Possessive noun phrases

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1 Preliminary remarks

Possessive DPs comprise a possessor and a possesum/possessee/possessed.

(1) a. Mary’s / her house
     b. the house of a famous actor / the Undying / the rising Sun

Possessive DPs do not necessarily express possession proper; they rather code an underspecified relationship that we interpret based on the context (Williams 1981).

(2) a. My husband is a great cook.               family relationship
     b. My portrait is hanging on the wall.          authorship
     c. My train leaves in an hour.               vague relationship
     d. The wind blew off the roof of the house.      part-whole
     e. The cat tore yesterday’s newspaper into pieces.    temporal relationship
     f. The enemy’s destruction of the city was unnecessary.  thematic relationship
     g. The city’s destruction was inevitable.            thematic relationship

(3) My book is on the top shelf. (I bought it, I borrowed it, I wrote it, I translated it, etc.)

We will focus on non-thematic possessors here.

The case of possessors may depend on the language, the type of possessor, as well as the type of possessive construction.

(4) Tundra Nenets: case depends on pronominality of possessor
    a. nʼib’a-h mal°
       needle-gen end
       the end of the needle     Genitive
    b. (pida) puxac’a-da
       he     wife-3sg
       his wife (Nikolaeva 2014: ch. 2)     Nominative/unmarked

(5) Hungarian: case depends on possessor height
    a. nekem a könyv-em
       Ldat  the book-1sg
       my book     Dative
b. az én könyv-én
   the I book-1sg
   my book unmarked/Nominative

(6) Udmurt: case depends on possessive DP role in the clause
a. [so-len anaj-ez] siče ug dišaški
   he-gen mother-3sg such neg.pres.3 dress
   His mother does not dress such a way. Genitive
b. [so-leš es-s-e] ažži-sko
   he-abl friend-3sg-acc see-pres.1sg
   I see his friend. (Assmann et al. 2014) Ablative

2 Structural position: Base position


(7)
NP
  N
     possessum
    DP
      possessor

Criticism: this makes the possessor an argument, but not every noun is an argument-taking noun (cf. Mary’s book)

Specifier of N: Ihsane (2000), Zribi-Hertz (2003) and others, mostly assumed in older works that do not work with a fine-grained functional sequence

Specifier of a functional projection:

• nP: Alexiadou (2005) + it is a possibility raised by Alexiadou et al. (2007)


(8)
FP
  DP
    possessor
  F
    possessum
  NP

F is Poss, Argument 1:
Hungarian: specific morpheme spelling out F, not present in non-possessive DPs → fits better if F is a dedicated Poss rather than n

(9) cson-t-ök-at
    bone-pl-acc
    bones
(10) János cson-t-ja-i-t
    John bone-poss-pl-acc
    John’s ones Hungarian\(^1\)

\(^1\)The plural marker is -k by default, but the allomorphic variant -i is used in possessives. This morphological detail need not concern us here; -k and -i are the same thing.
morpeme order tells us that PossP is lower than NumP

\[
\text{PossP} \quad \text{Num}
\]

- János csont -ja

F is Poss, Argument 2:

- Alexiadou et al. (2007) build on the vP – nP parallel
- possessor in the DP is in many respects like the subject in the clause (Szabócs 1983; 1992; 1994, Szabócs & Laczko 1992, Insane 2000, Ouhalla 2011)
- if the subject is merged in spec, vP then the possessor is merged in spec, nP
- however, according to Kratzer (1996) the external argument of verbs is merged in spec, VoiceP, a projection above vP
- then for a full parallel, the possessor is merged in a projection above nP

PossP is generally thought to be merged below adjectives and classifiers.

