snippets

Issue 46 - June 2024

Contents

Inalienable interpretation in attributive possession

Andrew Carnie · University of Arizona

Scottish Gaelic (SG) has two ways of expressing attributive pronominal possession. The first is to use a possessive pronoun (1a). The other is to use a definite determiner and an inflected form of the preposition *aig* 'at' (1b). (All data from my native speaker consultants, Muriel Fisher and Margaret Stewart.)

(1) a. mo mhac
         my son
         'my son'

     b. am peann agam
         the pen   at.1s
         'my pen'

     c. #mo pheann
         my pen
         'my pen'

     d. ?mo pheann fhìn
         my pen   self
         'my own pen'

     e. mo làmh
         my hand
         'my hand'

     f. #an làmh agam
         the hand at.1s
         'my hand'

The prescriptive literature on these two constructions identifies (1a) as expressing various forms of inalienability (kinship, whole part, body parts etc.) (Lamb 2003). The possessive pronoun construction with an alienable possession is either unacceptable or requires a special interpretation of closeness: (1c) means something like 'my favorite pen' but is viewed as odd by native speakers. The strangeness of (1c) is ameliorated by adding an emphatic particle like 'self' in (1d). The *aig*-construction in (1b) is typically used for alienable possession. (1e) would be the normal way of expressing body-part possession. (1f) requires special context to be acceptable, e.g., you are holding a severed hand.

This suggests that there is a structural difference between alienable and inalienable possession, since different constructions are used for the two types. However, the connection is not perfect, consistent with the literature on clausal possession (Bernd 1997, Myler 2016, Alshehri 1994, Guéron 2003). There are well-documented exceptions to tying the *aig*-construction to alienable possession, e.g., 'my husband' and 'my daughter' most naturally use *aig*-possession, by contrast to 'my wife' and 'my son', which use *mo*-possession (2):

(2) a. an duine agam   #mo dhuine   'my husband'
     b. an nighean agam   #mo nighean   'my daughter'
     c. #a' bhean agam   mo bhean   'my wife'
     d. #am mac agam   mo mhac   'my son'

Similarly, in East Sutherland Gaelic, the *mo*-construction has disappeared entirely, leaving only the *aig*-possessive construction for inalienable functions (Dorian 1981, Adger 2017). However, the connection between the mo-construction and inalienable is typically described in the descriptive literature as absolute.

SG does not have a verb 'have'. Instead, it uses 'to be' combined with the preposition *aig* 'at' (3a). An attributively possessed DP inside a clausal possession structure is completely rejected when the two pronouns are identical (3b). In order to express 'I have my pen', the preferred form uses the possessive pronoun (3c) – normally reserved for inalienable possession. The ungrammaticality of (3c) appears to be a haplological effect: if you change the person inflection on either of the two possessors then the sentence becomes acceptable (3d). Similarly, if you disrupt the adjacency of the two *aig* forms, then the double *aig* becomes acceptable. The *agam agam* sequence is disrupted in (3e) by clefting the possessed DP. In (3f), it is disrupted by the emphatic particle.

(3) a. Tha   peann agam.
        be.PRES pen   at.1s
        'I have a pen.' (literally 'a pen is at me')

    b. *Tha   [DP am peann agam] agam.
         be.PRES   the pen   at.1s   at.1s
         'I have my pen.'

    c. Tha   [DP mo pheann] agam.
        be.PRES   my pen   at.1s
        'I have my pen.'

    d. Tha   [DP am peann agad] agam.
        be.PRES   the pen   at.2s at.1s
        'I have your pen.'

    e. 'S e   [DP am peann agam(sa)]ᵢ   a   th'   tᵢ agam
        CLEFT   the pen   at.1st(EMPH) WH be.PRES   at.1s   ('S e = CLEFT)
        'It's my pen that I have.'

    f. Tha   [DP am peann agam-sa]   agam.
        be.PRES   the pen   at.2s-EMPH at.1s
        'I have your pen.'

The effect in (3) holds in all persons. The grammaticality of (3b) is not improved by putting *-sa* on the second *agam*, which is independently allowed.

Critically, in (3c) the *mo*-construction loses its inalienability requirement. When the competing force of haplology comes into play, the *mo*-strategy becomes the primary way of expressing alienable possession too. The syntactic coding of inalienability in SG attributive possession is thus not as rigidly enforced as typically described. While prepositional *aig*-possession was already known to allow both interpretations, the fact that the *mo*-possession in SG also allows alienable possession is new.

The haplological phenomenon in (3) also has implications for the model of the grammar. There are two competing sets of constraints: (a) a syntax-semantics mapping constraint for the *mo*-construction corresponding with alienable possession and (b) a syntax-phonology mapping constraint against identical adjacent forms. When these two constraints come in conflict, the phonological constraint wins. This competition is hard to express in a traditional Y model where LF and PF branches do not interact. Instead, a model that allows transderivational comparison is required.

References

Adger, David. 2017. Structure, use and syntactic ecology in language obsolescence. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 52:614–638.

Alshehri, Othman. 1994. The Syntax and Semantics of Arabic Possession. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Arizona.

Bernd, Heine. 1997. *Possession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dorian, Nancy C. 1981. *Language Death: The Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Guéron, Jacqueline. 2003. Inalienable possession and the interpretation of determiners. In *From NP to DP, vol. 2: The expression of possession in noun phrases*, ed. Martina Coene and Yves D'hulst, 189–220. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Lamb, Will. 2003. *Scottish Gaelic*. Munich: Lincom Europa.

Myler, Neil. 2016. *Building and Interpreting Possession Sentences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Andrew Carnie
carnie@arizona.edu
Department of Linguistics
University of Arizona,
Tucson AZ, 85721
USA