
Nigerian Languages, Literatures, Cultures &
Policy Reforms

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51. The Semantics & Morphosyntax of the \mathfrak{R} -relation in Yorùbá Genitive Constructions

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This paper examines the semantics and morpho-syntax of the \mathfrak{R} -relations found in Yorùbá genitive constructions, claiming that such a relation can be pragmatically determined (via discourse-linking), lexically determined via the inherent meaning of relational nouns or as inalienable body-part nouns. It establishes that in Yorùbá, it is possible to have a genitive relation without possession; but, conversely, all cases of nominal possession show some kind of genitive relation. It proposes a small clause *vP* as the base structure from which all the attested genitive constructions in the language can be derived.

1 Introduction

The notion of \mathfrak{R} -relation is to express ways by which lexical entities enter into relations with one another in the grammar of a language. This relation can take place in semantics or syntax. The entities in such a relation can be a verb and a noun; two nouns etc. The focus of this paper is to discuss the semantics and morphosyntax of \mathfrak{R} -relation of nominal expressions in Yorùbá genitive constructions as shown by the example in (1). I start by defining the terms that I frequently use in the paper in §1.1 and §1.2.

1.1 “Possessive” versus “Genitive”

Attempts have been made to draw a distinction between “possessive” and “genitive” construction in the literature. For example, in semantics (Borer 2004), this kind of phrase is referred to as possessive because the focus is on meaning. Once possessive is mentioned, semantic consideration necessarily comes in, whereas “genitive” denotes a morphosyntactic (not semantic) relationship between a nominal and some other item, which may not necessarily be a nominal.¹ The terms “genitive” and “possessive” as used in this paper therefore refer to constructions where two simple nouns enter into some relation with one another either at the semantic or syntactic level (Storto 2003).

Following from above, I conclude that the terms “genitive” and “possessive” are different names for the same kind of nominal expression.²

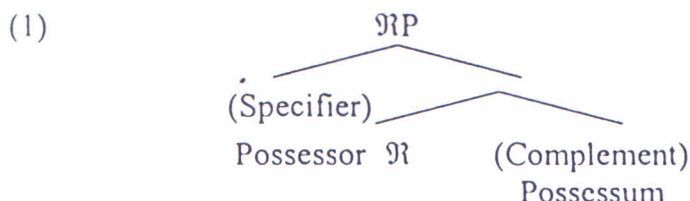
¹There is even a trend to decompose possession syntactically into location, BE and HAVE. See Benveniste (1971); Freeze (1992); Harley (1995); Partee and Borschev (2002)

²Following standard practice, I analyze genitive in terms of Case (Lindauer 1998).

1.2 Possessor and Possessum

The other two terms that I use very often are Possessor and Possessum. Following from the established fact in §1.1, a possessum NP does not necessarily mean an item possessed by X. Neither is it the case that a possessor NP always refers to the one who possesses X. Rather, the two simply represent the two arguments that are in some semantic or syntactic relation.

In the small clause, which I propose as the base structure (contra Ajíbóyè 2005), the \mathfrak{R} heads the phrase and projects to $\mathfrak{R}P$. The Possessor occupies the Specifier position whereas the Possessum is in the complement position.



I claim that this Possessor-Possessum structure is the base of all genitive constructions in Yorùbá. Any deviation from this linear order in the surface syntax is accounted for via raising.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. §2 and §3 discuss the semantics of R-relation in nominal and verbal domains respectively. In §4, I give a morphosyntactic account of the \mathfrak{R} -relation in those environments and conclude in §5.

2 Two kinds of \mathfrak{R} -relation in nominal domain

Nouns enter into a relation with each other in one of two ways: as pragmatically determined via discourse-linking or as lexically determined via the inherent meaning of relational nouns or as inalienable body-part nouns. I try to establish that the inherent meaning of the possessum determines the kind of relation that holds between it (possessum), and the possessor.

2.1 Discourse-linked \mathfrak{R} -relations

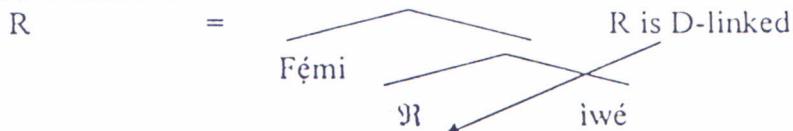
First is the kind of \mathfrak{R} relation that is Discourse-linked. This relation is pragmatically determined. According to Higginbotham (1983), an example such as (2a) is interpreted as in (2b).

- (2) a. iwé e Fémi
 book MT_μ F.
 'Femi's book'

- b. $\exists x [iwé(x) \wedge R(T,x)]$
 = there exists x, x is a book and x stands in some relation R to Femi

The *R* relation has its value supplied by discourse. This is the sense in which it is said to be Discourse linked (D-linked).