Functional sequence so far:

\[
K > \text{AsspP} > D > (\text{possessor}) > (\text{relative clause}) > \text{Dem} > Q > \text{Num} > \text{Adj} > \text{Cl} > \text{Adj} > (\text{Dem}?) > \text{Poss} > n > N
\]

Small clause analysis: possessor is the predicate, possessum is the subject (Den Dikken 1999, Larson & Cho 2003)

\[
\text{Den Dikken (1999)} \quad \text{Larson & Cho (2003)}
\]

\[
\text{FP}(-\text{SC}) \quad \text{PP}
\]

3 Cf. from handout 2:

(i)  D > Gen1 > Num > A > Dem > Gen2 > NP (Guardiano 2009)

3 NB: in more recent work F is called a Rel(ator). Rel is not a dedicated category label, it denotes any head that expresses predication bw. its complement and specifier. Den Dikken’s analysis is compatible with the PossP analysis if Poss is a predicational, relator type head.
3 Structural position: Surface positions

3.1 Below D

Nominative possessor: below D; the obligatory article belongs to the possesum because pronouns can’t be modified by the article

(15) az én könyv-em
    the I book-1sg
    my book
(16) (*Az) én alsz-om.
    the I sleep-1sg
    I am sleeping. Hungarian

(17) la sua bella casa
    the his/her nice house
    his/her nice house (Cardinaletti 1998)
    Italian

But just how much below DP?

(18) az én eme [tegnap befejezett] három cikk-em
    the I this yesterday finished three article-posl.1sg
    these three articles of mine finished yesterday
(19) *az eme én cikk-em
    the this I article-posl.1sg
    this article of mine
(20) *a [tegnap befejezett] én cikk-em
    the yesterday finished I article-posl.1sg
    my article finished yesterday Hungarian

Functional sequence so far:

(21) K > AsspIP > D > Poss(2) > *(relative clause) > Dem > Q > Num > Adj > Cl > Adj > (Dem?) > Poss > n > N

NB: the literature often calls this projection ‘AgrP’ because its head hosts an agreement morpheme (only if the possessor is a pronoun). I will avoid that label for theoretical reasons.

(22) a. csont-ja-i-m-at
    bone-poss-pl-1sg-acc
    my bones
d. csont-ja-i-nk-at
    bone-poss-pl-1pl-acc
    our bone
b. csont-ja-i-d-at
    bone-poss-pl-2sg-acc
    your bone
e. csont-ja-i-tok-at
    bone-poss-pl-2pl-acc
    your bone
c. csont-ja-i-t
    bone-poss-3sg-pl-acc
    his bone
f. csont-ja-i-k-at
    bone-poss-pl-3pl-acc
    their bone Hungarian
3.2 Above D

Dative possessor: above D

(24) **nekem** a könyv-e-i-m
    I.dat the book-poss-pl-1sg
    my book

Hungarian

It looks like this possessor is in spec, DP, as argued by Szabolcsi (1983; 1992; 1994). We’ll come back to this below.
But are Dative possessors in spec, DP? Unlike in English, they can co-occur with the demonstrative that *is* in spec, DP.

(26) János-nak ez a táská-ja John-dat this the bag-pposs
      (*this) John’s (*this) bag this bag of John’s

Most reliable Hungarian constituency test: focusing. Not everybody accepts (28).

(28) (%)*Csak [János-nak ez a táská-ja] tűnt el.
      only John-dat this the bag-pposs disappear.pst.3sg away
      Only this bag of John’s disappeared.
      (based on É. Kiss 2000; 2014; she judges this construction OK)

- if focus is OK, it’s a constituent → Dative possessor is in outer spec DP or higher than DP. É. Kiss (2000) takes it to be a DP-internal topic.

- if focus is not OK → Dative possessor and demonstrative compete for spec, DP (and in (28) we have an external possessor) or the test fails for some independent reason

In any case, the Dative possessor is on the left edge of the DP, nothing can precede it DP-internally; its position is the escape hatch.

Some of the literature argues that possessors that end up above D make a stop-over in the derived position below D (spec, Poss2P), cf. Ihsane (2000), Gavruseva (2000), Alexiadou et al. (2007). This is generally not accepted in the literature on Hungarian, cf. É. Kiss (2002), though see Szabolcsi (1994).

