

External possession in Kipsigis involves movement

Maria Kouneli*

Abstract

In this paper, I provide an analysis of external possession constructions in Kipsigis (Nilotic; Kenya), and I argue that possessor raising best captures the properties of the phenomenon in the language. Evidence for movement comes from an interesting interaction between possessor raising and topicalization. My analysis highlights that well-known constraints on remnant movement can be used as diagnostics for movement in external possession constructions in various languages.

1. Introduction

Possession in Kipsigis (Southern Nilotic; Kenya) is usually expressed DP-internally: the possessum is marked with the clitic *-a:p* and it precedes the possessor, as shown in (1).¹

- (1) Kò:-á-mwét [DP íjgòràìk-à:p Tʃè:bê:t].
PST.REC-1SG-wash clothes-POSS Cheebeat
'I washed Cheebeat's clothes.'

The language, however, also possesses an external possession construction, which is illustrated in (2). In this case, the possessum is unmarked, and the

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¹Glosses follow the Leipzig glossing rules, with the addition of: CL2 = (conjugation) class 2, IMP = impersonal, PART = participant, PST.CURR = current past, PST.DIST = distant past, PST.REC = recent past.

possessor is an argument of the verb, which is marked with the applicative suffix *-tʃi*.²

- (2) Kòr-á-mwé(t)-tʃi Tʃè:bê:t íngòràik.
 PST.REC-1SG-wash-APPL Cheebeet clothes
 ‘I washed Cheebeet’s clothes.’ (OR ‘I washed clothes for Cheebeet.’)

External possession constructions of this type are quite common cross-linguistically, and they have received significant attention in the theoretical literature because they exhibit a(n at least apparent) mismatch between syntax and semantics: a noun phrase behaves semantically as a possessor of another noun, but syntactically as an argument of the verb.³ There are two broad families of approaches to the phenomenon (see Deal 2017 for an overview):

- (3) *Approaches to external possession*
- a. Movement: The possessor is base-generated inside the DP, where it receives its thematic role. It then moves to a position within the vP; this position could be a thematic position (e.g., Lee-Schoenfeld 2006) or a position that is only associated with case/licensing (e.g., Landau 1999, Deal 2013).
 - b. Base generation: The possessor is base-generated as an argument of the verb. The possessor reading arises either via binding of an operator within the DP (e.g., Borer & Grodzinsky 1986) or via the semantics of a (low) applicative head used to introduce this verbal argument (e.g., Pykkänen 2008, Nie 2019).

In this paper, I analyze external possession constructions as in (2) in Kipsigis, and I argue that a movement-based analysis along the lines of (3a) best captures the properties of the phenomenon in the language. The main argument for movement comes from the following puzzle: while topicalization of the possessor in examples like (2) is possible, topicalization of the possessum is

²This applicative suffix can also be used to introduce benefactive (and other) applied arguments, which is why the noun *Tʃè:bê:t* can be interpreted either as a possessor or as a beneficiary in (2). See Section 2 for more details.

³In Africa, the phenomenon has mostly been studied for Bantu languages (e.g., Keach & Rochemont 1994 on Swahili, Henderson 2014 on Chimwiini, Halpert 2021, Zeller 2021 on Zulu), but even within Bantu it remains relatively understudied (Van de Velde 2020). There is barely any work on external possession in Nilotic languages (e.g., Payne 1997 on Maasai, Andersen 2019b on Jumjum, Andersen 2019a on Dinka).

not. This is quite surprising, since topicalization of either argument is possible in all other ditransitive constructions in the language. For example, in (4) below, topicalization of either DP is possible under the beneficiary reading of *Tfè:bê:t*, but not under the possessor reading.

- (4) a. **Tfè:bê:t**₁ kó kò:-á-mwé(t)-tjí _____₁ ŋgɔraik.
 Cheebeet TOP PST.REC-1SG-wash-APPL clothes
 ‘Cheebeet, I washed her clothes/the clothes for her.’
- b. **ŋgɔrar-tfu**₁ kó kò:-á-mwé(t)-tjí Tfè:bê:t _____₁.
 clothes-DEM.PL TOP PST.REC-1SG-wash-APPL Ch.
 ‘These clothes, I washed them for Cheebeet.’
 #‘These clothes of Cheebeet, I washed them.’

I argue that this asymmetry between possessors and other types of applied arguments is due to the fact that the former, but not the latter, end up in their surface position via movement. Under such an analysis, movement of the possessum over the possessor in examples like (4b) should obey well-known constraints on remnant movement.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, I provide some relevant background on Kipsigis syntax, especially the syntax of applicatives and movement types, which are important in the analysis of external possession constructions; in Section 3, I discuss the basic properties of external possession in the language and I present my analysis; in Section 4, I conclude and discuss avenues for further research.

2. Background on Kipsigis

Kipsigis is the major variety of Kalenjin, a dialect cluster of the Southern Nilotic branch of Nilo-Saharan. It is spoken by approximately 2 million speakers in Kenya (Eberhard et al. 2020). Unless otherwise indicated, data in this paper come from fieldwork with four speakers in Kenya. The language is pro-drop and it has the typologically rare marked nominative case system; case is generally expressed tonally (Toweett 1979, Kouneli & Nie 2021).

2.1. Kipsigis applicatives

Kipsigis has two applicative morphemes: *-tʃi*, primarily used for recipients, beneficiaries, and (directional) location, and *-ɛ:n*, primarily used for instru-

ments and (static) location. Examples of the former are given in (5) and of the latter in (6).

- (5) a. Kà-∅-í-gò:-[tʃí] Tʃé:bê:t Kíbê:t kítábó:t.
 PST.CURR-3-CL2-give-APPL Cheebeet.NOM Kibeet book
 ‘Cheebeet gave Kibeet a book.’
- b. Kò:-á-mwé(t)-[tʃí] Tʃè:bê:t íngòràik.
 PST.REC-1SG-wash-APPL Cheebeet clothes
 ‘I washed the clothes for/on behalf of Cheebeet.’
- c. Kà-α-twà:l-[tʃí] kàrí:t.
 PST.CURR-1SG-jump-APPL car
 ‘I jumped into the car.’
- (6) a. Kà-∅-tém-[é:n] Kíbê:t ímbàr mógó:mbé:t.
 PST.CURR-3-dig-INSTR Kibeet.NOM farm hoe
 ‘Kibeet dug the farm with a hoe.’
- b. ∅-tjén-[é:n] ajnɛ:t.
 3-sing-INSTR.IPFV river
 ‘He/she is singing at the river/about the river.’

2.2. Movement in Kipsigis

The pragmatically neutral word order is VSO, but various post-verbal orders are allowed depending on information structure (Bossi & Diercks 2019). Additionally, the language has a pre-verbal position marked by the particle *ko*. Thus, in a sentence with a subject and an object, all orders in (7) are possible.

- (7) a. Kò:-∅-ké:r Tʃé:bê:t là:kwé:t.
 PST.REC-3-see Cheebeet.NOM child
- b. Kò:-∅-ké:r là:kwé:t Tʃé:bê:t.
 PST.REC-3-see child Cheebeet.NOM
- c. Tʃé:bê:t kó kò:-∅-ké:r là:kwé:t.
 Cheebeet TOP PST.REC-3-see child
- d. Là:kwé:t kó kò:-∅-ké:r Tʃé:bê:t.
 child TOP PST.REC-3-see Cheebeet.NOM
 ‘Cheebeet saw the child.’

In Driemel & Kouneli (2022), we show that the pre-verbal position in examples

like (7c)–(7d) can only be occupied by topicalized elements, with *ko* being a dedicated topic marker. The position is subject to island effects, as shown in (8)–(9).⁴

(8) *Complex NP island* (Driemel & Kouneli 2022: p.14)

***Kibè:t**_i [ko] kɑ-Ø-soman Tʃébé:t [kitàbó:t
 Kibeet TOP PST.CURR-3-read Cheebeet.NOM book
 ne ki:Ø-sir-e **iné:ndèt**_i/__ i].
 REL.SG PST.DIST-3-write-IPFV 3SG.NOM
 Intended: ‘Kibeet, Cheebeet read the book that he wrote.’

