

Syntactic approaches to possessive constructions in Nuuchahnulth*

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Whilst possessive constructions in Nuuchahnulth have been discussed by various authors in the past¹, a detailed syntactic account has yet to be made. Simple possessive DPs containing a possessor (PSR) and a possessum (PSM) show agreement and ordering facts that suggest a right-branching specifier position. Nuuchahnulth also has Possessor Raising (PR) constructions, in which the PSR does appear to raise out of DP to [Spec IP], triggering agreement with the verb. Another possessive construction which looks at first as if it may involve right branching, turns out to provide evidence that objects can raise to a Focus Phrase located between VP and IP.

1 Introduction

This paper attempts to provide a preliminary account of a number of very common possessive constructions in Nuuchahnulth. Data is taken from fieldnotes on the Tseshaht dialect, collected by Edward Sapir between 1911 and 1921, supplemented by examples from Rose (1981) for Kyuquot and Kim (2000) and Nakayama (2001) for Ahousaht.

The next section examines possible syntactic analyses for DPs containing a PSM and PSR, and discusses the problems associated with each approach, concluding that there is some motivation for positing a right-branching specifier position. Section 3 considers the syntactic structure of “possessor raising” constructions, and section 4 looks at another problem involving sentences in which subject and possessor are co-referential. The final section reviews the findings and highlights a further area for research.

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¹ For example Rose (1981), Stonham (1999), Davidson (2002) and Nakayama (2001).

2 Possessive DPs

2.1 Features of Possessive DPs

DPs containing a PSR and PSM in Nuuchahnulth have a number of features that should be accounted for in their syntactic description. These are outlined in the following sections.

2.1.1 Alienable vs. Inalienable Marking

Possession in Nuuchahnulth is head-marked, that is the PSM² is marked with a possessive morpheme. The morpheme /-uk/ or /-ʔak/ (POSS)³ is used to indicate an alienable possessive relationship, and /-ʔat/ (INAL) is used to indicate inalienable possession.

- (1) čakupukqas
čakup -uk -qaʃs
husband -POSS -1S.SUB
“my husband”

- (2) kʷikʷinksatqas
kʷikʷinksu -ʔat -qaʃs
hand -INAL -1S.SUB
“my hand”

The distinction between alienable and inalienable possession is made in a large number of the world’s languages. The formal manifestation of this distinction and the semantic categories which are considered alienable and inalienable varies however.⁴ In Nuuchahnulth, body parts are generally marked as inalienable possessions (which cannot in normal circumstances be gained or lost), whilst other possessions are marked as alienable (which can).

This alternation is not however simply between body-parts and non-body parts. There are cases of body parts being marked with the alienable possessive marker, and non-body parts being marked with the inalienable.

In (3) fuḥčiti is marked with /-ʔat/, indicating its “inalienable” relationship to its owner. In (4) however, the head has been cut off from its original owner and is in the possession of someone else. The head is now treated as an alienable possession – a trophy that can indeed be given away or acquired – and is accordingly marked with /-ʔak/.

² Taken to be the head of the DP containing PSM and PSR.

³ These two forms are phonologically-conditioned allomorphs. The choice of allomorph depends on the form of the base to which it attaches.

⁴ For example Spanish possessive dative, Chinese “passive of bodily effect” see Valazquez-Castillo (1996) for further discussion.

- (3) hiɬʔaɫ hisaa ʔuɬʕitatʔi kuukuɬwisaʔi ʔanaɬʔis
kuukuɬwisa
hiɬ -'aɫ his ʔuɬʕiti -'at -ʔiʔ kuɬwisa -ʔiʔ ʔanaɬ^m -ʔis
kuɬwisa
LOC -NOW bleed head -INAL -DEF hairseal -DEF small DIM
hairseal
“Here the hairseal was with his head bleeding, the little hairseal”
- (4) tuxwaasʔaɫweʔin hiniicsʔaɫ ʔuɬʕitakʔi
tux -waʔs -'aɫ -weʔin hiniics -'aɫ ʔuɬʕiti -'ak -ʔiʔ
jump -go.outdoors -NOW -3.QT bring -NOW head -POSS -
DEF
“He jumped out of the house, carrying the (his) head with him.”

