Possessor agreement: Exploring Cross-Linguistic Variation

1. Background. This paper investigates agreeing head marking in the nominal domain, as in (1) from Garifuna (Arawakan), where the head noun *t-íleve* 'the flower' has a prefix agreeing in person and gender with the possessor, *nu-fáluma* 'coconut.'

(1) t- íleve nu- fáluma
3F-flower 1SG- coconut 'the flower of my coconut' (Haurholm 2016: (65))

Agreeing genitive possessors (hereafter AGP) have been studied previously, primarily in Uralic and Altaic, where they were observed to occur exclusively in a pre-Adj/pre-N position (Crisma et al. 2024). This talk presents novel findings from a typologically diverse dataset of 155 languages (Choussou-Polydouri et al. 2023), encompassing all major language families. Our analysis reveals a strong correlation between AGP-N *vs* N-AGP and SV *vs* VS. This discovery has implications for our understanding of the syntax of possessors and Agree, the relationship between clausal and nominal domains, and the nature of parameter hierarchies (Roberts 2019).

2. Data. We first illustrate the phenomenon with representative examples. In Garifuna, a Nom-Acc language, the morpheme *t-* in (1) as well as the rest of the possessor agreement paradigm is identical to the A/S-paradigm in verbal agreement (Haurholm 2016). A slightly more complicated pattern arises in Paunaka, a critically endangered Southern Arawakan language spoken in Eastern Bolivia (Krauss 2007:6). This language features obligatory agreement for inalienable nouns, as shown in (2), and optional agreement for alienable (Terhart 2022).

(2) chi-musuji merÿ
3-skin plantain 'banana peel' (Sell 2021:4)

In Paunaka, only one clausal argument is typically expressed overtly, in which case V always precedes S(ubject) and O(bject) (Terhart 2022: 389). The language has Nom-Acc alignment, and agreement affixes have identical form for Ss and Os (*nÿ/ni, pi, chÿ/chi, bi, e, chÿ/chi,* see Terhart 2022:178). There is a crucial difference between S- and O-markers, however; the former are prefixes and the latter are suffixes. (2) shows that agreeing head-marking overlaps with subject agreement since the marker is a prefix. This is also supported by the fact that there is only one 3-person exponent for possessors, similar to clausal subjects, and unlike objects for which two distinct 3-person markers are used, linked to DOM. Nisga'a (Tsimshian) also has AGPs, (3). Its alignment is Erg-Abs, as it uses distinct agreement paradigms for S/P and A (Tarpent 1987:187). Crucially, agreeing head-marking suffixes, as in (3), is identical to the suffixes used for S/P.

(3) wìlp-t s-t Peter
house-3 DC-D Peter 'Peter's house' Tarpent (1987:876)

3. A cross-linguistic survey. The pattern observed above points to a previously undocumented cross-linguistic generalization:

(4) THE A(GREEING) G(EN) S(UBJECT) G(ENERALIZATION): In agreeing head marking languages, genitives qualify as subjects in the nominal domain.

Two pieces of evidence for AGSG emerge from an in-depth study of genitives and subjects in Inmann et al.'s (2023) 153-language dataset. First, languages with AGP-N orders exhibit SV orders (108/153), as is also the case in Crisma et al.'s (2024) sample. The remaining languages are N-AGP (45/153) and predominantly show VS orders. Second, 38 of them show significant overlap in form between the possessor and the verbal agreement paradigm, similar to Garifuna,

Paunaka and Nisga'a. We conducted a detailed analysis of the alignment profiles of these 38 N-AGP languages. In the table below, the first column shows agreement affixes fully or partially overlapping with genitive agreement (S=intrans. subject, A=trans. subject, P=trans. object). The other columns show the alignment patterns of these 38 languages.

	Nom-Acc	Erg-Abs	Tripartite	Active-Stative	Hierarchical
S and A	**20**	0	0	0	0
S and P	0	**3**	0	0	**9**
P only	0	0	0	**2**	**1**
A only	0	**2**	**1**	0	0

In Nom-Acc languages (**20**, column 2), possessor agreement aligns with subject agreement, exhibiting the same form as agreement morphology found with A and S arguments. Also, possessor agreement patterns with what qualifies as the subject (S/P) in a significant proportion of Erg-Abs and Hierarchical languages: **3**/5 Erg-Abs (column 3) and **9**/10 Hierarchical languages (column 6). Following Bejar and Rezac (2009), we argue that in hierarchical languages, P is the first target of Agree, thus also straightforwardly accommodating the **1** hierarchical language (Kutenai) showing overlap with P-agreement only. In Tripartite (**1**, column 4) and Active-Stative (**2**, column 5) languages, the potential targets of Agree are A/S and A/P respectively, therefore it is not surprising that possessor agreement coincides with A-agreement and P-agreement in the languages of our sample. Finally, we discuss the **2** Erg-Abs languages showing overlap between possessor and A-agreement, these are Popti' and Chol (Mayan). Coon (2013) has shown that in Mayan, A-agreement in the clausal domain is S-agreement in certain syntactic contexts.

4. Analysis. In languages with agreeing head marking, we argue that there is a phi-bearing head, $F1^0$, on the nominal spine, above the categorizing n-head and below adjectives, which are introduced by heads such as F2 (cf. Cinque 2010). (4) is an illustration of an Adj-N-AGP order. As expected, in accordance with AGSG, VS invariably correlates with (Adj-)N-AGP orders.

(4) $[_{F2P}$ F2 $[_{F1P}$ $[_{n}$ Root n]+F1$_{\varphi}$ $[_{nP}$ Gen $[_{n}$ ~~Root n~~]]]

Under current assumptions, this correlation is derived from the hypothesis that both F1 and T probe downwards and lack an EPP feature. Turning to SV orders, they predominantly correlate with AGP-N. These are derived via movement of Gen to Spec,F1P, and movement of S to Spec,TP due to an EPP feature on both F1 and T. Note that in SV languages there are also cases where N precedes AGP (Catawba and Tutelo; Siouan), but crucially N also precedes adjectives suggesting an additional movement step of N raising past F2. The parallelism between T and F1 could be the result of a *horizontal* mesoparameter (Roberts 2019): they are both endowed with an EPP feature which attracts the goal of Agree, because they have the same structural height in the verbal and the nominal spine. Alternatively, the parallelism could be due to the fact that Agree is parameterized, being always downward in some languages and always upward in others (cf. Bjorkman & Zeijlstra 2019; Preminger & Polinsky 2015; Wurmbrand 2017 on Agree directionality). The different analytical options make different predictions regarding diachronic stability in Roberts' (2019) framework of parameter hierarchies. We spell out these predictions and outline ways in which they can be tested through various metrics of diachronic stability.

Selected References: Bjorkman, B. M., & Zeijlstra, H. (2019). Checking up on (ϕ-) Agree. Linguistic Inquiry, 50(3), 527-569. Bobaljik, J. D. (2008). Where's phi? Agreement as a post-syntactic operation. Phi-Theory: Phi features across interfaces and modules, 4410, 295-328. **Roberts, I.** (2019). *Parameter hierarchies and universal grammar*. Oxford University Press.