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# Possessor coreference marking and agreement in Chimane

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## 1. PRELIMINARIES

Chimane (or Tsimané, ISO 639-3: cas) exhibits a type of construction, here termed PREDICATE-POSSESSOR AGREEMENT, which has a similar function to external possession in other languages but is formally different. In predicate-possessor agreement constructions, possessors which appear to be internal to possessive object NPs can control object agreement on the verb. The phenomenon calls for closer examination as the construction appears to violate locality by allowing a non-argument to participate in predicate-argument agreement, a clause-level syntactic process. The construction alternates in discourse with another pattern in which the possessee controls object agreement. It is therefore also necessary to consider speakers' motivations for using the construction by looking at the discourse contexts in which it is used.

In typical well-behaved cases of external possession, the possessor appears as an independent clausal argument, as in English:

(1) Mary touched [him] [on the arm].

OBJ OBL

In (1) “a semantic possessor-possessum relation is expressed by coding the possessor as a core grammatical relation of the verb and in a constituent separate from that which contains the possessum.” (Payne and Barshi 1999: 3). The explanations usually offered for this type of construction relate to semantic and pragmatic features of the possessor and possessee<sup>1</sup> and/or the verb. However, in some languages, semantic and pragmatic effects of external possession have syntactic correlates which do not fit so easily into Payne and Barshi's definition (Polinsky and Comrie 1999). This seems to be the case in Chimane, where we find agreement relations between verbs and what appear to be internal possessors:<sup>2</sup>

(2) Sergio            *nqij-bi-te*            *ococo*            *Benjamin-si'*.  
name(M)            see-APPL-3SG.M.O            frog(F)            name(M)-F  
'Sergio saw Benjamin's frog.'

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper the term 'possessee' is used to denote the entity possessed by the possessor. Elsewhere the terms 'possessum' and 'possessed' are also used with the same meaning.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all examples come from my own fieldwork. The abbreviations used in this paper are 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, ADE = adessive, APPL = applicative, CLF = verbal classifier, DEF = definite article, EX = exclusive, F = feminine gender, FOC = focus marker, GNL = general meaning, IN = inclusive, INFR = inferential evidential, M = masculine gender, MVT = associated motion, O/OBJ = object, NON-OBJ = non-object, PL = plural number, PRES = present, SG = singular number, TR = transitive.

In (2), the verb agrees with the masculine gender of the possessor *Benjamin*. However, the possessor itself agrees with the feminine gender of the possessee *ococo* ‘frog’. This appears to indicate that the possessor is not in a constituent separate from the possessee, but is in fact in the same constituent as it. What we appear to have here is an internal possessor which can control object agreement on the verb. Note also that semantic restrictions often associated with external possession do not apply here: the action expressed by the verb is not highly patient-affecting, and the possessee is an alienable possession. In this paper I will argue that the construction has a discourse function: to indicate the topicality of the possessor.

Before that, I will propose an analysis of the syntax of predicate-possessor agreement. The construction may present a problem for some syntactic theories as it appears to violate the principle of locality. A non-argument should not be able to participate in clause-level syntactic processes such as predicate-argument agreement because it is not in the same local domain as the predicate (Lehmann 1982; Anderson 1992; Wechsler and Zlatić 2003). In order to account for the construction, it will be necessary to demonstrate whether it is the possessor or possessee that is the true object argument. First though, a very brief introduction to Chimane is given to familiarise the reader with some relevant aspects of the language’s grammar.

## 2. ABOUT CHIMANE

Chimane is spoken by around 7000 people living along the Maniqui river in Amazonian Bolivia. The language is closely related to Mosestén, a highly endangered dialect (Sakel 2004). The Chimane-Mosestén dialect continuum has not been satisfactorily shown to be related to any other language (Adelaar and Muysken 2004).

The language is mostly agglutinative with a few cases of fusion. Major open word classes are nouns and verbs. All nominals have inherent masculine or feminine gender.

Possessive constructions are encoded using the same strategy as attributive modification: compare *Benjamin-si' aca'* (Benjamin(M)-F house(F) ‘Benjamin’s house’) and *där-si' aca'* (big-F house(F) ‘big house’). Possessive pronouns are encliticised to the head, e.g. *aca'=yü* (house(F)=1SG ‘my house’). Third person pronouns are also employed as definite articles, for example *mu' itsiquij* (DEF.M jaguar(M) ‘the jaguar’).

Verbal morphology is complex. The only obligatory elements are the root (Slot B) and agreement morphology (Slot K) though most roots must also combine with a verbal classifier (Slot J).

**Table 1**  
Simplified schematisation of the Chimane verbal complex

SLOT A	Valency-changing prefixes
SLOT B	Verb root
SLOT C	Iterative aspect infix
SLOT D	Iterative aspect reduplication
SLOT E	Epenthetic vowel
SLOT F	Progressive aspect suffix
SLOT G	Intransitive progressive aspect suffix
SLOT H	Associated motion suffixes
SLOT J	Verbal classifiers
SLOT K	Valency-changing suffixes
SLOT L	Cross-reference/object agreement suffixes
SLOT M	(Valency-changing suffix <i>-bi</i> )
SLOT N	Subject agreement suffixes
SLOT P	Aspect suffixes
SLOT Q	Pronominal clitics

The intransitive agreement paradigm is relatively simple, with the occurrence or non-occurrence of a glottal stop suffixed to the verb referencing the feminine or masculine gender of the subject respectively. The transitive cross-reference paradigm is more complex, with suffixes indicating person, number, gender and clusivity features of the subject and/or the object depending on the combination.

**Table 2**  
Transitive agreement paradigm

A	O								
	1SG	2SG	3SG.M	3SG.F	1PL.EX	1PL.IN	2PL	3PL	
1SG		<i>-ye</i>					<i>-yac</i>	<i>-csi(')</i>	
2SG	<i>-ti'</i>				<i>-te</i>	<i>-'</i>	<i>-tiça'</i>		<i>-ti(')</i>
1PL.EX		<i>-yac</i>							<i>-yac</i>
1PL.IN		<i>-tiça'</i>	<i>-ya</i>	<i>-ya'</i>			<i>-tiça'</i>	<i>-cseyá'</i>	
2PL	<i>-tiça'</i>		<i>-tinte</i>	<i>-tiñe'</i>	<i>-tiça'</i>	<i>-ti(')</i>		<i>-csi(')</i>	
3	<i>-n</i>		<i>-te</i>	<i>-'</i>	<i>-n</i>	<i>-sin</i>	<i>-nac</i>		

Combinations with a reflexive meaning are not included here. Suffixes indicating third person objects do not reference features of subject except in the case of first person plural inclusive and second person plural subjects. Features of the subject in other combinations are therefore not indicated in the glossing. Parentheses around glottal stops indicate that these only occur with feminine subjects, the combination of object and subject marker being agglutinative in these cases. Note

that the glottal stop suffix is used to indicate feminine subjects of intransitive verbs, feminine subjects of transitive verbs in combination with the *-ti* and *-csi* object markers, and third person singular feminine objects of transitive verbs with most other subjects.

### 3. SYNTAX OF PREDICATE-POSSESSOR AGREEMENT

Predicate-possessor agreement in Chimane appears to violate locality as a non-argument can participate in a clause-level syntactic process. In order to account for this apparent violation, it is necessary to explain why the possessor has the argument-like property of being able to control predicate-argument agreement while simultaneously having the non-argument-like property of being an internal subconstituent of the possessive NP, as in example (2). In this section I will consider the possibility that the possessor is the object of the verb, but still remains internal to the possessive NP.

In order to support the claim that the possessor takes on the status of the object argument while remaining internal to the possessive NP it is necessary to posit a phonologically null argument coreferential with the possessor which takes on the object function. In examples such as (2), repeated here as (2'), the possessive NP is therefore demoted to some kind of clause-level non-object function.

(2')	<i>Sergio<sub>i</sub></i>	<i>na<sub>ij</sub>-bi-te</i>	$[\emptyset_k]$	<i>[ococo<sub>j</sub> Benjamin<sub>k</sub>-si']</i> .
	name(M)	see-APPL-3SG.M.O		frog(F) name(M)-F
			OBJ	NON-OBJ

‘Sergio saw Benjamin’s frog.’

