A split analysis of Tigrinya nominal possessive constructions
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Tigrinya (Semitic, Ethiopia & Eritrea; SOV) has two types of possessive constructions, which differ in both structure and function: (i) BARE POSSESSIVES have no marking on either the possessor or possessed, and are used for inalienable possession (ii) NAY-MARKED POSSESSIVES have the particle nay preceding the possessor and are used for alienable possession. This paper presents a split analysis of the two possessives by comparing two competing hypotheses proposed for similar constructions in other Semitic languages. Amharic, a very closely related language, uses the element yƏӘ, similar to the Tigrinya NAY, to encode possession. Two hypotheses have been proposed to account for the Amharic yƏӘ-marked possessives: (i) yƏӘ is a genitive Case marker (Ouhalla 2004) and (ii) yƏӘ is a linker (den Dikken 2007). I show that NAY is neither a Linker nor a Case marker, and argue that it is a spell-out of a functional element whose role is to mediate a grammatical relation between two dependents (e.g., the possessee and its possessor).

I present five pieces of evidence in support of my analysis. The first three demonstrate that a nay-marked possessor is a predicate but a bare possessor is not. First, the nay-marked possessor can appear across a copula in a copular clause (1a), but the non-nay-marked possessor cannot (1b). Second, the nay-marked possessor can appear either before or after a possessee-modifying adjective (2a), indicating that the possessor is a modifier; but a non-nay-marked possessor can only appear preceding a possessee-modifying adjective (2b). Third, the possessee of a nay-marked possessor can undergo ellipsis in a coordinated construction (3a), while the possessee of a bare possessor cannot (3b). The other two pieces of evidence show that nay introduces other kinds of nominal predicates. It introduces non-intersective adjectives (4a) and nominalized clauses (4b), suggesting that nay is neither a Linker nor a Case marker. Finally, nay does not occur before inalienable possessors of kinship nouns (5), again suggesting that nay is not a Case marker. Based on these, I argue alternatively that nay is a spell-out of a functional head that introduces a grammatical relationship between two dependents and claim that a split analysis of the two possession – nay-marked and bare – types in Tigrinya is tenable.

To account for the bare possessives, I compare them with similar constructions in Hebrew. Hebrew uses construct state possessives (CSPs), similar to the Tigrinya bare possessives, to encode possession. Two competing hypotheses have been put forward to account for CSPs: (i) CSPs involve standard head-movement (cf. Ritter 1991) and (ii) CSPs involve snowballing phrasal movement (cf. Shlonsky 2004). I show that Tigrinya bare possessives involve neither standard head-movement nor snowballing phrasal movement, and argue that a simple head-to-spec movement accompanied by M-Merger (in the sense of Matushansky 2006) and the operation Agree may account for all the facts of Tigrinya.
D-m.sg book of John be-3msgS D.m.sg book John be-3msgS
‘The book is John’s.’

(2) a. (ḥaduʃ) nay joni (ḥaduʃ) məs’haf  b. ʔit-i (nəwwiḥ) wəddi joni (*nəwwiḥ)
(new) of John new book D-m.sg (tall) son John (tall)
‘the teacher’s new book’

(3) a. [[nay joni] məs’haf] gəziʔ-ə-yyo [[nay əlsa] ___] gin ʔay-gəza -ku-wwo-n
of John book buy.PF-1S-3O of Elsa but Neg-buy.PF-1S-3O-Neg
‘I have bought John’s book, but I haven’t bought [Elsa’s [book]].’

b. *[hafti [joni]] raxib-ə-yya [___ [elsa]] gin ʔay-raxəb-ku-wwa-n
sister John meet.PF-1S-3O Elsa but Neg-meet.PF-1S-3O-Neg
‘I have met John’s sister, but I haven’t met [Elsa’s [sister]].’

(4) a. nay k’ədəm kəntiʃə  b. sibir nay mə-ball-u  nəgar …
of former mayor break of NML-say-3M.SG thing
‘a former mayor’ ‘The fact that it is broken (slightly/easily)…’

(5) a. *nay joni wəddi  b. wəddi joni
of John son son John
‘John’s son’
‘John’s son’

References

Den Dikken, M. (2007). Amharic relatives and possessives: definiteness, agreement and the
linker. *Linguistic Inquiry* 38: 302-320


