

POSSESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN WALAK:

Animacy, Constructional Strategy, and Discourse Participation

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Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea Conference

September 2026



Walak and the Wollo Dialect

Background and scope of the study



- Walak is a Papuan language of the highlands of West Papua.
- The language is spoken in parts of Jayawijaya, Mamberamo Tengah, and Yalimo Regencies.
- Reported dialects include Mbarima, Iluga–Wollo, and Eragayam.
- This study focuses on the Wollo dialect.



- Walak speakers: 20.000 people (Pawley and Hamstrom , 2018) based on Bromley (1967) and Larson (1977)
- Walak is spoken in parts of Jayawijaya, Mamberamo Tengah, and Yalimo Regencies (Karoba et al., 2021) and comprises several dialects, including Mbarima, Iluga–Wollo, and Eragayam (Uaga, 2026).
- This study focuses on the Wollo dialect, which exhibit lexical and phonological differences from the other Walak dialects while remaining mutually intelligible (Uaga, 2026)



Research Question

What determines the choice of possessive construction in Walak?

- Does the traditional alienable–inalienable distinction adequately account for the variation?
- Or is constructional choice better associated with possessor animacy / semantic class?
- How does discourse participation affect the person v expressed in the morphological system?



Research Objective

Separate two questions that are easily conflated:

CONSTRUCTIONAL CHOICE

- Which possessive strategy is selected?
- Morphological marking or noun–noun juxtaposition?
- Focus: possessor animacy / semantic class

PERSON VALUE

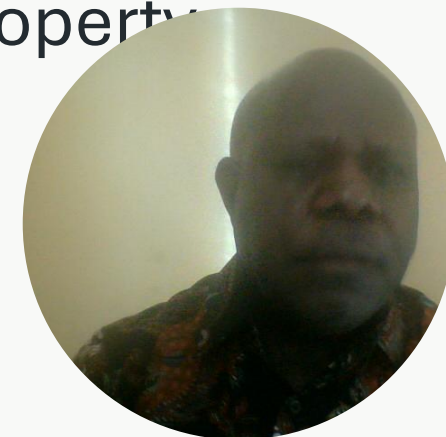
- Which person value is expressed?
- 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person
- Focus: discourse participant



Typological Background

Alienable and inalienable possession

- Inalienable possession generally refers to relationships seen as inherent, close, or difficult to separate from the possessor.
- Typical examples include body parts and kinship relations; in some languages, part–whole relations are also included.
- Alienable possession usually involves relationships that are acquired, transferable, or less inherent, such as ownership of objects, property, and other culturally defined possessions.



How the Distinction Can Be Grammaticalized

INALIENABLE

- May have to occur with a possessor.
- May carry possessive marking directly on the noun.
- Often shows tighter morphological integration.

ALIENABLE

- May be expressed through a more independent syntactic construction.
- Often involves less tightly integrated possessive expression.
- But the correlation is not universal or absolute.

Languages differ in which relations they treat as inalienable—and express the distinction.



The Walak Challenge

If alienability predicts constructional choice, why does the same morphological strategy occur across both domains?

INALIENABLE

- body parts
- kinship

ALIENABLE

- food
- water
- house
- garden
- stone

BOTH → MORPHOLOGICAL POSSESSION



Two Possessive Construction Strategies in Walak

A. MORPHOLOGICAL MARKING

n-iri

1SG.POSS-hand

‘my hand’

Bound person-number morphology
on the possessum

B. N–N JUXTAPOSITION

yebula legar

garden door

‘garden gate’

Possessor precedes possessum;
no possessive morpho



Strategy 1: Morphological Possession

Current data

In the current data, morphological possession is associated with human, supernatural, and animal possessors.

