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Agreement in Masai and the syntax of possessive DPs (I)

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Agreement in Maasai and the Syntax of Possessive DPs (I)*

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1 Introduction

Possessive DPs are “complex” in the sense that they involve two distinct nominal expressions as components. In this paper I address the issue of characterizing the nature of the syntactic relation holding between these two nominal expressions in possessives whose possessum is arguably not a syntactic argument-taking category. This amounts to providing an account of what licenses the insertion of the possessor in the derivation of possessive DPs and in accounting for any further steps in the syntactic derivation which lead to the structure which undergoes Spell-Out.

I discuss one existing proposal, that of den Dikken (1998), and argue that it does not provide a proper analysis of the syntax of possessive DPs. In particular, I show that den Dikken’s proposal that DP-internal Predicate Inversion drives the syntactic derivation of possessives after the insertion of possessors leads to a contradiction in his system.

However I argue that den Dikken is correct in suggesting that the possessor is inserted in the derivation of possessive DPs as complement of an empty preposition in the PP-predicate of a small clause whose subject is the possessum. I substantiate this claim using agreement data from Maasai, which follow naturally from the assumption of den Dikken’s account for the insertion of possessors in the syntactic derivation of possessive DPs.

Finally, I outline two alternative accounts for the derivation of prenominal possessors in English and briefly address the issue of whether the postnominal

*The data discussed in this paper were collected during the 1999/2000 Field Methods class at UCLA led by Hilda Koopman. I would like to thank Hilda and my fellow classmates for discussion of the Maasai facts, and Misha Becker for helping me with proofreading. The Maasai data collected during the class can be accessed in electronic format at the address http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/koopman/maasai/. This research could have not been conducted without the assistance (and patience) of our Maasai consultant, Saning’o Milliary Ngidongi.

I use the term possessive DPs (or possessives) to refer to DPs like the city’s destruction, a friend of John’s, John’s dog, etc. which are alternatively labeled genitives in the literature. With possessum I indicate the nominal component which determines the sortal properties of a possessive DP, e.g. dog in John’s dog. I use possessor to indicate the other nominal component in a possessive DP, e.g. John in John’s dog.
position of possessors in Maasai is the product of further movement operations preceding Spell-Out or reflects the absence of overt syntactic derivation.²

2 Two Issues in the Syntax of Possessive DPs

2.1 Licensing of Possessors

It has long been pointed out in the literature that possessives most likely do not constitute a syntactically unitary category.³ In some possessive DPs the possessum noun can be argued to be a syntactic argument-taking category. For example, Grimshaw (1990) argues that in possessives like the city's destruction the possessum noun destruction—a deverbal process nominal in Grimshaw's terminology—is a syntactic argument-taking category, i.e. a category which, like verbal heads, projects an argument structure.

Accounting for the insertion of the possessor in the syntactic derivation of possessives of this kind is quite unproblematic: the possessor DP is selected as syntactic argument of the possessum noun in a structural configuration like (1). Whatever licensing mechanism accounts for the insertion of, say, direct objects in the syntactic derivation of sentences containing a transitive verb automatically accounts for the licensing of the possessor in DPs of this kind.

\[(1) \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{DP} \quad \text{N} \quad \text{destruction} \quad \text{the city}\]

On the other hand, in many possessive DPs the possessum noun is arguably not a syntactic argument-taking category. For example, the noun dog which constitutes the possessum in a DP like John's dog does not project an argument structure under standard analyses. The licensing of the possessor in DPs of this kind cannot be accounted for along the lines proposed for the first class of possessive DPs: the semantic relation holding between possessor and possessum in possessives of the second type must be encoded in the syntax in a structural configuration different from (1).⁴

²A more extensive discussion of these issues can be found in Storto ([to appear]).

³A syntactic analysis of possessive DPs like a friend of John's in English (sometimes called double genitives in the literature) is outside the scope of this paper. For some discussion see Storto (2001) and the references mentioned therein.

