SQUIB: WHERE ARE THE POSSESSORS?

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Abney (1987) introduces and develops the idea that nominal possessors are structurally analogous to subjects of transitive verbs. Except for changes in implementation, his proposal can still be regarded as the standard theory of nominal possession in Generative Grammar. If textbook presence is a good correlate of acceptation of a theory, note that among the textbooks that follow Abney in assuming that nominal possessors are structurally analogous to subjects of transitive verbs are Adger (2003), Radford (2004), and Carnie (2006) (see also Bernstein (2001), a survey paper on noun phrases).

In this paper, I present data that challenges the hypothesis that nominal possessors are syntactically analogous to subjects of transitive verbs. In the class of languages I introduce here, nominal possessors are treated analogously to subjects of intransitive verbs. Before I introduce this novel class of languages, though, let me discuss and contextualize the languages Abney (1987) bases his theory on.

The support for Abney’s theory comes from languages whose morphology treats nominal possessors and subjects of transitive verbs alike. One of these languages is Yup’ik (Eskimo, Alaska). In Yup’ik, nominal possessors and subjects of transitive verbs display identical case marking (ergative). The relevant data, from Abney (1987, p. 42) is repeated below as (1) and (2). Abney cites Reed et al. (1977) as the source of this data.

(1) Yup’ik transitive verbs
   a. Angute-m kiputa-n-∅.
      man -ERG.SG buy -AGRg-AGRg
      ‘The man bought it.’
   b. Angute-t kiputa-n-t.
      man -ERG.PL buy -AGRg-AGRg
      ‘The men (pl.) bought it.’
   c. Angute-k kiputa-n-k.
      man -ERG.DU buy -AGRg-AGRg
      ‘The men (du.) bought it.’

(2) Yup’ik possessed nouns
   a. angute-m kuiqa-∅
      man -ERG.SG river -AGRg
      ‘the man’s river’
   b. angute-t kuiqa-t
      man -ERG.PL river -AGRg
      ‘the men’s (pl.) river’
   c. angute-k kuiqa-k
      man -ERG.DU river -AGRg
      ‘the men’s (du.) river’

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2. I follow Abney (1987) in employing noun phrase as a descriptive term, intended as neutral as to whether these phrases are headed by a noun or by a determiner, and the terms NP and DP to indicate a phrase headed by a noun and a phrase headed by a determiner.
Another language Abney discusses is Tzutujil (Mayan, Guatemala). Like Yup’ik, Tzutujil also treats nominal possessors and subjects of transitive verbs alike morphologically. Note that in Tzutujil the evidence supporting Abney’s theory is of a different kind than in Yup’ik. Whereas in Yup’ik nominal possessors and subjects of transitive verbs were treated alike in terms of case marking, in Tzutujil nominal possessors and subjects of transitive verbs are treated alike in terms of agreement: in Tzutujil, nouns agree with their possessors in the same way transitive verbs agree with their subjects.\(^3\)

The examples in (3) and (4) illustrate the statement that verbal agreement in Tzutujil follows an ergative-absolutive pattern. The full set of Tzutujil agreement morphemes is listed on Table 1.

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{ABS} & 1sg. & 2sg. & 3sg. & 1pl. & 2pl. & 3pl. \\
\hline
\text{ERG} & \text{in} & \text{at} & \text{qα} & \text{oo} & \text{ix} & \text{ee} \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

(3) Tzutujil transitive verbs

\[a. \text{ X-} \text{ix-} \text{qα-} \text{kunaaj. } \text{ASP-2.PL.ABS-1.PL.ERG-cure}\]

‘We cured you (pl).’

\[b. \text{ X-} \text{e}- \text{e-} \text{kunaaj. } \text{ASP-3.SG.ABS-2.PL.ERG-cure}\]

‘You (pl.) cured him.’

\[c. \text{ X-} \text{ee-} \text{ki-} \text{kunaaj. } \text{ASP-3.PL.ABS-3.PL.ERG-cure}\]

‘They cured them.’

(4) Tzutujil intransitive verbs

\[a. \text{ X-} \text{oo-} \text{wari. } \text{ASP-1.PL.ABS-sleep}\]

‘We slept.’

\[b. \text{ X-} \text{ix-} \text{wari. } \text{ASP-2.PL.ABS-sleep}\]

‘You (pl.) slept.’

\[c. \text{ X-} \text{ee-} \text{wari. } \text{ASP-3.PL.ABS-sleep}\]

‘They slept.’

