

External Possession and Nominative Subject in Basque

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We discuss the properties of external possessors with dative case in a dialect of Basque. The language has an external-possessor construction (EPC henceforth) close to the European prototype, where the possessor is realized as a clause-level dative-marked NP argument of the verb, rather than an adjunct of the possessum (Haspelmath 1999). The verbs that occur in this construction are generally dynamic, since the possessor needs to be affected by the situation.

The construction is readily available in transitive structures in the Lecumberry dialect, spoken in Lower Navarre, France. Consider the following alternation:

- (1a) *Manex hautx-i du Peio-ren otoa*
Manex break-PFV AUX Peio-GEN car
- (1b) *Manex hautx-i dako [bere/Ø] otoa Peio-ri*
Manex break-PFV AUX+DAT his car Peio-DAT
'Manex has broken Peio's car.'

In (1b) the person is marked by dative case to express a possessive relation with the object entity.

The EPC covers both inalienable and alienable possessions, but only in the former case is the overt expression of the NP-internal possessor permitted. Compare (1b) and (2).

- (2) *Manex hautxi dako [*bere/Ø] xudurra Peio-ri*
Manex broke AUX+DAT his nose Peio-DAT
'Manex has broken Peio's nose.'

On the other hand, the use of the EPC is more narrowly restricted in intransitive contexts. Alienable possessums must be animate as (3) and (4) demonstrate. In addition, as in (5), inalienable possessors can only be encoded in the dative form of the auxiliary and it is not possible to express them as a dative-marked NP.

- (3) **otoa hautx-i zako Peio-ri*
car break-PFV AUX+DAT Peio-DAT
'Peio's car has broken.'
- (4) *alaba joan zako Peio-ri*
daughter go.PFV AUX+DAT Peio-DAT
'Peio's daughter has gone.'
- (5) *zangoak hautx-i zazko [*Peio-ri/Ø]*
legs break-PFV AUX+DAT Peio-DAT
'Peio's legs have broken.'

The hypothesis I would like to propose is that the data observed for the dialect in question could be part of a broader process of language change toward the pattern which

highlights the nominative subject and abolishes the dative one. Lamiroy (2003) suggests that the emergence of this pattern in Dutch and French disabled the possessive-dative construction for wide application in the languages.

I will outline several arguments for the above hypothesis. With respect to the drift to nominative-subject highlighting, evidence is provided by two changes in the grammar of the dialect. It allows non-marked NPs as subjects in both intransitive and transitive contexts, while well-known, more conservative dialects consistently mark transitive subjects with ergative case. Besides the fact, a subject NP is in a structurally higher position than other co-arguments. The structure is reflected in the binding constraint on reflexive possessives. This is not true of conservative dialects. Change in the lexicon also shows the drift: most of the verbs used with a dative subject in other dialects have come to select a nominative-subject.

My suggestion is that the reason why in intransitive contexts alienable inanimate possessums and inalienable possessors are prohibited resides in the topicality of the NPs. In these contexts the dative possessor NPs are more topical than the nominative possessums. There are two reasons for this. First, the possessor is always animate since it must be susceptible to the situation. Second, it has a part-whole relation to its possessum in inalienable possession. This subject-like property of the possessor dative conflicts with the dialect's tendency toward nominative subjects. In alienable possession, animate possessums are acceptable because they are as topical as the possessor.

The above proposal is supported by an example from the standard dialect of Basque *Batua*, which keeps dative subjects and has no nominative ones. *Batua* is thus lenient about the EPC in intransitive contexts. Compare (3) with (6).

- (6) *kotxea hauts-i zaio Peio-ri*
 car break-PFV AUX+DAT Peio-DAT
 'Peio's car has broken.'

Another piece of evidence is from the Lecumberry dialect itself. The meaning intended by the structure in (3) can be encoded in a transitive structure with the possessor in the subject position as in (7).

- (7) *Peio otoa hautx-i-a du*
 Peio[SBJ] car[OBJ] break-PFV-SG have.PRS
 'Peio's car has broken.'

We can conclude that the drift toward nominative-subject highlighting suppresses subject-like dative NPs in the EPC with an intransitive verb.

Haspelmath, Martin (1999) External possession in European areal perspective. In: Doris L. Payne and Immanuel Barshi (eds.) *External possession*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 109-135.

Lamiroy, Béatrice (2003) Grammaticalization and external possessor structures in Romance and Germanic languages. Martin Coene and Yves D'hulst (eds.) *From NP to DP*. vol. 2. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 257-280.