⁴The case of possessive DPs whose possessum noun denotes a semantic argument-
Minimally, an analysis of possessive DPs of this second type should account for the fact that the possessor in these DPs is semantically interpreted as a restrictive modifier of the possessum. Intuitively, the meaning of a DP like John's dog is not built by applying the meaning of the (phonologically empty) definite determiner to the meaning of the predicate 'dog' and then predicating that the relevant entity stands in some (possessive) relation to John. Rather, it is the meaning of the definite determiner to be applied to the set of dogs which stand in some relation to John, a set which is derived by applying the restriction imposed by the possessor to the denotation of the predicate contributed by the possessum. John's dog denotes the unique entity which satisfies the predicate 'dog that belongs to John' rather than the unique entity which satisfies the predicate 'dog' and happens to satisfy the predicate 'belong to John' as well.

2.2 Word Order in Possessive DPs

However, once it is assumed that possessive DPs do not constitute a syntactically unitary class the fact that, by and large, the surface form of possessive DPs seems to be quite uniform in each language must be explained. That is, the fact that in languages like English the Saxon Genitive form is available for possessives of both types distinguished above suggests that some formal requirements trigger further syntactic derivation for both kinds of possessive DPs, which end up having a similar structure at Spell-Out. These formal requirements should be properly identified in order to account for the syntactic derivation of possessives.

A related issue is that of accounting for the crosslinguistic variation in the form of possessive DPs. Under the assumption that the mechanism licensing the insertion of the possessor in the derivation of possessive DPs is the same in typologically different languages, the task is to identify the point at which the syntactic derivations of possessives in languages like e.g. English and Italian diverge, with the result that in general possessors appear in prenominal position in the first language and in postnominal position in the second language. **taking** category but is commonly assumed not to project a syntactic argument structure—e.g. deverbal result nominals (see Grimshaw (1990)) and relational nouns—is left aside for future investigation.
3 Den Dikken's (1998) proposal

3.1 DP-internal Small-clause Predication

Den Dikken (1998) proposes that the structure underlying possessive DPs like *John's dog* is a small clause encoding a predication relation between the NP projected by the possessum noun and a PP predicate containing the possessum DP.\(^5\) Thus, the basic syntactic configuration which combines the possessum and the possessor in possessives of this kind is as sketched in (2).

(2) \[ \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{XP} \\
\text{NP} \\
\text{dog} \\
\text{X'} \\
\text{X} \\
\text{PP} \\
\text{P}_{[\text{Dat}]} \\
\text{DP} \\
\text{John}
\end{array} \]
\]

In the structure proposed by den Dikken the possessor is the syntactic argument of an empty Dative preposition within the predicate PP which modifies the NP headed by the possessum noun. The insertion of the possessor DP in the derivation is thus not licensed directly by the possessum noun as in the case of possessives like *the city's destruction*, which is consistent with the different syntactic properties of the possessum noun in the two cases.

Furthermore, the structure in (2) is conceptually adequate in that it accounts for the interpretation of the possessor in DPs like *John's dog* in a straightforward way. The possessor DP behaves like a modifier of the possessum because it is part of the PP predicate which applies to the NP projected by the possessum. And the *restrictive* nature of the modification follows from the fact that the modified category is smaller than a full DP.\(^6\)

\(^5\)In this paper I cannot review other influential analyses of possessive DPs proposed in the literature, e.g. Chomsky (1970), Chomsky (1986), Kayne (1994). In my opinion none of these analyses provides a satisfactory account for the licensing of the possessor and the syntactic derivation for the kind of possessives discussed in the text.

