

## Agreement and directionality of possessives in the Meta' Language

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**ABSTRACT:** Language dynamics and structured community setup communication requires a close examination of how agreement and directionality of possessives are construed in main stream pragmatics. This paper investigates the types and distribution of possession markers in Meta', - a Grass-fields Bantu language of the Momo subgroup community in the North-West Region of Cameroon. It examines the nature of the Meta' possessives or possession markers in general, with particular attention on its possessive determiners as portraying some complexity in structure and distribution. This situation leads us to question whether possessives in Meta' are pre-modifiers or post modifiers to nouns and to further examine what accounts for the different positions occupied by possession markers in this language. The study further argues that the post-nominal position of possessive determiners is as a result of focus on the head noun and asserts that, the co-occurrence of two possessive determiners in Meta' is as a result of emphases or the fact that they do not modify the same noun.

**KEYWORDS:** Agreement, determiner, directionality, modifier, possessives, nominalizer.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Elements that are used to indicate possession of things or individuals are of four types in Meta': possessive pronouns, possessive determiners (adjectives), genitive of possession marker and the possessive verb **beri** (*have*). Possessive pronouns, substitute a noun phrase and possessive determiners are used with nouns as modifiers. This paper adopts a strict descriptive approach in the first section of the work, and a minimalist approach to interpret the behavior and directionality of possessive that occur as modifiers within the noun phrase.

In the literature of possessives in Meta', [1] distinguishes two types of possessive pronouns in Meta': the dependent and independent possessive pronouns. To him, the dependent possessive pronoun is the one used in a noun phrase that has more elements than the head noun. The dependent possessive pronoun can have a different form even for the same noun class depending on the position of the possessive pronoun in a clause. The independent possessive pronoun is restricted for it mainly appears in non-verbal predicate clauses. In this paper, we do not agree with this distinction because he somehow mixed possessive pronouns and possessive adjectives in both categories. In possessive nominal constructions in Meta', possessives are structurally ambiguous. They tend to be pre-nominal in one context and post nominal in another context. This raises the question of directionality in order to determine the standard position of possessives with regards to nouns and to determining what causes such changes. In the course of this paper, we present in the second section the nature, agreement and distribution of the various types of possession markers, and in the third section, we present the bi-directionality of possessive determiners and the theoretical motivation of such ambiguousness with possessive determiners in Meta'.

## 2 TYPES OF POSSESSION MARKERS IN META'

In this section, we look at the various elements that mark possession in the language. As aforementioned, these markers are of four types: possessive pronouns, possessive adjective, genitive of possession and the possessive verb. These markers will be treated separately in the subsections that follow, from their structure to their distribution.

### 2.1 POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS

In light with the fact that a pronoun is an element that replaces a noun phrase, the pronominal possessives are distinguished with a noun class prefix. That is, the possessive pronouns is made up of the stem (beginning with a vowel) and a concord consonant or CC cluster corresponding to the nominal class. As earlier noted, there is an additional consonant or CC cluster in each form and it is this class concord prefix or marker, which [2] considers to be the nominalizer (prefix) which permits these forms to be used as pronouns. This is presented in table 1 below.

Table 1. Possessive pronouns

NC	Agreement marker	1s 'mine'	2s 'yours'	3s 'his/hers'	1p 'ours'	2p 'yours'	3p 'theirs'
1	w-	ɪwūm wūm	ɪwê, wê	wí mād, ɪwí, wí	ɪwá, wá	ɪwón wón	wí mīmăd
2	Mb-	ɪmbúum mbúum	ɪmbê mbê	mbí mād ɪmbí, mbí	mbá	ɪmbón	mbí mīmăd
3	w-	ɪwúm	ɪwê	wí mād, ɪwí	ɪwá	ɪwón, wón	wí mīmăd
6	z-	əzúm	əzê	əzí ə mād, əzí	əzá	əzón	əzi mīmăd
6a	Mb-	ɪmbūm, mbūm	ɪmbê, mbê	mbí mād, ɪmbí, mbí	mbá	ɪmbón, mbón	mbí mīmăd,
7	z-	əzum	əzê	əzi ə mād, əzi	əza	əzón	əzi mīmăd
8	Mb-	ɪmbúum, mbúum	ɪmbê, mbê	mbí mād, ɪmbí, mbí	mbá	ɪmbón, mbón	mbí mīmăd
9	z-	ɪzúm, zúm	ɪzê	zi mād, ɪzi, zi	ɪzá	ɪzón	zi mīmăd,
10	t-	ɪtúm, túm	ɪtê, tê	tí mād, ɪti	ɪtá	ɪtón, tón	tí mīmăd,
13	t-	ɪtúm, túm	ɪtê, tê	tí mād, ɪti	ɪtá	ɪtón, tón	tí mīmăd,
19	f-	ɪfúm, fúm	ɪfê	fí mād, ɪfi	ɪfá	ɪfón	fí mīmăd,

