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“Looking for my locusts”: The possessive-benefactive connection

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Abstract

In many Oceanic languages possessive constructions can have a benefactive meaning. For example, a phrase such as ‘my fish’ can actually mean ‘fish for me’. This paper looks at the structural features of these constructions, explores the scope of this phenomenon, and also discusses questions of interpretation, as well as translation into English.

Keywords

Possession, benefactive, Oceanic.

1. Introduction

Only rarely do grammatical-semantic categories map in a one-to-one fashion between two languages. For example, both English and Dutch have the category of present tense. Language learners and translators transferring from Dutch to English (or vice versa) are able to use the same construction in the large majority of instances. In spite of this, there are a number of significant mismatches which need to be learnt and studied consciously (or acquired subconsciously), illustrated by a simple example here. The equivalent of *Wij wonen al tien jaar in dit huis* (literally ‘We live already ten years in this house’), with a simple present tense in Dutch, must use the perfect in English: *We have lived in this house for ten years*. The simple present is clearly ungrammatical in English. The reasons for this difference in encoding need not concern us here. I simply want to point out that grammatical mismatches for apparently comparable constructions are common. Similar examples can be drawn from any two languages that are compared.

The topic of this brief paper is to point out such a mismatch between certain Oceanic languages and English, with regard to the possessive. In the large majority of cases where an Oceanic language uses a possessive construction, this is adequately translated with a possessive pronoun in English. However, mismatches also occur here, and it is precisely one of these mismatches which sheds light on the full range of meanings of the possessive construction. The mismatch in question is the benefactive use of a simple possessive, which is common in Oceanic, but absent in English. In this paper, I limit myself to Oceanic languages from Papua New Guinea.

Let us start with an example taken from a story in the Gumawana language (Milne Bay Province; Oceanic - Papuan Tip. Data from Olson 2011).

The story is about how a woman ends up killing her son, because he cried too much. At a particular point in the story, the woman takes her son up a mountain to catch grasshoppers. It is there that she will push him down a cliff and kill him. (The items under discussion are underlined; translations are fairly literal. In the interlinear glosses TM stands for ‘thematic marker’, PC for ‘possessive classifier’ and TR for ‘transitiviser’.)

- (1a) So they climbed to Daguwa and his mother remained but...
- (1b) *gomana-ya-na i-lusala i-na digo.*
child-TM-3S 3S-search PC-3S grasshopper
‘her child searched for his grasshopper(s).’
- (1c) He searched and searched until he looked over and saw a grasshopper and said,

- (1d) *"Sina-gu, ku-ma gu-na digo ta-yois-i."*
 mother-1S 2S-come 1S-3S grasshopper 1PI-catch-TR
 "My mother, come and let's catch my grasshopper."

Note the following features of the underlined construction:

- There is a NP functioning as object.
- This NP consists of a noun and an alienable possessive modifier.
- The alienable possessive construction consists of two parts: a possessive classifier (PC) *i-* and a pronominal suffix indexing person and number, e.g. *i-na* 'his' in (1b). The form *gu-na* 'my' in (1d) is irregular; it is a variant of the expected *i-gu-na* (itself a lengthening of the regular *i-gu*).
- The meaning of this construction is not possessive in the traditional sense, but benefactive ('done for the benefit of', 'intended for'). The action is done so that the person coded as possessor will benefit from the object. A more natural translation of (1b) is therefore: 'He searched for grasshoppers for himself (to eat).'

A second example comes from Vitu (West New Britain, van den Berg and Bachet 2006), using a similar construction:

- (2) *Kata pade-a ha-do hiha.*
 PURP spear-3S PC:FOOD-1DI fish
 'I will spear fish for the two of us.' (Lit. 'I will spear our fish.')

A number of questions can be asked concerning these constructions:

- What kind of construction is this?
- How common is it?
- How does one decide on the interpretation?
- How does one translate such constructions?

These questions will be discussed in the following sections.

2. Possession in Oceanic

Possession in Oceanic languages is a complex and fascinating area of study, with a growing body of studies devoted to it. For the purposes of this brief article, it suffices to mention one of the major features of possession in Oceanic, namely, the distinction between direct and indirect possession. For further references, see Lynch, Ross and Crowley (2002). The important features of this distinction are listed below.