\(^6\)In (2) this category is assumed to be a NP, but it is quite likely that the subject of the small clause is a bigger functional category which includes the possessum NP.
3.2 DP-internal Predicate Inversion

Den Dikken's syntactic analysis of possessive DPs is modeled on similar accounts proposed for the analysis of possessive constructions at the sentential level. Freeze (1992), Kayne (1993) and den Dikken (1997), among others, propose that possessive sentences like (3a) are built on an underlying small-clause predication relation holding between the possessor and the possessor, and that possessive *have* is not a lexical verb but a category derived by incorporation of material from the basic small clause into a higher syntactic head.\(^7\)

\[(3) \quad \text{a. John has a dog.} \]
\[\quad \text{b. } [\text{IP} \ldots [\text{XP} [\text{DP a dog}] [\text{X}, X [\text{PP P [DP John]]]])] \]
\[\quad \text{c. } [\text{IP} [\text{PP tj [DP John]]}, i [\text{Pj+xk+1 (=HAVE)}] [\text{XP [DP a dog]} [\text{X tj}]]] \]

Den Dikken (1997) proposes that the possessor DP constitutes the subject of the small clause, of which a Dative PP predicate containing the possessor DP is predicated. The basic structure underlying possessive constructions is thus as in (3b). The sentence in (3a) is derived from this basic structure by successive-cyclic movement of the predicate PP containing the possessor to Spec,IP in order to satisfy the EPP feature of the syntactic head I.

Den Dikken argues that this is an instance of *Predicate Inversion*, a movement operation that is restricted in its application to predicates of small clauses in complement position. Movement of the predicate across the subject of the small clause constitutes a violation of the *Minimal Link Condition* (MLC, see Chomsky (1995), ch.3) unless the head X of the small clause incorporates into the first functional head (F) which dominates the small clause. In this case the minimal domain of the predicate is extended and the position of the subject and Spec,FP (the intermediate target for movement to Spec,IP) are rendered *equidistant* from the extraction site.\(^8\) The complex functional head determined by incorporation of the head of the small clause is in general spelled out as the copula *be*,\(^9\) but in the case of possessive sentences like (3a) the preposition

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\(^7\)The exact implementation of these basic intuitions differs considerably in the various accounts proposed. In the text I discuss only den Dikken's (1997) proposal, but I invite the reader to compare it to the analyses proposed by the other authors.

\(^8\)The analysis rests on the assumption that Predicate Inversion is an instance of A-movement. The correctness of this assumption is argued for in den Dikken (1997).

\(^9\)The contrast in (i)–(ii) is predicted if the copula is a derived functional complex:

i. I consider a picture of a politician (to be) the cause of the riot.
ii. I consider the cause of the riot *(to be)* a picture of a politician.
which heads the PP predicate incorporates in this complex head as well and the resulting category is spelled out as *have.*

Returning to the case of possessive DPs now, den Dikken (1998) proposes that Saxon Genitives in English are derived essentially along the same lines. That is, the predicate PP containing the possessor in (2) undergoes Predicate Inversion within the possessive DP, which again requires incorporation of the syntactic heads X and P into the first (DP-internal) functional head F which dominates the small clause. The resulting complex head is spelled out as 's in English possessive DPs: 's is the copula in the nominal domain. The relevant step in the derivation of a DP like *John’s dog* is depicted in (4).

(4)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{FP} \\
\text{PP}_2 \\
\text{DP} \\
\text{P}_1+X_3+F (=’s) \\
\text{XP} \\
\text{NP} \\
\text{X’} \\
\text{dog} \\
\text{t}_3 \\
\text{t}_2
\end{array}
\]

3.3 A Summary and a Problem

Let me take stock. Den Dikken’s (1998) analysis of possessive DPs proposes the following answers to the two issues pointed out in §2: (i) the possessor can be inserted in the syntactic derivation as complement of a phonologically-empty preposition in a PP predicate which modifies the NP headed by the possessum noun in a small-clause configuration; (ii) further syntactic derivation of possessive DPs involves DP-internal Predicate Inversion, which displaces the PP predicate to a higher position within the possessive DP.

