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# Introduction: the limits of the explanatory potential of the alienability contrast

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**Abstract:** This introductory article outlines the central topic of the present special issue, viz. the contrast between alienable and inalienable possession, and how this contrast is reflected in the grammars and lexicons of natural languages. It sketches the historical background of the alienability contrast in the linguistic literature and points to a number of biases that need to be overcome in order to (1) advance our understanding of the contrast and (2) face the limits of its explanatory potential. Specifically, the present introduction, as well as the contributions to the present issue, proposes to move beyond prototypical possessive relationships (ownership, part-whole, and kinship relations), prototypical possessor categories (human possessors) as well as prototypical possessee categories (artifacts, body-parts and kin). In addition, the issue contains three contributions dealing with Amazonian languages, thus filling in an important gap in previous crosslinguistic studies on possession. The data presented in the special issue show that many morphosyntactic phenomena that have been explained in terms of the alienability contrast – or are amenable to such explanations – cannot be reduced to it, and are sometimes even better described without recourse to alienability at all. The present article thus concludes that the alienability contrast is at best regarded as a heuristic tool in exploring linguistic data, and cautions that, if used as the only explanatory principle, it could actually hamper an adequate description of the data.

**Keywords:** adnominal possession; alienability; body parts; kinship terms; noun classes

## 1 Introduction

The present special issue deals with a topic where cognition and grammar intertwine, i.e., the concept of alienability, and hones in on how the contrast between

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inalienable and alienable possession is reflected in grammar and the lexicon. It brings together contributions that, on the basis of first-hand data collected in the field or crosslinguistic sample work, critically address the alienability contrast as a functional explanation for linguistic facts, such as, for example, the different coding strategies in adnominal possessive constructions, i.e., noun phrases consisting of the expression of both a possessor and a possessee (also known as attributive possession). Example (1) from the West Papuan language Abun illustrates a coding split in this grammatical environment. Whereas Abun uses simple juxtaposition of possessor and item possessed (henceforth possessee) for the body-part term ‘arm’ in (1a), it uses a construction with a linker for the term ‘garden’ in (1b).

- (1) a. *ji syim*  
       1sg arm  
       ‘my arm’  
    b. *ji bi nggwe*  
       1sg poss garden  
       ‘my garden’  
       (Abun; Berry and Berry 1999: 77–78)

Berry and Berry (1999: 77–78) explain the difference in morphosyntactic marking between (1a) and (1b) in terms of alienability, with juxtaposition being used for inalienable possession (1a) and the linker construction for alienable possession (1b). They define alienable possession as a type of possessive relationship in which the possessee has “only a temporary or non-essential dependence on the possessor”, whereas inalienable possession involves “a permanent or necessary relationship” between possessee and possessor (Berry and Berry 1999: 77). These definitions illustrate a semantic view of alienability.

While the alienability contrast serves very well to account for the adnominal possession data in Abun, the articles in the current special issue in fact point to the limits of the alienability contrast as a principle motivating lexico-grammatical patterning. Most contributions focus on unrelated individual languages from various parts of the world, often on the basis of first-hand data collected in the field. The languages studied in detail are presented in Table 1. In addition to these language-specific studies, two articles take a crosslinguistic approach. The article by Chousou-Polydouri et al. is based on a sample of 120 genetically and areally diverse languages, and the one by Cristofaro is based on data from about 50 languages.

The remainder of this introductory article is organized as follows. Section 2 will give a (necessarily non-exhaustive) overview of how the alienability contrast entered the linguistic scene as a semantic notion and how it has been invoked as a functional motivation for grammatical organization in a wide variety of languages for more than a century. In some accounts, the alienability contrast has also been interpreted as a binary pattern of linguistic organization, and hence been treated as an explanandum itself rather than as an explanation. Section 3 will discuss the research

**Table 1:** Individual languages focused on in the special issue.

Language	Glottocode	Family	Macro-area (Hammarström et al. 2023)	Article in the present issue
Mandinka	mand1436	Mande	Africa	Creissels
Negidal	negi1245	Tungusic	Eurasia	Aralova and Pakendorf
Zuanga-Yuanga	yuag1237	Austronesian	Papunesia	Bril
Harakmbut	amar1274	Harakmbut	South America	Van linden
Mojeño Trinitario	trin1274	Arawakan	South America	Rose
Piaroa	piar1243	Jodí-Sáliban	South America	Rosés Labrada

questions addressed by the articles in the issue, and Section 4 details how the articles advance our current understanding of the alienability contrast, among others by taking into account sets of data that have hitherto been overlooked or deemed irrelevant. Specifically, Section 4 will present the collective highlights of the issue (Section 4.1), as well as summarize the individual contributions (Section 4.2).

## 2 The alienability contrast in the literature

Before discussing the treatment of the distinction between alienable and inalienable possession in the literature, we briefly want to address the concept of possession itself. Possession has been defined extensionally in the literature as comprising three prototypical possessive relations: ownership, kinship, and part/whole relationships (e.g., Haspelmath 2017; Langacker 1995). This goes back to Seiler (1981: 6), whose narrow definition of possession involves “the relationship between a human being and [their] kinsmen, [their] body parts, [their] material belongings, [their] cultural and intellectual products” and whose extended definition also encompasses part/whole relationships. Heine (1997: 39), in turn, defines possession in terms of its prototypical properties: (i) the possessor is a human being; (ii) the possessee is a concrete item; (iii) the possessor has the right to make use of the possessee; (iv) possessor and possessee are in spatial proximity; and (v) possession has no conceivable temporal limit. One attempt to define possession intensionally is Creissels’ (2006: 143): possession relates to “the notion of participation of an entity (commonly referred to as the possessee) in the personal sphere of an individual (commonly referred to as the possessor)”.<sup>1</sup> We adhere to this last definition but extend it even further so as to also include non-human possessors.

