

Possessive constructions in Gbe (either oral or poster)

This talk gives an overview over the forms of expressing alienable and inalienable possession in Gbe languages. In particular, it analyzes the parameters which affect the choice between the structures at hand.

In Gbe, we can identify three distinct types of possessive constructions which show a different distribution across the single Gbe languages (see (1)):

- (i) simple juxtaposition *possessor – possessee*, sometimes accompanied by tonal changes due to a floating high tone between the two items;
- (ii) the use of a possessive linker, *ɸé* in Ewegbe and *sín* in Fongbe between the nouns in the same order as in (i);
- (iii) reversed order of the two nouns, *possessee – possessor*, with an additional possessive particle *tə/ tən* following the possessor.

The single Gbe languages behave differently with respect to the use of these three formal means to express possession. Ewegbe shows a possessive classification with two different structures clearly determined by the alienability hierarchy (cf. Nichols & Bickel 2008) – (i) is used with inalienable possession (the reason why the example is given in brackets), (ii) with alienable. This is not the case in Ajagbe and Fongbe. In Ajagbe, (i) is the preferred structure for all kinds of possession, (ii) can be used mainly with alienable possession. Finally, in Fongbe all three structures are interchangeable for alienable relations; kinship terms and locative relations are mainly expressed by simple juxtaposition. All three languages behave alike concerning the “possession” of body parts (mostly treated as inalienable possession, cf. Nichols 1988) which is not allowed to be formed with (i).

The paper aims at analyzing in more detail the conditions that favor the use of the different constructions in each language and to account for the differences that we observe in them. The initial hypothesis is that all Gbe languages show the alienability split, but that, at least in Fongbe and Ajagbe, the lexical meaning of the possessee is not the only parameter determining the choice between the above structures. Haspelmath (2006) explains the motivation of the alienability split for reasons of economy rather than iconicity (see Haiman 1983). But can this parameter also be responsible for the use of one of the two structures with alienable possessive relations found in Ajagbe? In other words, is there a semantic difference between structures like the ‘arriving of Koku’ (*kəkú vává* = (i)) and ‘Koku’s sickness’ (*ədólélé kəkú tə* = (iii)) provided that in both cases, the notions involved are neither frequent nor conceptually close. As for Ajagbe, a survey of the different uses shows that the character of the possessive relation as well as the phonological weight of the possessee affect the choice of the structure.

Lefebvre & Brousseau (2002) provide indications that contrast is among the parameters influencing the choice of the possessive structure. Whereas the “possession” of body parts is normally expressed by (iii), (ii) is also possible but only if contrast on the possessor is involved (see (2)). The results gained from the implementation of contrastivity in the analysis will be presented in the talk.

Examples

(1)		Ewe	Aja	Fon	
(i)	possessor – possessee	(Kòkú xò)	Kòkú xò	Kòkú xó	‘the hut/house of Koku’
(ii)	possessor – PRT - possessee	Kòfí fé xò	--	Kòkú sín xó	‘the hut/house of Koku’
(iii)	possessee – possessor – PRT	--	xò Kòkú tò	xò Kòkú tòn	‘the hut/house of Koku’

(2a) àwà nyè tòn wé wèn.
arm 1sg Poss FM break
‘It is my arm that is broken.’ (not e.g. my leg)

(2b) nyè sín àwà wé wèn.
1sg Poss arm FM break
‘It is me whose arm is broken.’ (not e.g. someone else’s)

(adapted from Lefebvre & Brousseau 2002 : 71)

References:

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