It seems to me that the second answer proposed by den Dikken is quite problematic. Indeed, the very assumption of the occurrence of PI within DP leads to an argument against den Dikken’s analysis of the derivation of possessive DPs.10 The occurrence of Predicate Inversion at the sentential level can be, and generally is, analyzed as an alternative to the “uninverted” derivation,

Head incorporation is necessary to derive “inverted” predicative sentences, and this translates into an obligatorily overt copula in sentences like (ii).

10 As a matter of fact, it can be argued that the analysis of possessives proposed in den Dikken (1998) faces a number of other empirical and conceptual problems, as well.
which involves raising of the subject of the small clause to Spec, IP in order to check the EPP feature on I. As argued by den Dikken domain-extending incorporation of the head of the small clause licenses the possibility of raising the predicate, instead, in order to check the same feature on I.

But then it is not clear why in the DP-internal case only the attested “inverted” structure is licensed in English: the “uninverted” structure in which the possessor follows the possessor without any overt “nominal copula” intervening between the two is ungrammatical (e.g. *the dog John). If both the subject NP and the predicate PP can move to check some EPP-like feature on a higher functional head, this second structure should be derivable. On the other hand, if the subject NP is not attracted by the higher functional head it should not constitute—under reasonable (relativized) minimality assumptions—an intervener for movement of the PP: raising of PP would not require head incorporation and an overt “nominal copula”’s should not be required in the English “inverted” structure. Den Dikken’s analysis seems to derive a contradiction.\footnote{The “uninverted” structure is not available in English possessive sentences either (e.g. *The book is John.). But this does not redeem den Dikken’s analysis of possessive DPs: it rather shows that the analysis of possessive sentences in terms of Predicate Inversion is problematic as well.}

4 Evidence from Maasai

The problems inherent to den Dikken’s account of the derivation of possessive DPs in terms of Predicate Inversion could lead one to reject his proposal for the licensing of possessors as well. Indeed, one might claim, these problems are at least in part due to the need in den Dikken’s theory to “invert” the position of possessum and possessor in languages with prenominal possessors like English: in the basic structure (2) that he proposes the possessor is inserted in the syntactic derivation in a position lower than the possessum.

However I do not think that this is a necessary conclusion. Den Dikken’s proposal for the licensing of possessors is conceptually independent from his account of the further syntactic derivation of possessives, and this proposal is supported by both conceptual and empirical considerations.

In §3.1 I argued that the structure in (2) is conceptually adequate in that it accounts for the semantic role of possessors in possessive DPs in a very straightforward way: the possessor behaves like a restrictive modifier of the possessum because it is part of a PP which is predicated of the possessum NP. In this section I argue that den Dikken’s proposal for the licensing of possessors is empirically supported as well. In particular, I discuss some agreement
facts from Maasai, a Nilotic language spoken in Kenya and Tanzania, and argue that the common agreement patterns within possessive DPs and PPs in that language follow naturally under the assumption that the basic structure of possessive DPs is (2). This can be taken as evidence in favor of the proposal.

4.1 The Morphosyntax of Maasai DPs

Before getting to the relevant data, some notes on the general features of Maasai DP morphosyntax are in order. In general modifiers follow the noun in the surface word order in Maasai DPs (5) and determiners cannot be separated from the noun by intervening material. These facts can be assumed to indicate that the head noun raises to a high position in Maasai DPs.

(5) a. èmësà sidài
DETsg.m- table nice
b. èmësà nàdò
DETsg.m- table red
'the/a nice table'
'the/a red table'

Nouns in Maasai are morphologically inflected for gender and number and for Case, and in general DPs display a very rich array of agreement phenomena between their constituents. For example, determiners agree with their complement noun in gender and number (6).