As you can see in (5) Tzutujil nouns agree with their possessors in the same way transitive verbs agree with their subjects (that is to say, using the ergative set of agreement morphemes). The Tzutujil data was copied from Abney (1987, p. 43), who cites Dayley (1985) as its source.

\[a. \text{ qa-} \text{tzaʔ?i} \text{1.PL.ERG-nose}\]

‘Our nose’

\[b. \text{ ee-} \text{tzaʔ?i} \text{2.PL.ERG-nose}\]

‘Your (pl.) nose’

\[c. \text{ kee-} \text{tzaʔ?i} \text{3.PL.ERG-nose}\]

‘Their nose’

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\(^3\) Though Yup’ik nouns do agree with their possessors in the same way verbs agree with their subjects (see 1–2), the fact that verbal agreement in Yup’ik follows a nominative-accusative rather than an ergative-absolutive alignment (unlike Tzutujil) makes it impossible to state whether agreement in Yup’ik aligns possessors with subjects of transitive or with subjects of intransitive verbs.
Besides languages like Yup’ik and Tzutujil, whose morphology distinguishes subjects of transitive from subjects of intransitive verbs (ergative-absolutive morphology), Abney also discusses languages whose morphology doesn’t mark that distinction (nominative-accusative morphology). I won’t discuss the latter here, since they don’t provide any evidence as to whether possessors are analogous to subject of transitive or to subjects of intransitive verbs. Only ergative-absolutely aligned phenomena like those found in Yup’ik and Tzutujil can provide us with clear evidence as to whether nominal possessors pattern with subjects of \textit{transitive} verbs (ergative subjects), or with subjects of intransitive verbs (absolutive subjects).

This detail has played an important role in Abney’s (1987) theory of possessors as well as in the more recent theories of possession that follow Abney’s insight (see, e.g. Bittner and Hale, 1996, p. 60; Radford, 2000; Alexiadou, Haegeman, and Stavrou, 2007). In Abney’s original theory as well as in the more recent theories it inspired, subjects are assumed to be generated in a nominal position analogous to the clausal position in which subjects of \textit{transitive} verbs are generated. Moreover, nominal possessors are taken to undergo similar types of syntactic operations as subject of transitive verbs.

The assumption that possessors are analogous to subjects of transitive verbs rather than subjects of intransitive verbs — notwithstanding its specific morphosyntactic implications — is challenged by the existence of ergative-absolutive languages where nominal possessors actually pattern with the subject of \textit{intransitive} verbs. In spite of the fact that this class of languages isn’t mentioned by either Abney (1987) or any of the more recent theories of possession that follow Abney’s insights, such languages are far from unheard of.

One language that marks possessors analogously to subjects of intransitive verbs is Kĩsëdjê (Jê, Brazil).\footnote{The Kĩsëdjê data used here was collected in fieldtrips I took between 2008 and 2013. I thank my many teachers, in special Kawiri, Suyá, and Jamthô Suyá. See Nonato (2014) for a more complete description of Kĩsëdjê.}

Kĩsëdjê case-marks the arguments of embedded/nominalized verbs following an ergative-absolutive alignment, as illustrated by the examples in (6) and (7).\footnote{Negation is a predicate and takes an embedded clause as argument.}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{(6) Kĩsëdjê transitive verbs}
\begin{enumerate}
\item a. \texttt{Ire a- mun khère.} \\
\texttt{1.\textsc{erg} 2.\textsc{abs-see} \texttt{not.be}} \\
\texttt{"I didn’t see you."}
\item b. \texttt{Kare i- mun khère.} \\
\texttt{2.\textsc{erg} 1.\textsc{abs-see} \texttt{not.be}} \\
\texttt{"You didn’t see me."}
\item c. \texttt{Kôré ñ- mun khère.} \\
\texttt{3.\textsc{erg} 3.\textsc{abs-see} \texttt{not.be}} \\
\texttt{"She/He didn’t see her/him."}
\end{enumerate}
\item \textbf{(7) Kĩsëdjê intransitive verbs}
\begin{enumerate}
\item a. \texttt{I- ñhem khère.} \\
\texttt{1.\textsc{abs-go} \texttt{not.be}} \\
\texttt{"I didn’t go."}
\item b. \texttt{A- ñhem khère.} \\
\texttt{2.\textsc{abs-go} \texttt{not.be}} \\
\texttt{"You didn’t go."}
\item c. \texttt{ñ- æhem khère.} \\
\texttt{3.\textsc{abs-go} \texttt{not.be}} \\
\texttt{"He didn’t go."}
\end{enumerate}
\end{itemize}
As you can see in (8), Kišêdjê case-marks possessors of inalienable nouns like subjects of *intransitive* verbs (i.e. with absolutive case). Unlike Yup’ik and Tzutujil, in Kišêdjê possessors are treated analogously to subjects of *intransitive*, rather than those of transitive verbs.

