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. bosí-ne vyanten en=tak
   bone=TRANS person DEM=PROX
   ‘this person’s bone’ (body part)
b. bosí Ø-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. themé-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