There are several types of evidence which may support this analysis. The first is the presence of the verbal suffix *-bi*. This suffix does not occur in any other syntactic context and is obligatory in such contexts. Its removal is judged to be ungrammatical with predicate-possessor agreement, while its insertion in a predicate-possessee agreement construction (also a possibility in the language, as in 3b) is also deemed ungrammatical:

(3)	(a)	<i>*Sergio</i>	<i>na<sub>ij</sub>-te</i>	<i>ococo</i>	<i>Benjamin-si'</i> .
		name(M)	see-3SG.M.O	frog(F)	name(M)-F
	(b)	<i>Sergio</i>	<i>na<sub>ij</sub>-tye-'</i>	<i>ococo</i>	<i>Benjamin-si'</i> .
		name(M)	see-CLF.TR-3SG.F.O	frog(F)	name(M)-F
	(c)	<i>*Sergio</i>	<i>na<sub>ij</sub>-bi-'</i>	<i>ococo</i>	<i>Benjamin-si'</i> .
		name(M)	see-APPL-3SG.F.O	frog(F)	name(M)-F

‘Sergio saw Benjamin’s frog.’

In (3b) another suffix, the verbal classifier *-tye*, occurs. These elements classify the verb in terms of transitivity and control of the verb’s arguments (Sakel 2007)

and are usually required with roots such as *najj-* ‘see’ in order to enable the root to take inflection. In examples such as (2), the *-bi* suffix appears to override the requirement for the classifier to occur. This could be taken as evidence that it is itself a verbal classifier. However, its morphological distribution in the verbal complex shows that this cannot be the case. In (4), it occurs in combination with a classifier:

- (4) *Sergio cäts-je-bi-'* *ačhuj mɔ'* *Margarita-ty.*  
 name(M) hit-CLF.GNL-APPL-3SG.F.O dog(M) DEF.F name(F)-M  
 ‘Sergio hit Margarita’s dog.’

In combination with a plural possessor, it may occur to the right of the object agreement suffix, as in (5).<sup>3</sup> This is impossible for a verbal classifier which must occur in a higher position than the valency changing suffixes and agreement suffixes (see Table 1).

- (5) *Isabel ju-ta-cse-bi-'* *mɔ' carta*  
 name(F) send-CLF.TR-3PL.O-APPL-F.S DEF.F letter(F)
- miquimuntyi-s=in Maria-ya'.*  
 children(M)-F=PL name(F)-ADE  
 ‘Isabel sent the children’s letter to Maria.’

If *-bi* is not a verbal classifier, and obligatorily occurs only in predicate-possessor agreement constructions, it could be assumed that its function is to change (or at least to signal the change in) the grammatical functions of the possessor and possessee. Sakel (2004) analyses the equivalent suffix in Mosetén as an applicative, and this seems to support the analysis presented here, the general function of applicatives being “a means some languages have for structuring clauses which allow the coding of a thematically peripheral argument or adjunct as a core-object argument.” (Peterson 2007: 1). Under this analysis, the function of *-bi* is to enable a phonologically null argument coreferential with the internal possessor to assume the object function.

Another piece of evidence which may further support this analysis is the optional occurrence of an independent pronoun which appears to be an overt realisation of the phonologically null argument posited. In (6), the pronoun *mu'in* ‘they, their, them (M)’, doubles the internal possessor *miquimuntyi* ‘children’.

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<sup>3</sup> The transitive classifier *-tye* occurs in a phonologically conditioned reduced form in this example.

- (6) *Sergio*     *d̥ac-a-cse-bi*     [m̥oʼ     *ococo*  
name(M)     find-CLF.GNL-3PL.O-APPL.M.S     DEF.F     frog(F)
- miquimunt̥yi-s*] [muʼ-in].  
children(M)-F     3.M-PL  
‘Sergio found the children’s frog.’  
(Lit. ‘Sergio found the children’s<sub>i</sub> frog their<sub>s<sub>i</sub>/\*j.</sub>’)

In examples like (6), predicate-possessor agreement is unproblematic; the verb agrees with the external possessor argument which is coreferential with the internal possessor. It is therefore possible to imagine a scenario in which the generalised predicate-possessor agreement construction with the null external argument developed on the basis of this pattern.