<sup>1</sup> This is our translation of the French original: “la notion de participation d’une entité (communément désignée comme possédé) à la sphère personnelle d’un individu (communément désigné comme possesseur)” (Creissels 2006: 143).

The distinction between alienable and inalienable possession dates back to the early twentieth century, when Lévy-Bruhl (1914: 96) observed that structures expressing adnominal possession such as ‘my head’ and ‘my garment’ are coded differently in Oceanic languages, and explained this in terms of the conceptually different types of possession they involve, viz. inalienable possession (‘my head’) versus alienable possession (‘my garment’). On the other side of the world, the distinction had also been noted around the same time in North American languages for the same grammatical environment (e.g., Uhlenbeck [1916], and Sapir’s [1917] review of the latter), but under different labels, e.g., *inherent* versus *accidental* (Dixon 1910; see Nichols [1988: 561] for an overview). Languages were thus found to formally indicate the fact that entities like garments can easily shift possessors, while entities like heads cannot, i.e., to formally encode a semantic distinction between alienable and inalienable possession. Inalienable possession is assumed to involve “either inextricable, essential or unchangeable relations” between possessor and possessee (Chappell and McGregor 1996a: 4). Alienable possession, by contrast, involves associations between possessor and possessee that are of a less permanent and inherent type (Chappell and McGregor 1989: 25).<sup>2</sup>

In the literature on the alienability contrast, the status of the concept as a semantic notion or as a structural contrast has been variable (cf. Nichols 1988: 561), and at times it is not made explicit. On the one hand, some accounts consider it to be fundamentally a semantic distinction, in line with Lévy-Bruhl (1914).<sup>3</sup> Ever since the alienability contrast was put forward, it has been invoked as a semantic explanation for the differences in the morphosyntactic marking of adnominal possession, as illustrated in relation to Example (1). The scope of the explanatory potential of the concept has also widened considerably, not just to other phrase-level phenomena like proprietive markers (Tsunoda 1996), but also to phenomena at the word and

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2 Note that the definitions of inalienable versus alienable possession are not symmetrical. Specifically, their conceptualizations differ in terms of scalarity (cf. Paradis 2001). For inalienable possession, the relation between possessor and possessee is conceptualized in terms of ‘either-or’, that is, the relation is unchangeable. Inalienable possession hence is a non-scalar category. While this conceptualization implies a complementary (contradictory) mode of oppositeness with alienable possession, what we note in the definition of the latter is a scalar conceptualization: the relations between possessor and possessee are “of a *less* permanent and inherent type” (Chappell and McGregor 1996a: 4, emphasis ours). The same asymmetry has been noted with respect to inalienable versus alienable noun classes. Nichols (1988) asserts that while inalienable nouns form a closed set and show semantic coherence, alienable ones do neither.

3 Seiler (1981: 8–9) coined the terms ‘inherent’ versus ‘established’ possession to refer to this semantic contrast in order to avoid terminological confusion, as he was aware that within a single language, “a possessive relation to one and the same object (e.g., a kinsman) can be represented as either ‘inalienable’ or ‘alienable’.”

clause levels. Examples of such phenomena are given below (based on Chappell and McGregor 1996a).

- (i) Word level:
  - Noun classes
  - Binominal lexeme constructions
  - Incorporation of (body-part) nouns into adjective roots
- (ii) Phrase level:
  - Adnominal possession
  - Proprietary/privative markers
- (iii) Clause level:
  - External possession
  - Double subject constructions
  - Noun incorporation
  - Predicative possession
  - Double non-subject (object/locative/dative) constructions
  - Quasi-passive

Within these linguistic phenomena, the semantic concept of alienability has mostly served as a functional explanation for adnominal possessive constructions (from Lévy-Bruhl 1914 to Haspelmath 2017), and for external possession (from Bally 1926 to Payne and Barshi 1999), illustrated in the Middle Dutch sentence in (2).

- (2) *Doen querteleerde ic hem ende ondeckte*  
 then trepanned I him:ACC and uncovered  
*hem dat hersenbecken*  
 him:DAT the cranium:ACC  
 ‘Then I trepanned him and uncovered his cranium (lit. uncovered him the cranium).’  
 (Middle Dutch; Burridge 1996: 681)

The second clause in (2) features a structure in which a possessive relation is expressed with the possessor (*hem*) and the possessee (*dat hersenbecken*) expressed in different constituents (dative- vs. accusative-marked noun phrases respectively), and the possessor being a core argument of the predicate – all defining properties of external possession. However, some authors have pointed out the limits of such an explanation, such as Burridge (1996) herself, and Mithun (2001: 308), who noted that so-called external possession constructions are not primarily used “to specify possession or even inalienability, but the significant affectedness of a participant.”

