

Dene [Athabaskan] Possessive Compounds and the Architecture of the Grammar

Dene [Athabaskan] languages make rich use of compounding in word formation (see, for example, Rice 1985, 1989, 1998, Hargus 2007, and dictionaries of the languages). We examine compounds in two Dene languages of northern Canada to conclude that the class of possessive compounds accesses the syntactic category *nP*, and that their formation involves the syntactic operation Merge.

There are two types of compounds in Tłı̄chǫ [Dogrib] and Dēne Sų́líné [Chipewyan]. One type involves the simple concatenation of roots or words; the other type involves possessive morphology. A minimal pair from Tłı̄chǫ is given in (1). (Heads are final and PNS stands for 'possessed noun suffix'.) Other examples from Tłı̄chǫ and Dēne Sų́líné are shown in (2) and (3).

| | <i>Non-possessive compounds</i> | <i>Possessive compounds</i> |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| (1) <i>Tłı̄chǫ</i> | tłehtł'ih 'gas-line' <i>oil.rop</i> e | tłehtł'ii 'starter cord on motor' <i>oil.rop</i> e.PNS |
| (2) <i>Tłı̄chǫ</i> | łédzèh 'clay' <i>flour.gum</i> | eezhiik'oò 'thunder clouds' <i>thunder.cloud</i> .PNS |
| (3) <i>Dēne Sų́líné</i> | chąʔih 'raincoat' <i>rain.coat</i> | jéth t'ulé 'fish line' <i>hook.rop</i> e.PNS |
| | dzéhke 'rubber shoes' <i>gum.shoe</i> | layúé 'tools' <i>hand.equipment</i> .PNS |

Compare the "possessed" compound heads in (1)-(3) with the possessed nouns in (4). The morphological properties of the head nouns in possession and in possessive compounds are identical.

| | <i>Bare nouns</i> | <i>Possessed nouns</i> |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| (4) <i>Tłı̄chǫ</i> | tł'ih 'rope' | wetł'ii 'his/her rope' |
| | k'oh 'cloud' | wek'oò 'his/her cloud' |
| <i>Dēne Sų́líné</i> | tł'uli 'rope' | betł'ulé 'his/her rope' |
| | yú 'equipment' | beyúé 'his/her equipment' |

Building on proposals that possessors are merged in [Spec, *nP*] (cf. Alexiadou et al. 2007), we argue that regular possessors as well as nonheads of possessive compounds are merged there, and that *n* is realized as the PNS in Tłı̄chǫ and Dēne Sų́líné.

English too has possessive compounds, for example *baby's breath*, *lady's-slipper*, *menswear*, and *houndstooth*. The facts in Tłı̄chǫ and Dēne Sų́líné go beyond what is found in English because the whole range of syntactic options within *nP* may appear in lexicalized forms. In particular, whole clauses may occupy [Spec, *nP*], as in the examples below from Tłı̄chǫ (5) and Dēne Sų́líné (6). Such examples are not rare in the dictionaries of these two languages.

- (5) [wet'à gokwighà k'enaʔetsee] datłèè 'shampoo'(lit. 'soap with which one's hair is washed')
3.with UH.hair be_washed.NOM soap.PNS (DCSB 1996)
- (6) [tsádhéth kanı̄dhēni] dēné 'trapper' (lit. 'fur-seeking person') (E&E 1998)
beaver.fur seek.NOM person.PNS

Just as possessive compounds and possessive phrases are exactly alike in form, the lexical type exemplified in (5)-(6) is exactly parallel to productively formed syntactic formations in which pre-nominal clauses express characteristic properties of the head noun, as in Tłı̄chǫ (7). (Note the use of the deictic second person plural subject inflection in this example, unexpected in lexicalizations.)

- (7) [eghàlaahdaa] kòḡ 'the places where you (pl) work; your (pl) work-places'
2pS.work.NOM building.PNS

This suggests that it is not possible to assign the possessive construction to either lexicon or syntax. We find it sufficient to say that certain structural configurations are available to nominal expressions; the expression is syntactic unless it becomes "lexicalized" through entrenchment and conventionalization. Morphology, then, is not the domain of "lexical" word formations such as compounding; rather, it realizes the specific form of each possessive construction, particularly the shape of the host noun and the PNS.

References

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