

57 Position of Pronominal Possessive Affixes

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1 Defining the values

This map shows the position of possessive affixes on nouns, as illustrated by the first-person possessive prefix *u-* in (1a) from Macushi (Carib; Guyana etc.) and by the second-person singular possessive suffix *-m* in (1b) from Loniū (Oceanic, Austronesian; Manus Island, Papua New Guinea).

- (1) a. Macushi (Abbott 1991: 86)

u-pana'
1.POSS-car
'my ear'

- b. Loniū (Hamel 1994: 46)

εye-m
blood-2SG.POSS
'your blood'

● 1. Possessive prefixes	238
● 2. Possessive suffixes	330
● 3. Both possessive prefixes and possessive suffixes, with neither primary	24
○ 4. No possessive affixes	203
total	795

Note that the term **possessive affix** is used by different linguists for two very different sorts of affixes. This chapter uses the term for affixes like those in (1) which code the person, number, and/or gender of a possessor, and which appear on a noun denoting the entity which is possessed. The term is occasionally used for what will be called here **genitive affixes**, case affixes which occur on nouns denoting possessors, to indicate that these nouns denote the possessor of something expressed by a separate noun, as illustrated by the example in (2) from Archi (Nakh-Daghestanian; Russia).

- (2) Archi (Kibrik 1994: 312)

diya-n k'oč'o
father-GEN cup
'father's cup'

Genitive affixes have the same function as the preposition *of* or the clitic *'s* (as in *John's car*) in English; possessive affixes have the same meaning as English words like *my*, *your*, and *their*. The contrast between possessive affixes and genitive affixes is brought out clearly by languages like Québec-Labrador Inuktitut (Eskimo-Aleut), which employ both in genitive constructions. In (3), there is both a genitive case affix on the noun *illu* 'house' and a third-person possessive affix on the noun *ukkuā* 'door'.

- (3) Québec-Labrador Inuktitut (Dorais 1988: 27)

illu-up ukkuā-nga
house-GEN door-3SG.POSS
'the door of the house'

It should be stressed that the term *possessive* is used here, as it is generally used by linguists, to denote a range of meanings that is broader than that associated with the word *possession* in everyday English. While it includes a relationship of ownership or possession in the everyday sense, it also includes kinship relations (as in *my father*), part-whole relations (as in *my hand*), and other relations as in *its population*, *its foreign minister*, *his first novel*, or *his favourite movie*.

The map shows the distribution of **possessive prefixes**, as in (1a) above, in contrast to **possessive suffixes**, as in (1b). Some languages have both possessive prefixes and possessive suffixes. If neither can be considered primary, then the language is shown on the map as having **both possessive prefixes and possessive**

suffixes with neither primary. For example, Squamish (Salishan; British Columbia) employs a combination of prefixes and suffixes, as illustrated by the paradigm in (4).

- (4) Squamish (Kuipers 1967: 87)

?n-snax'i'λ 'my canoe'
?ə-snax'i'λ 'your (singular) canoe'
snax'i'λ-s 'his canoe'
snax'i'λ-čət 'our canoe'
?ə-snax'i'λ-iaɸ 'your (plural) canoe'
snax'i'λ-s-ɣit 'their canoe'

However, if there is a reason to view either prefixes or suffixes as primary, the language is shown according to that primary type. For example, in Lillooet, which like Squamish is a Salishan language of British Columbia, there are possessive suffixes on nouns for five of the six combinations of person and number, but for one (first person singular), a prefix is used, as in (5).

- (5) Lillooet (van Eijk 1997: 145)

n-tmix^w 'my land' *tmix^w-ka* 'our land'
tmix^w-su 'your land' *tmix^w-lap* 'your (plural) land'
tmix^w-s 'his land' *tmix^w-i* 'their land'

Because the affixes are primarily suffixes, Lillooet is treated as a language in which possessive suffixes are primary. Similarly, Maricopa (Yuman; Arizona) employs possessive prefixes that represent the person of the possessor and, if the possessor is plural, possessive suffixes that code the plurality of the possessor. The example in (6a) illustrates a noun with a first-person singular possessor, while (6b) illustrates a noun with a first-person plural possessor.

- (6) Maricopa (Gordon 1986: 34)

a. *?-ime*
1.POSS-leg
'my leg(s)'
b. *?-ime-sh*
1.POSS-leg-PL.POSS
'our legs'

Since possessed nouns in Maricopa can contain a possessive prefix without a possessive suffix, but not a possessive suffix without a possessive prefix, the prefixes are considered primary and Maricopa is shown on the map as having possessive prefixes.

The fourth type of languages shown on the map are those that have **no possessive affixes**, but express pronominal possession by means of separate words modifying the noun, as in English *my hat*. Note that languages of this sort are proportionally underrepresented on the map; they are much more common than their frequency on the map might suggest.

Some languages have what at first sight look like possessive affixes in that they can attach phonologically to nouns, but which on more careful examination turn out to be possessive clitics with a syntactically defined position within noun phrases that under certain circumstances attach to nouns, but in other circumstances attach to a nominal modifier. For example, while (7a) from Tukang Besi (Austronesian; Sulawesi, Indonesia) looks like it contains a possessive suffix, the example in (7b) shows that the possessive marker can attach to a postnominal modifier, showing that it is a clitic.

- (7) Tukang Besi (Donohue 1999: 73)

a. *te kene=su*
CASE friend=1SG.POSS
'my friends'
b. *te wunua molengo=su*
CASE house old=1SG.POSS
'my old house'

Such clitics are not treated as possessive affixes for the purposes of this map, and *Tukang Besi* is thus shown as a language lacking possessive affixes.

