

# Two cases of prominent internal possessor constructions

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Syntactic prominence is an asymmetry between elements such that the most prominent one has some morphosyntactic property which the others lack (Vogel 2015). In a number of genetically unrelated languages, possessors which are apparently internal to possessive NPs can exhibit greater syntactic prominence than is typically encountered by controlling agreement on the verb. These ‘prominent internal possessor constructions’ or PIPCs (Nikolaeva 2014) are attested for example in Maithili (Indo-Aryan, India/Nepal):

- (1) a. *dekhalthun*  
saw.3H.2MH  
‘He (honorific) saw you (mid-honorific).’
- b. [*tohar ba:bu*] *Mohan-ke dekhalthun*  
**your** father Mohan-OBJ saw.3H.2NH  
‘Your (non-honorific) father saw Mohan.’
- c. *o [tora: ba:p-ke] dekhalthun*  
he.H **your.NH** father-OBJ saw.3H.2NH  
‘He saw your (non-honorific) father.’ (Stump & Yadav 1988: 306, 309, 317)

(1a) shows regular transitive agreement, with the subject controlling the ‘primary’ agreement (on the left in the gloss) and the object controlling the ‘secondary’ agreement. Primary agreement in Maithili is always controlled by the subject, while secondary agreement can be controlled by a number of non-subject elements including internal possessors. This can be seen in (1b), where the possessor internal to the subject NP controls the secondary agreement, and in (1c), where the possessor internal to the object NP controls the secondary agreement. Stump and Yadav provide several types of evidence to show that these agreement controlling possessors are internal to the possessive phrase.

In a similar way, agreement is also possible between the verb and internal possessors in Chimane (or Tsimane’, unclassified, Bolivia). In this case, however, the agreement pattern is more restricted; it can only occur between possessors internal to patient-like NPs, and must be accompanied by an additional applicative-like verbal suffix:

- (2) a. *Juan täj-je-’* [*un* *mu’ Sergio-s*].  
Juan(M) touch-CLF-3SG.F.O hand(F) the.M Sergio(M)-F  
‘Juan touched Sergio’s hand.’
- b. *Juan täj-je-bi-te* [*un* *mu’ Sergio-s*].  
Juan(M) touch-CLF-APPL-3SG.M.O hand(F) the.M Sergio(M)-F  
‘Juan touched Sergio’s hand.’
- c. \**Juan täj-je-te un mu’ Sergio-s.*  
Juan(M) touch-CLF-3SG.M.O hand(F) the.M Sergio(M)-F  
(‘Juan touched Sergio’s hand.’)
- d. \**Mu’ vojity=yu naj-tye-ye / naj-bi-ye mi.*  
the.M brother(M)=my see-CLF-1SG>2SG see.CLF-APPL-1SG>2SG you  
(‘My brother saw you.’) (Ritchie 2015)

(2a) shows object agreement with the feminine head of the patient-like possessive NP. In (2b), the verb appears to exhibit object agreement with the internal possessor, and it also exhibits the suffix *-bi*. (2c) shows that this agreement pattern is not possible if the *-bi* suffix is not present, and (2d) shows that it is not possible for possessors internal to subject NPs to control agreement on the verb, whether or not the *-bi* suffix is present. Just as in Maithili, several syntactic tests show that the possessor in (2b) is internal to the possessive phrase.

This kind of configuration presents a challenge for linguistic theories, as it has hitherto been assumed that verbal agreement can only be controlled by the head of a noun phrase, and not by non-head subconstituents (e.g. *Gadzar & Pullum 1982; Gadzar et al. 1985*). A further complication is the observed variance in languages which exhibit PIPCs. Maithili allows agreement with possessors internal to both subject and object arguments, while in Chimane the pattern is restricted to only occurring with possessors internal to patient-like arguments. What these differences suggest is that PIPCs are not a homogeneous phenomenon and require different types of analysis for different languages. The aim of this paper is to supplement an existing analysis of Maithili formulated in the LFG framework with a complementary analysis of Chimane, and to show through this comparison that PIPCs require a case-by-case approach which situates the constructions within the broader structural profile of the languages in which they occur.

A crucial point to note in developing the analysis is that in both Maithili and Chimane, and also in many other languages which exhibit PIPCs (*Nikolaeva 2014*), the construction is optional and alternates in discourse with regular or canonical (*Corbett 2006*) agreement constructions, as shown in (1a) and (2a). *Stump & Yadav (1988)* argue that in Maithili, this choice is determined by three contributing semantic and information structural factors, namely (i) the desire on the part of the speaker to emphasise the relevance of the controller, (ii) honorific grade, and (iii) animacy, which *Comrie (2003)* argues all contribute to a referent's 'topic-worthiness'. Topic-worthiness is more or less equivalent to the notion of semantic/information structural prominence, which is understood here as partly a function of the semantic features of referents, e.g. affectedness, animacy and definiteness, and partly a function of their information structure features, in particular topicality (*Aissen 1999; 2003*). *Ritchie (2015)* has also shown that the choice between the PIPC and the canonical construction in Chimane is (at least partially) determined by information structure, with topical or topic-worthy possessors being more likely to control agreement on the verb.

If agreement between verbs and possessors in PIPCs is determined by the relative information structural prominence of possessors, then it is necessary to incorporate a level of information structure in the analysis. The model of information structure adopted in this study follows the approach developed in *Lambrecht (1994)*, and its integration with other structures in LFG is assumed following *Dalrymple & Nikolaeva (2005; 2011)*. Essentially, constraints in specific languages can target different levels of structure. For instance, assuming that instances of agreement between internal possessors and verbs mark the topicality of the possessor, the relevant constraint will indicate that any element which bears some grammatical function in the clause, or even elements which occur within grammatical functions, can be the controller of agreement. It will also specify that the element in question bears the information structure role of topic.