On the other hand, alienable/inalienable possession have often been taken as terms expressing a formal distinction. As Nichols (1988: 568) puts it, in that respect, there are two major uses of the terms: either for classes of nouns or for constructions,

the latter also known as alienability splits. Nichols (1988) herself uses the terms as lexical categories for noun classes, which could be taken to be the equivalent of valence on nouns (see also Queixalós 2005, 2016 for this idea). Nichols considers that inalienable nouns always form a closed set, and relates the existence of this formal distinction with head-marking languages. Other common terms for this lexical distinction are (i) relational, bound, and obligatorily possessed for inalienable nouns; and (ii) absolute, free, and optionally possessed for alienable nouns (Haspelmath 2017; Nichols 1988). In relation to adnominal possessive constructions, Dahl and Koptjevskaja-Tamm (1998: 38–39) state that “[t]he choice between inalienable and alienable constructions is seldom predictable from such general definitions” as the ones cited at the beginning of this section, and that in language-specific accounts the alienability distinction often means “that a set of inalienable nouns are singled out for special treatment”, i.e., kin terms and/or body-part terms. They thus argue that the alienability contrast should be regarded as a structural contrast (see also Chappell and McGregor 1989; Nichols 1992: 117). In the same vein, Haspelmath (2017: 198–199) notes that “in general the difference between alienable and inalienable possession [as in (1a) vs. (1b), FR & AVL] is simply a constructional split, with no clear semantic implications, not unlike the split between pronouns in English (which make a nominative/accusative distinction) and nouns (which do not)”. Based on earlier crosslinguistic work, he formulates a number of universals, like the following: “Possessive constructions with inalienable nouns tend to show zero coding, short coding, bound coding, and/or obligatoriness, while possessive constructions with alienable nouns tend to show overt coding, long coding, free coding, and/or impossibility” (Haspelmath 2017: 218).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to notes on the variable use of the term alienability in the literature, some comments are in order with respect to the areal distribution of the manifestations of the alienability contrast. Initially, the alienability contrast was noticed as being particularly significant for the understanding of adnominal possession in Oceanic languages (Lévy-Bruhl 1914; Lichtenberk 2009) and North American languages (Nichols 1988). More recently, Nichols and Bickel (2013) have asserted that the binary pattern of alienable versus inalienable possession is “fairly common everywhere except Eurasia”; however, Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2002) and Stolz et al. (2008) present some examples that contradict this claim. Of course, the alienability contrast in European languages has been discussed more often in relation to predicative possession (see articles in Baron et al. 2001), and dative of involvement constructions

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<sup>4</sup> While the term “impossibility” might be used to refer to the fact that nouns cannot be possessed at all (see Aikhenvald 2012), it is often used for nouns that cannot enter the basic possessive construction of an individual language. To avoid ambiguity, some authors suggest using the term “non-directly possessible” for the latter meaning (see Krasnoukhova [2012: 58] and Rose the present issue).

(Bally 1926) or more generally external possession (Haspelmath 1999; König and Haspelmath 1998), illustrated in (2). But what we found particularly striking in perusing the general linguistics literature on possession and alienability is the little attention given to South American languages – one notable exception is Velázquez Castillo's (1999) article on Spanish and Guarani in Payne and Barshi (1999).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, some area-specific studies on possession have been published recently, like Krasnoukhova (2011, 2012) and van der Voort (2009). In Krasnoukhova's (2011: 96) survey, only a minor subset of the languages under investigation shows an alienability-based constructional split (18/55 languages); in most of these (14/18 languages), predictably, "inalienable possession involves less morphological marking than alienable possession". Turning to noun classes, Bickel and Nichols (2013) found that South American languages, just like North American ones, commonly show a class of obligatorily possessed nouns. Specifically, either these nouns obligatorily take a pronominal or a lexical possessor, as in Tupi-Guarani languages (Jensen 1999: 162), or they are obligatorily inflected for their possessor (whether they have a lexical possessor or not), as in some Arawakan languages (Rose, in this issue). Another interesting coding strategy attested in South American languages is that of possessive classifiers (Aikhenvald 2012: 165–167, see also Section 3).

Finally, we want to touch on a long-standing debate relating to the possible explanations of alienability phenomena and their diachronic origins. In relation to adnominal possession, there is consensus that the encoding of inalienable possession, which involves less morphosyntactic marking, is generally older than that of alienable possession, which involves more (complex) morphosyntactic machinery (Nichols 1988: 579). Much ink has been spilled over how and why alienability splits arise. Nichols' (1988: 579) original explanation dealt with the relative frequency of occurrence of nouns as possessed: nouns that most often occur as possessed will enter the 'inalienable' (i.e., more tightly encoded) possessive construction. By contrast, Haiman offers an explanation in terms of iconicity, i.e., the principle that "[t]he linguistic distance between expressions corresponds to the conceptual distance between them" (Haiman 1983: 782). Applied to adnominal possession, this means that the formal distance between the item denoting the possessor and the item denoting the possessee reflects the conceptual distance between the possessor and the possessee – "there is a closer conceptual link between a possessor and an inalienably possessed object than between a possessor and an alienably possessed

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5 Nichols (1988) focuses on North American languages and Stolz et al. (2008) on European languages. In pan-area works on possession, South America is not represented in Chappell and McGregor (1996b) nor in Baron et al. (2001). There is one chapter on Nanti (Michael 2012), a South American language, in Aikhenvald and Dixon (2012), and one on North-Western Amazonian languages (van der Voort 2009) in McGregor (2009), but these do not embrace the alienability concept. Indigenous languages of South America are extremely underrepresented in Heine's (1997) work.

object” (Haiman 1983: 783). Within grammaticalization theory, Heine (1997: 174), in turn, explains the formal characteristics of adnominal possessive constructions on the basis of the cognitive source structures they originate in. New possessive patterns more likely emerge “in contexts where it is least obvious that a possessive relation exists”, i.e., not in contexts of inalienable possession. In the same vein, Dahl and Koptjevskaja-Tamm (1998) speak of a need for ‘disambiguation’ for nouns that can enter multiple relations with other entities. More recently, Haspelmath builds on Nichols’ original explanation that the alienability contrast is best predicted “due to the higher relative frequency of possessed occurrences of inalienable nouns” (2017: 193).

