

Possessive noun phrases

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1 Preliminary remarks

Possessive DPs comprise a possessor and a possessum/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 under-specified 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. nʹɪb'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
I.dat the book-1sg
my book Dative

- b. az **én** könyv-em
 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** eš-s-e] ažži-ško
 he-abl friend-3sg-acc see-pres.1sg
 I see his friend. (Assmann et al. 2014) Ablative

2 Structural position: Base position

Complement of N: Szabolcsi (1992), É. Kiss (2000)

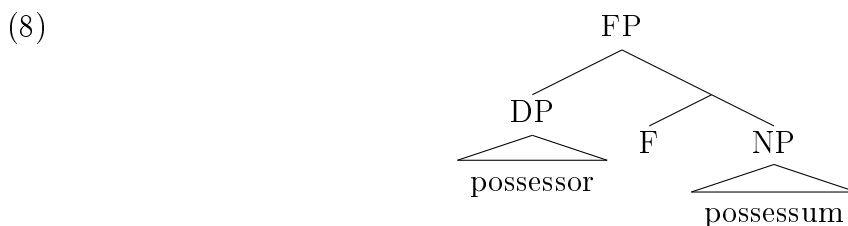


Criticism: this makes the possessor an argument, but not every noun is an argument-taking noun (cf. *Mary's book*)

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:

- *n*P: Alexiadou (2005) + it is a possibility raised by Alexiadou et al. (2007)
- dedicated PossP: Bartos (1999), Radford (2000), É. Kiss (2002), Dékány (2015), see also Alexiadou et al. (2007)



F is Poss, Argument 1:

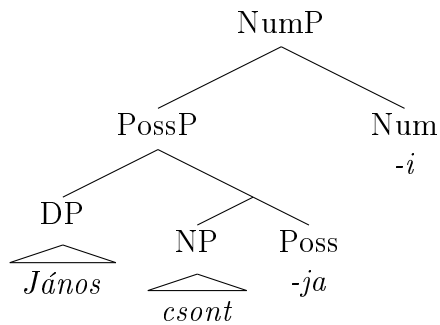
Hungarian: specific morpheme spelling out F, not present in non-possessive DPs

→ fits better if F is a dedicated Poss rather than *n*

- | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------|------|--|
| (9) | csont-ok-at
bone-pl-acc
bones | (10) | János csont- ja -i-t
John bone-poss-pl-acc
John's ones Hungarian¹ |
|-----|-------------------------------------|------|--|

¹The 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.

(11) morpheme order tells us that PossP is lower than NumP



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 (Szabolcsi 1983; 1992; 1994, Szabolcsi & Laczko 1992, Ihsane 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

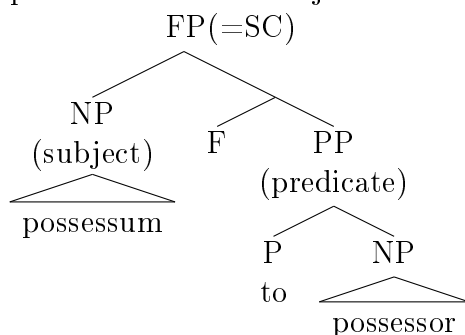
PossP is generally thought to be merged below adjectives and classifiers.

Functional sequence so far:²

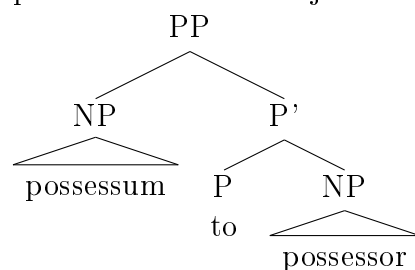
(12) $K > \text{AssplP} > D > (\text{possessor}) > (\text{relative clause}) > \text{Dem} > Q > \text{Num} > \text{Adj}$
 $> \text{Cl} > \text{Adj} > (\text{Dem?}) > \mathbf{Poss} > n > N$