The difference between the two languages under discussion is that in Maithili, there are no differences between PIPCs and canonical agreement constructions in terms of the marking and position of possessors, possessed nouns, and verbs, apart from the fact that the possessor controls agreement on the verb in the PIPC, while in Chimane, differences between the PIPC and the canonical construction, for example the additional suffix on the verb and the availability of a pronoun which doubles the possessor in the PIPC (see (3) below), indicate that there are some underlying syntactic differences between the two types of constructions. The most likely explanation for the PIPC in Maithili is simply that agreement does not match one-to-one with grammatical functions, but is instead determined by information structure. The internal possessor can therefore control agreement on the verb despite being internal to the possessive NP purely on the basis that it is topical or topic-worthy. *Dalrymple & Nikolaeva (2005)* argue more specifically that the internal possessor controls agreement in Maithili when it bears a secondary topic role, defined as "an entity such that the utterance is construed to be ABOUT the relationship between it and the primary topic" (*Nikolaeva 2001: 26*). They represent the mapping between grammatical functions and information structure roles as in (4), with the assumption that whichever element bears the secondary topic function will control secondary agreement on the verb (the secondary topic role is represented by the TOPIC2 attribute in the information structure).

*Dalrymple & Nikolaeva (2011)* argue that some notion of contrast may also be involved, so alternations such as the one under discussion cannot be attributed purely to the secondary topic role. Assuming their projection architecture, in which information structure roles are represented in a separate i(nformation)-structure projection, the crucial point in the case of Maithili is that there is no difference in the f-structure (and presumably also the c-structure) of the PIPC versus the default: the only difference lies in which one of the possessor, possessed noun or other potential controller bears the (contrastive) secondary topic role and therefore controls agreement on the verb.

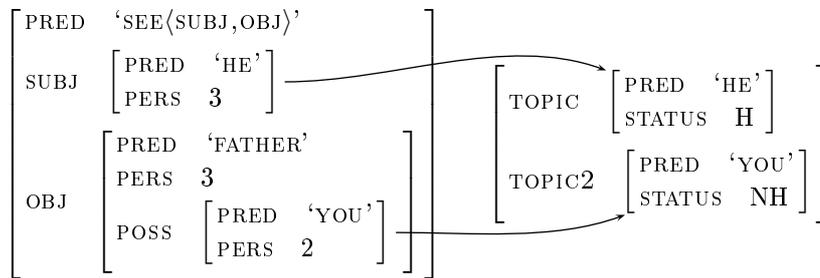
As examples (2c) and (2d) show, agreement between the verb and internal possessor in Chimane is



- (4) *o [tora: ba:p-ke] dekhalthun*  
 he.H **your.NH** father-**OBJ** saw.3H.2**NH**  
 'He saw your (non-honorific) father.'

Functional structure:

Information structure:

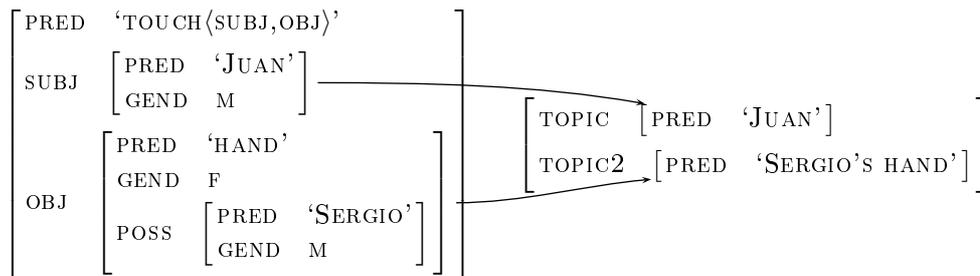


(Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2005: 87)

- (5) *Juan täj-je-ʔ [un mu' Sergio-s]*.  
 Juan(M) touch-CLF-3**SG.F.O** hand(F) the.M Sergio(M)-F  
 'Juan touched Sergio's hand.' (IPC)

Functional structure:

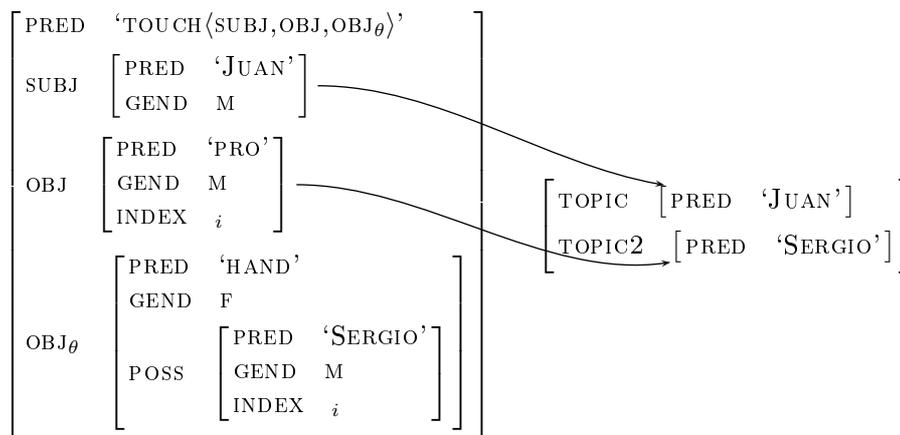
Information structure:



- (6) *Juan täj-je-bi-te [un mu' Sergio-s] (=mu')*.  
 Juan(M) touch-CLF-APPL-3**SG.M.O** hand(F) the.M Sergio(M)-F =**him**  
 'Juan touched Sergio's hand.' (PIPC)

Functional structure:

Information structure:



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