Rather than marking a clearly defined semantic class of nouns (e.g. body parts), it looks like inalienable marking in Nuuchahnulth indicates a part-whole relationship between PSM and PSR. As (5) shows, inalienably marked possessions need not be body parts as such.

- (5) piʂafatʔi
piʂ -'at -ʔiʔ
bad -PASS -DEF
“its bad side”

Unlike a number of other languages⁵, kinship terms are not encoded as inalienable, and are generally marked with -uk.

- (6) nuwiiqsakʔi.
nuwiʔqsu -'ak -ʔiʔ
father -POSS -DEF
“her father”

2.1.2 Agreement

As well as the marker of (in)alienable possession, the PSM also shows agreement with the person number of the PSR, as shown below.

- (7) ʕakupukʔitqak
ʕakup -ukʔiʔitqak
husband -POSS.2s
“your husband”
- (8) quuʔukʔi
quuʔ -uk -ʔiʔ
slave -POSS -DEF
“his slave”

⁵ See Valazquez-Castillo (1996) p24.

- (9) ʕahʔinʔakʔi ʔiihtuup
 ʕah -ʔin -ak -ʔiʔ ʔiihtuup
 dive -costume.for... -POSS -DEF Whale
 “Whale’s diver”
- (10) ʔimcsaafatʔi
 ʔimcsaafa -ʔat -ʔiʔ
 forehead -INAL -DEF
 “his forehead”

We can identify the following paradigm:

(11)

1	-ukqas	-ukqin
2	-ukʔitqak	-ukʔitqsuu
3		-uk(ʔi)

Agreement with a 3rd person possessor is indicated either by /-ʔi/, or is zero-marked⁶. A parallel paradigm exists for inalienable possessive forms starting with -ʔat.

2.1.3 Site of Attachment

When the PSM is modified by an adjective, the possessive inflection appears on the first word in the DP, as illustrated in the following examples:

- (12) ʔuuʔaʕakʔi ʔaʕa
 ʔuuʔaʕu -ʔak -ʔiʔ ʔaʕa
 second.ranking -POSS.3 -DEF child
 “his second oldest child”
- (13) ʕaʔuuʔakʔi ʕaaqaaʕt
 ʕaʔuʔ -ʔak -ʔiʔ ʕaaqaaʕt
 another -POSS -DEF dried.blubber
 “another one of his pieces of dried blubber”
- (14) ʔaʔiihʔatʔi qasii
 CVdup- ʔiihʔ -ʔat -ʔiʔ qasii
 PL- big -INAL -DEF eye
 “his big eyes”
- (15) ʕaʔuuʔatʔi ʔaʔii
 ʕaʔuʔ -ʔat -ʔiʔ ʔaʔii
 another -INAL -DEF ear
 “his other ear”

⁶ Whether the variation between these two forms is significant is not altogether clear.

2.1.4 Ordering of PSM and PSR

If there is an explicitly named PSR as in (10) and (16), it always follows the noun indicating the PSM.

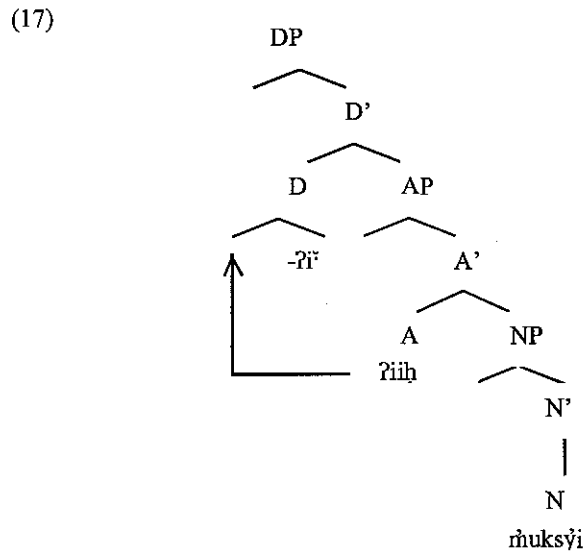
- (16) ḥawīṭuk q^oayačiiktaqimṭ
 ḥawīṭ -uk q^oayačiik -taqimṭ
 chief -POSS wolf -...tribe
 “the chief of the wolves”

Personal pronouns are not often used in Nuuchahmulth, and rarely appear in these structures.

