External Possession in Kinyarwanda:
A Tale of Two Applicatives

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External possession constructions (EPCs) are syntactic configurations in which a possessor, semantically licensed by a nominal argument, is realized as verbal dependent, separate from the possessum. EPCs present an apparent mismatch between the syntax and semantics, as it is not clear how the possession relation between the nominals is derived when they have no clear syntactic relation. Furthermore, the syntactic properties of EPCs can vary cross-linguistically and even within a language. Kimenyi (1978) describes two distinct patterns of external possession constructions in Kinyarwanda. The first type, termed nuclear EPCs (1b), features no overt morphology, while the second type, applied EPCs (2b), requires applicative morphology on the verb.

(1) a. umugóre y-a-shokoj-e umusatsi w'=ûmugabo
       woman SM_1-PST-comb-FV hair CON_3=man

  b. umugóre y-a-shokoj-e umugabo umusatsi
       woman SM_1-PST-comb-FV man   hair

     'The woman combed the man's hair.'
     lit. 'The woman combed the man the hair.'

(2) a. Ingurube z-a-ri-iye ibíryo by'=abaána
       pigs $10SM$-PST-eat-ASP food CON_8=children

  b. Ingurube z-a-ri-**ir**-iye abaána ibíryo.
       pigs $10SM$-PST-eat-**APPL**-ASP children food

     'The pigs ate the children's food'
     lit. 'The pigs ate children the food'
     (Kimenyi, 1978, p. 105)

In addition to the morphological difference, the external possessor has different objecthood properties between EPC types. When the applicative suffix is realized, the possessum resists passivization, relativization, and pronominal incorporation. External possessa, on the other hand, in nuclear EPCs retain those objecthood properties. We are thus tasked with understanding how the same possessive relationship between two nominals can be derived in two distinct constructions, neither of which shows a clear syntactic relation between possessor and possessum.

I argue both EPCs are derived from an underlying structure where the two nominals are related by an ApplP, and attribute objecthood asymmetries to different applicative types and phasal boundaries. Applied EPCs involve overt high applicatives while nuclear EPCs attach a covert low applicative. This approach is contra previous explanations of Kinyarwanda EPCs which have been primarily within a relational grammar (RG) framework (Bickford, 1986; Davies, 1997; Kimenyi, 1978). The alienability of the possession is determines where the applicative attaches. Inalienable possessa participate in nuclear EPCs similarly to affective constructions in Romance (Cuervo, 2003).

Applied EPCs are derived via raising of an alienable possessor to the specifier of a HighApplP. While RG accounts of EPCs derive certain restrictions placed on applied possessa, such as their inability to become the subject of a passive clause or be pronominally incorporated, they fail to explain why applied possessa resists Ā-movement, such as relativization. Following Mcginnis and Gerdts (2004), I propose the demotion of applied possessa is attributable to only HighApplP constituting a phase which makes the possessum inaccessible to higher operations.

While external possession constructions seemingly obscure the relation between syntax and semantics, the analysis presented returns to a theory where structure and meaning are interpreted together. Crucially, the possessive reading is only available as it is derived from an underlying structural relation between two entities.

References

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