### 3 Our research questions on the alienability contrast

In relation to the alienability contrast and the distinct levels of analysis listed in Section 2, as well as the topics considered in the existing literature discussed above, the current special issue aims to answer seven research questions, presented in (a) to (f) below.

(a) How does the alienability contrast surface in the lexicon?

Question (a) relates to alienability phenomena surfacing at the word level. It investigates whether the nouns that are grammatically treated in a distinct way from other nouns in a particular grammatical environment, such as adnominal possession, come from a specific semantic domain. For the Pala dialect of Patpatar (Oceanic, Papua New Guinea), for instance, Peekel (1909: 68, cited in Lévy-Bruhl 1914: 101) notes that kinship terms for siblings are treated as inalienable in adnominal possession, whereas terms for husband/wife and in-laws are treated as alienable; in the context of the present issue, these two sets of kinship terms would be analyzed as belonging to distinct possessive (noun) classes (see also Nichols and Bickel 2013 on possessive classification). While Nichols (1988: 572) proposes an implicational hierarchy for membership of the inalienable class (i) kin terms and/or body parts; (ii) part-whole and/or spatial relations [i.e., relational terms]; (iii) culturally basic possessed items [e.g., arrows, domestic animals], Chappell and McGregor (1989, 1996a) insist that the three core domains of inalienably possessed items, i.e., kinship terms, body-part terms, and spatial relations, are treated so differently in individual languages that any attempt to propose a crosslinguistically valid hierarchy is futile. Interestingly, to the usual suspects listed above, Heine (1997: 10–16) adds less prototypical conceptual domains that are also likely to be treated as inalienable, viz. physical and mental



states, like ‘strength’, or ‘fear’ (cf. Lichtenberk 1985: 105), as well as nominalizations where the possessee is a deverbal noun, for instance ‘her sleeping’ or ‘his catching of fish’. In the current issue, we want to open up these non-prototypical possessives for closer examination. For languages that have noun classes, in turn, this research question urges the analyst to verify whether the members of these classes are semantically homogeneous and motivated by the alienability contrast. For example, Dalabon (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia) shows six possessive noun classes, which can be identified as more or less inalienable (Ponsonnet 2015). Beyond language description, it would be interesting to learn to what extent it is culture that determines which items are grammatically treated as inalienably possessed. This question bears on the theoretical status of alienability as a purely lexical property of nouns, a universal, or a culturally determined phenomenon.

- (b) What types of semantic relation can be coded by an adnominal possessive construction in the language under study?

This question tackles the definition of the notion of possession, taking as a point of departure a grammatical environment coding the notion ‘par excellence’, i.e., adnominal possession. As mentioned in Section 2, possession has often been defined in terms of ownership, kinship, and part/whole relationships, but in the special issue we aim to broaden the concept to cover any participation of an entity (the possessee) in the personal sphere of an individual (the possessor) (Creissels 2006: 143), with the proviso that the possessor need not be human. The question is best answered on the basis of close analysis of spontaneously produced speech that allows for careful tracking of the referents of the possessor and the possessee featuring in an adnominal possessive construction; the analyst should also take extralinguistic information into account.

- (c) If a language shows a split system in adnominal possession, is it necessarily an alienability split?

This question takes a closer look at differential coding for adnominal possession and investigates whether the pattern observed rates as an alienability split or not. Alienability splits are determined by the possessee, but there are also other possessive splits based on the possessor (possessee-governed vs. possessor-governed splits, cf. Haspelmath 2017). So, if a language shows a possessive split that is determined by the possessee, is it motivated by the conceptual distinction between alienable and inalienable possession (see Section 2)? Or is the split perhaps determined by the animacy of the possessor? And then, within the class of animate possessors, do animal possessors pattern differently from human ones?

In possessee-governed split systems, Bickel and Nichols (2013) also discuss an additional structure found in languages in which some nouns cannot bear any possessive inflection: “most of these languages have nouns conventionalized or grammatically specialized for use in apposition to the possessed noun and bearing the inflectional possessive marking which the head noun cannot bear”. These nouns are called “possessive” nouns. They can be either semantically generic, as *-wa* in (3) from Katukina (Queixalós 2016), or specialized, as *-iba* in (4) from Teko, a Tupi-Guarani language; languages of this family generally make use of a possessive noun for pets (Rose 2011: 164–167). If in a language there is a “small and closed set of nouns grammaticalized for such usage and their semantics amounts to classification of possessive relations”, these can be considered possessive classifiers<sup>6</sup> (Bickel and Nichols 2013). Example (5) shows the use of four possessive nouns in Paamese (Crowley 1982: 60), classifying in four different manners the possessive relationship involving the same possessee, a coconut, and the same possessor (first person singular).

- (3) *a-wa poako itowun*  
 3-GRN paddle DEM  
 ‘This is his paddle.’  
 (Katukina; Queixalós 2016: 149)
- (4) *o-ekar o-iba pureru*  
 3-search 3COREF-pet toad  
 ‘He looks for his toad (lit. his pet toad)’  
 (Teko; Rose 2011: 166)
- (5) a. *ani ma-k*  
 coconut POSS.POT-1SG.POSS  
 ‘my green coconut’ (speaker intends to drink the juice)
- b. *ani aa-k*  
 coconut POSS.ED-1SG.POSS  
 ‘my green coconut’ (speaker intends to eat the meat)
- c. *ani sa-k*  
 coconut POSS.LEG-1SG.POSS  
 ‘my green coconut’ (e.g., growing in speaker’s plantation)
- d. *ani ona-k*  
 coconut POSS.MAN-1SG.POSS

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<sup>6</sup> Possessive classifiers are often called “relational classifiers” in the literature on Oceanic languages (see Lichtenberk 1983). They have also been called “genitive classifiers” by Carlson and Payne (1989) and Grinevald (2000).