(9) *Adjunct island* (Driemel & Kouneli 2022: p.14)

***Kibè:t**_i [ko] ka-kɪ-sɪ:ndan-ɛ:tʃ [ɑmun
 Kibeet TOP PST.CURR-1PL-win-1PL(IMP) because
 mɑ-Ø-ɲo: __ i].
 NEG-3-come
 Intended: ‘Kibeet, they beat us (at the race) because he didn’t come.’

We can thus assume that topicalization involves movement to SpecCP, with *ko* spelling out the C head (see also Bossi 2023 for the same conclusion). Similar to the same position in the related language Dinka (van Urk 2015), topicalization in Kipsigis shows mixed *A* – \bar{A} properties.⁵

Starting with the \bar{A} properties, movement to the *ko*-position is driven by an information structure feature (=topic) and it can be long-distance, as shown in (10). Furthermore, there is obligatory reconstruction for Principle C (Bossi 2023), illustrated in (11).

(10) **Kibè:t**_i kó kɪ:á-mwá [à:lé kɪ:Ø-tʃó:r __ i
 Kibeet TOP PST.DIST-1SG-say 1SG-LE PST.DIST-3-steal
 ràbí:ník].
 money
 ‘Kibeet, I said that he stole the money.’

⁴See also Bossi (2023), as well as Creider & Creider (1989) for the related dialect Nandi.

⁵Relativization seems to behave in the same way, but I have not been able to run all of the diagnostics yet.

- (11) Linus is looking through a big box of pictures. There's a picture of Chebet, one of Kiplangat, one of Lydia, even one of himself. Some of the pictures were stuck together, though, so Linus saw some of them, but didn't see others. I'm explaining which pictures he saw and which pictures he didn't see. I say:
- a. Pichaart-aap Cheebet ko koo-Ø-keer.
 picture-of C. TOP PST2-3-see
 'As the the picture of Chebet, he saw it.'
- b. Lakini pichaart-aap Linasj ko ma-Ø-_{i/*j}-keer.
 but picture-of L. TOP NEG-3-see
 'But as for the picture of Linus_j, he_{i/*j} didn't see it.'
 (Bossi 2023: p.65)

However, other properties of topicalization point towards A-movement. First, the *ko*-position is restricted to nominals. Examples (12) and (13) show that fronting of adverbs and PPs respectively is ungrammatical.⁶

- (12) *Mù:tjà kó Ø-kèt-é Kíbê:t.
 slowly TOP 3-drive-IPFV Kibeet.NOM
 'Slowly, Kibeet drives.' (Driemel & Kouneli 2022: p.6)
- (13) *Ak Kiplàngàt kó ka-Ø-tʃap-e Kíbê:t
 with Kiplangat TOP PST.CURR-3-make-IPFV Kibeet.NOM
 amitwa:gik.
 food
 'With Kiplangat, Kibeet made food.' (Driemel & Kouneli 2022: p.6)

Second, there is a case alternation for subject DPs: they are inflected for marked nominative in post-verbal positions (14a), but are unmarked for case in the pre-verbal position (14b).⁷

- (14) a. Ø-ám-è Kíbê:t kímpé:t.
 3-eat-IPFV Kibeet.NOM ugali
 'Kibeet is eating ugali.'

⁶PPs headed by *een* can sometimes appear in this position. See discussion in Driemel & Kouneli (2022) and Bossi (2023).

⁷This is a robust property in Nilo-Saharan languages with this case system (König 2006, 2008, van Urk 2015).

- b. **Kibê:t** kó Ø-ám-è kímpé:t.
 Kibeet TOP 3-eat-IPFV ugali
 ‘Kibeet is eating ugali.’

Third, there is no reconstruction for quantifier-variable binding, illustrated in (15).