1. Direct possession:

morphology: possessive affixes are directly suffixed to the noun
 semantics: inalienable possession, i.e. possession that cannot be transferred (kinship, body parts, parts of wholes)
 Vitu example: *lima-gu* 'my hand/arm'

2. Indirect possession:

morphology: possessive affixes are suffixed to noun-like elements, usually called **possessive classifiers**
 semantics: alienable possession, i.e. possession that can normally be transferred
 Vitu example: *ka-gu ruma* 'my house'

Many Oceanic languages have two different possessive classifiers that mark indirect possession, one for food items, and another for everything else. Sometimes a third classifier is used for drinkable items. Vitu has only two classifiers (*ka-* and *ha-*). Table 1 illustrates both direct and indirect possession in Vitu; for the sake of simplicity, non-singular (dual and plural) forms are ignored.

	possessive suffix	direct possession	indirect possession (general classifier <i>ka-</i>)	indirect possession (food classifier <i>ha-</i>)
		<i>lima</i> 'arm, hand'	<i>ruma</i> 'house'	<i>beti</i> 'banana'
SG 1	<i>-gu</i> 'my'	<i>lima-gu</i>	<i>ka-gu ruma</i>	<i>ha-gu beti</i>
SG 2	<i>-V</i> 'your'	<i>lima-a</i>	<i>ka-a ruma</i>	<i>ha-a beti</i>
SG 3	<i>-na</i> 'his/her'	<i>lima-na</i>	<i>ka-na ruma</i>	<i>ha-na beti</i>

TABLE 1. VITU DIRECT AND INDIRECT POSSESSION (SINGULAR ONLY)

More **Vitu** examples (from van den Berg and Bachet 2006):

- (3) *Hau ta kaze-kaze ka-gu hobu.*
 1S REAL search-RED PC-1S firewood
 'I am looking for firewood (for myself).' (Lit. 'I am looking for my firewood.')
- (4) *Dia ta roti-a ka-na karoro.*
 3P REAL tie-3S PC-3S carrying.chair
 'They made a carrying chair for him.' (Lit. 'They tied his carrying chair.')
- (5) *Azei ni miu da zahe ki pele-a ha-gu marasin?*
 who LOC:PN 2P FUT go.up CONT get-3S PC:FOOD-1S medicine
 'Which one of you is going to get medicine for me?' (Lit. 'Who of you will go up and get my medicine?') [Spoken by a sick eagle; the medicine is available on the sun.]

Below are examples from various other Oceanic languages, all illustrating indirect possession with a benefactive reading.

Mangap-Mbula (Bugenhagen 1986)

- (6) *Silas i-taara le-ng ke.*
 Silas 3S-cut PC-1S tree
 'Silas cut a tree for me.' (Lit. 'Silas cut my tree.')

Balawaia (dialect of Sinaugoro, Kolia 1975:160, quoted in Song 1998:252)

- (7) *Tama-gu tari-gu ge-na gio kalato.*
 father-1SG brother-1S PC-3S spear he.made.COMP
 'My father made a spear for my younger brother.'
 (Lit. 'My father made my younger brother's spear.')

Gumawana (Olson 2011: 86)

- (8) *Ku-sou a-da nimowo ku-kabi.*
 2S-descend PC:FOOD-1PI shellfish 2S-get
 'You go down and get shellfish for us to eat.'
 (Lit. 'You go down and get our shellfish.')

3. Benefactive marking in Oceanic languages

The question can be raised as to whether benefactive possession is common in Oceanic languages, and to which extent. Is this the only way of marking benefactives in Oceanic? Song (1998) provides a useful initial typology as an answer to this question. The following (simplified) summary is my restatement of Song's conclusions, with pseudo-English equivalents, rather than fully glossed examples from the various languages. The three most common marking strategies appear to be the following:

- (a) preposition *He is building a house for me*
(Tolai, Banoni, Labu)
- (b) prepositional verb *He is building a house he.gives.to me*
(Kairiru, Labu, Tigak, Nissan)
- (c) possessive classifier *He is building my-one house*
(Mangap-Mbula, Tolai, Balawaia, Mono-Alu)