‘my green coconut’ (speaker will use it as an implement, e.g., to flatten something) (Paamese; Bickel and Nichols 2013, based on Crowley 1982: 60)

The examples above illustrate that possessive nouns and classifiers also need to be taken into account as coding strategies for adnominal possession. In investigating these strategies, the analyst is also encouraged to verify whether there is an asymmetry in the coding strategies and whether this is in line with the prediction formulated in Haspelmath’s (2017) universal (see Section 2).

- (d) Is the morphosyntactic encoding of the alienability contrast limited to adnominal possession or are there also differences in noun incorporation, binominal lexeme constructions, external possession, or other phenomena?

Question (d) seeks to inventory where the alienability contrast surfaces in the architecture of the grammar of a specific language at different levels of organization (see Section 2). If it is observed to turn up in different grammatical environments, does it do so in a consistent way? These questions push the analyst to investigate whether the different environments show a distinct behavior of the same semantic classes of nouns. If that were the case, this would mean that such a language would show several systems of noun categorization, rather than a two-class system as expected from the alienability contrast. That is, semantically inconsistent distribution of sets of nouns across possession-related phenomena in a single language considerably weakens the explanatory potential of the alienability contrast.

- (e) What can the etymology of possessive markers tell us about how possessive splits arise?

Heine (1997: 182–183) states that “‘inalienability’ refers to a number of different phenomena, and that trying to understand and explain its crosslinguistic meaning without reference to time is unlikely to yield meaningful results: which shape ‘inalienability’ exactly takes in a given language is to a large extent dependent on the pragmatics of its genesis and further evolution.” This is a strong incentive to look for the source construction(s) at the origin of an adnominal possessive construction, as it may explain not only its particular structural aspects but also the semantic type of possessees, possessors, or possessive relationships it associates with.

- (f) How can we compare the manifestations of the alienability contrast across languages? Is the distribution across the languages of the world biased by genealogical and areal factors?

As the alienability contrast potentially has a very wide scope in terms of linguistic domains (see Section 2), and in view of the vast amount of languages in the world, there is little hope that any study will be able to answer the questions in (f) exhaustively. More realistically, new advances could come from either crosslinguistic studies focusing on a particular linguistic domain (on a crosslinguistic worldwide or regional scale) or comprehensive studies on alienability phenomena in a particular language or language family.

## 4 Contribution of the issue: re-assessing the alienability contrast

### 4.1 Highlights of the issue

The contributions to the present special issue re-assess the explanatory power of the alienability contrast by pushing the boundaries of the types of possessive situations to be studied, specifically by widening the scope of relevant data in three respects. First, they pay attention to a wider variety of possessive relationships. As mentioned in Section 2, studies on possession traditionally focus on the canonical relations of ownership, part-whole and kinship relations, while possession as a grammatical concept encompasses many more relation types. The articles in the special issue will not limit themselves to these canonical possessive relationships, but also address, among others, associative possession, social relationships, and participants-in-event relations (e.g., the articles by Aralova and Pakendorf, Bril, Creissels, Rose, Van linden). Second, the articles take into account diverse types of possessors, while the literature is often restricted to human possessors only. This bias towards human possessors is apparent from most definitions of possession. Hollmann and Siewierska's (2007: 410) definition is a case in point: "Inalienable possession is generally seen as involving a fairly stable relation over which *possessors have little or no control*, alienable possession as comprising a variety of less permanent, more controlled relationships" (emphasis added). As inanimate possessors do not show variability in terms of more or less control, these have often been overlooked. In their description, the analysts will move beyond this anthropocentric bias in the literature on possession and extend their attention to non-human possessors (e.g., Rose, Rosés Labrada, Van linden). This is actually crucial for having a complete view of the expression of possession in individual languages. Rosés Labrada, for example, shows that in Piaroa inanimate possessors make use of a fully distinct possessive construction from the ones recruited by animate possessors. Third, we are not limiting ourselves to canonical possessors either, and include for example 'intentional parts'

(e.g., ‘soul’), cultural aspects of life (e.g., ‘job’), and event-denoting nouns as possible possessors (e.g., Bril, Creissels, Van linden).

The present special issue also differs from previous studies with a crosslinguistic approach by including three studies on South American languages, one from a major and well-studied family, the Arawakan family (Rose), one from a small family, Jodi-Sáliban (Rosés Labrada) and, third, an unclassified language, Harakmbut (Van linden). In doing so, it fosters further reflection on possessive classifiers, derivation among possessive noun classes (i.e., lexical classes of nouns depending on their behavior regarding possession), and the behavior of various noun classes in compounding and noun incorporation.

The articles in the issue discuss the manifestations of the alienability contrast at different levels: (i) the word level with the question of possessive noun classes (Aralova and Pakendorf, Bril, Chousou-Polydouri et al., Rose, Rosés Labrada, and Van linden), compounding (Van linden), and proprietive markers (Aralova and Pakendorf), (ii) the phrase level with the major question of adnominal possessive constructions (Aralova and Pakendorf, Bril, Chousou-Polydouri et al., Creissels, Rose, Rosés Labrada, and Van linden) but also that of non-possessive adnominal modifiers (Van linden), (iii) the clause level with questions regarding noun incorporation (Van linden), and (iv) the sentence level, with complex sentences featuring possessed modal nouns taking complement clauses (Bril). In fact, several contributions to the issue (Aralova and Pakendorf, Bril, Chousou-Polydouri et al., Rose, Rosés Labrada, and Van linden) build their analyses of the expression of possession on drawing a clear line between possessive noun classes and adnominal possessive constructions (i.e., the word and the phrase level).