2.2 Four Possible Analyses

In this section I discuss four possible syntactic analyses for the data presented above. Each approach is problematic in some way. In 1.3 I compare the analyses and discuss conclusions.

All of the following approaches adopt the basic DP structure in (17) (for (19)).



The apparent second position clitic attachment demonstrated in (18) and (19) is explained by saying that the -ʔī originates in D, and that the highest head moves up into D, where clitic attachment takes place.

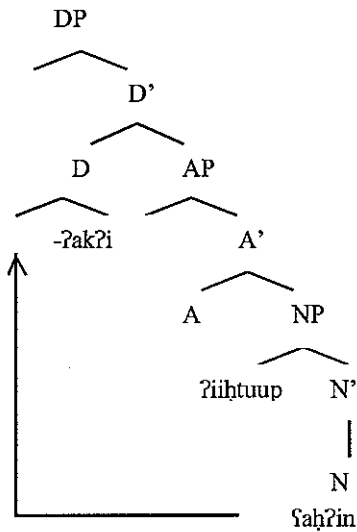
(18) *müksýi?i*
müksýi -?i'
 stone -DEF
 "the stone"

(19) *?iih?ii müksýi*
?iih -?i' müksýi
 big -DEF stone
 "the big stone"

2.2.1 Analysis 1

The first analysis posits that the possessor DP is base-generated in [Spec NP]. This produces the correct word order in a sentence like (9). The head N moves up into D, where it attaches to *-?ak?i*.

(20)



There are several immediate problems with this analysis. It runs into trouble dealing with a sentence like (21) where the head noun PSM is modified by an adjective.

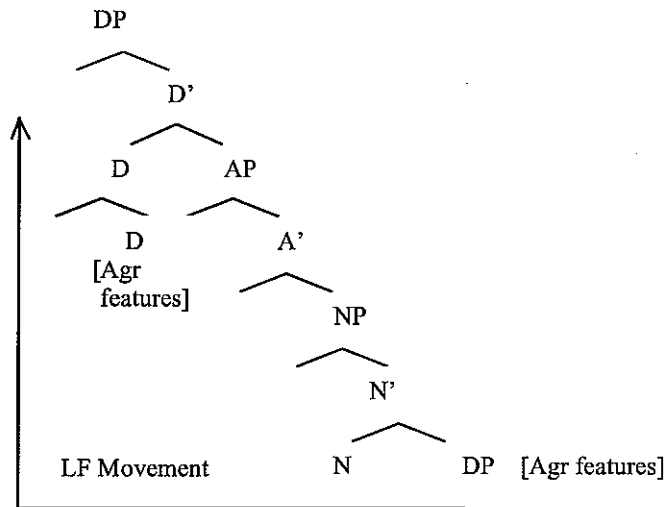
(21) *?iihuk?i maht?ii k^oiisaah?i?ii?*
?iih^o -uk -?i' maht?ii k^oiisaah?i?ii?
 big -POSS -DEF house Douglas.Thomas
 "Douglas Thomas' big house"

As described above, in this case the adjective appears to move to D, leaving N in its base-generated position. Unfortunately, under the current analysis the noun now follows the PSR. Assuming that the N cannot move up into ADJ, it is hard to see how to get round this problem. Also, it is not clear how agreement is generated between the PSR and the PSM in this configuration.