Source: Adopted from Spreda (1991: 18) and modified by the author

From the table above, it is noticed that the changes on the forms of the pronominal possessives are caused by the change in the form of agreement marker for each noun class that inflects the pronominal stem. Again, all possessive pronouns bear overt agreement markers. Examples of these possessive pronouns include the following.

- 1) a. ètən zò chō' àzá  
*9-chair this resembles 9-ours*  
 'This chair looks like ours'
- b. mbí mōd mbīā jīgō mbúm  
*his him are eating mine*  
 'His are eating mine'
- c. iwē wīā fā'è ikáb ákú  
*yours is working money too much*  
 'Yours is working too much money'
- d. Fibi fō yīā fúm  
*19-Knife 19-this is 19-mine*  
 'This knife is mine'
- e. Tīngòm tō yīā tē  
*13-plantain 11-these are 13-yours*  
 'These plantains are yours'
- f. wán wō wīā sōmīā iwē  
*1-child 1-this is beating 1-yours*  
 'This child is eating yours'

The above examples show that the various nominal grammatical relations of subject, object and oblique can be pronominalised by possessive pronouns. Even though the pronominal possessives replace the noun, they still agree with the noun they replace. These possessive pronouns maintain their forms in all positions but for the fact that they agree in class with the head noun they replace.

In example (1a), the pronominal possessive is in oblique relation because it is neither the subject nor the object of the phrase. The same holds for examples (1d) and (1e). We will like to say they are passive nominal phrases. In example (1b), the subject and object positions have been pronominalized, and the two pronouns are in agreement because they replace and make reference to the same noun. The agreement markers on these pronouns do not show a particular class since most plural classes have the same agreement marker. That is why we did not put a class marker beside the pronoun as we did with the others. In example (2c), the subject has been pronominalized while in (1f), it is the object that has been pronominalized. This shows that all nominal grammatical functions can be pronominalized in Meta', and these possessive pronouns must agree with the nouns they replace. Let us now see how the determiner counterparts of the possessive pronouns look like.

## 2.2 POSSESSIVE DETERMINERS

As earlier mentioned, possessive determiners are used with nouns as modifiers. They are dependent on nouns for concrete interpretation and they may be considered as the actual stems. These stems are generally vowels that may be inflected with the various nominal agreement markers for class and number, just like the once presented in table 1 above. This is illustrated in table 2 with columns representing the various persons and the rows representing the noun classes and agreement pattern.

Table 2. Possessive determiners

NC	Concord markers	1s 'my'	2s 'your'	3s 'his/her'	1p 'our'	2p 'your'	3p 'their'
1	∅ w-	mī, wúm	ê, wê	ī, wī	ā, wā	ā, wān	ā
2	mb-	mbí	mbê	mbí	mbá	mbá	mbá
3	∅	mí	ê	í,	à	é,	é
6	∅	mí	ê	é	á	é	é
6a	mb-	mbì	mbê	mbī	mbā	mbā	mbá
7	∅	mí	ē	é	á	é,	é
8	mb-	mbí,	mbê	mbí	mbá	mbá	mbá
9	∅	mī	ê	í	ā	ā	ā
10	t-	tí, tum	tê	tí	tá	tá	tá
13	t-	tí, tum	tê	tí	tá	tá	tá
19	f-	fí, fúm	fê	fí	fá	fá	fá

Source: Adopted from Spreda (1991: 15) and modified by the author

From the table above, it is noticed that the forms of the pronominal possessives are almost the same for all singular and plural classes but for class 10, 13, 19 whose concord/agreement marker is unique in the language. Again, not all possessive pronouns bear overt agreement markers. As seen in the table above, some have covert agreement markers represented by the null symbol (∅). This is interpreted to mean that, possessive determiners do not obligatorily take agreement markers when they modify nouns from noun class 1, 3, 6, 7, and 9. Thus, it is optional.