In many languages, possessive affixes are used only for certain possessive relationships, separate possessive pronominal words being used for other relationships. It is common, for example, for possessive affixes to be used for instances of **inalienable possession**, where the possessive relationship is an inherent or permanent one, but not for alienable possession, where the possessive relationship is in principle a temporary one (see Chapter 58). The two most common subtypes of inalienable possessive relationships are kinship and body-part relations. For example, in *Loniu*, possessive suffixes are used for inalienable possession, as illustrated in (1b) above, but not for alienable possession, where a pronominal possessor is expressed by a possessive particle followed by an independent pronoun, as in (8).

- (8) *Loniu* (Hamel 1994: 44)
- | | | |
|----------------------------|----------|-----------|
| <i>p^wɛləyah</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>yo</i> |
| parrotfish | POSS | 1SG |
| 'my parrotfish' | | |

In *Ungarinjin* (Wororan; northwestern Australia), there are two different sets of possessive affixes, a set of prefixes used with a subset of body-part terms, as in (9a), and a set of suffixes used with kinship terms, as in (9b); alienably possessed nouns do not employ possessive affixes.

- (9) *Ungarinjin* (Rumsey 1982: 43, 47)
- niy-embulari*
1SG.POSS-foot
'my foot'
 - gayi-ŋi*
grandmother-1SG.POSS
'my grandmother'

In *Paumari* (Arauan; Brazil), there is one set of possessive affixes for body parts and a different set for kinship terms and alienable possession (Chapman and Derbyshire 1991: 256). In some languages, the use of possessive affixes is restricted to kinship terms; an example is *Mparntwe Arrernte* (Pama-Nyungan; Northern Territory, Australia; Wilkins 1989: 133). Conversely, in *Tauya* (Madang, Trans-New Guinea; Papua New Guinea), possessive affixes are only used with body-part terms, separate words being used with other nouns, including kinship terms (MacDonald 1990: 129, 131).

Many languages extend the use of inalienable possession beyond kinship terms and body parts, and often the boundary between alienable and inalienable possession is apparently partly lexicalized. For example, in *Kiribati* (Oceanic, Austronesian; Kiribati, Pacific), one of the words for 'house' takes the suffix used with inalienable possession, while another word for 'house' takes the separate possessor word used with alienable possession that precedes the possessed noun, as illustrated in (10).

- (10) *Kiribati* (Groves et al. 1985: 49)
- mweenga-ra*
house-1PL.POSS
'our house'
 - ara* *auti*
1PL.POSS house
'our house'

While there may be some semantic difference between these two nouns that would explain this difference, Groves et al. (1985: 49) give no indication of such and simply describe the example in (10b) as "exceptional".

While the distinction between alienable and inalienable possession is relevant in some languages for whether or not possessive affixes are used, there are other languages that employ possessive affixes for both types of possession, but where the particular nature of the morphological construction varies according to whether the possession is alienable or inalienable. For example, *Alune* (Austronesian; Ceram, Indonesia) employs possessive suffixes for inalienable possession, but possessive prefixes for alienable possession (Niggemeyer 1951–2: 62).

There are also languages where the use of possessive affixes as opposed to separate possessive pronominal words depends on the particular person-number combination. In *Nivkh* (isolate; Sakhalin Island, Russia), there are possessive prefixes only for singular possessors; independent pronouns are used for dual and plural possessors (Gruzdeva 1998: 28). Similarly, in *Wolof* (Atlantic, Niger-Congo; Senegal and Gambia), the third-person singular possessive is realized by a suffix on the noun, while other person-number combinations involve a separate possessive word preceding the noun (Sauvageot 1965: 94). As long as a language regularly employs possessive affixes under some set of circumstances, it is shown on the map according to the position of those affixes.

2 Geographical distribution

The map shows what is perhaps the clearest apparent example in this atlas of an Old World–New World split in the distribution of the two types of possessive affixes: while possessive suffixes are the primary type in the Old World, possessive prefixes are primary in the New World. One must be wary, however, of concluding that this pattern reflects large-scale areal (or genealogical) relationships; to some extent, it may be coincidental.

In Africa, possessive prefixes are relatively uncommon, though instances of them are scattered over the continent. In Europe and Asia, suffixes again predominate, the largest set of exceptions being Tibeto-Burman languages in an area centred in north-east India, all of which employ prefixes if they have possessive affixes. The other genealogical groups containing languages with prefixes in Europe and Asia are North-West Caucasian, Jarawa (an Andamanese language and four isolates: Burushaski, Ket, Nivkh, and Ainu). The Austronesian languages with possessive affixes are overwhelmingly suffixing.

Perhaps the largest overall exception to the appearance of an Old World–New World split is provided by non-Austronesian languages of the region in and around New Guinea. In terms of numbers of genera (linguistic groups comparable in time depth to the subfamilies of Indo-European; see Introduction to Genealogical Language List) containing languages of the two affix types, possessive prefixes strongly outnumber possessive suffixes in this region, by nineteen genera to seven. When one looks at the map of New Guinea, the two affix types look comparable in frequency, with prefixes more common to the west and suffixes more common to the east, but the distribution is largely predictable genealogically: all Austronesian languages of the region with possessive affixes employ suffixes. This predictability from genealogical classification extends eastward: on Bougainville and in the Solomon Islands the Austronesian languages with possessive affixes employ suffixes while the non-Austronesian languages employ prefixes.