Strategy (c) is illustrated in examples (1) - (8). Less common ways of marking benefactives include the following three:

- (d) verbal suffix *He is building-for.me a house*
(Manam)
- (e) possessive suffix on the verb *He is building-my a house*
(Nakanai)
- (f) case suffix *He is building a house me-for*
(Manam)

Seimat appears to use a distinctive benefactive strategy, not found in Song's sample, listed here as (g):

- (g) directional suffix *-ma* 'towards me, for me' (venitive), in combination with a prepositional verb *He is building it.goes-towards.me a house*
(Seimat)

An example from Seimat illustrating strategy (g) is (9), from Wozna and Wilson (2005:51):

- (9) *I tan-omi hani-ma nga ing-i mom.*
3S make-TR go.to-VEN 1S house-POSS chicken
'He made a chicken house for me.'

It is not the point of this article to discuss these benefactive constructions (and their origins) in detail. Lichtenberk (2002) on Toqabaqita and Margetts (2004) on Saliba are excellent studies on the semantics and grammaticalisation paths of possessives in two individual Oceanic languages, and the reader is referred to these articles for further discussion.

A question, which, to my knowledge, has not yet been answered, is the following: exactly how widespread is the use of benefactive possessives among Oceanic languages? In his study of forty Oceanic languages, Song (1998) reports possessive classifiers functioning as benefactives in six of the then nine recognised subgroups of Oceanic. This does seem to indicate that possessive classifiers already may have had benefactive meanings by the time of Proto-Oceanic, though this remains to be verified. I also have the impression that benefactive possessives are more widespread than is usually recognised, possibly because several descriptive studies simply fail to mention the benefactive usage of possessive constructions.

Another question is whether non-Austronesian languages in Papua New Guinea have similar constructions. Foley (1986: 96-98) discusses benefactive marking in Papuan languages, but does not mention possessives in that context. I have not investigated this issue in any detail, but at least one example that is clearly parallel has come to my attention. The example is from Nukna, a Finisterre-Huon language of the Trans-New Guinea family (data from Matt Taylor; ITER = iterative; SV = serial verb marker).

- (10) *Nát=ku kuhát tahát-náti=ya sung~suli-ng...*
 1DU=TOP frog crayfish.sp-1DU.POSS=DAT ITER~hunt-SV
 ‘Let’s hunt for frogs and crayfish...’
 (Lit. ‘Let us [dual] look for our frogs [and] crayfish...’)

It is likely that similar examples will turn up in other Papuan languages.

4. Interpretation: regular possession or benefactive possession?

In languages which allow for a benefactive reading of a possessive, how do speakers actually know whether the construction is a ‘regular’ possessive or a benefactive possessive? Is it always clear? Below are four examples of potentially ambiguous constructions.

- (11) ‘**They cut down my tree**’
 Possessive reading: I had a tree and people cut it down.
 Benefactive reading: People cut down a tree for me.
- (12) ‘**I bought your canoe**’
 Possessive reading: I bought the canoe that you owned.
 Benefactive reading: I bought a canoe for you to use.
- (13) ‘**They broke his chair**’
 Possessive reading: He owned a chair and people broke it.
 Benefactive reading: They broke up an old chair for his benefit (e.g. so that he could use the wood for firewood or to make a toy). Or possibly: they broke something, so that they could make a chair for him.
- (14) ‘**I will spear my fish**’
 Possessive reading: I have some fish in a pond and I’m going to spear them.
 Benefactive reading: I’m going (to the sea) and look for fish that I can spear (and later cook and eat).

When these examples were tested with a native speaker of Vitu, both readings appeared to be possible in each case, though the benefactive reading is somewhat far-fetched in (13), while the possessive reading for (14) is culturally unusual, as people normally only fish at sea. Context is therefore crucial.

5. Translating benefactive possessives

A final question remains. Why does a literal translation of (1b), such as *I’m looking for my locusts* (or, without the alliteration, *I’m searching for my grasshoppers*) sound odd in English? There appear to be two reasons:

- The phrase ‘my locusts’ implies a **definite** set of locusts, that is, a referent which the speaker assumes the hearer can identify.
- The phrase ‘my locusts’ implies **existing ownership**, or an existing relationship.

