

Possessives in (three) Sign Languages

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Background. Two approaches are currently available for possessive DPs whose possessive relation depends on contextual information (cf. (1)): i) either they are analyzed as the result of a coercion process of the possessum DP (a non-relational noun becomes relational while the pragmatic component lets infer the appropriate relation), as in Vikner & Jensen (2002); or ii) as involving a relational adposition-like element (which surfaces as the possessive marker or the preposition “of” in English), as in Storto (2003).

The **Goals** of this paper are to show: 1) that data from (three) sign languages (SL) support Storto's theory of possessives; 2) that SLs introduce an unexpected puzzle which is still accountable under Storto's theory; 3) that the analysis extends to kinship possessives, thus supporting an approach to the syntax of possessives in which the possessive relation is never encoded by the possessum (Adger 2013).

Basic pattern. The distribution of context-dependent possessives distinguishes between cases in which the possessive relation expresses some sort of CONTROL (ownership being the default case), and those cases in which the relation is totally dependent on contextual information. The relevant readings for the example in (1) emerge under the scenarios in 1 and 2 (adapted from Storto 2003).

- (1) John's dogs left

Reading 1 (CONTROL): The dogs that John owns/is responsible for left.

Reading 2 (non-CONTROL): The dogs that attacked John (or, that crossed John's way, etc.)

- (2) **Scenario 1:** John is a dog-sitter. This morning he walked the dogs through the park when all of the sudden they attacked him. Mary is also a dog-sitter. This morning she walked another group of dogs through the park and all of the sudden the dogs attacked her.

Scenario 2: John and Mary own no dogs and love jogging at the park. This morning, John was at his park and a group of dogs attacked him. Mary was at another park and she was attacked by a different group of dogs.

Once this distinction is considered, the following pattern emerges: definite (but also partitive) possessives (cf. (3)a) are always felicitous; indefinite possessives (cf. (3)b) are either infelicitous (#) or marginally acceptable (?) when the possessive relation is other than CONTROL (scenario 2). Italian examples are used in order to get rid of irrelevant syntactic complications instantiated by their English equivalent (Storto 2003).

- (3) a. Poi, [i cani di John] sono scappati
Then, [the dogs of John] left Definite DP: [John's dogs left]
b. Poi, [alcuni cani di Mary] sono scappati
Then, [some dogs of Mary's] left Indefinite DP: # or ? Under Scenario 2.

SL data. SLs normally have at least two ways to mark possessive phrases (Perniss and Zeshan 2008): either juxtaposition is used (cf. (4)) or an overt possessive marker is (cf. (5)). The data in (4) and (5) are from French SL (LSF), but a similar pattern is replicated in Italian and Catalan SL (LIS and LSC). These data show that the possessive marker (**POSS**) is used in CONTROL scenarios but not in non-CONTROL scenarios.

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|-----|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| (4) | a. JOHN DOG (ALL) LEAVE | 'John's dogs left' | [ok under scenario 2] |
| | b. MARIA SOME DOG LEAVE | 'Some dogs of Mary's left' | [ok under scenario 2] |
| (5) | a. JOHN POSS DOG (ALL) LEAVE | 'John's dogs left' | [# under scenario 2] |
| | b. MARIA POSS DOG SOME LEAVE | 'Some dogs of Mary's left' | [# under scenario 2] |
| (6) | MARIA DE SOME DOG LEAVE | 'Some dogs of Mary's left' | |

The contrast between (4) and (5) shows that LSF (LSC and LIS) has an overt marker for possessives of the CONTROL type, while juxtaposition marks the other type (for similar data in ASL see Abner 2012). LSC is even richer in that it has another overt marker that can be used under scenario 2 (cf. (6)). The marker DE was first described in Quer and GRIM (2008).

SL data also show a puzzle once compared with spoken languages. The contrast between definite and indefinite DPs is somehow lost in SL (cf. (3)b vs. (4)b). Nonetheless, non-CONTROL possessives with

indefinite DPs headed by an n-word are marginal in LSF (cf. (7), where the possessive relation is “Maria drives the bus the kids take”). The same sentence is fully acceptable under the CONTROL scenario 4 in (8).

- (7) **Scenario 3:** Maria works as a bus-driver in the public company. Every morning she takes service on the line 7, which goes through a residential area. On that bus, several kids regularly jump in and go to school.
a. ?? TODAY [KID MARIA] SICK RIEN 'Today, no kid of Maria's are sick'

Finally, a possessive marker has been documented in LSC that is preferably used to mark kinship relationships. This marker was glossed as “LINKER” in Quer and GRIM (2008). For some signers of LSF and LIS, a similar marker is exclusively used to mark for kinship relations.

- (8) **Scenario 4:** Maria has 7 children.
a. TODAY [KID LINKER MARIA] SICK 'Today, Maria's kids are sick'

Analysis. The fact that SLs have dedicated constructions (and markers) for CONTROL vs. non-CONTROL possessives is evidence that context-dependent possessives cannot be part of the lexical meaning of the possessum (contra Vikner & Jensen 2002), thus favoring Storto's theory. Moreover, SLs provide morphological evidence that the adposition-like element of possessives is not always ambiguous between a CONTROL and a non-CONTROL reading. The entries are given in (9).

- (9) a. $\llbracket \text{POSS} \rrbracket = \lambda x_e \lambda y_e [x \text{ and } y \text{ stand in the CONTROL relation}]$
b. $\llbracket \text{DE} \rrbracket = \llbracket \emptyset_{\text{juxtaposition}} \rrbracket = \text{relational variable (meaning provided by assignment function, Partee 1997)}$

Storto explains the contrast in (3) by assuming that indefinite Ds are ambiguous between entries with or without an existential presupposition (Mislark 1974) and that the latter makes (3)b acceptable (marginality is a side-effect of the fact that presuppositional entries are not the default interpretations for indefinites). The use of signing space makes NP referential indices “iconically” visible in SL (Lillo-Martin and Klima 1990). I claim that this fact makes presuppositional D entries readily accessible (i.e. no need to revert any default), hence (4)b is not degraded under scenario 2. When the existential presupposition is not available, like in the case of DPs headed by n-words, marginality/unacceptability is predicted and found (cf. (7)).

At the syntactic level, SL data support a strong claim about the nature of possessive constructions. Indeed, it seems that at least for kinship relations SLs provide evidence for a dedicated possessive marker. If this is the case, then even those possessive relations which are claimed to be the result of relational NPs are actually due to the presence of an “external” adposition-like element, thus favoring syntactic analysis like the one proposed in Adger (2013) where the meaning of possessive constructions is claimed to be dependent on the presence of a “light prepositional phrase”.

Conclusions. This paper provides evidence from three SLs that the meaning of context-dependent possessives is not lexically encoded by the possessum, thus favoring an analysis along the line of Storto (2003). The fact that SLs do not show marginal acceptability in indefinite DPs under non-CONTROL scenarios is because the use of space cancel the bias over indefinite DPs without the existential presupposition. Further data also point toward an analysis of all possessives (not just those that are dependent on contextual information) in which the possessive relation is never encoded by possessum DPs.

References

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