As well as proposing a formal analysis of the predicate-possessor agreement construction, the second aim of this paper is to consider speakers’ motivations for using the construction. In the next section I will consider the function of predicate-possessor agreement in discourse.

#### 4. DISCOURSE FUNCTION OF PREDICATE-POSSESSOR AGREEMENT

Predicate-possessor agreement alternates in Chimane discourse with an alternative pattern in which the possessee controls agreement (e.g. 4b). This alternation appears to be motivated by a desire to mark the possessor or possessee as a topic. Topic is understood here as “the thing which the proposition expressed by the sentence is **about**.” (Lambrecht 1994: 118, original emphasis). In other words, the topic is an established entity which the speaker is adding information about or increasing the addressee’s knowledge of.

In the previous section, I proposed a scenario in which the generalised predicate-possessor agreement construction developed on the basis of the restricted benefactive construction with an overt external possessor. In this section, I will expand on this by hypothesising that speakers’ motivations for developing the construction was to signal a topical possessor (cf. Nikolaeva 2005). There are no historical texts for Chimane so evidence to support this hypothesis must come from contemporary sources. Three types of evidence are presented here to substantiate the claim that predicate-possessor agreement is used to mark the topicality of the possessor: elicited question-answer pairs, texts and experimental data.

In elicited question-answer pairs, depending on whether the possessor or possessee is topicalised in the question, the verb agrees with that referent in the answer.

- (7) ‘What happened to Isabel’s brother?’

*Claudio*     *uja-te*.  
name(M)     kill-3SG.M.O  
‘Claudio killed him.’

(8) ‘Why is Isabel angry?’

*Claudio*      *uja-bi-'*      *vojity=mɔ'*  
name(M)      kill-APPL-3SG.F.O      brother(M)=3SG.F  
‘Claudio killed her brother.’

In (7) the possessee referent is topicalised in the question, and the verb agrees with this argument in the answer. In (8), the agreement in the answer is with the possessor as this referent is topicalised in the question.

Texts may also provide evidence that predicate-possessor agreement occurs when the possessor is topical. The following text fragment is taken from a children’s story in which the protagonist Sergio is hunting two jaguars.

- (9) (a) *Mu'*      *Sergio*      *yiri-ty*      *uja-te,*  
DEF.M      name(M)      one-M      kill-3SG.M.O
- (b) *yoc-tyi'*      *Na*      *ca*      *ča'-joij.*  
other-M      FOC      INFR      flee-MVT.M.S  
‘Sergio killed one of them and the other one escaped.’
- (c) *¡Där*      *jäm'*      *mu'!*  
big      Good      3SG.M  
‘He was very lucky!’
- (d) *Mu'*      *Sergio*      *jäc-bi-te*      *ca*  
DEF.M      name(M)      remove-APPL-3SG.M.O      INFR
- sho'pa'*      *ĩtsiqui-s.*  
skin(F)      jaguar(M)-F  
‘Sergio skinned the jaguar.’  
(Gill 1987: 25, own glossing)

There are several indications that the jaguar referent controlling predicate-argument agreement in (9d) is a topic. In (9a), the same referent is expressed as *yirity* ‘one (of them)’, an anaphoric referring expression. Phonologically ‘lighter’ referring expressions like this are often used to refer to topical referents (Givón 1983). Note also the use of the focus marker *na* marking the other jaguar referent in (9b). This may be an example of contrastive focus; the jaguar that got away is focused in contrast to the topical one that was killed.

Topicality may not be the only factor which is contributing to the use of the predicate-possessor agreement construction in (9d). Semantic features such as animacy might also play a role here, as the jaguar referent outranks its body part on the animacy hierarchy (e.g. Aissen 2003).