One word-level phenomenon that will be addressed in several articles is that of noun classes; common nouns fall into distinct classes depending on how they behave morphosyntactically in adnominal possessive constructions and in unpossessed contexts. Some languages discussed in the present special issue show more than two possessive noun classes, including at least bound nouns, or obligatorily possessed nouns, and two sets of independent nouns, viz. those that are optionally possessed nouns, and those that cannot directly carry possessive personal markers (often called non-possessible or non-directly possessible nouns, see Footnote 4), as in the articles by Aralova and Pakendorf, Bril, Rose, and Rosés Labrada. The binary alienability contrast only sets the first class apart from the remaining ones. This first class typically includes nouns that are – in conceptual terms – inalienably possessed. Interestingly, this class often includes items that have inanimate possessors, like ‘(the tree’s) leaf’, ‘(the landscape’s) river’, and ‘(the path’s) half’. The remaining classes, in turn, typically comprise nouns that are alienably possessed or non-directly possessible, but the alienability contrast leaves the distinctions among them unexplained unless a gradable view of alienability is adopted. As the definition of alienability is highly abstract, semantic analyses in terms of the alienability contrast are difficult to

evaluate, which is further aggravated by the circumstance that variable treatment of individual items as alienable or inalienable is often dismissed as being culturally specific. Overall, the contributions thus tend to support Nichols' (1988: 574) view of alienability as a lexical property of nouns, but at the same time also show that possessive classes need not be limited to two in a single language.

At the phrase level, the articles of the issue illustrate two types of split in adnominal possession, governed by either the possessee or the possessor. Interestingly, in three languages a superficial look at the data suggests an analysis in terms of an alienability split, lexically constrained by the possessee, but the bigger picture points to a split conditioned by the animacy of the possessor (Creissels, Rosés Labrada, and Van linden). In one of these languages, the animacy of the possessor plays a role for one noun class only (Van linden), while in the other two, the possessor-determined split takes precedence over a possessee-determined split (Creissels, and Rosés Labrada).

Focusing on possession-determined coding splits, the articles largely confirm Haspelmath's (2017) universal presented in Section 2, although Cristofaro's article presents counterexamples to it. It should also be noted that languages that show more than two possessive noun classes somewhat spoil the picture. In some such languages, nouns that cannot be directly possessed can nevertheless enter some possessive constructions. These constructions then show more morphological marking than the basic possessive construction (by including for instance derivational marking, generic possessive nouns, possessive classifiers, or non-canonical possession marking). Being more marked morphologically than obligatorily possessed nouns, they thus verify again the alienability contrast when compared to the latter. But at the same time, the alienability contrast does not account for the distinction between the nouns that cannot be directly possessed and those that can (but do not have to), as they both include referents that are semantically possessible but for which possession is marked differently.

Interestingly, the word-level and phrase-level phenomena discussed in the previous paragraphs (possessive noun classes and adnominal possessive constructions) are usually "explained" on the basis of the alienability contrast. What is remarkable is that some languages investigated in the current issue, for example, Piaroa (Rosés Labrada), Zuanga-Yuanga (Bril), Negidal (Aralova and Pakendorf) and Mojeño Trinitario (Rose), require a distinction between the word level (noun classes) and the phrase level (adnominal possession) because there is no one-to-one correspondence between the categorization at these two levels. Consequently, the explanatory power of the alienability contrast is weakened by being used ad hoc for two phenomena that do not coincide. The articles by Aralova and Pakendorf, and Rose even go one step further and propose accounts in which alienability is, at best, epiphenomenal and in any case marginal. These

contributions propose alternative accounts to the traditional analysis of the expression of possession in specific language families, viz. in Arawakan and Tungusic respectively, that could be fruitfully extended to other languages of those families.

As language-specific work on the alienability contrast often deals with various levels of organization, as detailed above, crosslinguistic comparison of adnominal possessive constructions is not straightforward. For instance, one could choose to compare the semantic categories picked out by alienability contrasts, or rather focus on their morphosyntactic patterns. The matter of crosslinguistic comparison is addressed in the issue by Chousou-Polydouri et al. They use a specially designed database to look at alienability phenomena from multiple perspectives, considering noun possession classes and adnominal possessive constructions independently of each other. Their methodology also allows for the inclusion of languages with non-possessible noun classes and multiple non-default possession classes alongside languages with a more traditional inalienable/alienable noun class distinction.

Finally, the present issue approaches the questions of the functional motivation for alienability splits and their emergence. At the synchronic level, the article by Rose offers a quantitative survey of the distribution of Mojeño Trinitario nouns of different possessive noun classes as possessed or not in discourse, following the method used in Haspelmath (2017) for Biblical Hebrew, Ancient Greek, and English (three languages which are known not to show an alienability contrast). Even though there is a general association between possessive noun classes and frequency of use in possessive constructions, the results show that nouns cannot be successfully predicted to belong to one class or another depending on the relative frequency of their possessed occurrences in discourse. At the diachronic level, the articles by Creissels and Cristofaro investigate the semantic distinctions that may have played a role in the constructions at the origin of possessive coding splits, going against explanations in terms of iconicity (Haiman 1983) and predictability or frequency (Haspelmath 2017). All of these articles thus contribute to the special issue's conclusion that possessive splits are a multi-factorial phenomenon and that an all-encompassing explanation is, and will likely remain, elusive.

