On the Accessibility of Possessions

The topic of my talk is the relationship between different kinds of possessives and their semantics. Most of the discussions of this topic consider nominal possessive constructions and center around the question of whether the possessum takes the possessor as an argument or as a modifier ([4], [2], [8] inter alia). I use data from a wider range of Russian possessive constructions, which typically has not been considered in the previous literature, to show that there is a relationship between the accessibility of the possessor’s referent and its syntactic realization. Consider the following examples of Russian nominal and external possessive constructions:

(1) Nominal possessive constructions
   a. Genitive possessor
      Velosiped Mashi slomalsya.
      'Masha’s bicycle broke.'
   b. Adjectival possessor
      Mash-in velosiped slomalsya.
      'Masha’s bicycle broke.'

(2) External possessive constructions
   a. Possessor as a subject
      Viktor pokachal (*svoey) golovoy:INST.
      Viktor shook (*his) head.
   b. Possessor as an accusative object
      Petya potseloval Mashu v lob.
      Petya:NOM kissed Masha:ACC on the forehead.
   c. Possessor as a dative object
      Petya slomal Mashe ochki.
      Petya:NOM broke Mashe:DAT glasses:ACC.
      'Petya broke Masha’s glasses.'
   d. Possessor as a prepositional phrase:
      U Mashi slomalsya velosiped.
      Mashe:GEN broke bicycle
      'Masha’s bicycle broke.'

In Russian nominal possessive constructions, possessors can appear in the position of a syntactic argument (1a) or an adjectival adjunct (1b). Genitive possessors are, henceforth, deeper embedded in the syntactic structure of the sentence than adjectival possessors. Possessors in external possessive constructions (EPC) (2) show even less syntactic embedding: they can appear in the position of predicate’s argument (as a subject (2a), an accusative object (2b), or a dative object (2c)) or in the position of a PP-adjunct (2d), which corresponds to the least syntactic embedding in the clause structure. The positions, in which possessors can appear, can be ordered according to the level of their embedding into the syntactic structure of the clause as follows:

(3) Embedding hierarchy of the possessor (PR) (maximal embedding to the left):
   Genitive PR > Adjectival PR > Predicative Argument PR > Predicative Adjunct PR

Semantically, possessors can be organized along the level of the accessibility of their referents in the discourse. The accessibility hierarchy (4) (cf. [1], [12]) shows the relationship between the cognitive status of an entity and the kind of anaphorical expression used to refer to this entity. Accessibility is, therefore, reflected in the choice of an anaphoric expression: the more accessible the referent, the less informative the anaphoric expression (e.g. a pronoun), and vice versa, i.e., the less accessible the referent, the more information there needs to be contained in the anaphoric expression (e.g. full NP).

(4) Accessibility hierarchy (abbreviated):
   Zero Forms - Personal Pronouns - Definite NPs - Indefinite NPs

The level of accessibility of the possessor’s referent can be inferred from the kind of anaphoric expression used: zero forms are used to refer to the most accessible, i.e., more prominent, discourse referents; indefinite NPs not necessarily have any referent in the previous discourse, they are, henceforth, low on the hierarchy.
Along with the level of syntactic embedding, the syntactic realization of Russian possessors can be ordered in accordance to the accessibility of their referents. Indefinite non-topical possessors can only appear in genitive possessive constructions (1a). These constructions allow syntactically most complex possessors which usually are highly informative. Adjectival possessors (1b) can only be formed from personal pronouns, proper nouns and a limited class of other definite descriptions (unique kins and domestic animals) (cf. [11]). Such possessors are higher on the accessibility hierarchy than genitive possessors. The argumental EPCs (2) can only be formed with possessees which belong to the extended domain of relational nouns (canonical relational nouns and common personal belongings). Semantically, relational nouns are two place predicates: they are typically assumed to take possessors as their external arguments. I claim that in EPCs, possessors of relational nouns are expressed in the argumental structure of possesses as highly accessible zero forms. These forms, not present on the surface, allow us to access the referent of the possessor in the discourse. Simply put, they make the EPCs work. This claim can be supported by the fact that external possessors in Russian always appear in topical positions (cf. [13], [9], [5]).

The relationship between the accessibility of semantically argumental possessors and the embedding of their syntactic representation is, henceforth, inverse (Figure 1).

As illustrated, there is no direct correspondence between the semantic argumenthood of the possessor and its syntactic realization. And yet, the relationality of the possessee does play a role in the choice of a structure for the expression of possession: the relationality of the noun, i.e., the presence of a semantic external argument, the possessor, allows us, or even requires, in cases of the high accessibility of its referent, to omit the possessor in the argumental structure of the relational possessed NP in the syntax. The final choice of the best suitable structure for the possession expression is, in each case, the interplay between the relationality of the possessed noun and the discursive status of the possessee. This behavior of Russian possessives speaks against the modifier analysis of possessives as discussed by Hellan and Partee & Borschev ([3], [8]). On the contrary, such behavior provides clear evidence of the presence of the possessor in the argumental structure of a possessee on the semantic level in accordance with the analysis by Jensen & Vinker ([4], [10]), and Partee ([6], [7]).