### 3.3 In D

Cardinaletti (1998), Ihsane (2000), Alexiadou (2005), Alexiadou et al. (2007): possessive pronouns that are incompatible with the definite article move on from spec, Poss2 to D

(29) (*le) son livre
    the his book
    his book (Cardinaletti 1998) French

NB: É. Kiss (2000) suggest that Hungarian pronominal possessors that do co-occur with the definite article also adjoin to D.
4 Approaches to the English Saxon genitive

4.1 Structures


\[
(30) \quad \text{DP} \\
\quad \text{DP} \\
\quad \text{D'} \\
\quad John \quad \text{D} \\
\quad \text{NP} \\
\quad \text{hat}'s
\]


\[
(31) \quad \text{DP} \\
\quad \text{D} \\
\quad \text{FP} \\
\quad \text{DP} \\
\quad John \quad \text{F'} \\
\quad \text{F} \\
\quad \text{NP} \\
\quad \text{hat}'s
\]

’s forms a constituent with the possessor: Barker (1995), Radford (2000), Alexiadou et al. (2007)\(^4\)

\[
(32) \quad \text{DP} \\
\quad \text{DP} \\
\quad \text{D'} \\
\quad John’s \quad \text{D} \\
\quad \text{NP} \\
\quad \text{hat}
\]

4.2 Relation to the copula

Den Dikken (1998):

- ’s is the singular form of the copula (is) on both lexical DP possessors and possessive pronouns (John’s, his, its)

- ’s is the plural form of the copula (are) on possessive pronouns (our, your, their)

- plural lexical DP possessors anti-agree (the children’s, *the children’r)

\(^4\)See also Lowe (2016) for a related view.
Bernstein & Tortora (2005):

- 's on possessive pronouns is the singular form of the copula (is)
- -r on possessive pronouns is the plural form of the copula (are)
- 's on lexical DP possessors is not the copula but the 3sg agreement marker also present in She knows
- plural lexical DP possessors show 0 agreement, like they know-0

5 External possession

External possession: on the surface, the possessor is a dependent of the verb and not within the DP of the possesum.

(33) Possessor \ldots [DP [NP Possessum ]]

See Nikolaeva (2002), Deal (2013), the contributions in Payne & Barshi (1999), and the references cited therein.

5.1 External possession via extraction


Hungarian: Dative possessors in spec, DP may extract; Nominative possessors lower than D may not.

(34) János-nak a táská-ja
John-dat the bag-poss John’s bag
(35) az ő táská-ja
the he bag-poss his bag

(36) János-nak i eltűnt
John-dat away.disappear.pst.3sg the bag-poss
John’s bag has disappeared.

(37) *János,/*[(az) ő], i eltűnt
John-dat/the he away.disappear.pst.3sg the bag-poss
John’s/his bag has disappeared.

Tzotzil: Wh-possessors are in spec, DP, lexical possessors are lower (data adapted from Aissen 1996).

(38) a. s-p’in li Maruch-e
3-pot the Maruch-enclitic
Maruch’s pot
b. *Maruch s-p’in
Maruch 3-pot

(39) *[li Maruch, s-p’in ...-e
the Maruch 3-pot -enclitic
Maruch’s pot
Wh-possessors may extract, lexical possessors may not.

The extracted possessor may land in an A or an  \( \tilde{A} \) position (depending on the language).

-  \( \tilde{A} \) position

(42) \[TopP János-nak \[FocP MARI fogta \[VP meg \[DP t_i a \]
John-dat Mary hold.pst.3sg perf the kez-\( e\)-t.]]
hand-poss-acc
It was Mary who took John’s hand. Hungarian

- A position

(43) \[pro hi-nees-hex-ne'ny-\( \theta \)-e ma-may'as-na pist. \]
pro 3subj-o-pl-see-spec-morph-perf-rem.pst pl-child-obj father.nom
He saw the children’s father. (adapted from Deal 2013) Nez Perce

- the possessor moves to a low object-scrambling projection
- possessor has objective case, possesum has nominative (internal possessor have Genitive case)
- possessor controls object agreement on V, not possesum
- V has a special morpheme marking possessor raising
- possessor and possesum freely separable in the clause

5.2 External possession via base-generation

Recall that the Hungarian possesum displays agreement only with pronominal possessors, otherwise only a Poss marker appears.