- (15) a. kɔ:-Ø-sús ηð:ktà age-tùγóli **tʃi:tá-nì:nj/i**.
 PST.REC-3-bite dog.NOM any-all.NOM person-his.SG
 ‘Every dog bit its owner.’
 b. **tʃi:tá-nì:nj/*i** ko kɔ:-Ø-sús ηð:ktà age-tùγóli
 person-his.SG TOP PST.REC-3-bite dog.NOM any-all.NOM
 —.

‘Its owner, every dog bit.’

It is clear that the *ko*-position has many similarities to the pre-verbal position in Dinka, a related Nilotic language, as described by van Urk (2015). The Dinka position exhibits similar mixed properties: movement to this position is long-distance and driven by information structure features, but it also exhibits A properties such as a restriction to nominals and the same case alternation displayed by subjects in Kipsigis.⁸ I therefore analyze topicalization in Kipsigis along the lines of van Urk’s (2015) analysis of Dinka. More specifically, I assume that C probes for two features: a topic feature [top] and a nominal feature [δ] responsible for the A properties that we observe.⁹ For a noun phrase to satisfy this probe, it must be able to check both features. Thus, for a phrase to move to SpecCP, it must be specified for *both* [top] and [δ].

With this background on Kipsigis syntax in place, I present in the next section the main properties of external possession in the language, along with my analysis.

⁸There are also some differences between Kipsigis and Dinka, the analysis of which has to be left as a topic for further research. These are the following: in Dinka, but not in Kipsigis, there is agreement between the verb and the fronted DP; in Dinka movement to SpecCP is obligatory and compatible with either topics or foci, while in Kipsigis it is optional and restricted to topics; there is no reconstruction for Principle C in Dinka.

⁹I leave the exact nature of this feature open for the time being. For van Urk (2015), this is a [ϕ] feature, but this choice is (at least partly) motivated by the fact that the verb agrees with the noun phrase in SpecCP in Dinka. This is not the case in Kipsigis.

3. External possession in Kipsigis

In the Kipsigis external possession construction, the presence of the applicative morpheme *-tʃi* on the verb is obligatory, as shown in (16).¹⁰

- (16) Kà-∅-méj-*(tʃí) Tʃè:bê:t ɲò:ktà.
 PST.REC-3-die-APPL Cheebeat dog.NOM
 ‘Cheebeat’s dog died.’

Furthermore, there is a restriction to internal arguments.¹¹ So far, we have seen examples with possessors associated with the direct object of a transitive verb (2) and the sole argument of an unaccusative (16). A DP added to an unergative, however, cannot be interpreted as a possessor of the agent: in (17), *Tʃè:bê:t* can only be interpreted as a beneficiary.

- (17) ∅-tʃén-tʃí:n Tʃè:bê:t là:kwè:t.
 3-sing-APPL.IPFV Cheebeat child.NOM
 ‘The child is singing for/on behalf of Cheebeat.’
 # ‘Cheebeat’s child is singing.’

An additional property of the construction in Kipsigis (which is common cross-linguistically) is that the possessor has to be ‘affected’. For example, in all of the above examples, speakers reject the possessor reading in a context where *Tʃè:bê:t* is known to be dead. Moreover, possessor readings are impossible with stative verbs (18), another diagnostic for affectedness (e.g., Tyler 2021).

- (18) α:ɲgen-tʃim-i Tʃè:bê:t là:kwé:t.
 1SG-know-APPL.IPFV-PART Cheebeat child
 # ‘I know Cheebeat’s child.’