- The possessed noun is obligatorily prefixed with a person-number bound morpheme.
- The same construction occurs across different semantic types of possessum.
- This distribution is therefore not limited to traditionally inalienable relations.

k-iri

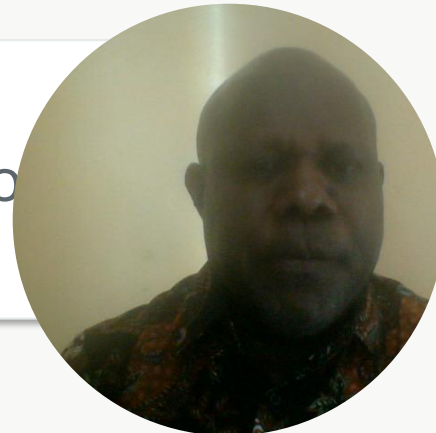
2SG.POSS-hand
'your hand'

in-ombae

3PL.POSS-father
'their father'

n-eyangge

1SG.POSS-dog
'my dog'



A Crucial Distinction: Possessor vs. Possessum

The relevant factor appears to be the type of POSSessor—not simply the animacy of the POSSessum.

HUMAN POSSESSOR

MORPHOLOGICAL
POSSESSION

POSSESSUM

- human
- divine being
- animal
- plant
- inanimate

The current examples show the morphological strategy across different possessum.



Morphological Possession Across Semantic Domains

n-iri

1SG.POSS-hand
'my hand'

in-ombae

3PL.POSS-father
'their father'

n-eyangge

1SG.POSS-dog
'my dog'

nin-arom

1PL.POSS-food
'our food'

Body parts + kinship + animals + food → same broad morphological strategy



Strategy 2: Noun–Noun Juxtaposition

Current data

In the current data, plant and inanimate part–whole / locative relations are predominantly expressed without possessive morphology.

o engga

tree leaf
'tree leaf'

di ebe

banana stem
'banana stem'

kono tugenda

kitchen window
'kitchen window'

o balek tu

house door
'house door'



Possessor Animacy / Semantic Class

Human

**Divine /
Supernatural**

Animal

Plant

Inanimate

MORPHOLOGICAL

MORPHOLOGICAL

MORPHOLOGICAL

N-N

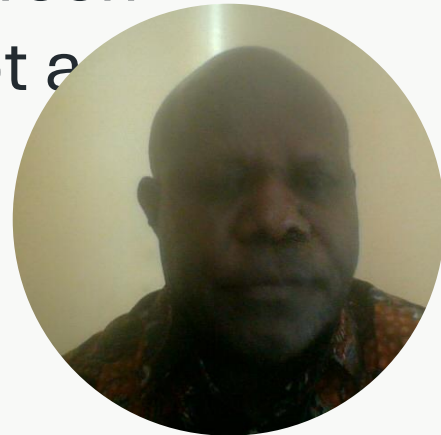
N-N

Provisional generalization: higher-animacy possessors tend to favor morphological possession, while lower-animacy possessors tend to favor juxtaposition.



Important Qualification

- The current dataset is not sufficient to establish a fully grammaticalized animacy hierarchy.
- Plants are especially interesting: they are living entities but pattern, in the available data, with inanimate entities.
- The relevant distinction may involve animacy together with agency, individuation, and conceptual status.
- The strongest claim at this stage is therefore a correlation between possessor semantic class / animacy and construction type—not a categorical rule.



Person Marking: A Separate Dimension

Once morphological possession is available, person value tracks the possessor's relation to the speech event.

1ST PERSON

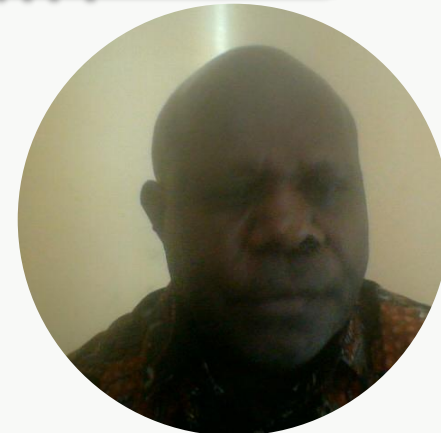
SPEAKER

2ND PERSON

ADDRESSEE

3RD PERSON

**NON-PARTICIPANT /
REFERRED-TO
ENTITY**



Animal Possessors: A Discourse Contrast

The strongest evidence for discourse-sensitive person marking

Same possessor type: ANIMAL | Different discourse role: referred-to vs. addressed