2.2.2 Analysis 2

One solution to this ordering problem is to claim that the PSR is the complement of N. This ensures that, no matter what modifies the head N, it is always followed by the PSR. The problem of how agreement between PSR and PSM is achieved remains however. Assuming that agreement features are generated in D, it looks like the PSR needs to be in [Spec DP] to check features. In order to maintain this analysis, we would have to claim that the PSR moves to [Spec DP] at Logical Form.

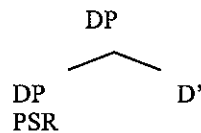
(22)



2.2.3 Analysis 3

The third analysis then claims that the PSR is base-generated in [Spec DP]. This is the position that PSRs are usually claimed to occupy in many other languages (for example English).

(23)

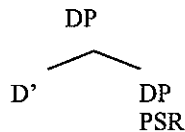


This however leaves the ordering problem. We would need to claim that the PSR raises to the Spec of a functional head above DP and that there is subsequent remnant movement of the PSM DP to another even higher position. This seems a rather ad hoc solution in the absence of any further motivation for such movement.

2.2.4 Analysis 4

One final attempt to reconcile the ordering and agreement facts is to claim that the PSR is in a right-branching specifier position of DP.

(24)



This makes the correct prediction regarding relative ordering of PSM and PSR, and agreement is accounted for by the spec-head relationship between PSR and D.

The problem with this analysis is more broadly theoretical. In particular, Kayne's (1994) Linear Correspondence Axiom (LCA) leads to the claim that all languages show spec-head-complement order. Under this framework right branching specifiers are prohibited⁷. Nevertheless, it is perhaps unsurprising to find evidence of such structures in Nuuchahnulth, given its head-initial nature.

2.3 Comparison of Solutions and Conclusions

As we have seen, each of the above analyses is problematic in some way. The Spec NP analysis in 2.2.1 seems to be seriously flawed, failing as it does to describe the ordering phenomena, or to explain the agreement between the PSM and the PSR. The Comp N analysis in 2.2.2 fares better in terms of describing the ordering, but forces us to claim that the PSR moves after Spell-Out to [Spec DP] at Logical Form.

The Spec DP account in 2.2.3 faces the opposite problem to that in 2.2.2. Agreement is characterised by a spec-head relationship, but in order to get the correct order, two otherwise unmotivated movement operations must be stipulated.

The right-branching Spec account in 2.2.4 captures these two empirical facts most satisfactorily, but may face objections on the theoretical grounds that right-branching specifiers are disallowed in some frameworks.

⁷Nonetheless, there is cross-linguistic evidence to suggest that such positions do exist. Laenzlinger for example argues that a right-branching specifier position is needed to account for facts about adverb placement in French.

3 Possessor Raising

Often, when the subject of a verb is possessed, a possessive morpheme appears on the predicate, and verbal agreement is with the possessor. I follow Davidson(2002) and Nakayama(2001) and refer to this phenomenon as Possessor Raising (PR).

- (25) $\lambda\text{isukuk}^{\text{a}}\text{h}$ $\text{?i}\check{\text{s}}\check{\text{c}}\text{iip}$
 λisuk -uk -(m)a $\check{\text{h}}$ $\text{?i}\check{\text{s}}\check{\text{c}}\text{iip}$
 white -POSS -1s.IND gum
 “my gum is white”
- (26) $\lambda\text{u}\check{\text{t}}\text{uk}^{\text{e}}\text{?ic}$ $\check{\text{c}}\text{i}\text{f}\text{uu}\check{\text{t}}$
 $\lambda\text{u}\check{\text{t}}$ -uk -(m)e $\check{\text{?}}\text{ic}$ $\check{\text{c}}\text{i}\text{f}\text{uu}\check{\text{t}}$
 good -POSS -2s.IND warclub
 “you have a fine war-club”
- (27) $\lambda\text{isuk}^{\text{a}}\text{at na}\check{\text{c}}\text{a}$
 λisuk - a t na $\check{\text{c}}\text{a}$
 white -INAL tail
 “its tail was white”
- (28) $\lambda\text{u}\check{\text{t}}\text{?at}$ $\text{?u}\check{\text{h}}\check{\text{c}}\text{i}\text{ti maamaati}\text{?is}\text{?i}$.
 $\lambda\text{u}\check{\text{t}}$ - a t $\text{?u}\check{\text{h}}\check{\text{c}}\text{i}\text{ti maamaati}$ - ?is - $\text{?i}\check{\text{?}}$
 attractive -INAL head bird -DIM -DEF
 “The little bird’s head was pretty.”