(44) plausibly involves possessor extraction.

(44) A nő-k-nek, eltünt \[ t_i a \ kalap-ja].
the woman-pl-dat disappear.pst.3sg the hat-poss
The women’s hat has disappeared.

(45) cannot involve possessor extraction because the possesum exhibits agreement:

(45) %A nő-k-nek eltünt [a kalap-juk].
the woman-pl-dat disappear.pst.3sg the hat-poss.3pl
The women’s hat has disappeared. (adapted from Den Dikken 1999) Hungarian
Den Dikken (1999): (45) involves an externally generated possessor co-indexed with a DP-internal zero pronoun. The pronoun is 3PL; the possessum agrees with it.

\[(46)\] A nő-k-neki, \ldots \ [_{DP} \text{(3PL-pronoun)}, \ a \ kalap-juk] \ \\
the woman-pl-dat \ldots \ 3PL \ the hat-poss.3pl

→ here the Dative constituent is base-generated as an argument or adjunct of V and is co-indexed with a DP-internal possessor. (For this construction to work, in Hungarian the possessum must be alienable and the Dative constituent must be affected by the event.)

We know independently that Dative constituents can be licensed as verbal arguments/adjuncts (Rákosi 2006, É. Kiss 2014):

- the internal possessor does not need to be coreferent with the Dative constituent

\[(47)\] János-nak fáj \ldots \ [Péter kudarc-a]. \ \\
John-dat hurt.3sg Peter failre-poss \ \\
The failure hurts John. (É. Kiss 2014)

- there does not need to be a possessor in the DP

\[(48)\] János-nak fáj \ldots \ [a kudarc]. \ \\
John-dat hurt.3sg the failure \ \\
The failure hurts John. (É. Kiss 2014)

The externally generated possessive construction is constrained by several implicational hierarchies; the higher the possessor is on these hierarchies, the more likely it is to be externalized (Haspelmath 1999).

\[(49)\] Animacy Hierarchy
1\textsuperscript{st}/2\textsuperscript{nd} person > 3\textsuperscript{rd} person > proper name > other animate > inanimate

\[(50)\] Situation Hierarchy
patient affecting > dynamic non-affecting > stative

\[(51)\] Inalienability Hierarchy
body part > garment > other contextually unique item

\[(52)\] Syntactic Relations Hierarchy
PP > DO > unaccusative subject > unergative subject > transitive subject

**Tests** for movement vs. base-generation with external possessors (Deal 2013):

- externally generated possessors are always *affected*

- moved possessors are subject to minimality effects

NB: In the European Sprachbund, external possessors are typically Dative (Haspelmath 1999, Nikolaeva 2002). In Finno-Ugric languages, except for Hungarian, external possessors are never Dative (Nikolaeva 2002).
6 Alienable vs inalienable possession

6.1 The (in)alienability hierarchy

Inalienable possession: the possessum holds an intrinsic relation with the possessor (involves an individual-level property)

Alienable possession: the possessum holds a non-intrinsic relation with the possessor; the possessum and the possessor are independent in terms of their existence (involves a stage-level property)

(53) Inalienable relations crosslinguistically
kinship terms, body-parts, relational spatial concepts, part-whole relations, physical and mental states, nominalizations where the possessee is a verbal noun (e.g. *the planting of bananas*), clothes being worn Heine (1997)

(54) (In)alienability hierarchy
body parts and/or kinship terms > part-whole relations > spatial relations > culturally basic possessed items (e.g. clothes) > other (Nichols 1988; 1992)