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12 The data I present are from the Kisongo dialect, which is spoken in Tanzania.
13 I call morphemes like en, in, ol and il (the vowel in these morphemes undergoes changes due to a general process of ATR harmony) determiners because they appear in complementary distribution with demonstratives (see (i)–(ii) in fn. 14). But these morphemes appear on indefinite predicate nominals too (see (i) in fn. 23), which seems to indicate that their presence does not entail a full DP structure. Furthermore, they do not specify the definiteness value of the DP on which they appear (see (5)–(6)).
14 The modifier other can appear between the head noun and determiners:

i. 5lèkàidìà
DETsg.m other

ii. èlè kàidìà
DETsg.m this

5. Modifiers agree with the noun they modify as well. "True" adjectives display only Case and number agreement. Modifiers like (n)àdò in (5b) which display gender agreement can be argued to derive from relative clauses (Tucker and Mpaayei (1955)).
MaaSAI AND THE SYNTAX OF POSSESSIVES

(6) a. èmèsà
        èn- mèsà
        DETsg.f- table
        'the/a table'

b. ñùmèsàf
        in- mèsà- í
        DETpl.f- table- pl
        'the/some tables'

c. ðldìfà
        ðl- ðìà
        DETsg.m- dog
        'the/a dog'

d. ðldìafì
        il- ðìà- in
        DETpl.m- dog- pl
        'the/some dogs'

Maasai nouns display an alternation between two Case forms: the form of subjects of transitive verbs (Nominative) and the form of direct objects of transitive verbs (Accusative), which are marked through tonal morphology.¹⁶

4.2 Agreement in Maasai Possessive DPs

In this paper I focus only on a subset of the agreement phenomena which take place within Maasai DPs.¹⁷ In particular, I concentrate on what I call the "possessive agreement morpheme" which appears in Maasai possessive DPs.

Full-DP possessors in Maasai follow the possessum and are preceded by a complex morpheme which marks agreement in gender with the possessum and agreement in number with the possessor:¹⁸

(7) a. èmèsà/ñùmèsàf èmlîtòk/ìlëë
        èn- mèsà/ in- mèsà- í è- èn- kitòk /
        DETsg.f- table / DETpl.f- table- pl POSSsg.f- DETsg.f- womanACC /
        è- ìl- lëë
        POSSpl.f- DETsg.m- manACC
        'the woman's/the man's table/tables'

¹⁶Unless otherwise specified, when discussing DPs in isolation I give them inflected for Accusative, which is used as the citation form by native speakers.

¹⁷Here I do not address phenomena like number and gender agreement on the morpheme which introduces relative clauses, the Case agreement morphology on the plural possessive and relative clause morphemes, etc. See Koopman ([to appear]) and Storto ([to appear]b) for a more detailed discussion of agreement phenomena in Maasai DPs.

¹⁸I apologize to the reader for the graphical complexity of the examples below. Each item collapses four DPs in order to show that the form of the possessive agreement morpheme does not distinguish between the singular vs. plural form of a possessum and between a masculine vs. feminine possessor (dog and man are masculine and table and woman are feminine). A more user-friendly synopsis of the data is given in table 1.
b. ɔldià/ɔldiàn leŋgitok/ɔlëë
   ɔl-  dià / il-  dià- in lë-  èn-  kitok /
   DET<sg.m> dog / DET<pl.m> dog- pl POSS<sg.m> DET<sg.f> woman<ACC>
   lë-  ɔl-  léë
   POSS<sg.m> DET<sg.m> man<ACC>
   'the woman's/the man's dog/dogs'

c. ēmèsà/įmèsā f ŋığituak/ɔlëwä
   èn- mèsà / in- mèsà- f õû- in- kituak /
   DET<sg.f> table / DET<pl.f> table- pl POSS<pl.f> DET<pl.f> woman<ACC>
   ôû- il- léwa
   POSS<pl.f> DET<pl.m> men<ACC>
   'the women's/the men's table/tables'

d. ɔlɗìÀ/ɔldiàn lûŋgitûak/ɔlɘwä
   ɔl-  dià / il-  dià- in ôû- in- kituak /
   DET<sg.m> dog / DET<pl.m> dog- pl POSS<pl.m> DET<pl.f> woman<ACC>
   ôû- il- léwa
   POSS<pl.m> DET<pl.m> men<ACC>
   'the women's/the men's dog/dogs'

