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*Статтю рекомендовано до друку
кандидатом філологічних наук,
доцентом кафедри германської філології та зарубіжної літератури
Вінницького державного педагогічного університету
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Стаття надійшла до редакції 18 лютого 2017 року

UDC 81-119

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ON THE CONCEPT OF POSSESSION AND POSSESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS: A PRELIMINARY INSIGHT

*У статті, на основі неопублікованих матеріалів автора, представлено поняття «володіння» (лат. *possessio*; англ. *possession*) і засоби формальної (граматичної) кодифікації «присвійних конструкцій» в деяких з найбільш поширених європейських мов.*

*Ця тема стала провідною у типологічному мовознавстві західноєвропейської традиції починаючи з другої половини 1990-х років. Незважаючи на те, що з того часу чимало статей і монографій, присвячених різним аспектам володіння і його формальної кодифікації у різних мовах були опубліковані, вважаємо за потрібне обговорити істотні аспекти володіння та презентувати основні граматичні характеристики присвійних конструкцій як, наприклад, відношення між «*possessor*» та «*possessum*» з метою розширити ракурс дослідження.*

Ключові слова: *порівняльно-типологічне мовознавство; мовна типологія; присвійні конструкції.*

*В статье, на основе неопубликованных материалов автора, представлено понятие «владение» (лат. *possessio*; англ. *possession*) и средства формальной (грамматической) кодификации «притяжательных конструкций» в некоторых наиболее распространенных европейских языках.*

Эта тема стала ведущей в типологическом языкознании западноевропейской традиции начиная со второй половины 1990-х годов. Несмотря на то, что с тех пор немало статей и монографий, посвященных различным аспектам владения и его формальной кодификации в разных

языках были опубликованы, считаем нужным обсудить существенные аспекты владения и представить основные грамматические характеристики притяжательных конструкций как, например, отношение между «possessor» и «possessum» с целью расширить ракурс исследования.

Ключевые слова: сравнительно-типологическое языкознание; языковая типология; притяжательные конструкции.

The article is devoted to presenting the notion of «possession» (lat. possessio; eng. possession) and means of formal (grammatical) codification of «possessive constructions» which are presented in some of the most common European languages.

This topic became central to typological linguistics of the Western European tradition in the second half of the 1990s. Since then quite a few articles and monographs dealing with different aspects of possession and its formal codification in different languages have been published. So it's necessary to discuss the essential aspects of possession and to present the basic grammatical characteristics of possessive constructions, such as the relation between «possessor» and «possessum» for expanding the perspective of the study.

Key words: comparative-typological linguistics, language typology, possessive constructions.

Introduction

This topic became central to typological linguistics in the second half of the 1990s. Since then quite a few articles and monographs dealing with different aspects of possession and its formal codification in different languages have been published.

Besides the earlier, pioneering works of Seiler¹ [8; 9], at least a few monographs are worth of mention: Chappel & Mc Gregor [2]; Taylor [11]; Heine [6] etc. One can certainly agree with Seiler [10, c. 28] that there has been a rapid proliferation in studies on possession over the past decades.

In this introductory account on the concept of possession and possessive constructions we are mainly drawing on our own unpublished materials dating back to the second half of the 1990s.² We are aware that since then a lot has been written on this subject and that in this paper some claims may appear axiomatic for those typologists working on this and related fields. Nonetheless we intend with this contribution to revise our initial work with the aim of extending in future contributions its original scope and research aim.

In this article we are primarily going to introduce the concept of Possession as a philosophical-linguistic category and the terminological question related to it. Some basic grammatical characteristics of possessive constructions and the way languages such as English, German, Italian, Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian

¹ Seiler's earlier contributions on possessivity date back to 1970s.

² Cf. Del Gaudio S. Possessive Constructions in European Languages: a Comparison. Final thesis within the joint European programme "European Master's degree in Linguistics and Sociolinguistics". Università di Napoli Federico II / Freie Universität Berlin. Unpublished, 1998. Supervised by E. König.

express the Possessor – Possessum relation (cf. internal vs. external Possessor constructions) will be also discussed.

1. The Concept of Possession

Generally speaking Possession indicates a relation between someone who possesses something and the thing he/she possesses. More specifically we can say that possessive constructions describe the relationship between two entities:

- 1) the possessing entity or Possessor;
- 2) and the possessed entity or Possessum.¹

According to Seiler [8, c. 1] Possession is fundamental to human life and therefore fundamental to human language. To be able to define the concept of possession is a difficult task for the linguist. In fact he cannot base himself on a solid body of knowledge or doctrines on what possession is, «established by either philosophy or epistemology». Consequently the notion of possession is far from clear, to the extent that many linguists, among whom Weinrich [13, c. 433], deny to Possession a grammatical status altogether. «Possession» is therefore a problematic concept, which is used very differently by different scholars, and often goes undefined.

Possession expresses a relation between a human being and his kinsmen, his body parts, his material belongings, his cultural and intellectual products. In a broader sense, one can say that «Possession is the relationship between parts and wholes of an organism» [8, c. 4].

Adopting, as a starting point, Seiler's characterization, linguistic possession expresses a relationship between a substance and another substance. The former or substance A is called the Possessor and displays the following semantic traits: [+animate], [+human], and more specifically [+Ego], cf. Seiler [10].

Possession is the linguistic expression of the relation between two entities: a Possessor and a Possessum. The kind of relation between the two can be of various sorts cf. Baron et al. [1, c. 4]. One can distinguish three major dimensions of possession:

- 1) predicative possession;
- 2) attributive possession;
- 3) external possession.²

To the question whether Possession is a universal of language, Seiler [8, c. 11] maintains that linguistic possession presupposes conceptual possession and «*in the sense that conceptual possession is presupposed for the expression of possession in all languages, it is undoubtedly universal*».

In the next section before examining the formal (grammatical) codification of Possession in some major European languages such as Latin, Italian, German and the East Slavic group (Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian), we are going to briefly discuss the notion of «alienable» vs. «inalienable» with reference to the kind of Possession involved. This semantic category is useful to grasp the semantic shades involved in this category.

¹ The terminology implying the conceptualization of possession conventionally uses the capital letters to designate both the entities of Possessor and Possessum. Cf. Seiler [10, c. 39]. In the next pages we shall follow this tradition.

² External possession is also known as constructions in between and/or possessor ascension.

2. «Alienable» vs. «Inalienable» Possession

The semantic category and/or the concept of «alienable» and «inalienable» possession is fundamental for a better understanding of the problems involved in the study and comparison of possessive constructions and, more exactly, in the analysis of implicit and explicit possessive constructions.

By the term «alienable» are traditionally meant those relationships where «a possessed item is seen as having a temporary or non-essential dependence on a possessor», for example: *the man's car*; whereas the term «inalienable» is applied to those relationships where the «dependence is permanent or necessary», for example: *the man's brain* [3].

A more recent definition of alienable vs inalienable possession proposed by Crystal does not essentially vary from the one given above; he writes «[...] if a possessed item is seen as having only a temporary or non-essential dependence on a possessor, it is said to be «alienable», whereas if its relationship to the possessor is a permanent or necessary one, it is **inalienable**. Distinctions of **alienable possession** (or **alienability**) are not morphologically marked in English, but semantically the contrast can be seen in *the boy's book* (alienable) and *the boy's leg* (inalienable)» [4, c. 19].

According to Seiler, the traditional terminology is somehow misleading. He speaks of inherent possession as opposed to established possession. A relation is inherently given in one entity, i.e. the Possessum: father is inherently and necessarily someone's father or whether the relation is not inherently given and therefore has to be established by special means. The relation of Possession appears in two basic varieties: «inalienable», symbolized as (X) Father – father of X and «alienable» symbolized as (X) R (Y) = «X possesses Y». The correct terms would thus be inherent vs. established Possession. Nonetheless, for the sake of simplicity, he still prefers to use the terms in quotation marks of «alienable» vs «inalienable». For the same reason and for practical purposes we shall also stick to the already established terminology.

The difference in permanence and necessity observed in the first and second examples: *car* vs *brain* is clear. More complicated is to determine to which category would such items as *spectacles* and *hair* belong? If we consider Crystal's definition as functioning on the basis of two continua: temporality and dependence (sometimes acting in harmony, sometimes in discord) these criteria must be consulted in the setting of alienable – inalienable boundary. It becomes clear that this boundary cannot always be as distinct as implied by the examples given above. Indeed the cut-off points on the continua vary from language to language, within single semantic field of a language, and even from context to context.

Seiler [8, c. 2] holds the view that the differentiation into «alienable» vs «inalienable» possession cannot be reduced to a categorical one: «(...) *within one and the same language, a possessive relation to one and the same object can be represented as either «inalienable» or «alienable» but different languages are not likely to make this distinction in the same way*». For example in modern standard German those nouns that are «inalienably» possessed cannot, in principle, be «alienably» possessed, whereas in other non-Indo-European languages (e.g.

Cahuilla, Uto-Aztecán) those nouns that are «inalienably» possessed can also be «alienably» possessed. Therefore, concludes Seiler (ibid.): «an adequate theory of Possession must be able to resolve these apparent paradoxes».

Finally, it should be underlined that the boundary between «inalienable» / «alienable» is not distinct and permanent as they were two completely distinct class of the lexicon.¹

3. Possessive constructions

In order to express the relationship between two entities: Possessor and Possessum, European languages adopt grammatical/lexical and semantic categories, such as connectors, classifiers, case affixes, locative markers, verbs etc. This semantic-grammatical / lexical relationships are usually defined «possessive constructions». The latter definition is a useful operational instrument for the constructions under consideration.

The range of semantic properties to be attributed to possession often depends on the researchers' theoretical approach to this issue. For example, Taylor [11, c. 340] among the properties attributed to possession, enumerate the following:

1. The possessor is a specific human being;
2. The possessed is an inanimate entity, usually a concrete physical object;
3. The relation is exclusive, in the sense that a possessed entity usually has only one possessor;
4. The possessor has exclusive rights of access to the possessed;
5. The possessed is typically an object of value, whether commercial or sentimental;
6. The possessor's rights of access to the possessed are invested in him through a special transaction, such as purchase, inheritance, or gift, and remain with him until the possessor effects their transfer to another person by means of a further transaction;
7. Typically, the possession relation is long term, measured in months and years, not in minutes and seconds;
8. In order that the possessor can have easy access to the possessed, the possessed is typically located in the proximity of the possessor. In some cases, the possessed may be a permanent, or at least regular accompaniment of the possessor.

In the case that all properties are present, we have a case of what Taylor calls «paradigmatic possession». In our opinion, however, some of the above mentioned points are debatable; this is, for example the case of points 3 and 4. In the modern world, in fact, there are many instances of shared possession.

Besides the criteria mentioned above to identify the element that expresses the relationship of possession, it is possible to develop a typology of possessive constructions on other criteria. The latter can rely on the following structural-semantic properties:

- the Possessor and the Possessum belong to the same noun phrase;
- the Possessor is expressed or remains implicit;

¹ For a more up-to-date and complete account on the alienable vs inalienable possessive constructions, see: Haspelmath [5].

▪ the type of function that the Possessor and the Possessum do have in a sentence.

On the basis of these criteria it is possible to distinguish constructions with internal and external possessors. European languages tend to code, in many cases, the Possessor and the Possessum within the same noun phrase. Cf. König & Haspelmath [7, c. 1].

In this type of constructions or, internal Possessor constructions (further: IPCs), it is usually the Possessor that carries the formal mark of the possessive relation, as it can be seen by the following examples:

Internal Possessor

1. Latin

Sic transit Gloria mund-i

thus passes glory world-Gen.

«Thus the glory of the world passes»

2. Ukrainian

knyžka včytel'-ja

book teacher-Gen.

«The teacher's book»

3. Russian

ručka advokat-a

pen lawyer-Gen.

«The lawyer's pen»

Internal possessive constructions usually do not imply serious problems neither on the formal (grammatical) level nor at the semantic one since they clearly express a typical case of possession. On the other hand, the possessor does not necessarily need to be part of the same noun phrase as the possessum. It can, under certain semantic conditions, be coded in a different noun phrase. This kind of codification is known as constructions with an external Possessor (further: EPCs).

External Possessor

4. German

Mir brennt das Gesicht

me-Dat. burns the face

«My face is burning»

5. Italian

Mi fà male la testa

me-Dat. hurts the head

«I have headache»

Worth pointing out is that the dative case is used with external Possessors in many languages. In this connection it would be appropriate to examine the relation occurring between the dative and the constructions with external Possessor.

Before devoting our attention to some structural aspects of internal and external possessive constructions, for the sake of completeness, we are going to briefly introduce a third type of possible constructions: the implicit possessive construction. With the latter are meant those constructions in which the Possessor does not always have to be made explicit. Among the languages already

considered, this is particularly the case of German, Russian and Ukrainian and, to a certain extent, Italian. Here a few examples:

Implicit Constructions

6. Russian

Rebjonok podnjaj ruku

child-Nom. raised hand-Acc.

«the child raised his hand»

7. Italian

Il bambino alza la mano

The child raised the hand

«the child raised his hand»

8. German

Er hob den Arm

He raised the-Acc. arm

«He raised his arm»

The contrast immediately stands out between the English translations of the examples given where the use of the English possessive pronouns points out at the Possession and the other languages in which this relation is somehow hidden (implicit) at a first examination of the grammatical construction.