All the contributions to the present issue therefore concur in showing that the explanatory power of the alienability contrast is not sufficient to explain the complexity of the data. At best, it can be regarded as a heuristic tool for exploring the data. In other words, if used as the only explanatory principle, the alienability contrast could actually hamper an adequate description of the data, which are sometimes even better described without recourse to alienability at all. The data presented in the issue show that noun classes and all morphosyntactic phenomena often explained in terms of the alienability contrast cannot be reduced to it; other factors also come into play, such as specific semantic characteristics of the possessee

(whether it is edible, for example), of the possessor (animacy, for example), or of the possessive relationship (such as different kinship relations), as well as language contact and diachrony. As hinted at in several places above, we believe that some of the limits and problems of the alienability contrast stem from an ill-defined concept of possession. While many accounts focus on some ‘canonical’ possessive situations (very often the possession of a body part by a human possessor), the articles in the issue reveal that the reality of grammatical possession is much wider in the production of speakers of various languages.

## 4.2 Summaries of the contributions

We start the special issue with a crosslinguistic survey of differential adnominal possession by **Chousou-Polydouri, Inman, Huber and Bickel**. The article first carefully describes the methodology used for the survey, namely a questionnaire forming the structure of a detailed multi-level and relational database. This questionnaire investigates both the word and phrase levels, distinguishing possessive noun classes and adnominal possessive constructions. Each noun class is lexically defined by having a unique way of being possessed and not possessed (i.e., by its noun valency and valency-changing mechanisms). The semantic domains covered by each class in individual languages are also surveyed. The article then offers the first results of this approach applied to an areally and genetically diverse sample of 120 languages. Important results of the survey include that about half of the languages have several possession classes, and these are mostly semantically coherent. Classes of conceptually inalienable nouns are rather frequent (but only about a third consist of obligatorily possessed nouns), while classes of conceptually non-possessible nouns are rare. Furthermore, the findings on the semantics of nouns that make up different possessive noun classes, analyzed as semantic networks, confirm the existence of a universal semantic core for the classes of inalienable nouns (precisely kinship and body parts) and non-possessible ones (essentially animals). However, the existence of lexical possessive classes is not universal, as half of the languages have no possessive noun class distinction.

The next six contributions address the role of the alienability contrast in the analysis of individual languages. **Bril**’s article goes back to the roots of the alienability contrast, studying adnominal possession in a number of Oceanic languages in the footsteps of Lévy-Bruhl (1914). However, the data from Zuanga-Yuanga and other northern Kanak languages of New Caledonia prove too diversified to be meaningfully captured by the binary contrast, both at the word and phrase level. Brill shows that the possessive noun classes are not based on the alienability contrast. For



instance, nouns from a single semantic domain (e.g., kin terms and body parts) are spread across different noun classes. There are four main possessive noun classes (indirectly possessed free nouns, nouns possessed with classifiers, directly possessed bound nouns, and directly possessed free nouns) and a fifth small class of non-possessibles; these classes are determined by their members' access to both possession and non-possession constructions. In addition, there is a set of nouns denoting parts of wholes – not distinguished as a separate noun class by Brill – that behave differently: they have access to three distinct possessive constructions depending on the semantic type of part-whole relation expressed, from more inherent to more temporary or contingent. The article thus also addresses the question of what types of semantic relations can be coded by adnominal possessive constructions. In addition to the prototypical relationships, including different kinds of part-whole relations, the data point to participants-in-event relations for deverbal-noun possessives and to that of modal agents (Verstraete 2005: 1402) for modal-noun possessives like 'duty' or 'will'.

The issue then crosses the Pacific, presenting three contributions on South American languages, which have often been neglected in earlier work on alienability. First, **Rosés Labrada** analyzes the mismatch between possessive noun classes and adnominal possessive constructions in Piaroa (Jodí-Sáliban, Venezuela and Colombia). In this language, there is a possessor-determined split: only animate possessors are indexed on the possessee via affixation; inanimate possessors occur in a juxtaposition construction with their possessee. In constructions with animate possessors, two different possessee-determined splits – and therefore, Rosés Labrada argues, four possessive classes – can be identified in Piaroa. One split relies on a contrast between obligatorily-possessed nouns (kinship and body-part terms) and optionally-possessed ones (other semantic categories), and thus can be said to be motivated by the alienability contrast. The other split is dependent on the type of possessive construction, namely, direct versus indirect possession, a given possessee noun can occur in. All obligatorily-possessed ("inalienable") nouns and some optionally-possessed ("alienable") nouns occur in the direct construction. Other alienable nouns, such as those denoting food and drinks, by contrast, occur in the indirect construction, which features possessive (or genitive) classifiers. Importantly, the alienability contrast cannot account for the distribution of possessee across the different Piaroa possessive constructions: alienability yields two classes that only partially overlap with the two classes that stem from the contrast between direct and indirect possession. Rosés Labrada therefore concludes that two concurrent systems of possessive classification must be posited to account for the data.

