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   Mash-i   slomalsya.
        bicycle:NOM **Masha**-GEN broke
        'Masha's bicycle broke.'

    b. Adjectival possessor

        Mash-in   velosiped   slomalsya.
        Masha-ADJZ **bicycle**:NOM broke
        'Masha's bicycle broke.'

(2) External possessive constructions

    a. Possessor as a subject

        Viktor pokachal (**svoey*)   ***golovoy***:INST.
        Viktor shook   (*his own) **head**
        'Viktor shook (with) (his) head.'

    b. Possessor as an accusative object

        *Petya   potseloval **Mashu**   v lob*.
        Petya:NOM kissed   **Masha**:ACC in **forehead**
        'Petya kissed Masha 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***.
        at Masha: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 adjective 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):
    $\xleftarrow{\text{HIGH ACCESSIBILITY}\qquad\qquad\text{LOW ACCESSIBILITY}}$
    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 possessees 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).

SYNTACTIC EMBEDDING

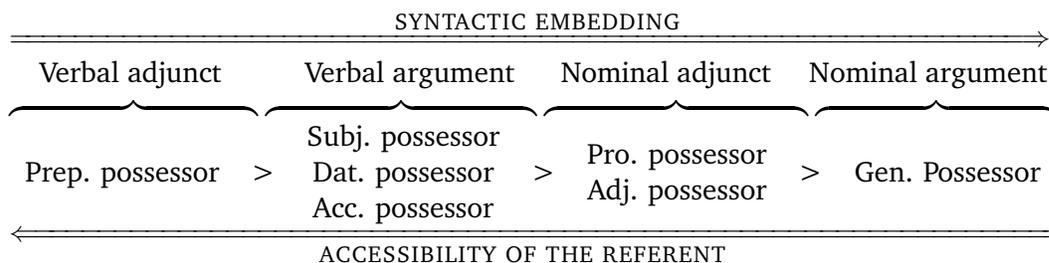| Verbal adjunct	Verbal argument	Nominal adjunct	Nominal argument
Prep. possessor >	Subj. possessor Dat. possessor Acc. possessor >	Pro. possessor Adj. possessor >	Gen. Possessor

ACCESSIBILITY OF THE REFERENT

Figure 1: *Relationship between the accessibility of the possessor and its syntactic embedding*

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 possessed. 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]).

[1] Ariel, M. (2014). Accessing noun phrase antecedents; **[2] Baker, C.** (1995). Possessive descriptions; **[3] Hellan** (1980). Toward an integrated theory of noun phrases; **[4] Jensen, P.A. & C. Vikner** (1994), Lexical knowledge and the semantic analysis of Danish genitive constructions; **[5] Nam H.H.** (2013). Study on Russian external possessor constructions as a diathetic phenomenon and their semantic-discursive functions; **[6] Partee** (1999). Copula inversion puzzles in English and Russian; **[7] Partee** (1999). Week NPs in HAVE sentences; **[8] Partee, B.H. & V. Borschev** (2003). Genitives, relational nouns, and argument-modifier ambiguity; **[9] Paducheva, E.V.** (2004). Dinamicheskiye modeli v semantiki leksiki; **[10] Vinker & Jensen** (2002). A semantic analysis of English genitive. Interaction of lexical and formal semantics; **[11] Vinogradov, V.V.** (1960). Grammatika russkogo yazika: Sintaksis; **[12] von Heusinger, K.** (2007). Accessibility and definite noun phrases; **[13] Zolotova, G.** (1988). Sintaktichaskiy slovar'. Repertory of elementary units of Russian syntax.