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

(13) Den Dikken (1999)³
 predicate-external subject



(14) Larson & Cho (2003)
 predicate-internal subject



²Cf. from handout 2:

(i) $D > \text{Gen1} > \text{Num} > A > \text{Dem} > \text{Gen2} > \text{NP}$ (Guardiano 2009)

³NB: 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 possessum 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-poss.1sg
these three articles of mine finished yesterday
- (19) ***az** eme én cikk-em
the this I article-poss.1sg
this article of mine
- (20) ***a** [tegnap befejezett] én cikk-em
the yesterday finished I article-poss.1sg
my article finished yesterday Hungarian

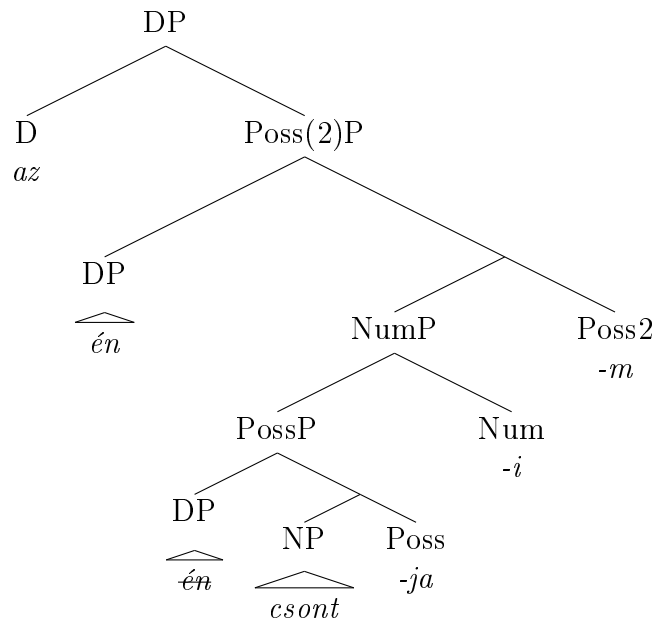
Functional sequence so far:

- (21) K > AssplP > 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
- b. csont-ja-i-d-at
bone-poss-pl-2sg-acc
your bone
- c. csont-ja-∅-i-t
bone-poss-3sg-pl-acc
his bone
- d. csont-ja-i-nk-at
bone-poss-pl-1pl-acc
our bone
- e. csont-ja-i-tok-at
bone-poss-pl-2pl-acc
your bone
- f. csont-ja-i-k-at
bone-poss-pl-3pl-acc
their bone Hungarian

(23)



Note how the possessor precedes numerals and the possessive agreement follows the plural morpheme.

3.2 Above D

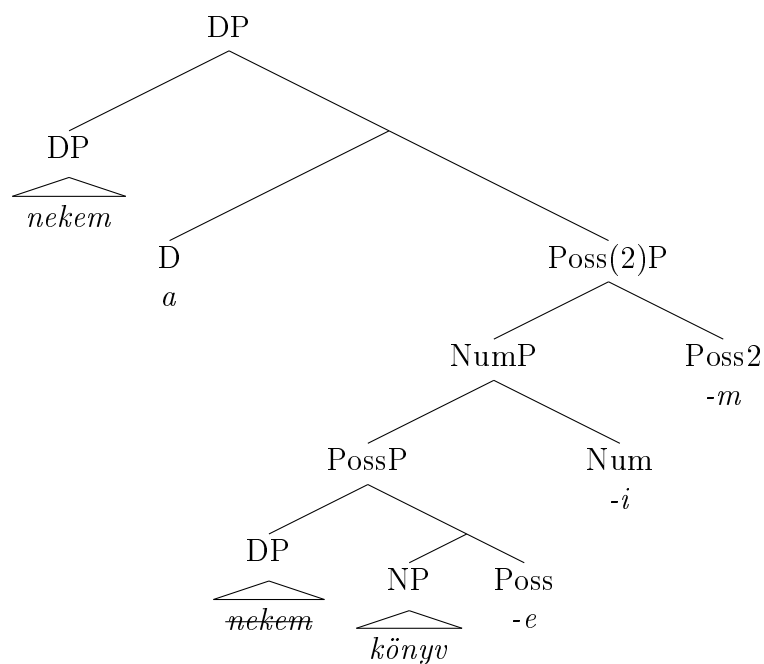
Dative possessor: above D

(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.