The second contribution on South American languages, by **Rose**, focuses on Mojeño Trinitario (Bolivia) but has implications for the whole Arawakan family. While existing accounts propose that the alienability contrast is at work in Arawakan

languages at the word level, distinguishing between alienable and inalienable noun classes, and at the phrase level, through the competition between two adnominal possessive constructions, Rose breaks radically from this tradition, by bringing also a third class of non-(directly) possessible nouns into the picture and by attributing a central role to derivation among noun classes. Applying her account to the whole family would leave most Arawakan languages without a class of optionally possessed (or “alienable”) nouns, as these would be stems derived from non-directly possessible noun roots. With respect to the class of obligatorily prefixed (or “inalienable”) nouns in Mojeño Trinitario, Rose finds that it is a large class, semantically more heterogeneous than the class of optionally prefixed (or “alienable”) nouns and that it is receptive to loans, characteristics that go against Nichols’ (1988) generalizations (see Section 2). More generally, Rose identifies as the main theoretical problem behind investigating the explanatory power of the alienability contrast that it is unclear to which levels of linguistic organization it should apply a priori. At any level considered, its explanatory potential in Mojeño Trinitario – and by extension Arawakan languages – is weak.

The last South American language reported on is Harakmbut (unclassified; Peru). **Van linden** offers a detailed description of two noun classes (independent and bound) and two adnominal possessive constructions (one-word vs. two-word). At the word level, the distinction between bound and independent (or free) nouns is rather well accounted for by the alienability contrast, with most bound nouns being semantically inalienably possessed and independent nouns being construed as alienable. Interestingly, this article also brings into the discussion the behavior of deverbal nouns, which do not neatly behave as either bound or independent nouns. At the phrase level, while at first sight, the distinction between the two adnominal possessive constructions could also look like a perfect illustration of the binary contrast of alienability, the intricate interplay between the noun classes and the possessive constructions leads to a much more complex picture of possession in Harakmbut. Furthermore, the distribution of the two noun classes also differs in contexts other than adnominal possession, such as in noun-noun compounding at the word level, with interrogative, demonstrative, or quantifying modifiers at the phrase level, and noun incorporation at the clause level. The alienability contrast does not satisfactorily explain the distinct morphosyntactic behavior of the two noun classes, neither in adnominal possession nor in the other morphosyntactic contexts.

The next article moves to Eurasia, and is also fieldwork-based; **Aralova and Pakendorf** draw on a large corpus of oral speech of Upper Negidal (Tungusic, Far East of the Russian Federation). Their contribution goes against traditional accounts of differential possession marking in Tungusic, according to which the suffix *-ŋ(V)* marks alienable possession, e.g., on body parts belonging to a non-inherent

possessor. Distinguishing three possessive classes, they argue instead that the suffix  $-\eta(V)$  signals non-canonical possession. It is found on members of two classes only, viz. on obligatorily possessed body-part terms (yielding an “alienable” interpretation), and on non-possessible items. The latter class is argued to not only include nouns denoting entities like humans, wild animals, plants and substances, but also non-nominal items (e.g., numerals, demonstratives, adjectives and participles). Importantly, what all of these share is that they require the suffix  $-\eta(V)$  to accept possessive suffixes in adnominal possession or the proprietive suffix in predicative possession. The types of semantic relation coded by adnominal possessive constructions, with or without the suffix  $-\eta(V)$ , include associative possession, which establishes a relation of salience between two discourse participants. A semantic relation found with  $-\eta(V)$ -marked constructions only is that of particularization, which delimits a mass quantity (e.g., ‘your water’ for ‘the water you need in the house for washing and drinking’). Aralova and Pakendorf also extend their analysis to a cognate suffix found only on possessors and build the case that both of them (when formally distinct in individual languages) flag non-canonical possession across the Tungusic family. The alienability account in prior literature, by contrast, would leave the majority of occurrences of  $-\eta(V)$  unexplained.

A similar conclusion is arrived at for Mandinka (Mande, Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea Bissau) in **Creissels’** article, which represents the African macro-area in the present issue. The language shows no noun classes but has a coding split in adnominal possession. While the differential possessive marking for body parts, kin terms and artifacts may look as if conditioned by alienability, extending the scope to non-prototypical possessive relations (privileged relationships of any kind) bears out that the split for ordinary nouns is governed by animacy. That is, inanimate possessors by default require the direct possessive construction (juxtaposition), whereas animate possessors require the indirect possessive construction (with linker), except for body parts or (a set of) kin terms. These exceptions are accounted for by the etymology of the possessive marker *lá*, according to which the indirect construction originally meant ‘the Y located near X’, and for kin terms also by specific cultural practices. Extending the scope to non-prototypical possessives, viz. deverbal nouns, the article further argues against an alienability split: the split between the two possessive constructions is determined by the syntactic role of the possessor in the corresponding clause (notional objects use the direct construction, while notional subjects use the indirect one). All in all, the data show that the Mandinka coding split is possessor-governed and that semantic features such as animacy and control may play an important role in the genesis of possessive splits.

The issue concludes with **Cristofaro’s** article, which concentrates on the alienability contrast as an explanandum itself and discusses data on the genesis of possessive splits. By investigating the diachronic development of overt markers

involved in adnominal possession splits in a great variety of languages, this contribution shows that the usual explanation of these splits by the alienability contrast is inconsistent with these diachronic processes. The origin of these markers goes back to some use in constructions for which the alienability contrast was irrelevant, such as localization, for example, as is the case for Mandinka (Creissels, the present issue). Moreover, the synchronic distribution of these markers is best explained by the semantic properties of their source constructions, rather than by some general functional explanation that would apply a posteriori to the result of unrelated historical developments. Cristofaro's conclusions thus seriously challenge the idea that possessive splits reflect general preferences for the use of overt marking for alienable possession.

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## Abbreviations

1	first person
ACC	accusative
COREF	coreferential
DEM	demonstrative
ED	edible
GEN	genitive
GRN	generic relational noun
LEG	legally constituted ownership

MAN	manipulable
POSS	possessive marker
POT	potable
SG	singular

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