

Title: Interpreting Possessives in ASL: Nominal and Verbal Factors

Key Words: ASL, Possessives, Locatives, Definiteness, Maximality, Syntax, Semantics

Language of Presentation: English

Two Puzzles: This research addresses two puzzles in the syntax and semantics of POSS possessive constructions in American Sign Language (ASL). First, paralleling cross-linguistic patterns, Attributive POSS (1) allows for a more flexible interpretation of possession than Predicative uses of POSS (2).

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| (1) | [Attr-POSS _i iMONSTER POSS _i LEG]
<i>A leg of the monster('s)</i>
✓alienable / ✓inalienable | [Attr-POSS _i iBRUNO POSS _i BOOK]
<i>A book of Bruno's</i>
✓he wrote it / ✓he owns it |
| (2) | [Pred-POSS LEG POSS _i iMONSTER]
<i>The leg belongs to the monster</i>
✓alienable / #inalienable | [Pred-POSS BOOK POSS _i iBRUNO]
<i>The book belongs to Bruno</i>
he wrote it / ✓he owns it |

Second, while both Attributive and Predicative POSS allow maximal or non-maximal interpretations (3), word order variation in Attributive POSS results in obligatorily maximal interpretations (4).

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|-----|--|---|
| (3) | [Attr-POSS _i iBRUNO POSS _i THREE BOOK]
<i>Three books of Bruno's</i>
✓Has 3 books total / ✓Has more than 3 books | [Pred-POSS THREE BOOK POSS _i iBRUNO]
<i>Three books belong to Bruno</i>
✓Has 3 books total / ✓Has more than 3 books |
| (4) | [Attr-POSS _i iBRUNO THREE POSS _i BOOK]
<i>Three books of Bruno's</i>
✓Has 3 books total / # Has more than 3 books | |

Analysis: Following [1], POSS is analyzed as a verbal predicate (5) with reduced relativization of the POSS-VP underlying Attributive POSS constructions (6). The properties described above follow from this shared substructure and its interaction with independently motivated components of the verbal and nominal domains.

- (5) [VP POSSESSEE [POSSESSOR [V POSS]]]
(6) [DP ... [RC [VP ~~POSSESSEE~~ POSSESSOR POSS]]] ... [NP POSSESSEE]]

Deriving Strict Possession: The restricted interpretation of Predicative POSS is the consequence of embedding the POSS-VP in a Loc(ative) projection (7): POSS contributes the more flexible possessive relation, while Loc restricts this relation to one of strict possession ('possession'+ 'located at'). This analysis is independently supported by the felicitous use of Predicative POSS in response to locative WHERE questions (8), default POSS-POSSESSOR order of Predicative POSS constructions (2), and language-specific properties of verbal decomposition [2], especially in predicates with locative components [5, 3]. Moreover, this approach converges with cross-linguistic parallels between possessive and locative constructions and research on the functional nature of prepositions [4].

- (7) [TP POSSESSEE ... [LocP POSS+Loc ... [VP ~~POSSESSEE~~ [POSSESSOR [V POSS]]]]]
(8) AIRPLANE WHERE ✓AIRPLANE POSS_i iBRUNO
Where is the airplane? ≈ *The airplane is with Bruno.*

Deriving Maximality: Comparably, order-dependent maximality effects in the Attributive POSS construction result from interaction with the functional structure of the DP. In this case, base generation of the possessor in the DP left periphery activates definiteness (9), yielding the observed maximality effects; the intervening numeral serves only to distinguish otherwise string ambiguous structures.

- (9) [DP_[+Def] POSSESSOR_i ... (NUMERAL) ... [RC [VP ~~POSSESSEE~~ pro_i POSS]]] ... [NP POSSESSEE]]

References

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