As (27-28) show, the inalienable possession marker can also participate in PR. I assume that inalienable and alienable pairs show parallel structures.

As can be seen in (25) and (26), the verb in these constructions appears to show agreement with the PSR, rather than the PSM. This leads Nakayama (2001:128) to claim that in these constructions, the possessor is a “grammatical argument” of the verb. Similarly, Davidson (2002:308) claims that the PSM in PR constructions is oblique. Thus it appears that PR changes the argument structure of a predicate⁸

3.1 Theta-roles and Possessor Raising

PR happens very commonly with intransitive predicates, although it can occasionally also occur with transitive predicates.

- (29) $\lambda\text{i}\check{\text{y}}\text{aqstu}\lambda\text{uksi ?i}\text{i}\text{tu}\text{?i}$
 λi - $\text{i}\check{\text{t}}$ - a qstu λ -uk - $\text{si}\check{\text{?}}$. $\text{?i}\text{tu}$ - $\text{?i}\check{\text{?}}$
 shoot -on.floor -inside[MC] -POSS -1s.ABS bird.sp. -DEF
 “my (arrow) hit the iitu bird”

⁸ This could be a clue to the link between inalienable possession and passive /- ?at / discussed in the final section.

Example (34) below from Rose (1981:238) shows that as well as controlling the pronominal marking of the verb, the PSR appears to have Nominative Case. The first person pronoun appears in its subject, rather than possessive form.

- (34) $\dot{y}apicukk^{\circ}iis$ $si\dot{y}aaq$ / * $si\dot{y}aas$
 $\dot{y}apic$ -uk -uk -(y)iis $si\dot{y}aaq$ / * $si\dot{y}aas$
 blue -DUR-POSS-INDF.1s I / mine
 “Mine is blue!”

This could be taken as an indication that the possessor raises to [Spec IP] to check off Nominative Case and Person features.

Notice that if the PSR does raise to a higher specifier position, this position must branch to the right in order for the word order to be correct in examples like (28). This could then be further evidence to support our previous suggestion that Nuuchahnulth shows right-branching specifiers.

Nakayama (2001) also observes that more topical PSRs are likely to raise, whereas less topical ones are not. Laenzlinger (1996), in discussing adverb positions in French, claims that right-branching specifiers are licensed by A' features, such as [Top]⁹. Perhaps it is the topicality of the possessor which causes it to raise and check with a [Top] feature located in a higher head, which in turn licenses the projection of the right-branching Spec position.

3.2 Movement of D

Two important questions still remain. Where is -uk base-generated, and how does it find its way onto the predicate in these examples?

Our analysis so far has assumed that the possessive morpheme originates in D, rather than being base-generated in I (or indeed elsewhere). There is some evidence to suggest that this might be correct.

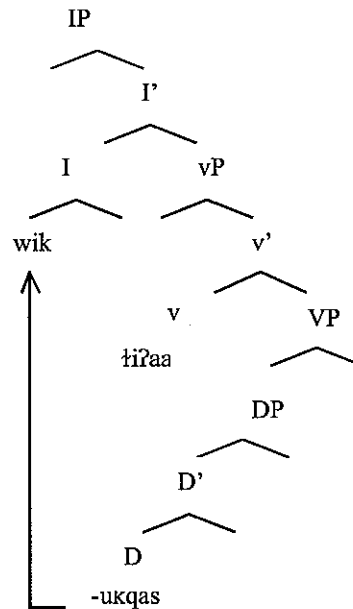
Examples (25-28) all show the apparent PSM immediately following the verb. Notice that in all these cases the PSM lacks any clitic attachment. This would appear to support an analysis whereby the clitic cluster is generated in D, and then attaches outside of DP. We have not yet explained how this happens.