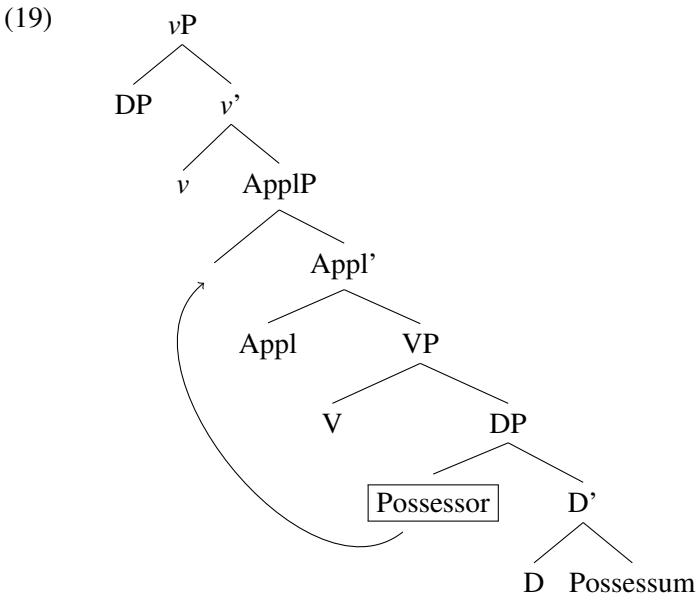
Any analysis of the phenomenon will need to capture (at least) the following properties: the obligatory presence of the applicative morpheme, the restriction to internal arguments, and the fact that the possessor has an additional thematic role (associated with affectedness). Assuming a theory in which applied arguments are introduced by applicative heads, all of those properties can be

¹⁰This is different from the situation in many Bantu languages, where there is a tendency for the applicative morpheme to be absent in these constructions (Van de Velde 2020).

¹¹In this respect, Kipsigis is similar to Hebrew, where external possession has been used as an unaccusativity diagnostic (Borer & Grodzinsky 1986 and subsequent work).

explained if the possessor DP occupies the specifier position of an applicative head. Let's look at the details.

I assume that the possessor DP is base-generated in the specifier position of the DP headed by the possessum; this is where it receives its possessor thematic role. I further assume that the possessor is unable to receive case in this position (e.g., Landau 1999), and it therefore needs to move to a position within *v*P to receive case.¹² I argue that the position that the possessor DP moves to is the specifier of a (high) applicative head, where it is assigned case and an additional thematic role associated with affectedness. The tree in (19) illustrates the derivation.



This derivation accounts for the properties of the external possession construction in Kipsigis. The presence of the applicative head implies the presence of

¹²As a reminder, the language also has a DP-internal possession construction, which was illustrated in (1). In this case, the possessum is followed by a possessive clitic, which is absent in the external possession construction. I assume that this clitic spells out a Poss head within the DP, with the possessor being generated (and assigned case) in SpecPossP. Thus the difference between the DP-internal and DP-external constructions lies in the presence vs. absence of the Poss projection and the position in which the possessor is first merged. The possessor is licensed within the DP in the presence of Poss, but has to move outside of the DP in its absence.

applicative morphology and the assignment of an additional thematic role to the possessor DP. Furthermore, since the applicative head is below the external argument-introducing head, we have an explanation for the restriction of the external possession construction to internal arguments: if the DP in which the possessor is base-generated is merged in SpecvP, there is no higher projection that it can move to to get case.¹³

Given the discussion so far, it would seem that most of the work in accounting for the properties of the construction is done by the presence of an applicative head, and not necessarily the movement of the possessor. Apart from the fact that a movement analysis gives a straightforward explanation for the relationship between the possessor and the possessum, it can also account for the puzzle first introduced in (4), repeated here as (20): while the possessor can move to the topic position in the left periphery (discussed in Section 2.2), the possessum cannot.

- (20) a. **Tʃè:bê:t₁** kó kò:-á-mwé(t)-tʃí _____₁ ɲgɔraɪk.
 Cheebeet TOP PST.REC-1SG-wash-APPL clothes
 ‘Cheebeet, I washed her clothes/the clothes for her.’
- b. **ɲgɔraɪ-tʃu₁** kó kò:-á-mwé(t)-tʃí Tʃè:bê:t _____₁
 clothes-DEM.PL TOP PST.REC-1SG-wash-APPL Ch.
 ‘These clothes, I washed them for Cheebeet.’
 # ‘These clothes of Cheebeet, I washed them.’