6.2 Formal distinctions

Some languages make a formal distinction bw. alienable and inalienable possessive relationships. They can do this in a variety of ways, I will mention some of these below.5

(55) In no language will the phonological expression of inalienable possession be bulkier than that of alienable possession (Haiman 1983)

(56) Universal: If a language has an adnominal alienability split, and one of the constructions is overtly coded while the other one is zero-coded, it is always the inalienable construction that is zero-coded, while the alienable construction is overtly coded. (Hасpelmath 2008)

Morphological marking on the possessum:

(57) a. nu-wita
   lsg-head
   my head (Haspelmath 2008)

   b. nu-carru-ni
   lsg-car-possd
   my car

   Achagua

Self-standing morphological marking:

The Mandarin linker *de* is obligatory with alienable constructions

(58) a. wo *(de)* didi
   I DE brother
   my brother (Lin 2011)

   b. wo * *(de)* qianbi
   I DE pencil
   my pencil

   Mandarin

5On the marking of (in)alienability in Hungarian, see Schirm (2005) and Den Dikken (2015).
The Abun (West Papuan) linker *bi* appears only with alienable possessive constructions:

(59)  
\begin{align*}
a. & \text{ji syim arm} \\
& \text{my arm (Haspelmath 2008)} \\
b. & \text{ji bi nggwe}
& \text{I of garden my garden Abun}
\end{align*}

**Bound vs. free possessor:**

(60)  
\begin{align*}
a. & \text{d-za? arm} \\
& \text{my arm (Haspelmath 2008)} \\
b. & \text{dga? fu} \\
& \text{my pig Hua}
\end{align*}

**A variety of syntactic ways:**

Maybrat uses word order to distinguish the two types of possessives.

(61)  
\begin{align*}
a. & \text{Sely m-me} \\
& \text{Sely 3U-mother} \\
& \text{Sely's mother (Hedwig 2007)} \\
b. & \text{amah ro-Petrus} \\
& \text{house poss-Petrus} \\
& \text{Petrus' house Maybrat}
\end{align*}

Moroccan Arabic does not allow free state possessives with inalienables.

(62)  
\begin{align*}
a. & \text{xal al-bnt uncle the-girl} \\
& \text{the girl's uncle (Ouhalla 2011)} \\
b. & *\text{al-xal dya/ta' al-bnt} \\
& \text{the-uncle of the-girl} \\
& \text{the girl's uncle M. Arabic}
\end{align*}

NB: English shows the alienability/inalienability contrast in the following construction (Nevins & Myler 2014):

(63)  
\begin{align*}
a. & \text{brown-eyed, six-cornered, ill-fated} \\
b. & *\text{white-housed, *big-carred}
\end{align*}

For the alienability/inalienability contrast in French, see Guéron (1985; 2006).

### 6.3 Structures

Generative researchers working on (in)alienability largely agree that i) alienable and inalienable possessors are merged at different places; ii) inalienables are merged lower, due to a closer relationship to the noun.

Fábregas (2011), Nevins & Myler (2014): inalienables are introduced by the root, alienables are introduced by a functional head⁶

\[ \text{(64) inalienable possession} \]
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{nP} \\
\text{possessor} \\
\text{n root/N}
\end{array}
\]

\[ \text{(65) alienable possession} \]
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{PossP} \\
\text{possessor} \\
\text{Poss nP}
\end{array}
\]

⁶This semantic intuition is also present in Barker (1995).
Lin (2011): inalienables involve a SC, with the possessor as a subcategorized argument; alienables are introduced via a functional head

(66) inalienable possession

XP(SC)
possession X'
 X

inalienable noun

(67) alienable possession

DP

possession D
 NP

alienable noun

Ouhalla (2011): alienables involve a SC; inalienable possessors are subcategorized arguments introduced in spec, NP