(3) Simple *N* Possession



To say that the *R*-relation is D-linked therefore means that a genitive phrase needs a proper discourse setting before an accurate reading can be obtained. Thus the example in (2): *iwé e Fẹmi* 'Femi's cutlass' needs a discourse context for the relation to be understood. For example, depending on the context, the book in question could be as given in 4.

- (4)
- a. the book that Femi read
 - b. the book that Femi drew a picture of
 - c. the book that Femi sang a song about
 - d. the book that Femi owns
 - e. the book that Femi threw into the river when he was fishing

According to Ajibóyè (2005), the discourse-linked otherwise known as pragmatically determined *R* relation genitive constructions fall into three subtypes: genitives of possession, of depiction and of modification.

2.1.1 Genitive of possession

While the genitive of possession in (5) corresponds to the semantic notion of possession,

- (5)
- a. ilé e Fẹmi *genitive of possession*
house MT_μ F.
'Femi's house'
 - b. owó o Bùnmi
money MT_μ B.
'Bunmi's money'

2.1.2 Genitive of Depiction

The genitive of depiction in (6) is ambiguous between possession and depiction.

- 6
- a. àwòrán an Fẹmi *genitive of depiction*
picture MT_μ F.
'Femi's picture'
 - b. ère e Sóláárín
statue MT_μ S.
'Solarin's statue'

2.1.3 Genitive of Modification

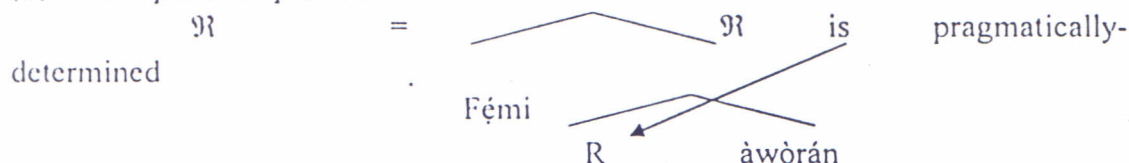
As for the genitive of modification in, it is never construed as a possessive relation (cf. Partee and Borschev 1999: 174). As with any modification, this type of genitive sheds more light to the noun that occupies the position of the possessor NP.

- (7) a. akoni òsèlú
astute politician
'an astute politician'
- b. ògbóntagi oníróyìn *genitive of modification*
gem journalist
'a gem of a Journalist'

2.1.4 Analysis

These three subtypes of genitive construction are all instances of the relation R. I represent that of R relation with genitive of depiction in (8).

(8) Simple N Depiction



2.2 Lexically determined \mathfrak{R} -relations

In addition to these pragmatically determined R-relations, another R relation is found with relational and inalienable nouns.

2.2.1 Relational nouns

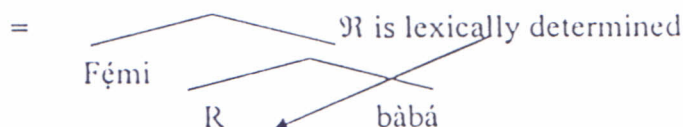
The relational nouns like *bàbá* 'father', where the relation is supplied by the meaning of the noun itself. Thus, R is lexically determined.

In (9), under its most salient reading, *bàbá* means 'someone who stands in the father-of relation'. 'Femi's father' does not need a discourse context for the relation to be understood: the person in question is unambiguously understood to be the one who stands in the father-of relation to Femi (cf. Déchaine 1993: 127).

- (9) a. bàbá a Fēmi
father MT_μ T.
'Tunde's father'
- b. $\exists x [\text{bàbá}(x) \wedge \text{bàbá}(x, T)]$
= There exists x, x is bàbá 'a father' such that x is the father of Femi

When we say that *R* is lexically determined, the idea is that for relational nouns such as *bàbá* 'father', it is the noun itself that supplies the relation *R*, as in (10).³

(10) Relational Nouns



2.2.2 Inalienable nouns

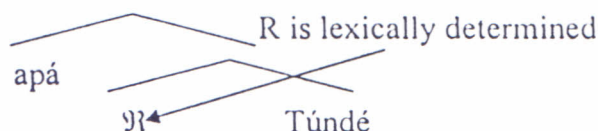
The other type of lexically determined *R* relation is found with inalienable nouns, which include body-part nouns such as *apá* 'arm' (11) (cf. Vergnaud and Zubizarreta 1992; Mühlbauer 2004).