What is striking about this asymmetry is that it only arises in external possession constructions. For all other ditransitive constructions in the language, either the direct object (=DO) or the indirect object (=IO) can move to the topic position. Topicalization is symmetric irrespective of the thematic role of the IO or the form of the applicative morpheme on the verb. Various examples of symmetry are given in (21)–(23) below.¹⁴

¹³This means that only DP-internal possession (where the possessor can be licensed within the DP) is possible for external arguments, which is indeed what we observe in the data.

¹⁴In these examples, the DO often has a demonstrative when in topic position. The presence of a demonstrative ensures a definiteness interpretation, which makes topicalization easier.

(21) *IO = Recipient*

- a. **Tfè:bê:t₁** kó kà-∅-í-gó:-tjí Kíbê:t
 Cheebeet TOP PST.CURR-3-CL2-give-APPL Kibeet.NOM
 ___₁ kítábú:t.
 book
 ‘Cheebeet, Kibeet gave her a book.’
- b. **Kítábù:-nì₁** kó kà-∅-í-gó:-tjí Kíbê:t
 book-DEM TOP PST.CURR-3-CL2-give-APPL Kibeet.NOM
 Tfè:bê:t ___₁.
 Cheebeet
 ‘This book, Kibeet gave to Cheebeet.’

(22) *IO = Instrument*

- a. **Kíla:mr:-nì₁** kó kà-∅-sír-é:n Kíbê:t
 pen-DEM TOP PST.CURR-3-write-INSTR Kibeet.NOM
 ___₁ párwé:t.
 letter
 ‘This pen, Kibeet wrote the letter with it.’
- b. **Párwà:-nì₁** kó kà-∅-sír-é:n Kíbê:t
 letter-DEM TOP PST.CURR-3-write-INSTR Kibeet.NOM
 kílá:mít ___₁.
 pen
 ‘This letter, Kibeet wrote it with a pen.’

(23) *IO = Location*

- a. **ajna:-nì₁** kó kà-∅-wí:r-tjí Tfé:bê:t ___₁
 river-DEM TOP PST.CURR-3-throw-APPL Cheebeet.NOM
 kòjtá.
 stone
 ‘This river, Cheebeet threw a stone into it.’
- b. **Kò-₁** kó kà-∅-wí:r-tjí Tfé:bê:t
 stone-DEM TOP PST.CURR-3-throw-APPL Cheebeet.NOM
 ajne:t ___₁.
 river
 ‘This stone, Cheebeet threw into the river.’

Given the analysis provided for topicalization in Section 2.2, symmetry is to be expected: for a DP to move to SpecCP, it must carry both a [top] and

[δ] feature. This also means that only DPs with both features can act as interveners. Therefore, the DO can always move past the IO if the former, but not the latter, carries a [top] feature. This makes the ungrammaticality of possessum topicalization even more surprising. We therefore need to look for differences between external possession constructions and other ditransitives in the language. I argue that the relevant difference is the following: the possessor in external possession constructions differs from other IOs in not being base-generated in SpecAppIP.

According to the analysis in (19), the possessor moves to SpecAppIP for case-related reasons. This movement step creates a remnant in the DO position: the DP that contains the possessum. Thus, topicalization of the possessum over the possessor should obey well-known constraints on remnant movement (Müller 1996, 1998, 2011, Abels 2007 a.o.). The relevant constraint for the configuration at hand is the following:

- (24) *The Müller-Takano Generalization* (Müller 1993, 1996, Takano 1994)
 After phrase XP has moved from node α to node ω , a remnant phrase YP that dominates α but not ω cannot move to any node c-commanding ω if movement of XP and movement of YP are of the same type.