One explanation would be to claim that -uk can cliticise onto the immediately preceding word. This does not appear to be correct however as (35) shows. The possessive morpheme appears not on the immediately preceding verb, but on the negative /wik/.

- (35) $wikukqas$ $hi\dot{?}aa$
 wik -uk -qas $hi\dot{?}aa$
 not -POSS -1s miss
 “May mine not miss”

⁹ There is not space to explore Laenzlinger's claims in detail here.

(36)



This might suggest that D raises by head-to-head movement, perhaps to I. I leave this for now as an area for further research.

3.3 Conclusion

I have argued that sentences such as (25-28) do indeed show raising of an apparently topical possessor. My analysis has again suggested that there is a need for right-branching specifier positions in Nuuchahnulth. It also appears that the possessive morpheme originates in D in these constructions, but attaches outside of DP. The mechanism by which this happens is not yet clear.

4 Sentences with Co-referenced Subject and Possessor

4.1 VOS Order

In this section I look at sentences like (37), in which ʔaatušmít is interpreted as both subject and possessor.

- (37) suuweeʔin hupinwašukʔi ʔaatušmít.
 suu -weʔin hupinwaš -uk -ʔiʔ ʔaatuš -míʔt
 hold -3.QT small.canoe -POSS -DEF deer -...Son
 “Deer_i held his_i small canoe”

(37) can also be expressed by (38).

- (38) suuweeʔin ʕaatuʂnit hupinwaʂukʔi.
 suu -weʔin ʕaatuʂ -nit hupinwaʂ -uk -ʔiʔ
 hold -3.QT deer -...Son small.canoe -POSS -DEF
 “Deer, held his, small canoe”

When the subject and PSR of the object are given a disjoint analysis, the verb typically shows the presence of the morpheme /-ʕiʔp/ as in (39).

- (39) sukʔilʕiʔpaʕweʔin ʕaʕaqaʕminhʔisukʔi
 suu -ʕilʕiʔp -ʔaʕ -weʔin ʕaʕaqaʕ -minh -ʔis -uk -ʔiʔ
 hold -MOM -INDIR -NOW -3.QT blanket -PL -DIM -POSS -DEF
 She took their little robes

4.2 Analyses

In this section I discuss the potential syntactic analyses for (37).

4.2.1 Analysis 1

At first glance, (37) looks like it might contain the DP [hupinwaʂukʔi ʕaatuʂnit] consisting of PSM (hupinwaʂ) and PSR (ʕaatuʂnit). This leads us to posit a null subject (not a problem in itself) as in (40).

- (40) [suuweeʔin pro_i [hupinwaʂukʔi ʕaatuʂnit]]

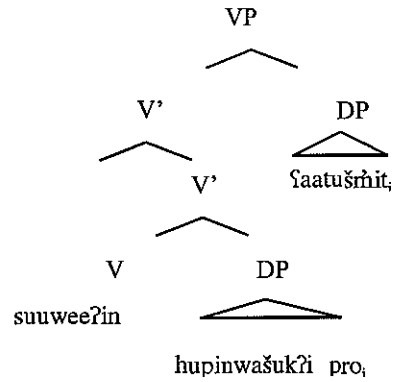
This is ruled out by Principal C of Binding Theory, since the R-expression ʕaatuʂnit is bound by pro. It is therefore concluded that ʕaatuʂnit is not part of a DP [hupinwaʂukʔi ʕaatuʂnit] in (37).

4.2.2 Analysis 2

It looks like there may be a case for claiming that ʕaatuʂnit occupies a right-adjoined specifier position above the subject and possessor, as illustrated in (41).

Binding relations are as they should be, and the order is also as expected. This analysis is less desirable however since again it relies on right branching, without any clear indication of how this might be licensed. Indeed, there is an alternative analysis which looks better.

