THE USE OF POSSESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH AND SLOVENE AND THE REFERENCE-POINT FUNCTION OF PRENOMINAL POSSESSORS

Frančiška Lipovšek

Abstract

The paper presents the findings of the study concerning the use of prenominal and postnominal possessive constructions in English and Slovene. The study has been based on the cognitive approach according to which the possessor functions as a reference point facilitating identification of the possessee. The term *identification value* has been used in the study to refer to the cluster of properties that render a nominal compatible with the reference-point function. The main factors contributing to the identification value of the possessor nominal are its *topicality* (i.e. mental accessibility) and its *informativity* (i.e. ability to be an effective cue for the identification of the relation between the possessor and the possessee). The findings of the study confirm that in both languages (i) the prenominal possessor has the reference-point function by default, and that (ii) the identification value of the possessor is the main factor determining the choice between the prenominal and the postnominal constructions.

The aim of this paper is to present the findings of the study[1] concerning the use of prenominal and postnominal possessive constructions in English and Slovene. The study has focused on the Saxon genitive and the *of*-phrase in English, and on the possessive adjective and the postnominal genitive phrase in Slovene. Of particular interest have been the Saxon genitive and the possessive adjective, which - in contrast to their postnominal counterparts - are not syntactic parallels. The difference between them is twofold:

(i) They occupy different positions in the phrase structure. The Saxon genitive phrase is a definite element whereas the possessive adjective is a modifier (Haspelmath 1999, Plank 1992). The latter does not affect the (in)definite status of the whole phrase and is as such compatible with a(n) (in)definite element: *ta Janezova knjiga, neka Janezova knjiga* (cf. **this John's book, *a John's book*).

(ii) Possessive adjectives ending in *-ov/-ev* or *-in* can only be derived from singular nouns. Therefore a prenominal possessor in Slovene cannot be complex or plural (dual) in form: **moj prijateljeva hiša, *prijatelji-eva hiša*. In English, on the other hand, there are no restrictions of the kind: *my friend's house, my friends' house*. This

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is due to the fact that the genitival -'s is neither a derivational nor an inflectional morpheme. Although it has emerged from the Old English genitival inflection -es, it is nowadays regarded as a clitic whose function is similar to that of a preposition (Quirk et al. 1985). It can also be considered an auxiliary possessive pronoun (Delsing 1998, Hudson 1995) or, as has been established within the framework of generative grammar, the linking verb *be* with an incorporated preposition (den Dikken 1998a, 1998b).

The primary objective of the study has been to determine factors governing the use of prenominal and postnominal possessive constructions and to establish the degree of overlap between English and Slovene in this respect. The theoretical approach underlying the study has been the reference-point analysis of the possessive construction, as has been developed within the framework of cognitive grammar (Lyons 1977, Langacker 1995, Vidovič-Muha 1998). This approach is based on the view that the function of the possessor is that of an abstract location: the possessor serves as a reference point facilitating identification of the possessee. Not all nominals, however, are able to discharge this function. Following Taylor (1996), the term *identification value* has been used in the study to refer to the cluster of properties that render a nominal compatible with the reference-point function.

As further elaborated by Taylor (1996), the main factor building up the identification value of the possessor nominal is its *topicality* (i.e. mental accessibility). Topicality may be *discourse-conditioned* (e.g. a concept may be mentally accessible due to its recent mention in the preceding discourse) or *inherent* (some concepts are automatically more easily accessed than others, regardless of discourse context). It seems that in judging the acceptability of a given possessive construction the most important role is played by the inherent topicality of the possessor. The highest degree of inherent topicality attaches to human beings and the lowest to abstract concepts.