(25)



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 (27) (*this) John's (*this) bag
 John-dat this the bag-poss
 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-poss 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), Gavrusseva (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

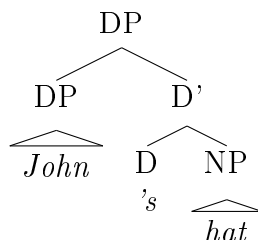
NB: É. Kiss (2000) suggest that Hungarian pronominal possessors that do co-occur with the definite article also adjoin to D.

4 Approaches to the English Saxon genitive

4.1 Structures

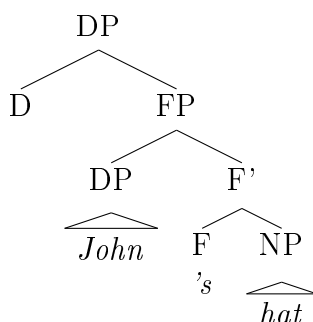
's is in D: Abney (1987), Larson & Cho (2003), Nevins & Myler (2014)

(30)



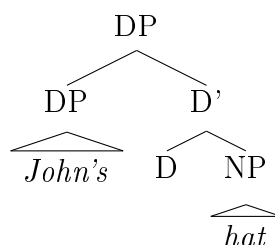
's is below D: Kayne (1993; 1994), Zribi-Hertz (2003; 1997) Den Dikken (1998), Bernstein & Tortora (2005)

(31)



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

(32)



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*)
- -r 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*)

⁴See also Lowe (2016) for a related view.

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 $n\ddot{o}$ -k-nek_i ... [_{DP} (3PL-pronoun)_i a kalap-juk]
 the woman-pl-dat ... 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 [Péter kudarc-a].
 John-dat hurt.3sg Peter failure-poss
 The failure hurts John. (É. Kiss 2014)

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

(48) János-nak fáj [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
 $1^{st}/2^{nd}$ person > 3^{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. (Haspelmath 2008)

Morphological marking on the possessum:

- (57) a. nu-wíta
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 borther (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) a. *ji syim*
I arm
my arm (Haspelmath 2008)
- b. *ji bi nggwe*
I of garden
my garden
- Abun

Bound vs. free possessor:

- (60) a. *d-zaʔ*
1sg-arm
my arm (Haspelmath 2008)
- b. *dgaʔ fu*
I pig
my pig
- Hua

A variety of syntactic ways:

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

- (61) a. *Sely m-me*
Sely 3U-mother
Sely's mother (Hedwig 2007)
- b. *amah ro-Petrus*
house poss-Petrus
Petrus' house
- Maybrat

Moroccan Arabic does not allow free state possessives with inalienables.

- (62) a. *xal al-bnt*
uncle the-girl
the girl's uncle (Ouhalla 2011)
- b. **al-xal dyal/ta' al-bnt*
the-uncle of the-girl
the girl's uncle M. Arabic

