

Irina Nikolaeva, SOAS & Andrew Spencer, Essex
Canons and the Possession-Modification Scale

We investigate the relationships between attributive modification and possessive constructions. We focus on four construction types: A: attributive modification, B: modification-by-noun; C: alienable possession; D: inalienable possession. Modification-by-noun is understood as intersectional modification involving a very general relationship between two noun-like denotations.

We consider the basic encoding strategies for each involving marking of the attribute/possessor, marking of the modificand/possessed, *ezafe*-type constructions and a wide variety of agreement patterns superimposed on these. Where languages use the same encoding strategy for more than one of these construction types there is a very strong tendency for the strategies to be deployed monotonically along a Possession-Modification (P-M) scale: $A > B > C > D$. Hence the following equivalencies are excluded:

1. $(A=D) \neq B, C$
2. $(A=C) \neq B, D$
3. $(B=D) \neq A, C$
4. $(A = C \& D) \neq B$

(Only juxtaposition reveals counterexamples, arguably for independent reasons.)

We argue that the P-M scale reflects semantic function: highly referential (inalienable possession) vs. pure property ascription, with modification-by-noun and alienable possession being intermediate cases. The literature on possessive constructions is replete with discussion of prototypical properties but this misses the point: the scale reflects typical grammaticalization paths which themselves reflect canonical properties of the components of the constructions. It goes from property-denoting adjectival encoding to object-denoting nominal encoding. The semantic pressure to conform to canonical content-to-form mappings is sufficiently strong to prevent languages from grammaticalizing constructions against this gradient.

We present a set of canons to describe canonical nouns and adjectives and additionally the following:

Canonical possession

- Poss1 Possessors are (canonical) nouns (hence, singular human referent terms)
- Poss2 There is a (unique) construction-internal marker (e.g. possessor agreement, adposition, genitive case, construct state etc)
- Poss3 Possessors occupy a Spec(ifier) position (and therefore are in paradigmatic opposition to other Spec elements)
- Poss4 Possesseees are semantically relational nouns
- Poss5 Possessors can take their own specifiers (other possessors and determiners) and attributive modifiers (they are DPs)

Canonical modification

- Mod1 Modifiers are (canonical) adjectives (hence qualitative, denoting gradable properties)
- Mod2 Modifiers show attributive agreement but no other construction-internal marking

Mod3 Modifiers are adjuncts to noun heads (hence, compatible with Spec elements such as determiners)

Mod4 Modifiers do not take specifiers and attributive modifiers

Given these canons, inalienable possession is canonical and alienable possession is an ill-defined notion (as it should be). Nouns are non-canonical modifiers, lacking intrinsically modificational semantics.

On the canonical perspective our P-M scale is essentially an artefact. The reason why specific morphosyntactic constructions exhibit monotonicity is that the two intermediate positions are neither canonical possession nor canonical attributive modification. While it's perfectly possible to express (non-canonical) modification-by-noun non-canonically, using, say, the canonical possessive construction (e.g. possessor agreement), or to express inalienable possession in the manner of attributive modification (e.g. possessive adjective), it seems that grammaticalization strongly resists the temptation to encode, say, possession as (canonical) modification, without also encoding modification-by-noun using the same basic strategy. Appealing to canons means we don't have to contemplate possession as a kind of 'non-prototypical modification' or (worse!) attributive modification as non-prototypical possession.