Another major factor contributing to the identification value of the possessor nominal is its *informativity*, i.e. its ability to be an effective cue for the identification of the relation between the possessor and the possessee. The possessor is able to perform a reference-point function if the semantic properties of the possessee are such that the possessor emerges as the more informative participant in the relation. In the case of kinship relations, for example, it is the semantic structure of the possessee that calls for a further specification: *son* >> *Whose son?* >> *Barbara's son.*

It has been claimed that the Saxon genitive performs the reference-point function by default (Taylor 1996). Therefore prenominal possessors in English can only be realized by nominals that have high identification values whereas nominals with low identification values tend to be used in postnominal *of*-constructions. It has been proposed in the study that the same applies to Slovene: the prenominal possessor is a reference point by default and as such incompatible with a low identification value. Consequently, the identification value of the possessor may be regarded as the main factor determining the choice between the prenominal and the postnominal constructions.

For either language, the following hypotheses have been put forward:

H1: The prenominal possessor has the reference-point function by default.

H2: The identification value of the possessor is the main factor determining the choice between the prenominal and the postnominal constructions.

Both hypotheses have been checked against the empirical data compiled from the *British National Corpus*[2] (a corpus of modern English) and the corpus *FIDA*[3] (a corpus of modern Slovene). The analysis has comprised 500 examples of the English prenominal (Saxon genitive) construction, 500 examples of the English postnominal (*of*-phrase) construction, 1954 examples of the Slovene prenominal (possessive adjective) construction and 1200 examples of the Slovene postnominal (genitive phrase) construction.[4] The focus has been on the semantic properties of possessors and on the relations between possessors and possessees in given constructions. The findings are as follows (1-3):

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1. In both languages the prenominal construction is characterized by a high identification value of the possessor, which is reflected in the fact that (1.1.) the possessor is highly topical, i.e. mentally accessible, and (1.2.) the relation between the possessor and the possessee is such that the possessor emerges as the more informative participant in the relation.

1.1. The prenominal possessor is realized predominantly by:

(i) Personal names:
   (1) <u>Joan's</u> hesitation, <u>the Simpsons</u>' flat
   (2) *<u>Žigov</u> naslov, <u>Pogačnikova</u> ponudba*

(ii) Kinship terms and nouns denoting mutual interpersonal relations:
   (3) <u>his wife's</u> persistent chattering, <u>her friend's</u> letter
   (4) *<u>očetov</u> obraz, <u>sosedino</u> vedro*

(iii) Other nouns denoting people:
   (5) <u>the old woman's</u> death, <u>the architect's</u> own design
   (6) *<u>starkina</u> odločnost, <u>doktorjevi</u> gostje*

Less frequent, however not unlikely to occur as prenominal possessors are names of institutions, places and countries, common nouns referring to these entities (e.g. *city, country, firm, institute, island, nation, school, state, town*) and expressions of time. What they all have in common is that they all relate to human activities and interests, which makes them relatively high in topicality. Abstract concepts, on the other hand, have the lowest possible degree of inherent topicality and are as such not used as prenominal possessors.

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[2] For more information see <http://info.ox.ac.uk/bnc>.
[3] For more information see <http://www.fida.net>.
[4] All examples are listed in Lipovšek 2002.

1.2. The prevailing relations between the possessor and the possessee are the following:

(i) The possessee denotes some part of the possessor's body or psyche:
  (7) *Elizabeth Danziger's face, Richard's mind*
  (8) *Irenine oči, Erazmova duševnost*

(ii) The possessee denotes some part of the possessor's life or identity:
  (9) *his father's death, the girls' switched identities*
  (10) *hčerina poroka, sestrino ime*

(iii) The possessee denotes some quality of the possessor:
  (11) *Hamlet's lunacy*
  (12) *Janezova hvalisavost*

(iv) Between the possessor and the possessee exists a kinship relation or a mutual interpersonal relation:
  (13) *the old farmer's daughter, Rory's pals*
  (14) *Aleševa sestra, hčerkin fant*

(v) Between the possessor and the possessee exists an "employer-employee" relation:
  (15) *Gorbrandt's men, the young king's faithful chamberlain*
  (16) *očkov šef, Oblakovi fantje*

(vi) The possessor is the owner of the possessee:
  (17) *Karen's things, the boy's sandshoe*
  (18) *Kajini čevlji, Martina bajta*

