Inconsistent Distinction of Possessive and Qualitative Nominal Attribution in Indonesian

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1. Possessive and Qualitative Nominal Attribution

Many languages of East and Southeast Asia permit the use of a noun as qualitative attribute (as in English *the table leg*) beside its more universally observable attributive use to express possession (*the table's leg*). I shall refer to the two syntagmatic modes as qualitative and possessive nominal attribute (QNA and PNA) respectively. It should be stressed, that it is the formal grammatical apposition which is meant here. Materially, or on the plane of content, of course, *a table leg* is practically the same as *a table's leg*. From a purely semantic point of view, therefore, a PNA explicitly indicates possession, whereas a QNA expresses either qualitative attribution, or one in which the either qualitative or possessive nature of the relationship is irrelevant or ignored. In some languages, perhaps, there only was one unspecific nominal attribute (UNA) which gradually specialized into a QNA after the emergence of a distinct PNA.

In most languages featuring the two alternative nominal constructions, the possessive can as a rule be distinguished from the qualitative in that the former requires the mediation of a possessive copula (PC) between the PNA and the target of attribution. It is thus typically:

N_1–PC–N_2 *versus* N_1–N_2,

where N_1 and N_2 are, respectively, the target and attribute nouns in languages with "post-attributing" word order, or vice versa in those with "pre-attributing" order.

Typically, the PC derives etymologically from a third person singular possessive pronoun, or from a noun meaning 'thing, possession, belonging'. In English, the possessive "suffix" *-'s*, which one could essentially also treat as an enclitic, derives from *his*. The use of *his* as PC, which apparently developed during the 13th–16th centuries, is believed to have been the result of misinterpretation of the Middle English genitive ending *-es*, often spelled *-is* or *-ys*, and pronounced correspondingly (Baugh & Cable 1978:240). Influence of Low German vernacular, in

which *sein* 'his' and *ihr* 'her' could serve as PC for the masculine and feminine respectively, might have played a role as a result of trade activities of the Hansa around the North and Baltic Seas.

In some Austronesian languages of insular Southeast Asia, the PC derives from the third person singular possessive pronoun too. It is often a clitic, which I shall indicate with a hyphen before an enclitic, or after a proclitic. Examples of PC in these languages are: Malay *-nya,* Javanese *-ne/-e* (the latter after a word with final consonant). In mainland Southeast Asia, the PC typically derives from a word meaning 'thing, possession', e.g. Vietnamese *của* (originally 'thing, possession'), Thai *khóong* ('thing'). In some languages of East Indonesia and Melanesia, the etymology points to 'possession' as the original meaning, e.g. Moluccan Malay *punya*,[1] Tok Pisin *bilong* (from English *belong*). In Chinese, the PC *-de* appears to derive from *dì* 'target' which is written with the same character.

In languages, in which the noun can be used as a qualitative attribute, the PC obtains additional significance as a formal marker distinguishing explicit possessive nominal attribution from the qualitative. In some of the languages, explicit PNA appears to be conditioned by the definiteness of the target or of the possessor, which may be expressed with the help of a preceding classifier[2] (Cl), sometimes preceded in turn by a deictic (Dct) or a numeral.

(1) Thai:

duang	*séeng*	*khóong*	*tàwan*
Cl	light-ray	PC	sun

'the light rays of the sun'

séeng	*tàwan*
light-ray	sun

'sunlight, sunbeam'

(2) Chinese:

zhè	*gè*	*jiàoshī*	*-de*	*bàngōngshì*
Dct	Cl	teacher	PC	office

'the office of this teacher'

yi *gè* *jiìaoshī* *-de* *bàngōngshì*
one Cl teacher PC office
'the office of a teacher'

jiìaoshī *bàngōngshì*
teacher office
'teachers' [office] room'

Thai is post-attributing, Chinese, pre-attributing. In the latter gloss, the teachers' room in a school is meant, i.e. the room reserved for teachers to meet or rest in during pauses.

The PC becomes redundant when the possessor is expressed by a personal pronoun (or a pronoun substitute), because the latter cannot serve as QNA in these languages. In some such languages, no PC is used at all before a pronoun in possessive mode, in some others, its use is optional. In Vietnamese, for example, the construction with PC seems to be restricted to instances when the target is rendered definite by a preceding classifier (compare also the Thai glosses above):

(3) Vietnamese:

cái *nhà* *của* *tôi*
Cl house PC me
'the house that is mine'

nhà *tôi*
house me
'my house'

In the instance of nouns, however, the general rule seems to be that a PC is required, because its absence would automatically imply qualitative attribution, or at least render the attributive relation unspecified.

2. The Development in Indonesian

In Indonesian we have a remarkable exception to the general rule for languages with qualitative nominal attribution, in that the use of a PC in possessive nominal attribution is optional, and under certain stylistic conditions even avoided. Whereas the construction with PC is unambiguously possessive, that without PC may essentially be interpreted as either qualitative or possessive:

(4) *pintu* *-nya* *rumah*
door PC house
'door of the house'
pintu rumah – '1. house door, 2. door of a/the house'

kamar *-nya* *guru*
room PC teacher
'the teacher's room'
kamar guru – '1. teachers room, 2. the teacher's room'

calon *-nya* *direktur*
candidate PC director
'the director's nominee'
calon direktur – '1. candidate director, 2. director's nominee'

In Classical Malay, the PC was usually omitted.[3] Consequently, the construction with PC was not provided for in School Malay (see van Ophuijsen 1910:49), the language which was officially prescribed from the first decade of this century for Malay classes in government schools and for Malay publications by the government Commission for Popular Literature till the end of the colonial period. This artificially conserved dialect however did not reflect the actually spoken language. The historical language tradition it reflected was rapidly declining from the fall of Malacca in 1511, dwindling to the status of court language of the since 1824 powerless petty Sultanate of Riau, and apparently all but extinct by the time School Malay was established in the first two decades of this century.

The declining role of literary and courtly High Malay was compensated by the dramatically increased importance and distribution of Low Malay vernaculars. The omnipresence of these latter was already noted in a letter dated November 15, 1697, from the later Malay Bible translator Melchior Leydecker to the Christian Synod of North Holland, in which the author referred to them as *Bahàsa Katsjòkan* or a "mixed or crooked crippled language" (p. 13 in the text of the letter reproduced in Valentyn 1698:9–30). During the period of Dutch rule, a very loosely uniform tradition of Low Malay developed as administrative or "Service Malay" (Dutch *Dienst Maleis[ch]*), in which the Moluccan Malay possessive construction with *punya* as PC was a prominent feature. It is interesting in that it preserves the East-Indonesia typical "pre-attributing" word order, i.e. the attribute precedes the target. The following may serve as example: