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1.1 Introduction

Possession is a universal domain, that is, any human language can be expected to have conventionalized expressions for it. Nevertheless, when working on the linguistic expression of possession one is likely to be confronted with a number of problems.

One of these problems relates to the cognitive nature of possession. Possession belongs to the kind of concepts that tend to be described as being inherently vague or fuzzy. The English verb *have* has been called ‘colorless’ (Buck 1949:740) and the possessive concepts expressed by it are said to be indeterminate; *have* has even been described as an ‘unsuitable lexical item’:

Take an expression like *a tree has leaves*. In passing we may observe the oddness of this verb *have*, which can appear in a wide variety of contexts, and express a variety of very different relations: *You have a cold, Mary has a sick grandmother, Bill has a good job, Who has the exact time?* and so on. All of these at least share the feature that if you were to take away your cold, Mary’s grandmother, or Bill’s job, you, Bill, and Mary would still be there intact. But in addition to *a tree has leaves*, we can say *a tree has branches, a tree has roots, a tree has a trunk, a tree has bark*. Take away all the things that a tree ‘has’, and there is no tree left to ‘have’ them. (Bickerton 1990:56)

In a similar fashion, possession has occasionally been described as a concept that is neither conceptually nor linguistically basic, or that is not of universal significance. Miller and Johnson-Laird say:

The ordinary business of life can be conducted without explicit recourse to the conceptual core of possession; people need only grasp the interrelations between having, buying, giving, and so forth. Indeed, many people have only the vaguest notion of the conceptual core. There may be whole societies that do not grasp the core explicitly; it may be embodied in their conventions and forms of social behavior rather than in their mental lexicons. (Miller and Johnson-Laird 1976:558)

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Irrespective of how this statement is to be interpreted, I am not aware of any language that would not dispose of some explicit means for expressing, for example, ‘This is my wife’ or ‘I have no food.’ But possessive expressions are used for a wide range of experiences and conceptual structures, and some authors therefore claim that linguistic expressions for possession are meaningless, that is, that English items like *have* or *of* are semantically vacuous (cf. Bach 1967). Furthermore, the wide range of meanings expressed by possessive constructions has induced some authors to propose fairly abstract descriptions of possession. For Langacker (1993:8), for example, the various uses of the English genitive have in common that one entity ‘is invoked as a reference point for purposes of establishing mental contact with another’, and some authors would go so far as to claim that possession simply involves any abstract relation between two entities.

We noted above that the range of meanings expressed by possessive constructions is so wide that referring to all of these meanings as ‘possessive’ ones would be misleading, and that possessive expressions are likely have other, non-possessive, meanings in addition. For example, there is no doubt that (1a) is an instance of possession, but what about (1b)?

- (1) (a) Liz has a car.
(b) Liz has a problem.

To take care of cases like (1b), alternative terms such as ‘relational’, ‘associative’, etc. have been proposed to refer to concepts that include possession but are not confined to it (cf. Creissels 1979). In a similar vein, Hawkins (1981) claims that possession, at least in English, is merely one particular case of what, following Chomsky (1972), he calls ‘intrinsic connection’; whether or not possession obtains, he argues, is determined by context and depends on world knowledge and possibly belief systems.

Nevertheless, even if possessive constructions tend to cover a wide range of relations or associations between two concepts, there are limits. For example, reversing the two participants in (1) would result in a non-sensical sentence: **A car has Liz* is not considered to be an acceptable utterance. Similarly, while *the cat's tail* is acceptable, *the tail's cat* is usually not.

1.1.1 *How to deal with possession*

In earlier accounts, interest in possession has focussed on how to delimit this domain and to define its status *vis-à-vis* other ontological entities. A number of problems have been highlighted, the main ones being discussed

in section 1.4. Among the descriptive concepts that were proposed to deal with possession, ‘control’ has perhaps most frequently been named, for obvious reasons: prototypical instances of possession imply some kind of control of the possessor over the possessee (see especially Hagège 1993:93ff.). The relevance of the notion becomes debatable in the case of inalienable possession, especially in many cases of kinship relations (e.g. *John’s father, John has three uncles*), and in the case of inanimate possessors (e.g. *the windows of this house, This house has ten windows*). Other problems surrounding the use of the term ‘control’ relate to the fact that it has been associated with at least two different senses. Control is said to involve the ability of the possessor to manipulate the possessee; the question is whether manipulation includes the possibility of discontinuing ownership or not. The phrase *my head* implies control in the former but not in the latter sense: I can manipulate my head in various ways but I cannot normally terminate ownership of it. Accordingly, while some authors argue that body-part possession does not involve control (Chappell and McGregor 1996b), others say it does (cf. Lynch 1973:6; Brugman 1988:229).

Another frequently named property of possession is contiguity of location or spatial proximity between possessor and possessee (Brugman 1988:230; Taylor 1989b:202). As we will see in section 1.3, this property is in fact relevant to canonical instances of possession, but, like control, does not qualify as a definitional criterion.

This does not exhaust the list of concepts that have been proposed to define or characterize possession. One might mention, for example, Langacker’s (1987) definition of the relation between the possessor and possessee in terms of a ‘sphere of influence’, or Brugman’s (1988:231ff.) ‘schema of interest or involvement’.

Students of law and other people draw a distinction between possession and ownership. This distinction is in fact relevant to the present topic and we will return to it in section 1.3. However, we will not deal with it in any great detail, first, because it appears to be highly culture-specific while our interest is primarily with cross-linguistic regularities. Second, there are a number of quite divergent ways in which this distinction is treated in the relevant literature. For example, while some authors argue that possession and ownership are clearly different things (e.g. Bickerton 1981), others treat the two as being essentially the same (cf. Gentner 1975:212). Rather, we will propose a more detailed classification of possessive notions that serves as a basis for further analysis. ‘Possession’ will be used as a cover term for all these notions, or any combination thereof.

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Another problem concerns the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural significance of the possessive domain. Is it in fact a universal domain, as some argue, or is it culture-specific, that is, does it occur in certain parts of the world but not in others, or did it evolve during certain periods in the history of mankind but not during others?

There is a related problem that has to do with the fact that possession has been widely studied in western societies but much less so in other parts of the world. The implications this fact may have for a theory of possession are considerable. For example, Bach (1967:479) notes that the situation in English, where we have a special verb-like form for 'have', 'is almost pathological' considering the fact that constructions in other languages corresponding to the English 'have'-sentences are notoriously varied. Bach's observation was in fact not new; rather, he was echoing what other authors had claimed earlier (e.g. Locker 1954; Löfstedt 1963).

From such observations it follows that defining possession is perhaps the most crucial problem. For example, should one aim at a definition in terms of linguistic properties? While most linguists will probably answer this question in the affirmative, there are some who are looking for an extra-linguistic definition. Two proposals in this direction are particularly noteworthy. For Seiler (1983:4–7), possession is essentially a conceptual relationship pattern: he defines possession as 'the relationship between a human being and his kinsmen, his body parts, his material belongings, his cultural and intellectual products'. What distinguishes possession from other relational domains such as location, he observes, is that it is bio-cultural. Like location, but unlike valence, it is binary, in that it involves two items, the possessor and the item possessed or, as we will say here, the possessee.

Seiler (1977b) proposes a cross-linguistically relevant distinction between two kinds of semanto-syntactic configurations, which he refers to, respectively, as the 'Agent of an Act'- and the 'Possessor of an Act'-configurations. Compared to the former, the 'Possessor of an Act'-configuration is said to have the following properties (Seiler 1977b:174–9): (i) it is time-stable (ii) it leaves the dichotomy AGENT vs. OBJECT unspecified (iii) this means, for example, that instances of this configuration have properties in common with both active and passive sentences (iv) at the same time, AGENT and POSSESSOR are mutually exclusive entities. The difference between the two configurations is portrayed in the following formulas, where (2a) represents the active and (2b) the passive form of the 'Agent of an Act'-configuration, while (2c) is the 'Possessor of an Act'-configuration (parentheses indicate that the relevant term is marginal).

- (2) Three kinds of semanto-syntactic configurations according to Seiler (1977b)
- (a) AGENT ACT (OBJECT)
 - (b) (AGENT) ACT OBJECT
 - (c) (OBJECT) ACT (POSSESSOR)

That a definition exclusively in terms of linguistic parameters would be inappropriate, is in fact argued for independently by Taylor (1989b:202–3, 1989a:679ff.). He views possession as an *experiential gestalt*, and defines it as a prototypical notion involving a constellation of properties such as the ones listed in (3).

- (3)
- (a) The possessor is a specific human being.
 - (b) The possessee is a specific concrete thing (usually inanimate), not an abstract.
 - (c) The relation between the two is an exclusive one, that is, for each possessee there is only one possessor.
 - (d) The possessor has the right to make use of the possessee; other people can make use of the possessee only with the permission of the possessor.
 - (e) The relationship of possession is a long-term one, measured in months or years rather than in minutes or hours.
 - (f) In linguistic discourse, the possessor is presented as a referential entity.

This does not conclude the list of properties that are associated with prototypical instances of possession. Taylor (1989a, 1989b:202) proposes the following properties in addition: the possessor's rights over the possessee are invested in him/her in virtue of a transaction, i.e. through purchase, donation, or inheritance, the possessor is responsible for the possessee, and the two are in close spatial proximity.

It goes without saying that not all instances of possession discussed here exhibit the entire range of these properties. Nevertheless, the more of the properties are present, the more does the expression concerned correspond to the prototypical notion of possession. Canonical instances of possession are characterized by the presence of most, if not all, of the properties listed in (3) and whenever disagreement arises as to whether a given linguistic expression is an instance of possession one may return to this characterization.

Most treatments of the subject do in fact take some highly prototypical instance as a point of departure for understanding and/or defining possession; the reader is referred to Snare (1972) and Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976) for what may be said to be classical examples. But things are more

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complex: which particular kind of possessive relationship is most ‘prototypical’ or ‘basic’ depends on the perspective one adopts and on the conceptual distinctions one decides to consider and ignore, respectively.

1.1.2 *The present volume*

The objective of this work is to study why possession is expressed the way it is. Thus, our concern is with explanation. The observations to be made are based on findings on grammaticalization, in particular on the following assumptions:

- (i) The structure of grammatical categories is predictable to a large extent once we know the range of possible cognitive structures from which they are derived. Underlying this claim there are assumptions of the following kind:
- (ii) Grammatical categories can be traced back to semantically concrete source concepts.
- (iii) For each grammatical category there is only a small pool of possible source concepts.
- (iv) While the choice of sources is determined primarily by universal ways of conceptualization, it is also influenced by other factors, especially by areal forces.

These assumptions are based on research carried out in the course of the last decade within the paradigm of grammaticalization theory; the reader is referred to the relevant works for more details (especially Traugott and Heine 1991a, 1991b; Heine, Claudi, and Hünemeyer 1991; Hopper and Traugott 1993; Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994; Stolz 1991, 1994). We will argue here that most expressions in the languages of the world for what corresponds to ‘have’-constructions in English can be described as conforming to the assumptions just made.

The label ‘have’-construction to be used throughout this book is suggestive of a Euro-centric perspective according to which verbs meaning ‘have’ form the or a primary means of expressing possession (Hilary Chappell, p.c.). As we shall see below, a verb corresponding to the notion of a ‘have’-verb in many European languages is much less common than one might be inclined to believe.

The book also falls within the scope of what is sometimes referred to as typological universal grammar as developed by Greenberg (1963b; see also 1978a, 1978b), Givón (1979, 1995), Comrie (1981), Mallinson and Blake

(1981), Bybee (1985), Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994), Croft (1991), and others. What these works have in common in particular is that they aim at establishing cross-linguistic regularities based on world-wide samples of languages. At the same time, however, the approach used here differs from that tradition in arguing that language structure is derivative of the cognitive forces that gave rise to it and, hence, our concern is primarily with extra-linguistic forces.

From what has just been said it follows that, more than in previous works on typological universal grammar, our concern will be with explanation, more precisely, with external explanation. The main explanatory parameters used are cognition and diachrony.

Cognition involves the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of knowledge. We will confine ourselves to one aspect of cognition, namely to the interrelationship between different concepts and the way linguistic expressions used for one of them are extended to also refer to other concepts. We will call the process concerned conceptual transfer. Our task will be to identify and describe salient processes of conceptual transfer relating to the domain of possession and, by doing so, to understand why possessive constructions are formed the way they are.

Conceptual transfer takes place in time and, hence, will be treated as a diachronic notion. Our findings thus are based on hypotheses on diachronic development. This means that the processes that we shall be concerned with can be accounted for with reference to diachronic principles, and that our findings are falsifiable by means of diachronic evidence. This also means that the terminology employed must be in accordance with that conventionally used in works on historical linguistics. Thus, labels such as derivation and reconstruction, even if they are meant primarily to refer to synchronic language use, must not be at variance with the interpretation these terms would receive if used in a strictly diachronic sense.

Thus, the evidence on which our hypotheses rest are linguistic on the one hand, and diachronic on the other. The methodology employed is simple. Suppose we discover that there is a linguistic form somewhere in Latin America, eastern Asia, or Europe which simultaneously denotes possession and verbal aspect; then we are led to conclude that the former is historically prior. The evidence for such a conclusion is twofold. First, it is based on attested cases of diachronic change; we know, for example, that the English construction exemplified in (4a) preceded constructions of the type (4b) in time. Second, it is based on generalizations on grammaticalization, according to which a linguistic item, like English *have*, that combines the functions

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of both a main verb and an auxiliary, was first used in its former capacity before its use was extended to express auxiliary functions (see especially Heine 1993; Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994).

- (4) (a) He has a car.
(b) He has left.

The relationship between structures like (4a) and (4b) can be described and accounted for in a principled way, as has been done in standard works on grammaticalization. Since we are dealing with a process that either has or has not taken place, such an account is falsifiable. While our goal is to account for synchronic language structure, the findings presented are based on, and hence must be in accordance with, diachronic facts.

One of the key notions proposed is that of event schema, which will be introduced at the beginning of chapter 2. As we shall see there, event schemas are propositional in nature, they relate to ontological domains such as action, location, etc., and they are abstracted from the way we experience our environment and describe our experiences when communicating with other members of our species. There is no evidence to suggest that event schemas are innate structures; what Comrie observes on language universals also applies here: ‘innateness remains empty because it is just a name given to the set of language universals, and using this name should not blind us to the fact that a name is not an explanation’ (Comrie 1981:24). The relevance of event schemas cannot only be manifested by means of linguistic evidence; as we shall see in chapter 5 (5.2), essentially the same kind of notion has been identified in anthropological works. Furthermore, we will distinguish between source schemas, that is, event schemas providing the structural templates of transfer, and target schemas, which describe the outcome of transfer.

The book is based mainly on the analysis of published sources on the language of possession. Accordingly, the data presented are accessible via the references provided. In addition, data elicited from field research carried out by the author on African languages, most of all on Ewe and Manding, and from a quantitative survey, have been utilized. The latter survey was carried out specifically to ascertain that the description presented is in accordance with the linguistic facts to be found across genetic and areal boundaries.

The work is divided into five chapters. In this introductory chapter 1, seven salient possessive notions are distinguished. These notions serve as a basis for cross-linguistic comparisons, to be carried out in subsequent

chapters. In 1.4, a catalogue of questions that have been raised in previous works on possession is presented.

Chapter 2 forms the heart of the book, and it is considerably longer than the remaining chapters. In this chapter, a catalogue of event schemas that commonly serve as structural templates for the expression of possession is identified. In section 2.2, some effects of the process leading from event schema to possessive construction are discussed. The semantic structure of possessive constructions is examined in 2.3 on the basis of the notions proposed in chapter 1. In 2.5 and 2.6, the conceptual skeleton presented in 2.1 is put into perspective by relating the schemas and possessive notions to language development and language structure.

The book is based essentially on the analysis of predicative possession, more specifically of 'have'-constructions. Nevertheless, chapter 3 is devoted to some issues relating to the grammaticalization of the main patterns of attributive possession. As will be argued there, the same kind of schemas that can be held responsible for the growth of predicative possession can also be held responsible for attributive possession.

While possession is analysed with reference to the forces that give rise to its expression, chapter 4 illustrates that possession may itself be the source for even more abstract concepts, the example looked at being verbal aspect. The relevance of the approach adopted in this book is the topic of the final chapter 5, by relating the present framework to alternative approaches and views. In section 5.4, an attempt is made to answer the questions raised in the introductory chapter (1.4). The main findings made in the course of the book are briefly summarized and some conclusions drawn in the final section 5.5.

1.2 Distinctions

A wide range of classifications have been proposed to account for the various manifestations of possession. One of them is based on conceptual properties of either the possessor or the possessee, or both. With regard to the former one could distinguish, for example, between human possessors (e.g. *I have a house*) and non-human possessors (*This house has two bedrooms*); with regard to the possessee, a distinction between concrete possession (*I have two cats*), social possession (*I have two sisters*), and abstract possession (*I have no time*) could be made. Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976) distinguish between three kinds of possession, which are (a) inherent, (b) accidental, and (c) physical possession. The way these three differ from one

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another can be demonstrated with the following English example volunteered by them (1976:565): (a) *He owns an umbrella*, (b) *but she's borrowed it*, (c) *though she doesn't have it with her*. As we will see below, the use of the term 'inherent' is at variance with the way the term is used by other authors.

1.2.1 *Alienable vs. inalienable and other distinctions*

A particularly widespread distinction to be observed in the languages of the world concerns what is commonly referred to as that between inalienable and alienable possession. A wealth of alternative terminologies and characterizations have been proposed. The inalienable category has also been called, for example, 'intimate', 'inherent', 'inseparable', or even 'abnormal', while the alienable categories have been labelled 'non-intimate', 'accidental', 'acquired', 'transferable', or 'normal' (cf. Voeltz 1976; Ultan 1978; Seiler 1983; Nichols 1988, 1992:116ff.; Chappell and McGregor 1996b). Nevertheless we will use the traditional labels even if they are not adequate in every respect.

All evidence that has become available so far suggests that whenever there is a language having a grammatical distinction between an inalienable and an alienable category, then the former is a closed class, that is, its membership is limited, while the latter category is an open class (Nichols 1988:562; see 3.4 below).

Superficially, the distinction is a straightforward one: Items that cannot normally be separated from their owners are inalienable, while all others are alienable. Thus, items belonging to any of the following conceptual domains are likely to be treated as inalienable:

- (a) Kinship roles.
- (b) Body-parts.
- (c) Relational spatial concepts, like 'top', 'bottom', 'interior', etc.
- (d) Parts of other items, like 'branch', 'handle', etc.
- (e) Physical and mental states, like 'strength', 'fear', etc. (cf. Lichtenberk 1985:105).
- (f) Nominalizations, where the 'possessee' is a verbal noun, for example 'his singing', 'the planting of bananas'.

In addition, there are a number of individual concepts in a given language that may also be treated inalienably, such as 'name', 'voice', 'smell', 'shadow', 'footprint', 'property', 'home', etc.

Based on Lévy-Bruhl's (1914) pioneering description of inalienability,