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

- (63) a. brown-eyed, six-cornered, ill-fated
b. *white-housed, *big-carred

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

- (64) inalienable possession
- ```

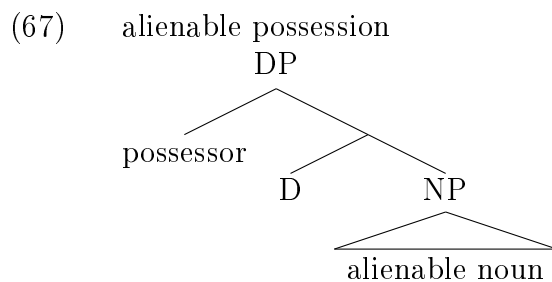
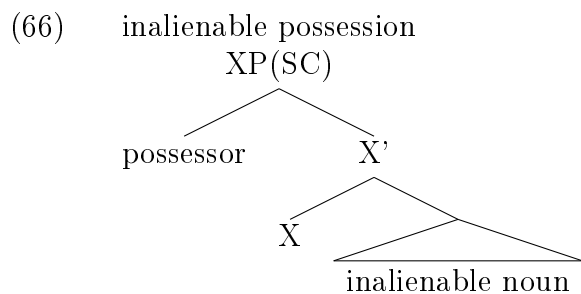
 nP
 / \
 possessor n
 / \
 root/N

```
- (65) alienable possession
- ```

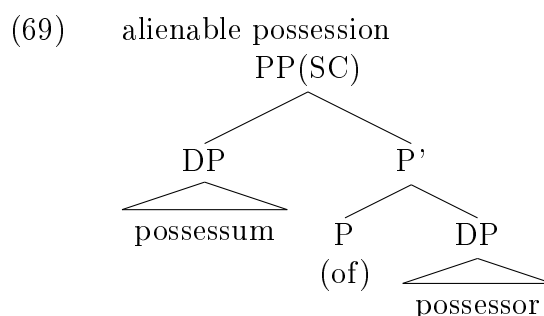
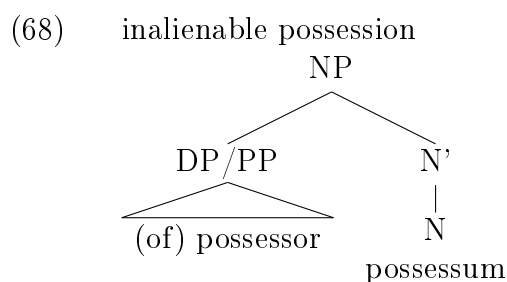
      PossP
     /  \
  possessor  Poss
             /  \
           nP
  
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⁶This semantic intuition is also present in Barker (1995).

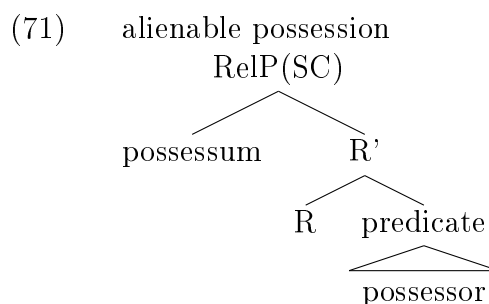
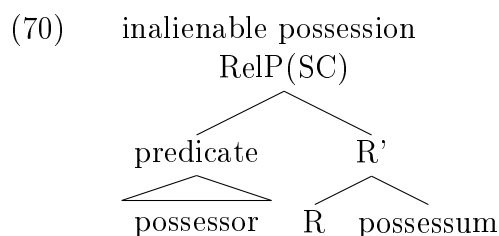
Lin (2011): inalienables involve a SC, with the possessor as a subcategorized argument; alienables are introduced via a functional head



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



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



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) [tχiin n^jen^jeke-čχ] čača-z-in / čača-s-kiپی?nin
 their child-dim cry-pres-3sg.subj / cry-pres-3pl.obl
 Their child is crying (Bobaljik & Wurmbrand 2002)

Itelmen (Chukotko-Kamchatkan)

- (75) There is [a coat] / *[the coat] on the chair.
 (76) 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.

- (77) Csak [egy diáknak két dolgozatát] talált-a / *talált
 only one student.dat two papers.acc found-def.obj / found-indef.obj
 jutalomra méltónak 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

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