The normal position of possessive determiners in Meta' is before the noun. Examples of these possessive determiners include the following:

- 1) a. Ā mbá'  
1-our 1-father  
'Our father'
- b. Ê wán  
1-your 1-child  
'Your child'
- c. mbí bón  
2-my 2-children  
'My children'
- d. tá t̩ngòm  
10-our 10-plantains  
'Our plantains'

Some possessive determiners come after the noun. That is, they are postpose to nouns.

- 2) a. áŋgrī wūm  
1-angel 1-my  
'My angel'
- b. Mbá' wā  
1-father 1-our  
'Our father'
- c. ávî wē  
1-mother 1-your  
'Your mother'

Looking at the examples above, the nouns in (2) take pre-nominal possessive determiners meanwhile the nouns in (3) take post-nominal modifiers. Both forms are grammatical in Meta'.

The data presented in section 2 above raises a problem of directionality. It intrigues us to fine out the standard position of possessive determiners and to explain what triggers the second position. It also brings about the question of nominal headedness in Meta'- what account for the different positions occupied by possessives? These preoccupations are what motivated the last section of this paper. Let us see how the genitive of possession functions in Meta'.

### 2.3 GENITIVE OF POSSESSION

[3] considers the word genitive to mean “a cover term used to refer to the second noun in an N of N type construction or what is commonly known in Bantu grammar as the associative construction”. [4] stipulates that, it was established in most Bantu languages that the genitive morpheme is simply tonal (see [5], [6], [7] This assertion is not true for Meta' for the language has genitive or associative morphemes à or a null morpheme ø, and this marker does not agree with the nouns in class and number. Meta' has other types of genitives which are different from genitive of possession. These genitives include genitive of origin, genitive of purpose, genitive of content and others. In this paper, we will concentrate on the genitive of possession. This is illustrated with the following examples.

- 1) a. náb      ø      ífón  
house      GEN      chief  
‘The chief’s house’
- b. àsōŋ      à      wán      wē  
tooth      GEN      child      def  
‘The tooth of the child’
- c. àbóŋ      à      wán      wē  
brain      GEN      child      def  
‘The brain of the child’

In these examples, the genitive noun can be interpreted as a pure possessor, i.e. the entity to which the first noun (N1) belongs. The possessee precedes the possessor in genitives of possession constructions. In example (4a) the genitive marker is null or covert while in (4b) and (4c), the genitive marker à is overt. Let us see how the possessive verb functions in Meta'.

### 2.4 POSSESSIVE VERB

As earlier mentioned, the possessive verb in Meta' is berì ‘have’ which in its infinitive form is nì berì ‘to have’. This introduces a possessive clause and acts as a connector between two nouns phrases. No matter the class of the two nouns or noun phrases, the possessive verb, just like other verbs in Meta', does not agree with the noun (s) in class and number. Since Meta' is an SVC language, the possessive verb occurs in between the subject and the object, with the subject preceding it, and the object following it. Exceptions to this order occurs in focus constructions. Let us examine the following clauses.

- 1) a. m̀̀      bèrì      wán  
I      have      child  
‘I have a child’
- b. mbì      bèrì      ìwē  
they      have      wisdom  
‘They have wisdom’
- c. wán      wô      bèrì      ìkáb  
child      this      have      money  
‘This child has money’
- d. ìkáb, à      yī̀      wán      wô      bèrì  
money it      is      child      this      have  
‘Money, it is this child who has it’

From these examples, we notice that the possessive copular occurs in between the two noun phrase with the subject acting as the possessor and the object as the possessee. In this kind of possessive constructions, the possessor precedes the possessee. Example (4d) shows a sentence in which the focus or emphasis is placed on the object *ìkáb* ‘money’. In this case, the structure of the clause in (4c) which is SVO changes to OSV Because of focalisation of the object that led to its fronting.