(41)

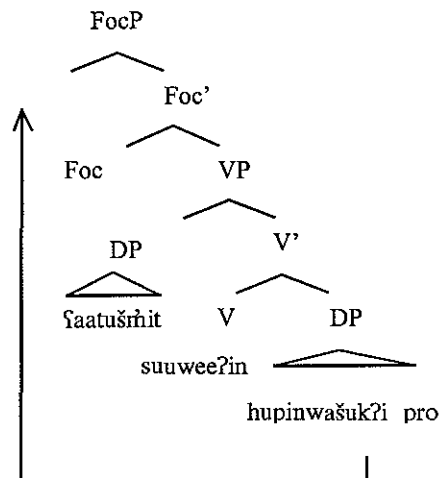


4.2.3 Analysis 3

If ʔaatušrhit does not originate inside a possessive DP, then it seems logical to assume that it originates in the subject position [Spec VP]. The problem now becomes accounting for the fact that it shows up sentence finally in (37). This could be achieved by claiming that the object DP is raised to the specifier of a head above VP.

Notice that pro is within the raised DP, with the result that it does not c-command the subject and Principle C is satisfied. If hupinwašukʔi can be shown to have focus, then this analysis works well. Indeed, in discussing cleft constructions, Rose (1981:118) claims that: “a new object can precede a subject adjunct”

(42)



Another strength of this analysis is that it explains the optionality observed in the alternative sentences in (37) and (38).

4.3 Conclusion

An analysis which claims that (37) contains the DP [hupinwašukʔi ʔaatušrɪt] falls foul of Principle C. We therefore claim that ʔaatušrɪt is outside the DP containing hupinwašukʔi and that there is a pro possessor instead.

Whilst this looks like a potential candidate for a right-branching analysis, if hupinwašukʔi can be shown to have a focused interpretation, then it looks more likely that it has been fronted, and that there is a Focus Phrase between VP and IP,

5 A Further Question and Conclusions

5.1 Further Question

The Nuuchahnulth ‘passive’ construction, as exemplified in (43), has received attention from a number of authors (Whistler 1985, Rose 1984, Emanantian 1988, Nakayama 1997, among others). There has been some debate over whether /-ʔat/ is a marker of prototypical passive (as claimed by Emanantian), of switch reference (Whistler), or whether neither of these terms provides an adequate characterization (the position of both Nakayama and Kim).

- (43) .yaaʔakʔatʔiš John ʔuhʔat Mary
 yaaʔak -ʔap -ʔat -ʔiš John ʔuhʔat Mary
 care -CAUS -ʔat -3sg John by Mary (Kim 2000:267)

Kim (2000) claims that the behaviour of /-ʔat/ can be explained by claiming that it has three morpho-syntactic properties.

- (44) Morpho-syntactic properties of /-ʔat/
 i. The presence of /-ʔat/ causes the ‘absorption’ of an Agent theta-role
 ii. The presence of /-ʔat/ causes the ‘absorption’ of Accusative Case
 iii. /-ʔat/ has a 3rd person feature

Is it possible to reconcile these properties with the behaviour of the inalienable possession marker and therefore to provide a unified description of the morpheme /-ʔat/? That is, are there a set of properties which account for both its passive effects in sentences like (43) and its possessive interpretation in sentences like (2) and (28)?

If this is not possible, then we will have to say that there are in fact two /-ʔat/ morphemes, presumably with two different sets of morpho-syntactic properties.

5.2 Conclusions

This paper has been a first attempt to provide syntactic analyses of various possessive constructions in Nuuchahnulth using a broadly Minimalist framework. We have looked at three constructions which are common in the language. We have shown that two of them may involve right-branching specifiers, whilst the third looks like a possible candidate for such a structure, but is better analysed in terms of a Focus Phrase between VP and IP.

Many questions have been left rather open-ended. It is felt that this is a promising area for future research, and that the answers to the problems raised here will lead us to a better understanding of Nuuchahnulth clause structure and also contribute to our understanding of a number of cross-linguistic phenomena.

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