- (11) a. *apá* *a* *Fẹmi*
 arm MT_μ F.
 'Femi's arm'

- b. $\exists x [apá(x) \wedge apá(x, T)]$
 = There exists *x*, *x* is *apá* 'an arm' such that *x* is the arm of Femi

Such inalienable nouns have a special part-of relation (Déchaine 1993: 127-133; Mühlbauer 2004a,b; 2005; Partee and Borschev 1999). Observe that the inalienable *R* relation is not discourse linked. Thus, as with relational nouns, the inalienable *R* relation is also lexically determined as in (12). In *apá a Fẹmi* 'Femi's arm', this means the arm that is a part of Femi: It is a component of his body, under its most salient reading.⁴

(12) Inalienable Nouns



Another case to consider is shown in (13). In (13a), both nouns are animate. In that case *Fẹmi* does not possess his boss, but instead the genitive simply allows for the satisfaction of the *R* relation, since if you are a boss, you must be somebody's boss. Further, there are cases like (13b) where *apá* 'arm', contextually means 'sleeve'; metaphorically the gown can be thought to possess the sleeve just as I possess my own arm via the part-whole relation (cf. Mühlbauer 2004; Partee and Borschev 1999).

³However, discourse linking is also possible with relational nouns in an appropriate context. Imagine the following scenario. "Every member of a community centre's 'Father's Group' was assigned a counselor. Counselor *Fẹmi*'s father was very enthusiastic about the centre's program but Counselor *Titi*'s father had no real interest in the group at all." In this context, discourse linking would take precedence over the kinship interpretation. However, such "forced contexts" are not considered here.

⁴See Burton (1995) for a discussion of the less salient readings of inalienable nouns.

- (13) a. [ògá a Fẹ̀mì]
 master MT_μ F.
 'Femi's master'
- b. [apá (a) agbádá]
 arm MT_μ garment
 'a garment's sleeve'

The simple N possession has an open semantic relation R whose content is provided by the context (i.e. pragmatically determined). For the other two types of genitives, namely relational nouns and inalienable body part nouns, the R relation is lexically determined.

To summarize, in Yorùbá, it is possible to have a genitive relation without possession. Conversely, all cases of nominal possession show some kind of genitive relation. In (14a), *àpò* 'a bag' cannot be possessed by *bàtà* 'shoes' in any obvious way, although the shoes stand in a relation to the bag, e.g. by occupying the bag in spatial terms. But even though possession as such is not found in (14a) it is no less genitive than (14b) which can have a clearly possessive construal along the lines of 'the money that Femi has'.

- (14) a. [àpò o bàtà]
 bag MT_μ shoe
 'a bag of shoes'
- b. [owó o Fẹ̀mì]
 Money MT_μ F.
 'Femi's money'

Based on (14), the conclusion must be that the notion of possession comes slightly different from that of genitive.

3 R-relation in verbal domain

Observe that just as the nominal R relation is compatible with a wide range of pragmatically conditioned interpretations, as in (15a), so too is the verbal R relation, as in (15b).

- (15) a. nominal R-relation (possessor/genitive)
 iwé e Tùndé
 book MT_μ T.
 (i) 'the book that Tunde owns'
 (ii) 'the book that Tunde wrote'
 (iii) 'the book about Tunde'

- b. verbal *R*-relation (possessor/genitive)
 Túndé ní iwé
 T. have book
 (i) 'Tunde owns a book'
 (ii) 'Tunde wrote a book'
 (iii) 'Someone wrote a book about Tunde'

Furthermore, just as lexical properties of nouns determine the *R*-relation, so too do lexical properties of arguments determine the relation expressed by a light verb.⁵ For example, in (16a) the *R*-relation is pragmatically determined by discourse-linking while in (16b-c) the *R*-relation is determined by the lexical properties of the relation and inalienable noun respectively.

- (16) a. bàtà a Bùnmi *discourse-linking*
 shoe MT_μ B.
 'Bunmi's shoes'
- b. ègbón ọ̀n Bùnmi *relational*
 elder MT_μ B.
 'Bunmi's brother'
- c. apá a Bùnmi *inalienable*
 arm MT_μ B.
 'Bunmi's arm'

Similarly, in (17) it is the inherent lexical properties of the object argument that determine how light verb *jẹ* 'eat, ingest' is interpreted. In (17a), *jẹ iṣu* translates to 'eat yam'; in (17b) *jẹ gbèsè* translates literally as 'eat debt', i.e. to be in debt; in (17c) *jẹ ẹgba* 'eat cane' translates as 'to be caned'. Thus, just as the co-argument relation between [ARG1 v ARG2] is determined by the lexical properties of [ARG₂] in the Possessive/genitive constructions of (17), so too is the co-argument relation between [ARG1 *jẹ* ARG2] determined by the lexical properties of [ARG2] in (15).

- (17) Bólá jẹ iṣu
 B. eat yam
 'Bolu ate yams.'
- b. Bólú jẹ gbèsè *experiencer-theme*
 B. eat debt
 'Bolu is in debt.'
- c. Bólú jẹ ẹgba *experiencer-theme*
 B. eat cane
 'Bolu received some strokes of cane.'