(8) Kišêdjê inalienable nouns

- a. pámá
  - 1.ABS-father
  - ‘my father’
- b. a- pámá
  - 2.ABS-father
  - ‘your father’
- c. Ø- pámá
  - 3.ABS-father
  - ‘His/her father’

Besides Kišêdjê, other ergative-absolutive languages that mark nominal possessors analogously to subjects of intransitive verbs are Bororo (Macro-Jê, Brazil, Nonato, 2007, p. 34), Nias Selatan (Austronesian, Nias Island, Brown, 2001, p. 342; Donohue and Donohue, 2010, p. 4) and possibly also the Celtic languages (Awbery, 1986; Harlow, 1989, as cited by Brown, 2001, p. 342, fn. 1). The examples in (9) and (10) below illustrate the case system of Nias Selatan and the examples in (11) and (12) illustrate the case of Bororo.

(9) Nias Selatan has ergative-absolutive case-marking

- a. Intransitive verb (absolutive subject)
  
  
  return again ABS-father-1.PL.INC.GEN Tohōnavaetau LOC Maenamóló
  
  ‘Ama⁶ Tohōnavaetau came back again to Maenamóló’

- b. Transitive verb (absolutive object)

  3.SG.REALIS-eat [m- bavi] [ama Gumi.]
  3.SG.REALIS-eat ABS-pig father G.
  
  ‘Ama G. is eating/eats pork.’

(10) Nias Selatan’s possessors are absolutive

  bavi [n- ama-gu]
  pig ABS-father-1.SG.GEN
  
  ‘My father’s pigs’

In Bororo, agreement aligns possessors with absolutive arguments. Agreement is obligatory with possessors, subjects of intransitive verbs and objects, but it is not obligatory with subjects of

6. Inalienable nouns are marked with a possessive auxiliary, whose form indicates the specific kind of possession:

(i) i-kit lám-pet parrot
(ii) i-noho lám-food parrot

‘my (pet) parrot’ ‘my parrot (not pet)’

7. Ama ‘father’ is obligatorily used as part of male names in Nias.
transitive verbs —in (11b), for instance, no agreement with the subject of the transitive verb is expressed. Note that the variation found among the agreement markers in the examples below is allophonic.

(11) Bororo displays ergative-absolutive agreement
a. Subject of transitive verb
   Έmağe ət- ac age dī.  
   They 3.PL-cry
   ‘They cried.’

b. Object of transitive verb
   Adugn- n̄ e  ema ġ e ə- wido.  
   jaguar-ASSERT. they 3.PL-kill
   ‘The jaguar killed them.’

(12) Absolute agreement with possessors
   ema ġ e ə- ogwa  
   they 3.PL-mouth
   ‘their mouths’

The existence of this class of languages poses a problem for the standard theories of possession, namely those that get their inspiration from Abney’s hypothesis that possessors are analogous to subjects of transitive verbs. Can these theories also deal with the class of languages in which possessors are analogous to subjects of intransitive verbs?

In order to proceed to that discussion, we need to understand how the perception that nominal possessors are analogous to subjects of transitive rather than those of intransitive verbs has influenced syntactic theories of possession. This influence is linked to the derivation assumed for subjects at different epochs of Generative Grammar. I will discuss these points in the next section.

2. THE STRUCTURE OF POSSESSION

Along the various eras of the Generative Grammar, quite unambiguous syntactic derivations have been proposed for subjects of transitive verbs. For subjects of intransitive verbs, on the other hand, different derivations have been proposed according to verb type (which includes at least unergative and unaccusative).

In what follows I will characterize the derivations proposed at various points in the history of Generative Grammar for subjects of transitive verbs, as well as the parallel derivations proposed for possessors. Afterwards, I will discuss the derivations proposed for subjects of intransitive verbs and discuss how the fact that the latter constitute a much less uniform class prevents a straightforwardly parallel derivation for possessors.

Abney (1987) assumed, as was standard at the time, that subjects of transitive verbs were generated in [Spec, IP]. Naturally, he proposed that possessors were generated in [Spec, DP]. IP was assumed to dominate VP and, analogously, Abney assumed that DP dominated NP. The clausal
structure standardly assumed at the time is given in (13), and the noun phrase structure Abney proposed is given in (14).

Abney’s theory predates the advent of VP-internal subject hypothesis (VISH). The VISH, a development of the late 80’s and early 90’s, was proposed more or less simultaneous by a number of different authors (for an overview of its history, see McCloskey, 1997). According to an earlier version of the hypothesis, rather than being generated in [Spec, IP], subjects were generated in [Spec, VP] and could, depending on the syntactic characteristics of a specific language, later be dislocated to [Spec, IP]. The structure and derivation of VP-internal subjects is illustrated in (15).

