Prominent Internal Possessors in languages of Australia  
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Prominent Internal Possessor constructions, in which the internal possessor of a possessive NP interacts with the morphosyntax as if it were not an embedded modifier, have not previously been described for Australian languages. However, as we show in recent work (Meakins and Nordlinger, in Press), they are prevalent throughout the Ngumpin-Yapa languages of northern Australia. In this paper we describe the details of this ‘possessor dissension’ construction in Ngumpin-Yapa languages and situate it within a broader typological and theoretical context. We show that the data has interesting implications for crosslinguistic models of agreement, and consider an analysis within the framework of Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG).

In the possessor dissension construction, the possessor NP remains a modifier within the larger possessive NP, yet both the possessor (PSR) and the possessum (PSM) are cross-referenced with clause-level agreement morphology. Thus, there is a type of morphosyntactic disagreement (or dissension) between the syntactic position of the possessor as an NP-internal argument, and the fact that it is agreed with at the clausal level as if it were a clausal argument itself.

Example (1) illustrates this construction in Gurindji. In this example we see that the possessor nominal ngayiny ‘my’ is marked with the dative case, showing it to be a modifier of the head noun karu ‘child’, and also carries ergative case in agreement with the head, yet both ngayiny and karu are separately cross-referenced with bound pronomininals in the clitic complex (shown by subscripts).

Possessor dissension construction:

\[
\begin{array}{l}
[\text{Ngayiny}_{\text{psr}}-ju\text{ karu}_{\text{psm}}-ngku]}\quad \text{ngu=yi}_{\text{psr}}=lu_{\text{psm}}=rla_{\text{ben}}\quad \text{ka-nya} \\
1\text{MIN.DAT-ERG} \quad \text{child-ERG} \quad \text{AUX=1MIN.O=3AUG.S=3OBL} \quad \text{take-PST} \\
\text{ngarin} \quad \text{marluka-wu}_{\text{ben}}. \\
\text{meat} \quad \text{old.man-DAT} \\
\text{‘The children of mine took meat for the old man.’ (Gurindji)}
\end{array}
\]

This construction can be clearly distinguished from the other possessive constructions in these languages. Inalienable possessive constructions exhibit ‘external possession’ (Payne and Barshi 1999) where the possessor is treated as the head of the argument NP. This is shown in (2) by the fact that the possessor doesn’t take dative case marking, but carries the relational case appropriate for the argument role (here, unmarked absolutive). In inalienable possessive constructions the PSM is never cross-referenced with a bound pronominal clitic.

Inalienable possessive construction:

\[
\begin{array}{l}
[\text{Ngayu}_{\text{psr}}]\quad \text{ngu=rna}_{\text{psr}}\quad [\text{mila}_{\text{psm}}]\quad \text{warrngun} \quad \text{karrinya} \\
1\text{MIN} \quad \text{CAT=1MIN.S} \quad \text{eye} \quad \text{ache} \quad \text{be.PST} \\
\text{‘My eyes were aching.’ (Gurindji)}
\end{array}
\]

In alienable possessive constructions (3), the possessor is marked with dative case showing it to be a modifier within the possessive NP, and is never cross-referenced.
with a bound pronoun. In this construction type only the head of the NP (the PSM) is cross-referenced:

Alienable possessive construction:

(3) [Ngayiny_{psm} karu_{psm} ngu=lu_{psm} warrngun karrinya]  
1MIN.DAT child CAT=3AUG.S ache be.PST

‘My children were aching.’ (Gurindji)

In this paper we discuss the properties of possessor dissension constructions in Ngumpin-Yapa languages and in other languages of Australia. We consider the implications of this construction for our understanding of dative constructions more broadly (cf. Bosse et. al 2012, Camilleri and Sadler 2012), and the challenges it presents for theoretical approaches to morphosyntactic agreement. In this construction we find an NP internal modifier (the possessor), which is both syntactically embedded within the possessive NP and agreed with at the clausal level as if it were a main clause argument. Such behaviour challenges assumptions about how agreement generally works (e.g. Corbett 2006), as has been observed by researchers discussing this phenomenon in languages such as Maithili (Stump and Yadav 1988, Yadav 1996) and Tundra Nenets (Nikolaeva 2014). Furthermore, the fact that the embedded possessor NP and the possesum itself (as head) are both cross-referenced at the clausal level in these Ngumpin-Yapa languages, results in a construction where there are two distinct agreement markers cross-referencing (different parts of) the same NP; a situation that has not previously been discussed in the literature on agreement, as far as we are aware.

We conclude by discussing a possible approach to these empirical facts within the framework of LFG and consider the extent to which prominent internal possessors across languages are all instances of a single construction type requiring a single theoretical analysis.

References