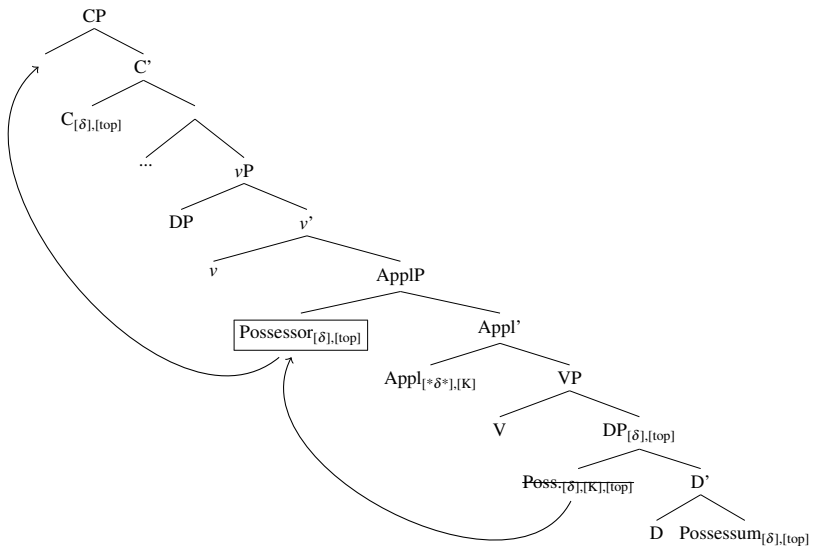
This constraint rules out movement of the remnant DP containing the possessum over the possessor DP if movement is of the same type (usually this translates into the movement being driven by the same feature). Recall that topicalization in Kipsigis displays A properties; possessor raising is also an example of A movement. Thus, whatever feature(s) these two movement types have in common must be responsible for the violation of the Müller-Takano generalization, and thus the ungrammaticality of possessum topicalization in external possession constructions.

There have been various proposals on how to derive the constraint in (24) (e.g., Müller 1998, 2011; see Zompì 2023 for a recent overview of previous proposals). I will here illustrate how a minimality-based account would derive the Kipsigis pattern, but further research is necessary to determine whether this is the best approach to the Müller-Takano generalization more generally.

An assumption that will be important in the case of Kipsigis is that if a DP carries a [top] feature (or any other type of information structure-related feature), this will percolate to all DPs contained within this DP. Thus, in (25),

when the DP where the possessor and possessum are base-generated has a [top] feature, then the possessor and possessum DPs will also carry this feature. The first head that is merged above the VP is Appl. I assume that this head has the ability to assign case to a case-less DP, which I will model here as an abstract feature [K].¹⁵ It also has a feature [δ], the feature responsible for A-properties in Kipsigis. The possessor moves to SpecApplP, since it carries both of these features.¹⁶ Later in the derivation, C is merged. It carries a [δ] and a [top] feature. Both the possessor and the possessum (=the remnant DP) can satisfy this probe and move to SpecCP. However, the possessor will always be closer to C than the possessum, blocking movement of the latter. We thus correctly predict that the possessum can never be topicalized in the presence of possessor raising.

(25)



¹⁵The details of case assignment do not matter - any mechanism that will attract a caseless DP to SpecApplP will do. This does mean, however, that the DO must have case assigned before Appl is merged (otherwise, it would be attracted to SpecApplP before Appl can probe for the possessor).

¹⁶It is irrelevant that it also has a [top] feature. What matters is that the features on the probe can all be checked.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that external possession in Kipsigis is best analyzed in terms of possessor raising. Kipsigis is thus added to a list of languages in which movement is involved in external possession constructions (see Deal 2017 for an overview). The interaction of possessor raising and topicalization highlights that constraints on remnant movement (such as the Müller-Takano generalization) can sometimes be used as a diagnostic for movement in external possession constructions.

In this brief paper, only a sketch of the derivation for the Müller-Takano effect was provided. Further research into the nature of the mixed position in the Kipsigis left periphery is needed in order to determine the details of the analysis, as well as the implications of the Kipsigis pattern for the analysis of constraints on remnant movement more generally. Kipsigis is an interesting case study, since remnant movement has not been extensively studied in languages with documented cases of movement with mixed $A - \bar{A}$ properties.

Finally, unexpected asymmetries in external possession constructions have also been observed in Bantu languages that are otherwise symmetric for movement (e.g., Zulu; Halpert 2021, Zeller 2021). It is an interesting topic for further research whether these should receive the same analysis as the one developed in this paper.

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