Lexical relationality and the alienability distinction
– a perspective from Daakaka

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Most approaches to inalienability concentrate exclusively on the most prototypical cases of inalienable possession, such as part-whole and kinship relations. In effect, what they describe is the difference between lexically transitive or relational nouns and lexically intransitive or non-relational nouns.

However, this difference does not necessarily correspond to the distinction between alienable and inalienable possession. This is shown by data from the Oceanic language Daakaka, which distinguishes between alienable and inalienable relations productively. Inalienable possession is expressed by the transitivizing clitic *=(a)ne*, while alienable possession is expressed by a possessive linker prefixed by a classifier:

(1)   a.   *bosi=ne*   *vyanten en=tak*
               bone=TRANS person   DEM=PROX
               'this person's bone' (body part)

        b.   *bosi* ∅-*e*   *vyanten en=tak*
               bone CL1-LINK person   DEM=PROX
               'this person's bone' (ownership)

The transitivized structure illustrated in (1-a) often expresses non-prototypical possessive relations involving inanimate possessors such as in the following examples:

(2)   a.   *theme=ane*   *webung en=te*
               theme=TRANS day   DET=MED
               'the theme of this day'

        b.   *vis=ane*   *tes*
               bow=TRANS sea
               'harpoon' (lit. 'bow of the sea')

        c.   *vyanten=ane* *peten=an*
               person=TRANS speak.truth=NM
               'a truthful person, a man of truth'

Thus, languages like Daakaka challenge us to reconsider our understanding of the alienability distinction and to integrate non-prototypical possessive relations into our classification. In my talk, I will pick out a number of representative approaches to the alienability distinction to demonstrate that their assumptions and conclusions apply to the difference between lexically transitive and lexically intransitive nouns, but not necessarily to a productive distinction between alienable and inalienable relations. I will then briefly discuss both the potential appeal and the limitations of the alternative approach developed in von Prince (2012).

References

von Prince, Kilu. 2012. Nominal possession in Daakaka: Transitivizing vs. linking. *Pages 156–170 of:* Clemens, Lauren Eby, Scontras, Gregory, & Polinsky, Maria (eds), *Proceedings of AFLA 18 (Austronesian Formal Linguistics Association).* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University. `http://westernlinguistics.ca/afla/proceedings/afla18/index.htm`.