⁵I define light verbs as verbs whose meaning and valence are determined exclusively by nouns with which they combine.

What is reported of the genitive and possessive parallels the case of nominative Case and the external theta-role of the verb. While many arguments with nominative Case are also agents, and many agents bear nominative Case, the correlation is not on one-to-one basis. For example, in (18a), *Rolake* is agent, in (18b) the same *Rolake* is the experiencer, whereas in (18c) *Rolake* is the possessor. In all three examples, *Rolake* is assigned Nominative Case.

- (18) a. Róláké jẹ àkàrà
 R. eat bean cake
 'Rolake ate the bean cake'
 θ: Agent
 Case: Nominative
- b. Róláké fẹ̀ràn àkàrà
 R. likes bean cake
 'Rolake likes bean cakes.'
 θ: Experiencer
 Case: Nominative
- c. Róláké ní àkàrà
 R. have bean cake
 'Rolake has a bean cake.'
 θ: Possessor
 Case: Nominative

Delsing (1998: 93-94) observes that though "the relation between possessor and possessum is semantically different from the relation between the subject and the verb, it seems to be morphosyntactically the same relation." On that view, genitive is defined in terms of structural Case.

4 The morphosyntactic realization of the *R*-relation in Yorùbá

The overt realization of the *R*-relation elements found in Yorùbá is morphosyntactically conditioned. To this end, In Ajíbóyè (2005), it is observed that there are three kinds of genitive constructions in Yorùbá:

- (19) a. Nominal genitive
 b. Nominal plus *ti* construction
 c. Verbal genitive

The examples in (20) illustrate these three types. In (20a) the possessum and the possessor are separated by a mid tone mora (μ) herein referred to as the genitive marker (henceforth mid tone mora (MT μ)). Similarly, the example in (20b) parallels the example in (20a) in the sense that the possessum and the possessor are also separated by mid tone element: *ti*, (20b). The example in (20c) is the sentential counterpart of (20a). This is a kind of possessive, which is assigned by the verb *ní* 'have'.

(20)	a.	<i>Nominal genitive</i> ilé e Bùnmi house MTμ B. 'Bunmi's house'	<i>possessum</i>	<i>MTμ</i>	<i>possessor</i>
	b.	<i>Nominal plus ti construction</i> ẹran ti Bùnmi animal of B. 'Bùnmi's animal'	<i>possessum</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>possessor</i>
	c.	<i>Verbal genitive</i> Bùnmi ní iwé B. have book 'Bunmi has a book.'	<i>possessor</i>	<i>verb</i>	<i>possessum</i>

In nominal genitives (20a), the *Ń*-relation is pronounced as D, which is a copy of the final vowel of the possessum. In nominal plus *ti* constructions (20b), the *R*-relation is pronounced as *ti*. Finally, in verbal genitives (20c), the *Ń*-relation is pronounced as the possessive verb *ní*. I show the derivation process in (21).

Assuming a small clause “*ŃP*” as the base structure for all kinds of Yorùbá genitive constructions, I claim that a Yorùbá nominal construction has the surface structure of a DP where the D takes the small clause as its complement. The possessum, which is a complement of the small “*Ń*” moves to the Specifier position of DP to derive the surface linear order of ‘Possessum-Possessor’. I illustrate this in (21a). As for the nominal plus *ti* construction, I also propose a DP structure, but this time the D takes a CP as its complement and the C of the CP in turn takes the small clause as its complement. Starting from the same complement position, the possessum moves to the Specifier position of the CP. I illustrate this in (21b). Finally, for the verbal genitive, I claim that they are base generated in the small clause, thus retaining the Possessor-Possessum linear order, (21c).

- (21)a. [DP_{POSS'Mi} iwé [D e [ŃP_{POSS'R} Bùnmi [Ń Ø] t_i]
- b. [DP [D Ø [CP_{POSS'M} ẹran [C ti] [ŃP_{POSS'R} Bùnmi [Ń Ø] t_i]
- c. [ŃP_{POSS'R} Bùnmi [Ń ní]_{POSS'M} iwé]

The motivation for the *ŃP* is to cover the generalizations that hold of the data set involving both nominal and verbal genitives. While the genitive morpheme is pronounced as *ni* in *Ń* in verbal domain; it is either pronounced as a mid tond mora in D or a mid toned *ti* or both in nominal domain.

5 Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined the semantics and morpho-syntax of the *Ń*-relations found in Yorùbá genitive constructions, claiming that such a relation can

be pragmatically determined (via discourse-linking), lexically determined via the inherent meaning of relational nouns or as inalienable body-part nouns. In particular, it establishes that in Yorùbá, it is possible to have a genitive relation without possession; but, conversely, all cases of nominal possession show some kind of genitive relation.

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