particularly clear in the Arabic varieties that have innovated accusative forms of pronouns, or a DOM system. More radical changes are attested in pidginized/creolized Arabic varieties, and a typologically unusual configuration is found in Gulf Pidgin Arabic. The development of possessive predication constructions unrelated to the original oblique-possessor construction is also attested in some Arabic varieties.

14.45 Promise Dodzi Kpoglu (University of Ghana): *Functional perspectives on Ewe (Tongu) adnominal possessive constructions* Typologically, the configurations of adnominal possessive constructions are generally accounted for according to two main functional perspectives: iconicity and usage-based principles. Falling on adnominal possessive constructions of Tongugbe, an Ewe (Kwa) dialect, I attempt to interrogate the adequacy of each of these hypotheses from a language-specific point of view. I first present the different types of adnominal possessive constructions in Tongugbe. I then focus on the distribution of body-part and kinship terms in possessee slots of constructions in which nominals occur as possessors. I show that apart from principles of iconicity and linguistic conventionalization, a third parameter, semantics of control, is relevant in accounting for various aspects of the data. I thus argue that the constructional configurations associated with the distribution of the different noun types in possessee slots are motivated by an interaction of various functional principles.

15.30 Coffee break

15.45 Mark Van de Velde (LLACAN/Inalco, Paris): *Formal peculiarities of the Bantu connective relator*

The Bantu languages mark possessive relations by means of a genitive linker, called connective or associative, which typically consists of an agreement prefix (PP) and a stem - a. Meeussen's (1967) reconstruction of the connective relator PP- a in Proto-Bantu has never been challenged. Claims according to which the connective stem -a is a retention of a much older morpheme, the reflexes of which could be found throughout the Niger-Congo phylum (Welmers 1963), are much more controversial, since cognition is very hard to (dis)prove for such a tiny form. The aim of this talk is to provide an overview of two sets of formal peculiarities of the connective construction that may contain clues for understanding its origin in pre- or proto-Bantu. One set of formal characteristics links connectives to relative clause constructions. They have been pointed out by Nsuka-Nkutsi (1982: 57–67) and include a tonal phenomenon known as Burssens rule and another one that can be called tonal harmony. The other set has to do with the incompatibility of the connective relator with possessee nouns that lack a gender specification and with a certain tendency in the Bantu languages to innovate connective constructions that are dedicated to expressing possession.

References

- Meeussen, Achille Emile. 1967. Bantu grammatical reconstructions. *Africana Linguistica* 3. 81–121.
- Nsuka-Nkutsi, François. 1982. Les structures fondamentales du relatif dans les langues bantoues (Annalen - Reeks IN-8° - Menswetenschappen). Tervuren: Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika.
- Welmers, William E. 1963. Associative a and ka in Niger-Congo. *Language* 39(3). 432–447. <https://doi.org/10.2307/411125>.

16.30 Closure