A Construction-theoretic approach to Possessive Relatives

Many languages contain externally headed prenominal relatives containing non-subject gaps, where MC means "mixed verbal category":



'the built boat'

In many languages containing such constructions, a pronominal subject argument is expressed by an affix or clitic within the domain defined by the MC, as exemplified by Eastern Ostyak:

 $\begin{array}{ll} [[\emptyset_i \text{ wer-t-äm }]_1 \text{ kiriw}_i]_2 \\ \text{ make-MC-1 sg } \text{ boat} \\ \text{`the boat I will make'} \end{array}$

A much smaller set of languages, restricted to genetically related and unrelated languages of Eurasia, expresses pronominal subjects on the modified head of the relative, thus raising intriguing issues concerning locality. This class is exemplified by Tundra Nenets:

[[\emptyset_i ta-wi°]₁ te_{*i*}-da]₂ give-MC deer-3sG 'the deer s/he gave'

In this relative clause it is evident that the pronominal marker *-da* is outside of the domain defined by the verbal form for which it functions as subject.

Languages with this latter relative construction all have possessive nominal constructions that are surface identical to these relatives, hence, the reference to this type of relative as possessive relative constructions. This is again exemplified by Tundra Nenets, where –da is suffixed to possessed nominal:

(pida) **te-da** he/she.NOM reindeer-3SG 'his/her reindeer'

We develop a construction-theoretic analysis in which possessive relatives are motivated by properties associated with three basic cooperating constructions, as illustrated below.



We argue that such a construction-theoretic proposal is compatible with the crosslinguistic variability in the expression of possessive relatives in a way that an alternative tree-theoretic proposal for similar data (Kornfilt 2005, 2008) is not. The tree-theoretic alternative adopts a Kaynean view of relatives adapted to prenominal relatives. The proposal requires positing (1) a universal structural base, (2) organized into binary branching subtrees, (3) with "movement" relating initial, intermediate, and final locations for pieces of trees among (more and less) abstract nodes, (4) assumptions about the parts of (phonologically integrated) complex word that are accessible to movement and indexing, and (5) assumptions about parts of such words that are not moved, but function as clitics. Some of these assumptions are simply not empirically disconfirmable, e.g., a universal structural base which requires deviations from the basic form in order to account for language particular variation, while those that are discomfirmable i.e., predicted morphotactics for e.g., case and person/number and their status as clitics or affixes, are empirically discomfirmed. Kornfilt (2005, 2008) identifies a typology of constructions previously discussed and analyzed lexically and constructionally in Ackerman 1998, Ackerman and Nikolaeva 1997, Malouf, and Nikolaeva (2004) and Sells 2008, Nikolaeva, Ackerman and Malouf (to appear) for more recent analyses. We compare these competing construction-theoretic and tree-theoretic proposals and argue that only the former succeeds in motivating the existence and specific realizations of the possessive relatives in the languages that contain them, while both proposals can be designed to adequately describe the facts with sufficient stipulation.