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>feminine possessum</th>
<th>masculine possessum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular possessor</td>
<td>è-</td>
<td>ë-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural possessor</td>
<td>ôû-</td>
<td>lôû-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Shape of the possessive agreement morpheme in Maasai

4.3 An Analysis of the Maasai Facts

Of the two components of the complex possessive agreement morpheme only the part which marks gender agreement with the possessor seems to be peculiar to possessive DPs. That is, whereas (the presence vs. absence of) the morpheme ū- as a marker of gender agreement occurs only in possessives, the alternation between the morphemes è- and ôû- to mark number agreement occurs in other Maasai syntactic constructions. In particular, the alternation between the morphemes è- and ôû- occurs within Maasai PPs to mark number agreement between the preposition ū-\(^{19}\) and its complement DP.

\(^{19}\)This is the only preposition in Maasai; obviously its semantics is quite "bleached."
This state of affairs is easily accounted for under den Dikken’s (1998) proposal for the licensing of possessors. Number agreement with the possessor in Maasai possessive DPs is simply an instance of the more general phenomenon of number agreement between a preposition and its complement: the agreement relation is established within the PP predicate in the small clause in (2).

Since the morphological alternation 0/1- is peculiar to possessive DPs, it seems correct to assume that gender agreement with the possessor is determined within the small clause encoding possession as well. A plausible hypothesis is that agreement is established in the Spec-Head configuration between the head X of the small clause and the possessor NP sitting in Spec,XP.20 The basic structure of possessive DPs in Maasai would then be roughly as in (9).21

20Noam Chomsky (MIT lectures, Spring 2001) argues that agreement cannot be determined in a Spec-Head relation because heads can entertain syntactic relations only with nodes which are lower in the tree. I do not have much to contribute to this debate at the moment, but I want to point out that my argument in favor of den Dikken’s proposal is independent from the theoretical stance one holds about the syntactic correlates of morphological agreement. Given a structure like (9), any account of number agreement within Maasai PPs provides an account for number agreement in possessives.

21Sandra Chung (p.c.) suggests that a structure like (9) predicts that possessive DPs of the form [[[DET possessum1] CONJ [DET possessum2]] AGR possessor] should be ungrammatical in Maasai. I have not tested this prediction, but it is unlikely that the data would be conclusive. I have already pointed out (fn.13) that Maasai “determiners” do not necessarily indicate a full-DP structure. Furthermore, even in English there are cases in which the determiner the appears on both NPs in a conjunction but seems to apply only once to the conjunction of the two NPs in the semantics (e.g. the man and the woman who met at the party; I owe this observation to Rajesh Bhatt).
To summarize, both the number and the gender agreement morphology which occur in Maasai possessive DPs can be accounted for in a very straightforward way within the basic structure suggested by den Dikken (1998) for the licensing of possessors. In particular, the parallel occurrence of the same number agreement morphology within PPs to mark agreement between the preposition and its complement DP provides empirical support for den Dikken's proposal that possessors can be projected as complements of an empty preposition in a PP predicate which modifies the possessum NP.22

5 The Derivation of Possessive DPs

5.1 The Case of English

The surface word order of possessive DPs in Maasai is compatible with the assumption that the structure in (9) undergoes very little (if any) further syntactic derivation. On the other hand, for the case of English it must be assumed that, if possessors are projected in a small-clause structure like that proposed in (2), some movement operation applies to the possessor DP (or a phrase containing it): possessors in English appear in prenominal position.

One could try to account for English possessives in terms of the presence of an EPP-like feature on some functional head above XP which triggers overt movement of the possessor DP (or a phrase containing it) into its Spec. However, in arguing against den Dikken's (1998) proposal that Predicate Inversion drives the derivation of possessive DPs, I pointed out that an analysis in terms of an EPP-like feature does not seem to account for the fact that raising of the possessor DP is obligatory, and not an alternative to the raising of the possessum NP to the Spec of the relevant functional projection. Movement of the possessor DP seems to be triggered by some feature which distinguishes between DP and NP, attracting only the former.

One such feature could be Case: under standard assumptions, DPs need to receive Case, whereas NPs do not. Raising of the possessor DP in English could be movement to a Case position. The possessor DP would then not be licensed for Case within the predicate PP in (2), but in the Spec of a higher Case-assigning head. A suggestive fact in this light is that in Maasai

22In §2 I suggested that the possessor in possessive DPs whose possessum is a deverbal process nominal is licensed as a syntactic argument of the latter. Thus possessives of this kind are not expected to display the agreement morphology in table 1 if the analysis suggested above is correct. Testing this prediction is not so easy, though, since deverbal nouns are in general ambiguous between a process and a result interpretation.
the parallelism between possessor DPs and complements of the overt preposition t- breaks with respect to Case morphology. DPs in Maasai PPs are always inflected for Nominative (8), whereas possessors are always inflected for Accusative (7), even when the whole possessive is inflected for Nominative.23

An analysis along these lines, however, has problems in accounting for DPs like yesterday's concert, in which the possessor seems to be an adverbial expression which most likely does not need to be licensed for Case. An alternative is that of analyzing the raising of the possessor DP (or possibly of the PP in which it is licensed in (2)) as attraction by some syntactic feature different from Case on a functional head above XP. As argued above, this feature should distinguish between DP (or the relevant category containing the possessor) and NP, since the possessum NP, which intervenes between the target of movement and the possessum DP in the structure proposed by den Dikken (1998), does not block raising of the latter. Providing a precise characterization of this syntactic feature should be a priority under this alternative analysis.

5.2 Another Quick Look at Maasai

Without attempting to choose one of these two analytic options for English possessives, an obvious question that arises is where the difference lies between a language with prenominal possessors like English and a language with postnominal possessors like Maasai. That is, once it is assumed that in both English and Maasai possessors are licensed in the structure in (2), the postnominal position of possessors in the second language could be assumed either (i) to reflect the absence of overt syntactic derivation, or (ii) to derive from further overt syntactic movement which, so to speak, restores the basic order in which the possessor follows the possessum after the syntactic requirement which triggers raising of the possessor is satisfied.

Under the first hypothesis the typological difference between English and Maasai reduces to the fact that Maasai possessors can be licensed for Case in situ or to the fact that the counterpart of the feature which triggers overt raising

1. ālcáktáríélélélēk

23The relevance of this fact is undermined by the observation that Accusative seems to be the default Case morphology for nominals in Maasai: it is not only used as the citation form by native speakers, but it appears on predicate nominals as well.

i. áldáktáríélélélēk

\[\text{DET}_{sg,m} \text{ doctor}_{ACC} \text{ this}_{m} \text{ man}_{NOM}\]

'This man is a doctor.'
of the possessor in English can be checked by covert movement in Maasai, depending on the analysis adopted for prenominal possessors in English.

The additional movement postulated in the second hypothesis, instead, could be either conceived as (ii') raising of the possessum N to a position higher than the position to which the possessor moves, or as (ii'') movement of a phrasal category containing the possessum NP to a position higher than the target of movement of the possessor.

Despite the independent observation that in Maasai DPs the head noun raises to a high position (§4.1), I do not think that the typological difference between Maasai and English possessive DPs can be reduced to the absence of N-raising in English. Restrictions on the relative order of possessors and other modifiers of NP seem to exclude the possibility of reducing the post-nominal position of possessors in Maasai to movement of the possessum noun alone. And the properties of Maasai possessive DPs with pronominal possessors seem to suggest that an analysis along the lines of (ii'') might be worth pursuing, and should be possibly preferred to the hypothesis in (i). These facts are discussed in detail in Storto ([to appear]a).

References


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