

## Alienable and inalienable possession in Nuer

Irina Monich

Princeton University

In this talk we present evidence that categories of inalienable and alienable possession are distinguished morphologically in Nuer, a West Nilotic language. Lexical items which may be encountered with both kinds of possessors, such as body parts, show difference in tone, depending on the possession type. High-toned nouns become low-toned when followed by an **alienable** possessor but remain high-toned when followed by an **inalienable** possessor: *wáŋ-ká* ‘my (own) eyes’ vs. *wáŋ-ká* ‘my eyes = eyes of a dead animal that belongs to me’; *túŋ rân* ‘a person’s (own) horn’ vs. *túŋ rân* ‘a person’s (animal) horn’. Low-toned nouns do not change with possession type: *càaaa-dá* ‘my bone’ = both ‘my (own) bone’ and ‘my (animal) bone’. These facts suggest presence of a floating L-tone indicating alienable possession which replaces the tone of the possessed noun. Inalienable possession, on the other hand, is expressed by stringing the two nouns directly together. The distinction in possession type was first noted in Crazzolara (1933), who also reports that alienable possession is associated with changes to the possessed noun. Although the specific stem modifications described by Crazzolara are different from those observed by us, both his and our Nuer data are consistent with the theoretical claim that inalienable possessors are arguments of possessed nouns, and therefore are structurally more closely associated with them than alienable ones (Español-Echevarría 1997, Alexiadou 2003).

The idea is further supported by a distinction in possession type found with deverbal nouns. All deverbal agentive nominalizations have an overlong stem vowel and a high tone. However, in presence of a possessor, the high tone of the agent noun is replaced by a low tone, in parallel to alienable possession of body parts, but only if the possessor is an ‘owner’ of the agent: for example, ‘my killer’ corresponds to *ŋááak-dá* (< *ŋák*- ‘kill’) when the intended meaning is ‘the killer who works for me’. In contrast, the tone of the agent noun *ŋááak* ‘killer’ remains unchanged if the possessor is the semantic object of the verb: ‘my killer’ is *ŋááak-dá* when the intended meaning is ‘the person who is killing/intends to kill **me**’.

Difference in possession type also impacts other aspects of nominal morphology. For an overwhelming majority of nouns, the same segmentally or non-segmentally suffixed form is used in functions akin to genitive case and in locative functions, i.e. for locations and goals of motion. For example, the noun *túŋŋ* ‘ladle’ has the same form in the phrase *bíel túŋŋŋŋ* ‘color of the ladle’ and in the sentence *téé túŋŋŋŋ* ‘It is at/on the ladle’. However, a semantically limited set of nouns denoting physical locations (e.g. ‘forest’, ‘river’, ‘desert’, etc.) have a distinct locative form: for instance, the noun *rúŋŋ* ‘forest’ has a genitive form *rúŋŋŋ* ‘of the forest’ and a locative form *rúŋŋŋ* ‘at/in the forest’. The special locative form is always non-segmentally suffixed and is available only if a corresponding non-segmentally suffixed genitive form is also possible.

Interestingly, non-segmentally suffixed genitive and locative forms are non-syncretic for inalienably possessed body parts just as they are for locations. For example, the noun *lép* ‘tongue’ distinguishes separate non-segmentally suffixed genitive and locative forms: *lép-dá* ‘of my tongue’ and *lép-dá* ‘to/at my tongue’ but only under the **inalienable** possession construal. In contrast, the segmentally-suffixed form *lép-ā-dá* ‘tongue-Obl-Poss.Sg.1Sg’ is used in both genitive and locative functions and with both types of possessors.

We discuss reasons for the observed peculiarities in morphological expression of alienable and inalienable possession from theoretical and comparative/diachronic perspectives.

## References

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