### 3 DIRECTIONALITY OF POSSESSIVE MARKERS IN META'

In linguistics, head directionality or the headedness principle is a proposed parameter that classifies languages according to whether they are head initial or head final [8] By head initial, we mean that the head of the phrase precedes its complement and by head final, we mean that the head of the phrase follows its complement. In this section, we do not attempt an answer to the question of if Meta' is a left headed or right headed language, since this cannot be stated looking at possessives only. We rather aim to categorize these elements with respect to their positions with the noun by simply presenting these modifiers as they occur with the head noun. To realise this objective, we focus more on possessive determiners which among the four types of possessives, has shown some complexity in the positions they occupy. This issue of directionality will be expatiated in the subsections that follow.

Although some possessives determiners precede the head noun, as further shown in (2) above, others have to be after the noun as in example (3) above. Some possessive determiners can even occur before and after the noun as in example (6a) below and some nouns have the possibility of choosing their possessive determiner as in (6b). The phrase structure rule that can generate this sequence of head noun and the possessive determiner is:

DP → (D) N

N (D)

Consider the following examples

- |  |             |  |
|--|-------------|--|
| 1) a. Ávî<br>Grandmother<br>'My grandmother' | wūm<br>mine | b. Wūm ávî<br>mine grandmother<br>'My grandmother' |
| c. Mbă'<br>Father<br>'My father'             | wūm<br>mine | d. Mī mbă'<br>My father<br>'My father'             |

The examples above show the different positions that these possessive determiners can occupy in the Meta' language. There are sometimes pre-nominal or post-nominal depending on the construction as in (6a), or substitutional or in free variation as in (6b) and (6c). How can we account for these differences in position?

Considering the fact that the basic structure of determiners in Meta' is D-N following Cinque (2005), therefore, the post nominal position of possessive determiners is as a result of focalisation of the noun. When emphasis is laid on the noun, it is moved to the left of the clause across the determiner to a position in front of the determiner node which is definitely Spec DP, following the Determiner Phrase hypothesis of [9]. When this happens, the possessive determiner now finds itself as a post nominal modifier thus explaining the structure in (6b) and (6c).

Another intriguing structure in Meta' is a structure with double possession. Consider the following examples. Such examples can be represented by the following phrase structure rule

DP → D- N- D

Or

DP → D-D-N

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1) a. mí mba' wūm<br>My father mine<br>'My father'                        | b. wí' tē mimbă'<br>its your fathers<br>'That of your fathers' |
| c. zî mî mbă'<br>it's my father<br>'It's my father's / That of my father' |  |

The possessive constructions above show how possessive determiners double as pre-nominal and post nominal modifiers as in (7a) or double as pre-nominal modifiers as in (7b) and (7c). Even though the two determiners co-occur in the same construction, they do not modify the same noun in all the examples. The two possessive determiners in (7a) indicate possession on the same noun, with the post-nominal determiner acting as a reinforcer on the pre-nominal possessive determiner. This example is less common in the Meta' community since it is used by a reduced number of speaker but the bottom line is that,

this structure do exist in the language. The two determiners in (7b) and (7c) do not modify the same noun. While the second merges with the noun to form a constituent and it is this constituent that is modified by the first determiner. This gives a phrase like the one in (8) below

- 1) [DP zɪ [DP mi [NP mbǎ’]]]  
 its my father  
 ‘Its my father’s / That of my father’

This example is justified by the split DP hypothesis of [9] which allows two or more DPs to co-occur in the same construction.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Language issues continue to preoccupy studies related to the understanding of the human being and his social environment. This paper highlights two major preoccupations emanating from the complexity of the elements that indicate possession in the Meta' language. It assesses the types of elements and justify their various positions with respect to possessive determiners in particular. In demonstrating that the Meta' language displays a rich array of possessive makers, the paper displays the double position occupied by some possessive determiners as postulated in Abney's split DP hypothesis, and reinforces the concept that, in contexts involving contrastive focus reference, the demonstrative, possessive or interrogative can precede the noun, but the definite article always comes last in the noun phrase. The affixing and prefixing role displayed by the determiners clearly affirms the alternation in the order of possessives and nouns in the Meta' language in lone or complementary distribution. The noticeable presence of this directionality of possession markers in terms of noun distribution in the Meta' language denotes that, such combinations are socially construed as to form, and their meaning derives from the combination.

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