

Inalienable Possession in Tlingit
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Many languages express inalienable possession (possession that ‘needs’ a possessor, as with body parts and family members) and alienable possession (possession of things that can be transferred). My fieldwork on Tlingit (Na-Dene, Alaska and northwest Canada) has found that that this language expresses this distinction in a very unusual way, previously not investigated by Tlingit scholarship: by manipulating DP-internal syntax. The following examples illustrate:

(1) Alienable possession:

$a\bar{x}$ $déi\bar{x}$ $lítaa-yí$
my two knife-PNS
‘my two knives’, ‘two of my knives’

(2) Inalienable possession:

$déi\bar{x}$ $a\bar{x}$ $tl'eik$
two my finger
‘my two fingers’, ‘two of my fingers’

Notice that in (1), the alienable construction, the modifier $déi\bar{x}$ appears between the possessor and possessum, while in the inalienable construction, it appears the left of both possessor and possessum.

I argue that the position of the modifier relative to the possessor and possessum is indicative of differences between the differences in thematic structure between alienable and inalienable possession in Tlingit: the inalienable possessor is an inner argument of the possessed noun (in NP), while the alienable possessor is in nP as an external argument of the possessed noun suffix (PNS, see example 1), as argued by Saxon and Wilhelm (2016) for Tlicho (Dogrib) and Dene Suline (Chipewyan). Contrary Saxon and Wilhelm, I argue that the inalienable possessor does not move to Spec-nP and remains in its base Merge position. However, there is one corner case where an inalienable possessive pronoun moves covertly: what I call “alienated” possession, illustrated below:

(3) “Alienated” possession

$déi\bar{x}$ $a\bar{x}$ $jín-i$
two my hand-PNS
‘my two [severed] hands’

By positing covert movement in this case, we fill both possessor positions with copies of $a\bar{x}$, capturing that they are co-referential. It may be possible that a different possessor can occupy the higher position and block this movement.

The main theoretical point I will be arguing is that possession relationships are structurally thematic, and that Possessor (alienable) and Possessor (inalienable) are different theta roles.

References

Saxon, L. and A. Wilhelm (2016) “The “possessed noun suffix” and possession in two Northern Dene languages.” In: *International Journal of American Linguistics* 82.1. pp. 35-70.