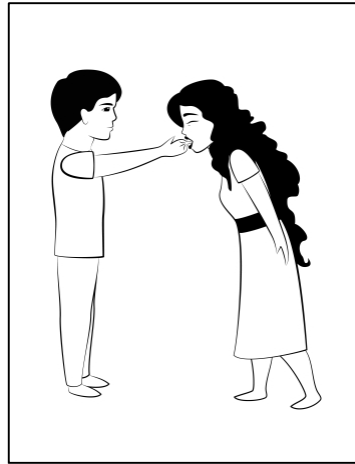
In order to further test the hypothesis that the function of predicate-possessor agreement is used to indicate the topicality of the possessor, I designed a picture description task in which participants were asked a question about a picture of a



person acting on part of another person's body. The questions topicalised either the possessor or possessee, e.g. 'What's happening to the man?' or 'What's happening to the man's hand?' My prediction was that the referent which was topicalised in the question would control predicate-argument agreement in the answer.

**Figure 1**

Example stimulus picture from description task: a woman biting a man's hand



I asked 12 questions of 12 different pictures like that in Figure 1. The experiment was carried out with 41 participants. In each case either the man or the woman carried out a different action on different parts of the other's body. The pictures were therefore presented in a different order each time to ensure that other possible semantic effects such as affectedness did not influence the results.

The experiment did not yield as clear a result as I had hoped, though this is most probably a problem with the design. With nearly all the participants, once the possessor had been established as topical in one question-answer pair, the predicate-possessor agreement construction would then be used throughout, whether it was the topic of the question or not. This is probably because the possessor is higher on the animacy scale than the possessee. Animacy also seems to be an influencing factor in whether the possessor or possessee controls predicate-argument agreement.

Despite this problem, some of the results are still useful. In each case, I began the experiment with a question which topicalised the possessee (the body part referent). In these exemplars, the possessor (the person) sometimes overrode the topical possessee, but there were also some cases in which the topical body part referent won out in spite of its lower position on the animacy hierarchy. Taking the first two question-answer pairs from each participant (and discounting non-possessive constructions) yields the following results:

**Table 3**  
Preliminary results from the picture description task

Topic in question	Agr. controller in answer	TOTAL
possessor	possessor	21
possessor	possessee	0
possessee	possessor	20
possessee	possessee	<b>12</b>
TOTAL		53

Despite being lower on the animacy hierarchy, the body part referent still controlled predicate-argument agreement in just over a third of cases in which it was topicalised in the question. This shows that the topicality of the referent does have an influence over the choice of agreement pattern. These preliminary results may therefore add weight to the hypothesis that topicality is a relevant factor in determining whether the possessor or possessee controls predicate-argument agreement.

## 5. FURTHER RESEARCH

The predicate-possessor agreement construction may be explained by postulating a null object argument coreferential with the possessor. Further syntactic tests are required to show whether this element really is the object, or whether another analysis might be more appropriate.

The picture description task needs to be redesigned with referents of equal animacy. For example, it would be possible to redesign the pictures with a person acting on the kin of another person. Rerunning the experiment with participants of equal animacy may yield stronger results in support of the hypothesis that topicality is a significant influencing factor in the choice of agreement pattern in discourse.

The predicate-possessor agreement construction may be better understood in the light of work on atypical syntactic effects of possessor prominence in other languages. Several other languages exhibit similar constructions which may inform the analysis presented here. These include Jarawara (Dixon 2000), Maithili (Stump and Yadav 1988; Bickel, Bisang, and Yadava 1999), Oneida (Michelson 1991), Tangut (Kepping 1979, cited in Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011) and Tseltal (Shklovsky 2012), amongst others.

It will also be useful to look at the functions of the other applicatives and other valency changing operations in Chimane. A preliminary review suggests that their primary function is also to mark topicality of arguments rather than change the valency of the verb in the way they are traditionally understood.

## 6. SUMMARY

The syntax of the predicate-possessor agreement construction may be explained by postulating that the true object is a null element coreferential with the possessor. Evidence of various types can be used to show that the function of this construction is to mark the possessor as a topic.

Further research on the effects of internal possessors on clausal syntax in other languages and the other valency changing operations in Chimane will help to better contextualise the phenomenon both language-internally and crosslinguistically.

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