A later development of the VISH, due to Kratzer (1994, 1996) and Chomsky (1993, 1995), consists in proposing that subjects are generated as specifiers of a light verbal head which takes VP as complement, rather than as specifiers of VP itself. Kratzer calls this light verbal head Voice and Chomsky calls it v (little v). Chomsky’s nomenclature seems to have gotten more traction, and this is why I am going to be sticking to it. The derivation of subjects according to the vP-internal subject hypothesis (vISH) is (16).

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8. There actually are small but important differences between Kratzer’s and Chomsky’s proposals, which I won’t discuss here because they aren’t relevant for the phenomenon under discussion.
Updating Abney’s theory of nominal possessors according to the VISH or the vISH is elementary (see, for instance, Bittner and Hale 1996). Assuming the VISH, in which transitive subjects would be generated in [Spec,VP], possessors are generated in [Spec,NP] and later dislocated into [Spec,DP] (17). Assuming the vISH, according to which subjects are generated in [Spec,vP], possessors are generated in the specifier of a light nominal projection dominating NP (n ‘light little n’) and later move into [Spec,DP] (18).

Abney ignored the existence of languages where possessors pattern with subjects of intransitive verbs. Had he not, and were he to propose a derivation for possessors that paralleled the derivation of subjects of intransitive verbs, would it be different from (14)?

Possibly not. Abney’s theory predates the important contribution for the understanding of the syntax of intransitive verbs that is due to Hale and Keyser (1993). At the time Abney developed this work, subjects of transitive as well as subjects of intransitive verbs were supposed to be generated in [Spec,IP]. Hale and Keyser’s influential work established a distinction between intransitive verbs with ‘external’ subjects and intransitive verbs with “internal” subjects. That is, subjects of intransitive verbs can be generated either in [Spec, VP/vP] (external) or in [Comp, VP] (internal). The former is the derivation of subjects of unergative verbs, which pattern with subjects of transitive verbs, whereas the latter is the derivation of subjects of unaccusative verbs, which
pattern with subjects of passive verbs. Then, in a later stage of the derivation, subjects can be dislocated to [Spec, IP]. The syntactic trees in (19) and (20) show these derivations.

Given theses two possibilities, would we want to say that possessors in languages like Yup’ik and Tzutujil are ‘external’, and should be attributed a structure analogous to that of subjects of unergative/transitive verbs (21), whereas in languages like Kišëdjë, Bororo and Nias Selatan possessors are ‘internal’, and should be attributed a structure analogous to that of subjects of unaccusative/passive verbs (22)?

Proposing that in different languages possessors are generated in different positions would be a problem for the standardly UTAH (Uniformity of Theta-role Assignment Hypothesis, Baker, 1988). According to the UTAH, the a thematic role should be identified with a single syntactic position cross-linguistically, never with different positions in different languages.

9. Note that though I am assuming the VISH rather than the vISH in the structures in (21) and (22), nothing hinges on this
Alternatively, we can maintain the UTAH if we manage to correlate the fact that there exist two types of possession —alienable and inalienable— with the fact discussed in this paper that some possessors are correlated with subjects of transitive/unergative verbs and some with subjects of unaccusative/passive verbs.

This road also doesn’t seem too promising, since alongside languages that make the distinction between alienable and inalienable subjects and have inalienable possessors that pattern with subjects of unaccusative/passive verbs (like Bororo and Kísêdjê), there are also languages that make that distinction and in which inalienable possessors pattern with subjects of transitive verbs. One such language is Paresi (Arawak, Brazil, Silva 2013).

In Paresi, transitive verbs don’t display subject agreement, whereas intransitive unaccusative verbs do. Unlike Kísêdjê and Bororo, possessors of inalienable nouns in Paresi pattern with subjects of *transitive* verbs — (23a) and (24a) —, whereas possessors of alienable nouns pattern with the subjects of intransitive unaccusative verbs — (23b) and (24b).

(23) a. Inalienable nouns don’t display agreement
   no= kano
   I= arm
   ‘my arm’
   b. Alienable nouns display agreement
   no= kahatse<Ref>-i
   I= fish<CL>-1.SG
   ‘my fish’

(24) a. Transitive verbs don’t display agreement
   No= tyoma-Ø.
   I= make-PERF
   ‘I made it.’
   b. Unaccusative verbs display agreement
   No= zan-i-Ø.
   I= go-1.SG-PERF
   ‘I went.’

At the current stage, it doesn’t seem possible to account satisfactorily for the possibilities displayed by the various languages reviewed in this paper, I hope, however, to have to have convinced the reader that the consensus that appears to have been reached in the area is illusory. We still can’t pinpoint where possessors are.

REFERENCES


