Modality effects in nominal possessive constructions: The ‘his genitive’ in signed and spoken languages

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Overview

• Background
  – Nominal possession in spoken languages
  – Signed languages and spoken creoles
  – Possession in signed languages
• ‘His genitive’ in signed and spoken languages
• Lexical vs morphological marking of possession in signed and spoken languages

Nominal possession in spoken languages

• Nichols & Bickel (2005)
  – Possessor is marked via affix (84% of 235 surveyed languages): head marked (1), dependent marked (2), or double marked
  (1) Fijian (Austronesian)
    a mata-i Jone
    ART eye-POSS John
    ‘John’s eye’
  (2) Chechen (Nakh-Daghestanian)
    joem-an k’omni
    lion-GEN baby.animal
    ‘lion cub’, ‘lion’s cub’ (lit. ‘of-lion cub’)
Nominal possession in spoken languages

- Nichols & Bickel (2005)
  - ‘Other’ marking (0.03% of 235 languages) - all examples given via cliticisation
  - Free (or floating) marking: marker positioned with regard to phrase boundaries (in 3, ‘n’ is clitic boundary; ‘=n’ is possessive marker and always attaches to first constituent in clause)

(3) Chamorro (Austronesian)
  \text{ihlapbion} estudiante
  \text{ART=book=LINK student}
  ‘the student’s book’

- Headward-migrated dependent marking: fully inflected dependent (in 4, a pronoun) clitics to head

(4) Bororo (Macro-Ge)
  \text{baree eno moto}
  \text{Brazilians 3PL GEN land}
  ‘Brazil (lit. ‘Brazilians’ land’)’

Nominal possession in spoken languages

- Nichols & Bickel (2005)
  - No marking on possessor (14% of 235 languages)
  - Juxtaposition as in (5)

(5) Asmat (Asmat-Kamoro)
  \text{Warse ci Warse canoe}
  ‘Warse’s canoe’ (lit. ‘Warse canoe’)

- Lexical rather than affixal marking, as in (6) and (7)

(6) Tiwi (isolate, N. Australia)
  \text{jarakukam jara bukaua crocodile he tail}
  ‘the crocodile’s tail’

(7) Amele (Trans-New Guinea)
  \text{Naus na jo Naus of house}
  ‘Naus’s house’

‘His genitive’

- Possessor + free possessive marker + possessum (PR POSS PM)
- Common in Germanic languages
- Occurred briefly in Middle English (Janda 1980, Allen 2002)

(8) Middle English (Ascham 1545, cited in Allen 2002)
  ...not borrowed of other men his lipes
  ‘not borrowed from other man’s lips’
‘His genitive’ in Germanic

• Still common in colloquial Dutch, German, Norwegian (Weerman & de Wit 1999, Krause 1999, Delsing 1998)

(9) Dutch (Weerman & de Wit 1999)

de man met de ‘gokke bril’ z’n caravan
‘the man with those funny glasses’ ‘caravan’

• ...alongside more standard genitive case marker or possessive affix

(10) Dutch (Weerman & de Wit 1999)

buurvrouws huis
‘our neighbor’s house’

‘His genitive’ in creoles

• ‘His genitive’ standard for expressing possession in Afrikaans (Oosthuizen & Waher 1994) and Atlantic creoles (Holm 1990)

(11) Sranan Creole English

konu ala en moni
‘all the king’s money’

(12) Mauritian Creole French

mo frer so madam
‘my brother’s wife’

(13) Papiamentu Creole Spanish

mi tatá su buki
‘my father’s book’

Nominal possession in spoken languages summary

• Nominal possession marking via separate words - e.g. personal pronouns, prepositions/postpositions in relatively few spoken languages (Nichols & Bickel 2005)

• Nominal possession marking via possessive pronoun ('his genitive') - occurs colloquially in some Germanic languages, standard in some creoles

• Nominal possession in signed languages?
Background about signed languages

• Phonology
  – Phonological parameters of a lexical sign in a signed language such as British Sign Language (BSL) and American Sign Language (ASL)
    - Handshape
    - Movement
    - Location
  – Minimal pairs
    - (14) BSL: NAME & AFTERNOON (location)
    - (15) BSL: DEAF & HEARING (handshape)

• Morphology
  – Sequential vs simultaneous: simultaneous preferred
  – E.g. aspect marking involves change of movement parameter rather than affixation
    - (16a) BSL: LOOK-AT
    - (16b) BSL: LOOK-AT:FOR-LONG-TIME

Sign language pronouns

• Singular personal pronoun
  – Pointing sign (extended index handshape) which points to referent or location associated with referent, as in Figure 1
    - (17) BSL: PRO LIKE CAR
      He likes cars

• Singular possessive pronoun
  – Points similarly to singular personal pronoun, but uses different handshape
    - (18) BSL: POSS BOOK
    - (19) BOOK POSS
      'his/her book'

Pronominal possession in BSL

• Possessive pronoun precedes (18) or follows (19) possessum
  - (18) POSS BOOK
  - (19) BOOK POSS
    ‘his/her book’
Nominal possession in BSL

- Either via juxtaposition (20) or possessor + possessive pronoun + possessum (PR POSS PM, as in (21))

(20) BOY BOOK
(21) BOY POSS BOOK ‘the boy’s book’

