Possession and Perspective: Subjectivity in the Encoding of Alienability

cognitive linguistics, subjectivity, possession, alienability, linguistic typology

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This study investigates how subjectivity shapes the encoding of inalienable possession across languages. While previous research has examined subjectivity as a typological tendency, its role in possessive constructions or the expression of inalienability remains underexplored. The aim of this study is to answer the following question: Is there a correlation between subjectivity and the encoding of typically inalienable nouns across different languages?

Previous studies suggest that languages differ in their propensity for subjective versus objective expression. For example, particular attention has been paid to English and Japanese; English has been characterized as more objective, while Japanese exhibits stronger subjective tendencies (Ikegami, 1991; Hirose, 2017). The subjective expression, as defined by Ikegami (2008), involves the conceptualizer being immersed in or projecting themselves onto a scene, perceiving it from their own "experiencer" viewpoint, while the objective expression involves the conceptualizer being detached from the scene, perceiving it from an external, neutral position.

Subjectivity has been linked to indices such as pronoun omission and preference for intransitive constructions, which are also relevant to possessive expressions (Ikegami, 1981, 1991). For instance, Example (1) illustrates the omission of a first-person pronoun, while Example (2) demonstrates an intransitive possessive construction and possible omission.

(1) Koko wa doko desu ka.
Here TOP where COP Q
Where am I? (Lit. "Here is where?")

(2) (Watashi ni wa) kodomo ga futari iru.
I DAT TOP child NOM two.people exist
I have two children. (Lit. "(To me,) two children exist.") (Ikegami 1991)

However, existing studies have primarily focused on predicative possession categorized through the BE/HAVE typology (Isačenko, 1974), leaving attributive possession and inalienable nouns relatively understudied. Additionally, while some languages formally distinguish alienable and inalienable possession, others do not but still employ distinct strategies for encoding possession (Seiler, 2001; Thunes, 2013).

This study examines Czech, French, Russian, Korean, Chinese, and Turkish to determine whether subjectivity correlates with inalienable possession encoding.

To assess the correlation between subjectivity and alienability, we first examine the general subjectivity features: discreetness distinction, transitivity and degree of agentivity, event realization, and pronoun-dropping. We also include predicative possession as a major feature.

We base our analysis on Heine's (2006) Event Schemas to account for the variety in the BE-type possession constructions.

We further assess the realization of subjectivity through cross-linguistic comparison of a controlled set of sentences used to analyze subjectivity (ref. Moriya 2018). Finally, through corpus analysis, we will examine the treatment of typical inalienable nouns based on Seiler's (2001) distinction between suppressed and obligatory possessors to determine if there is a correlation in the treatment of these inalienable nouns across languages.

This study investigates whether subjectivity correlates with the encoding of inalienable possession across languages. We hypothesize that languages with stronger subjective tendencies will show a preference for possessor suppression, while languages with stronger objective tendencies will favor obligatory possessor expression.

By integrating typological, experimental, and corpus-based approaches, this study seeks to clarify whether subjectivity influences how languages encode inalienable possession. This study aims to refine the theory of subjectivity, making it a more effective tool for cross-linguistic comparison and revealing how cognitive processes shape linguistic expression.

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