4. Internal vs External Possession

As already mentioned at the beginning of this paper the internal and external possessor constructions differ structurally in whether the Possessor and the Possessum are part of the same noun phrase or two separate sentence constituents. In IPCs, Possessor and Possessum are coded in the same NP: the Possessum as the head of the phrase and the Possessor as genitive attribute. This is more clearly visible in inflected languages such as most of Slavic languages, some Germanic languages such as German etc. but it is less evident in most romance languages such as French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. These languages, as known, recur to prepositions in order to express their syntactic relations.

In this section the most evident structural constructs in German, Italian and East Slavic languages will be illustrated and compared. Their respective verbal implications and semantic restrictions will only be briefly mentioned.

4.1. Structural Aspects

Let examine first some examples of internal Possessor constructions:

Internal Possessor

10a. Russian: *On iskal' pal'to učitel'ja;*

11a. Ukrainian: *Vin šukav pal'to včitel'ja;*

12a. Belarusian: *Ėn šukav palito nastav'nika;*

13a. Italian: (Egli) *cercò il cappotto dell'insegnante;*

14a. German: *Er suchte den Mantel des Lehrers;*

15a. English: *He looked for the teacher's coat.*

Whereas in **External Possession** the possessor is coded in a separate NP:

10b. Russian: *On nastupil prepodovatel'ju na pal'to;*

11b. Ukrainian: *Vin natupiv (nastav) vykladac'evi (/ -u) na pal'to;*

12b. Belarusian: *Ęn nastupiŭ vykladčyku na palito*;

13b. Italian: (Egli) *salì sul cappotto all'insegnante* / *gli salì sul cappotto*;

14b. German: *Er trat dem Lehrer auf den Mantel*;

15b. English: *He stood the teacher on the coat.

As it emerges in the examples reported above, Possessor and Possessum are encoded in different phrases in EPCs: *er trat (dem Lehrer) (auf dem Mantel)*; on the contrary they are encoded in the same NP in IPCs: *er suchte (den Mantel des Lehrers)*. As far as German is concerned, this statement can be confirmed by tests such as fronting and question-building:

German

14b. *Dem Lehrer trat er auf den Mantel*;

**Des Lehrers suchte er den Mantel*;

Wem trat er auf den Mantel?

These examples show that EPCs admit such transformations whereas internal possessor constructions have some semantic restrictions [12, c. 162]. The case of English is more complex. EPCs do not seem possible in English (15b). There is, however, a set of constructions, where they can be acceptable. The structural and semantic peculiarities of English will be dealt with on another occasion. In this section we shall be mainly focusing on German, Italian and East Slavic.

The German EPCs can be formed in three possible ways in which the Possessor is typically marked by the dative case.¹ For example:

16a. *Die Mutter wäscht dem Kind die Haare*;

16b. *Die Mutter putzt dem Kind die Nase*;

16c. *Mir zittern die Hände*;

16d. *Du bist mir auf den Mantel getreten*.

As it clearly emerges from the examples, the Possessum can be represented by a direct object (16a, 16b); a dative object (16c) or a locative argument marked by a prepositional phrase (16d) [7].

The exemplifications (16b-16d) also show that EPCs introduce an extra argument to the sentence which is not licensed by the valence of the verb. Thus the transitive verb *putzen* (to clean) has three arguments instead of the usual two, compare: *Die Mutter putzt die Küche*; the same can be said for the intransitive *zittern* (to tremble, to shake) which has two arguments instead of the expected one, e.g. *meine Hände zittern*.

In Italian, just as in German, there are three basic way of forming EPCs. The main formal difference is that Italian has no apparent (explicit) dative markers.² The latter being replaced by the allative preposition *a*; for example:

17. *La madre pulisce il naso al bambino*;

the mother cleans the nose:acc to the: dat child

«The mother cleans the child's nose».

¹ There is a fourth possibility of EPCs in German: the accusative marked possessor. This construction and its semantic implications will not be discussed in this paper.

² There are just relics of inflections in some personal pronouns.

the possessum can be represented either by a direct object:

18. **Mi** tremano le mani;
me:dat tremble the hands
«My hands are trembling»

or by a locative marker expressed by means of a PP:

19. (tu) **mi** sei salito **sul cappotto**;
you me:dat stepped on the coat
«You stepped on my coat»

In the last example (19) the Possessor occurs in initial position just as in German and Russian but differently from English, where the Possessor, in similar cases, cannot occur at the beginning of a sentence.