Sign languages as creoles

- Fischer (1978)
- Argued for creole status of ASL
  - Lexicon
  - Morphosyntax
  - Acquisition
  - Sociolinguistic context

Lexicon and morphosyntax

- Constant influx of new vocabulary from dominant language
- Content words used for grammatical purposes
  - HAVE used to indicate existence
    - (22) HAVE TEACHER THERE? (ASL)
    - “Is there a teacher there?”
  - Little tense marking on verbs, but rich aspectual system
    - (24) WAIT LONG TIME, but adverbs e.g. BEFORE, YESTERDAY, IN FUTURE for tense (ASL)
  - Verbs inflect for aspect but not tense, e.g. HCE bambai ‘in the future’
- Conditional clauses
  - (26) YOU WANT BECOME DOCTOR, BETTER STUDY HARD (ASL)
    - “If you want to become a doctor, you should study hard”
  - You like come one doctor, you gotta study hard (HCE)
    - “If you want to become a doctor, you should study hard”
Language acquisition and sociolinguistic context

- 90-95% of deaf children are born to hearing (usually non-signing) families
  - Like first generation speakers of a creole, first generation native signers (i.e. deaf of hearing) receive input from linguistically heterogeneous sources, many of whom (e.g. parents, teachers) are not native users of the language.

- Grammar of a creole cannot be traced to one language
  - ASL: French Sign Language mixed with different home sign systems (Goldin-Meadow & Mylander 1983) and or sign language used on Martha’s Vineyard (Johnson 1966).
  - Creoles: English but also Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Portuguese.

- Current social situations, like other creole situations (e.g. Hawaiian Creole English)
  - Viewed as “inferior” by speakers of prestige language
  - Used as marker of solidarity among minority group
  - Lack of standardization
  - ASL is recreated every generation

- 90-95% of deaf children acquire language from a highly varied set of sources

Sign languages, creoles & the ‘his genitive’

- In terms of grammar, lexicon, acquisition and current social factors, sign languages such as ASL fit the description of a creole
- Use of ‘his genitive’ - another morphosyntactic property shared by signed languages and spoken creoles
- Grammaticisation of ‘his genitive’ to possessive clitic/affix in spoken languages
  - This could happen in later stages in creoles
  - What about signed languages?

Grammaticisation

- Affixation
- Two types of cliticisation:
  - Assimilation
  - Coalescence
- Prosodic linking
Affixation

- Australian and American Sign Languages (Auslan and ASL) both demonstrate use of a possessive suffix based on the letter 'S' from the respective fingerspelling systems (Johnston & Schembri 2007, Pichler et al. 2006)
- Also reported for BSL although not in widespread use
- Movement of 'S' is modified slightly in both languages - see Figure 3 for Auslan
  - Borrowing from English and a result of language contact
  - Commonly used in expressing kinship relationships
  - However, sequential affixation in signed languages is generally considered to be rare

Assimilation

- The handshape of a pronoun can assimilate to that of a neighbouring sign (Corina & Sandler 1993, Johnston & Schembri 2007, Lucas et al. 2001)
- In Israeli Sign Language (ISL), assimilation has been described as cliticisation (Sandler & Lillo-Martin 2006)

  - (28) BSL: POSS-1 MOTHER ‘my mother’
  - (29) ISL: PRO-1 READ ‘I read’

  - Handshape assimilation can be either progressive or regressive (function sign to lexical sign but not strictly in one direction)
  - Non-structure preserving (e.g., orientation does not assimilate) which suggests it is a post-lexical process

Coalescence

- In ISL, a second process is described where pronouns can cliticise to a host sign (Sandler & Lillo-Martin 2006)
  - Two signs reduce to a single syllable (lexical sign + function sign)
  - Non-structure preserving (violates symmetry condition, whereby both hands in two-handed sign should have same handshapes)

  - (30) ISL: right: SHOP PRO-non1
  - left: SHOP

- Coalescence only occurs when the functional item is in prosodically weak position at the end of a phrase (and follows the host lexical sign)
Prosodic linking: mouth spreading

- Mouthings can spread beyond a specified sign; this is described as prosodic linking (Boyes Braem 2001, Sandler 1999).
- In a study of three sign languages (BSL, Sign Language of the Netherlands, and Swedish Sign Language), mouthings generally spread rightwards and were from a lexical sign onto a function sign (Crasborn et al. 2004).

\[
\text{BSL:} \quad 
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Wolf} \\
\text{DET} \\
\text{that wolf}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\text{SSL:} \quad 
\begin{array}{c}
\text{poss. shear} \\
\text{får} \\
\text{his sheep}
\end{array}
\]

Conclusions

- The fate of the ‘his genitive’ in spoken creoles?
- Even if spoken creoles do eventually sideline the ‘his genitive’ as Germanic has - this is probably less likely for signed languages.
- ‘His genitive’ unlikely to be lost via grammaticalisation in signed languages.
- Possible modality effect.
- Prosodic linking via cliticisation (e.g. assimilation/coalescence) occurs in signed languages within possessive NPs – but phonological rather than morphological process.
- Occurs with other constituents as well, not only possessive constructions.
- Consistent with notion of signed languages as creoles with reconstitutive with every generation.

References

References