(68) inalienable possession

NP

DP/PP N'
 (of) possession N

p ossessum

(69) alienable possession

PP(SC)

possession P'
 P
 (of) possession DP

Den Dikken (2015): both involve a SC with the possessor as the predicate; alienables involve canonical predication, inalienables involve reverse predication

(70) inalienable possession

RelP(SC)
predicate R'
 R
 pos sessor

(71) alienable possession

RelP(SC)
pos sessum R'
 R
 predicate

possession

NB: in the alienable case a prenominal possessor is derived by predicate inversion, which is often signaled by extra phonological material

7 Prominent internal possessors

7.1 Verbal agreement

The DP-internal possessor may control agreement on V in addition to or instead of the possessum/whole possessive DP.

(72) [t}\in n^e\text{eke-}\chi] \text{ca\-ca-z-in} \quad / \text{ca\-ca-s-kipi}\text{?nin}

their child-dim cry-pres-3sgsubj / cry-pres-3plobl

Their child is crying (Bobaljik & Wurmbrand 2002)

Itelmen (Chukotko-Kamchatkan)
NB: Bobaljik & Wurmbrand (2002) suggest that this may involve possessor raising or V agreeing with a covert benefactive

(73) Sergio naj-bi-te [occoo Benjamin-si']
    Sergio.masc see-app1-3sg.masc.obj frog.fem Benjamin.masc-fem
    Sergio saw Benjamins's frog (adapted from Ritche 2014)

Chimane (Bolivia, isolate)

The possessor is internal because

- the possessor agrees in gender with the possessee
- unlike with external possessors, the possessee can be alienable and the possessor
  does not have to be affected

NB: Ritche (2014) argues that this is, in fact, agreement with a covert object that is
co-referent with the possessor; the possessive DP is demoted to a non-object function.
The coreferent pronominal object can appear overtly. The (co)vert object is licensed by
-bi, an applicative-like morpheme that appears only if V agrees with the possessor.

Lesson from Itelmen and Chimane: all that glisters isn’t gold . . .

(74) [Nyayiny_p-or-ju karu-ngku]_{DP} ngu-yi_{p-or-lu}_{DP} tawirri� pa-ni marluka-wu
    1.dat-erg child-erg aux-1.obj-3.subj pelt hit-pst old.man-dat
    kurrurij
    car
    The children of mine threw rocks at the old man’s car
    (adapted from Meakins & Nordlinger to appear) Gurindji (Pama–Nyungan)

- V agrees with both the big DP and the possessor
- possessor and possessum form a constituent hence we have a DP-internal possessor
  because
  - they are both in front of the second-position clitic complex
  - the possessor must agree for the case of the possessum, like other nominal
    modifiers
  - regular alienable and inalienable possessives as well as benefactives have a
different morpho-syntax
  - agreement with the possessor may co-occur with agreement with a benefactive

NB: the University of Surrey has a current research project (October 2015 - September 2018) on prominent internal possessors (http://www.smg.surrey.ac.uk/projects/prominent-possessors/).

7.2 Outward definiteness

The (in) definiteness of English possessive DPs appears to depend on the (in)definiteness
of the possessor (Barker 1995, Alexiadou 2005, among others).
There is [a coat] / *[the coat] on the chair.

There is [a man’s coat] / *[the man’s coat] on the chair.

NB1: Den Dikken & Dékány (under revision) argue that the (in)definite article belongs to the possessum; the possessor is bare man.

NB2: Hungarian possessive DPs are outwardly definite even if both possessor and possessee are indefinite.

Csak egy diáknak két dolgozatát talált-a / *talált
only one student.dat two papers.acc found-def.obj / found-indef.obj
jutalomra méltonak a zsűri.
of.prize worthy the jury
The jury found only one student’s two papers worthy of a prize.
(É. Kiss 2002: p. 173) Hungarian

References


Zribi-Hertz, Anne. 2003. On the asymmetrical but regular properties of French possessive DPs. In Martine Coene & Yves D’hulst (eds.), *From NP to DP: the expression of