These implications mean that uttering *I’m looking for my locusts* conjures up a situation where someone keeps locusts (as pets, for instance), some or all of which have escaped. As a result, he or

she is looking for them. Benefactive possessives, on the other hand, typically refer to indefinite entities, for which the possessive relationship is prospective (future). Better translations of ‘I’m looking for my locusts’ are therefore listed in (15):

- (15) a. ‘I’m looking for locusts to eat.’
 b. ‘I’m looking for locusts that I can eat.’
 c. ‘I’m looking for edible locusts.’

Are the two features of definiteness and existing ownership relevant for all possessive NPs in English? Are they equally important? How about the following examples, where the possessive relationship is clearly not yet established but prospective?

- (16) *[Mother speaking to a teenage son]*
 “Your wife will need to be a very patient person.”
- (17) *[Advertisement]*
 “Your order will be delivered within three days.”
- (18) *[Principal to grade 12 students]*
 “When you get your diploma in a few months, you will be surprised to see how well you’ve done.”

It appears that the crucial feature of this construction is definiteness (see also Lyons 1999), not the established possession, which is probably a typical implicature. Compare also the selection of occurrences of ‘my coffee’ as object NP in Table 2 below, taken from the British National Corpus (www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk), divided into a large ‘established’ (or realis) group and a much smaller ‘prospective’ (or irrealis) group.

1. Established / realis	
A0U 20	I started to sip my coffee.
A0U 87	I stirred my coffee.
A74 1883	I sit there for a bit longer, till I finish my coffee
B0U 2674	I took my coffee and followed Trench over to his bed.
BP9 509	‘I’ll just finish my coffee, eh?’
FAJ 1068	I am drinking my coffee from a tin mug,
G07 1918	I went and got my coffee and leant against the bench, away from him.
FR6 577	Just then Helen arrived, bringing my coffee and bread.
G0A 383	I reached for my coffee, but it was cold.
HR7 97	‘You’re spilling my coffee.’
2. Prospective / irrealis	
A0F 150	This time I decided to have my coffee in a little cafe not far from SIS.
H8J 2274	I’ve had a dreadful night, Claudia, and I want my coffee.’

TABLE 2. ‘MY COFFEE’ IN THE BRITISH NATIONAL CORPUS

The two examples of the prospective use of ‘my coffee’ clearly show that the speaker assumes the addressee can identify the referent, presumably in reference to a cultural script and an established or expected pattern of behaviour. At the same time, the specific cup of coffee the speaker has in mind is still absent from the speech situation. In other words, the reference is definite, but the relationship is prospective.

Conclusion

The following modest conclusions can be drawn from this brief overview.

1. Possessive constructions can do more than one would expect.
2. Benefactives can be coded in unusual ways.
3. Finding good translation equivalents is always a challenge.

In spite of the various studies on this particular topic, possession in Oceanic has not yet given up all of its secrets. I therefore end by listing a few remaining research questions:

1. Most (maybe all) of the examples of benefactive possession occur with indirect possession. Is it possible that direct possession can also have a benefactive reading? Or is that unlikely, given the nature of the inalienable relationship? For example, could a literal translation, such as *They cut / tied / painted his leg* ever have a benefactive reading in an Oceanic language that excludes an existing possessive relationship? This seems doubtful, but would need to be verified.
2. It appears that benefactive possession typically occurs with NPs functioning as objects. Is this an integral part of the construction in question, or can subjects also participate? An example would be *My locusts are not here today* with the meaning, 'I normally find some locusts in this place to catch and eat, but today I find none.' Do such constructions exist?
3. What exactly is the distribution of benefactive possessives in Austronesian languages? Is it limited to Oceanic? Does it occur in Western Austronesian languages as well, even though there is no indirect possession? I have a few examples from Muna (Sulawesi) where the possessive clearly has a benefactive reading, as shown by the fact that the noun phrase is indefinite and hence fails to undergo the so-called definiteness shift.
4. Is a benefactive meaning of indirect possession reconstructable to the level of Proto-Oceanic?
5. Are there more Papuan languages that display this construction? Are these similarities due to language contact, parallel development or simply chance?

Author's Note:

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