Also in **East Slavic** languages EPCs can be basically formed in three ways although the Possessor is not always marked by the dative case. In those cases when it is marked by the dative case, the construction is similar to German:

Russian

20. Mat' moet (volosy) / golovu rebjonku;
mother washes:V (hair) / head: acc. child: dat.
«the mother washes her child's hair»

A second possibility is the peculiar usage of a special-local preposition that is governed by the genitive case: u (+ copula) + gen. This construction can be parallel found in all the three East Slavic languages: Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian. Nonetheless the case of Russian is more specific since this construction replaces the "habeo-relation" altogether.

This peculiarity differentiates Russian from other Slavic languages and the majority of European languages where this relation is expressed by the verb 'to have'; compare: Eng. *I have a book*; It. (io) *ho un libro* vs. Rus. *u menja est' kniga* = lit. a book is by me. This specific areal feature distinguishes the eastern Slavic languages from the southern (Balcanic) and western (Polish, Czech, Slovak etc.) groups. For example in Polish the same sentence recurs with the verb *mieć* (to have): *mam książkę* (I have a book).¹

In Ukrainian and in Belarusian there are two possible constructions: one that uses the same pattern as in Russian (u + gen.), e.g. Ukr. *u mene je knyha*; Bel. *u mjane ěst' kniha*. The other construction is formally similar to west Slavic (and Romance): Ukr. *ja maju knyhu*; Bel. *ja maju knihu*. According to the contemporary norms of Ukrainian, both constructions are absolutely synonymic. Nevertheless the prevalence in the average speakers' usage of one construction over the other reflects diatopic and diastratic variation.

Other possibilities are the direct object constructions and the instrumental constructions:

Direct object construction

21. Ivan otkryl glaza
Ivan opened eyes: acc

¹ Also in Polish, just as in Italian, the personal pronoun subject is used only if required by the semantic-pragmatic context.

«Ivan opened his eyes»

Instrumental construction

22. Sobaka viljala xvostom

dog wagged with tail: instr.

«The dog wagged its tail»

In English, German¹ and Italian, the latter construction is expressed by means of a prepositional phrase. On the basis of the examples given above, it is evident that although the difference between IPCs and EPCs is mainly (and at first glance!) a syntactical one, the peculiarities of these constructions are to be cross-linguistically searched in the semantic domain. Sometimes the semantic difference between both types of constructions can be very subtle. It might just refer to shades of meanings that are subjectively evaluated by the speakers. In other cases, instead, the alternative may be impossible because both constructions refer to two completely different semantic-pragmatic contexts. In case that both IPC and EPC constructions are alternatively available, EPC and IPC have to be considered from the perspective of the language investigated.

Conclusion

The notion of possession and its grammatical and semantic codification still remains, to a certain extent, controversial notwithstanding several contributions on this topic over the last two decades.

Sharing Seiler's view, we agree that possession is a language universal since this concept can be assumed in all languages.

The semantic category of «inalienable» (established) vs (inherent) possession was briefly discussed since this concept is fundamental to understand the degree of possession involved in the different 'possessive constructions'. The latter is also not exempt from linguistic debates since there is no complete agreement about its appropriateness. Nevertheless this term has an undoubtable operational value for it is necessary to render the idea of the relation occurring between the entity of Possessor and that of Possessum.

After a description of the fundamental characteristics intrinsic to possessive constructions, the distinction between internal and external possessor constructions and their formal codification were also illustrated. The structural (grammatical) opposition between IPCs and EPCs was exemplified on the basis of German (Germanic), Italian (Romance) and Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian (East Slavic); English was used as a sort of 'tertium comparationis' in the gloss of the given examples.

As mentioned in the introductory lines, we mainly focused on some formal aspects of encoding possession in the compared languages. It was clear, however, that the peculiarities of these constructions are to be cross-linguistically searched in the semantic domain. This aspect will be dealt with in a separate paper.

¹ The fact that German adopts a PP instead of the instrumental construction can be explained by the fact that German has at its disposal a more limited case system, non being a "fully inflectional language".

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Стаття надійшла до редакції 20 лютого 2017 року

UDC 81'373 : 159.93-115

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PERCEPTION VOCABULARY IN A CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

В статті розглядається перцептивна номінація в зіставно-типологічній перспективі. Об'єктом дослідження слугують композитні номінації з перцептивним компонентом. Перцептивна лексика аналізується з позицій ономаціологічного підходу. В ході аналізу встановлюється ступінь