(vii) The possessor is the performer or carrier of the activity or state denoted by the possessee:
  (19) *Mr Gorbachev's policies, the group's main strategy*
  (20) *Kristusovi čudeži, Andrejeva kariera*

(viii) The possessor is the author of the thing denoted by the possessee:
  (21) *Rupert Brooke's poems, the architect's own design*
  (22) *očetov prejšnji film, Einsteinova formula*

(ix) If the possessee is realized by a deverbal noun or a gerund, the possessor performs the function of an intransitive subject or a subject that does not denote a prototypical agent (i.e. a volitional initiator or causer of an action that affects the state of another participant in the process):
  (23) *white farmers' fears (<< White farmers fear something.), his wife's persistent chattering (<< His wife chatters.)*
  (24) *otrokov psihofizični razvoj (<< Otrok se razvija.), Sovino hukanje (<< Sova huka.)*

What all these relations have in common is the fact that in each of them even a non-relational possessee nominal starts to behave as a relational one. Thus the posses-

sor becomes part of the semantic structure of the possessee and emerges as the more informative participant in the given relation.

> 2. Unless their use is precluded by some morpho-syntactic factors, possessors with high identification values do not occur in postnominal constructions.

In Slovene, the crucial factors are the complexity and the grammatical number of the possessor. As soon as the possessor is complex or plural (dual) in form, the derivation of a possessive adjective is not possible. In English, on the other hand, the genitival -'s can attach to both complex and plural possessors. In the following cases, however, a postnominal construction is normally used (even if the possessor has a high identification value):

(i)   There's an apposition describing the possessor:
      (25) daughter <u>of John Neville, a Dublin merchant</u>

(ii) There's a relative clause describing the possessor:
      (26) the help <u>of Dr Blackwell, who needed a moral support now</u>

(iii) The possessor is rather long:
      (27) the future <u>of new director general John Birt</u>

(iv) The possessor is coordinated with another possessor:
      (28) the names <u>of the newly elected Mayor and the officials appointed by him</u>

> 3. Possessors with low identification values are normally used in postnominal constructions.

The only exception seems to be the type of construction generally known as *possessive compounds*, where the function of the possessor is classifying: the possessor does not function as a prototypical reference point but merely states the type (class) of the possessee (e.g. *a [boy's school]*, *limonin sok*). Representing a considerable extension from the prototype, possessive compounds may be excluded from the above generalization.

For both languages, the findings confirm the hypothesis that <u>the prenominal possessor has the reference-point function by default</u> (H1). This makes the prenominal possessive construction a perfect device for introducing new concepts into the discourse: a new entity is introduced via mention of an entity that has already been conceptualized by the hearer. Using the prenominal construction, the speaker makes it explicit to the hearer that the possessor is able to perform the reference-point function and thus facilitate identification of the possessee.

The findings also confirm the hypothesis that <u>the choice between the prenominal and the postnominal constructions depends primarily on the identification value of</u>

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the possessor (H2). At first sight it seems that in the case of Slovene constructions this factor is overridden by the complexity and the grammatical number of the possessor; in addition, a possessive adjective cannot be derived from any semantic class of noun. It has been argued in the study that even these factors can to some extent be explained in terms of identification value, namely (inherent) topicality:

The fact that personal names and kinship terms are used almost exclusively as prenominal possessors indicates that they tend to be simple in form. This tendency can be understood as a reflection of their topicality: as highly topical entities they do not need further description in order to be conceptualized by the hearer. Other types of nouns denoting people, which are slightly lower in topicality, are more often modified, the syntactic consequence being their use as postnominal possessors. The need for modification and topicality are obviously related. What is more, topicality is also connected with semantic classes of nouns that can(not) serve as derivational bases for possessive adjectives: most of the nouns that have a low degree of inherent topicality cannot perform this function. This is a reflection of the fact that the reference-point function of all prenominal possessors originates in the function of a prototypical possessor, i.e. a single, human, definite and mentally accessible owner of a particular thing. The analogy with the prototype seems to be so strong that the derivation of possessive adjectives is restricted mostly to nouns denoting people, i.e. nouns that are compatible with the function of a prototypical possessor.