Yangge 0-ak

dog 3SG.POSS-child

‘her puppy’ — dog as referred-to possessor

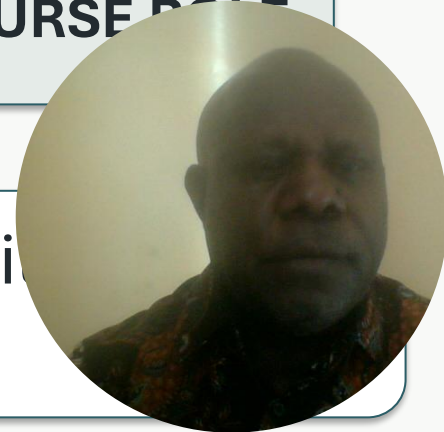
An k-agia

1SG 2SG.POSS-mother

‘I am your mother’ — dog as addressee

POSSESSOR TYPE STAYS CONSTANT → PERSON VALUE VARIES WITH DISCOURSE ROLE

Therefore: animacy may be associated with constructional availability
it does not determine 1st / 2nd / 3rd person.



An Inanimate Addressee

Extending second-person treatment

An inanimate entity can also be construed as an addressee and receive second-person treatment.

ei, aik yi kar kebe

(elicited utterance)

addressed to a toothache; second-person possessive form

- This supports the view that person is anchored to discourse participation rather than inherent animacy.
- The discourse interpretation is clear; the detailed morphological analysis is under investigation..



A Two-Level Analysis of Walak Possession

LEVEL 1 — CONSTRUCTIONAL SELECTION

Possessor semantic class / animacy

Morphological possession
or
N–N juxtaposition

LEVEL 2 — PERSON SPECIFICATION

Discourse participation

1st • 2nd • 3rd person

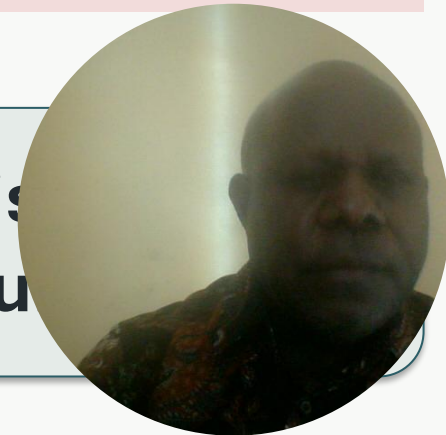
Key asymmetry: animacy / semantic class is associated with const choice; discourse participation determines person value.



What This Means for Alienability

- Alienability remains a useful comparative semantic concept.
- But it does not appear to be the grammatical parameter responsible for the major constructional contrast in the current Walak data.
- The same morphological construction occurs across traditionally alienable and inalienable domains.
- Noun–noun juxtaposition can occur with part–whole relations that are conceptually close to inalienable possession.

So the key question shifts from “What kind of possession is involved?” to “What kind of possessor is involved—and what is its discourse function?”



Conclusion

**Possessor animacy /
semantic class**

**CHOICE OF
CONSTRUCTION**

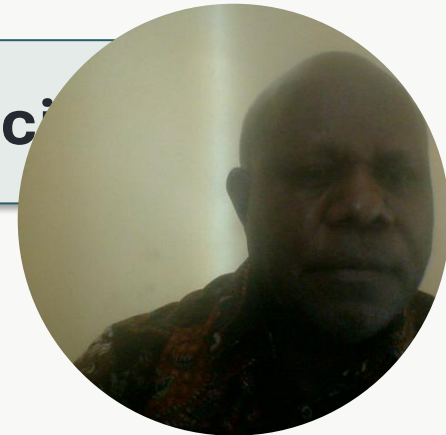
**Morphological
or N-N**

Discourse participation

PERSON VALUE

1st / 2nd / 3rd

Alienability does not appear to be the primary organizing principle



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