The prototypical reference point serves the unique identification of the target. This function of prenominal possessors reflects the exclusive nature of relation between a prototypical possessor and a prototypical possessee: there is only one owner of one particular thing. Most prenominal possessive constructions are extensions from the prototype, encoding a variety of relations other than prototypical possession. What they all have in common is the fact that in any of them the possessor facilitates the identification of the possessee in one of the following ways (1-3):

1. It serves the unique identification of the possessee.

The referent of the possessor is a specific, definite entity whose identification can be made by both the speaker and the hearer. This type of reference point enables the hearer to restrict the set of possible referents of the possessee to one particular referent: *Barbara's bike* ('the bike owned by Barbara').

2. It restricts the number of possible referents of the possessee by excluding referents with other possessors.

For example, in Slovene constructions like *nek Barbarin prijatelj* ('a friend of Barbara's') the referent of the possessee is a specific, indefinite entity. Although the (specific, definite) possessor cannot facilitate the unique identification of the possessee, it can be regarded as a reference point since it excludes certain referents ('those who are not Barbara's friends') and thus restricts the set of possible referents of the possessee to a subset ('only those who are Barbara's friends').

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Similarly, in English constructions like [*some student*]*'s bike* the referent of the possessor is a specific, yet indefinite entity. Despite its indefinite status the possessor has a reference-point function: it excludes certain referents ('bikes that are not owned by students') from the set of possible referents of the possessee.

> 3. It restricts the set of possible referents of the possessee to one particular class.

This type of reference point is present in possessive compounds, which are characterized by a classifying function of the possessor. For example, *a [lady's bike]* denotes a type of bike, i.e. 'a bike designed for women' and not 'a bike owned by some particular lady' (in fact, the possessive compound [*lady's bike*] does not exclude the possibility that the bike in question is owned by a man: *Bob's* [*lady's bike*]). The most striking difference between possessive compounds and other possessive constructions is the fact that possessors in possessive compounds are non-referential, i.e. they have no referents in the real world. In the case of *a [lady's bike]* only the possessee (*bike*) has a referent, either a specific (e.g. *She bought a new lady's bike. The lady's bike she bought was quite expensive.*) or a non-specific one (e.g. *A lady's bike is easy to ride.*). The possessor (*lady*), on the other hand, does not refer to any particular lady or ladies in general; it merely states the type of bike. The situation would be different if the phrase *a lady's bike* was not a possessive compound but a prototypical possessive construction: [*a lady*]*'s bike* ('the bike owned by some particular lady'). The two constructions, however, are not unrelated. If we ignore the fact that ladies' bikes are not popular with all women, we can conclude that if some lady owns a bike ([*a lady*]*'s bike*) it will be a bike designed for women (*a [lady's bike]*). If we start the other way round, we can now provide a definition of the possessee in the possessive compound on the basis of comparison with the possessee in the prototypical possessive construction: *a [lady's bike]* = *a bike of the same type as the bike owned by some particular lady*. An example from Slovene: *limonin sok ('lemon juice') = juice of the same type as the juice of this particular lemon.* The possessor in the possessive compound is, notwithstanding its non-referentiality, at least indirectly in the function of a reference point: it restricts the set of possible referents of the possessee to a particular class, the class being the same as the class the possessee in the (homonymous) prototypical possessive construction belongs to.

As proposed in the study, all the above functions of the possessor can be described as reference-point functions. Extending the notion of reference point makes it possible to associate the reference-point function with any prenominal possessor, irrespective of how far it may be removed from the prototype.

In conclusion, the study has confirmed the universal nature of some basic concepts and constructions. The fact that the reference-point analysis of the possessive construction may be applied to languages as different as English and Slovene suggests the potential for further application of the reference-point model to crosslinguistic studies.

University of Ljubljana

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