

## POSSESSION IN SOUTH-EASTERN BANTU - A CONTINUUM INTERPRETATION

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The general linguistic tradition in Bantu is to classify the morphological construction consisting of possessive concord and possessive base, as a discrete word category, termed the possessive. Although this may be the most salient way of expressing possessive relationships in South-Eastern Bantu, the notion of possession cannot be reduced to a single construction, since a variety of other constructions are also involved in the conceptualization of possession. The concept of a continuum is proposed as a means of putting some order into the variety of constructions which express a notion of possession, as manifested in South-Eastern Bantu.

**Keywords:** possession, continuum, South-Eastern Bantu, conceptual possession, prototypical extremes, possessor, possessee

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is firstly to point out that the traditional classification of "possession" in South-Eastern Bantu into a discrete category, fails to reveal the true nature of the concept "possession"; and secondly to demonstrate that the variety of categories involved in expressing the notion of "possession" in South-Eastern Bantu is best accommodated on an intercategorial continuum.

The term South-Eastern Bantu pertains to Doke's classification of the Bantu languages as outlined by Cole (1969:81) and is one of the eleven zones he identified as "large aggregations of languages having uniformity or similarity of linguistic phenomena, but which are not necessarily mutually intelligible. The division into Zones is largely a geographical one." The South-Eastern zone includes languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, Swati (belonging to the Nguni group), Northern and Southern Sotho and Tswana (belonging to the Sotho group), Venda and Tsonga. Selected examples from these languages which are all spoken in the Republic of South Africa, will be used in this article.

## 2. TRADITIONAL APPROACH

A review of traditional analyses by Bosch (1995) reveals that the general linguistic trend in the Bantu language family and more specifically in South-Eastern Bantu, is to classify possessives as a specific word category which expresses possession. Such a word category is morphologically characterized by a possessive morpheme which is concordial in nature e.g.

Zulu

(1a) *izindlu zabantu* (*za* + *abantu*)  
 houses of-people  
 'the people's houses'

Southern Sotho

(1b) *dijo tsa mosadi* (*tsa* + *mosadi*)  
 food of woman  
 'the woman's food'

In a study of possession as an operational dimension of language in general, Seiler (1983:1) describes the nature of possession as constituting conceptual or notional or cognitive aspects of POSSESSION on the one hand, and linguistic aspects of POSSESSION on the other. In other words, possession may be viewed on different levels, for example on a cognitive level and also on a linguistic one. It would seem that in the Bantu languages and in South-Eastern Bantu in particular, it is the linguistic aspect of possession that has traditionally been focussed on.

We find that constructions including conceptual aspects of possession are not traditionally classified as possessives. An example that comes to mind is:

Zulu

(2) *Umama wesula umntwana ubuso*  
 mother she-wipe child face  
 'Mother wipes the child's face'

In this example we have two nouns *umntwana* 'child' and *ubuso* 'face' adjacent to one another, involving a concept of possession, but with no morphological marking.

Furthermore, a concept of possession may be included in a construction although there is no so-called possessive marker. In fact, an associative or conjunctive morpheme is used in such cases, e.g.

Southern Sotho

(3) *Monna o na le motorokara* (*o* + *na* + *le* + *motorokara*)  
 man he have motor-car  
 'The man owns/has a motor car'

The few examples that have been cited so far, already indicate that the category "possessive" is multi-faceted in nature and also that possession may be expressed by a variety of constructions in South-Eastern Bantu.

### 3. CONTINUUM APPROACH WITH REFERENCE TO SEILER'S MODEL

With a view to establishing a systematic relation between the various expressions of the notion of possession in South-Eastern Bantu, I shall first of all, briefly present a model of possession as hypothesized by Seiler (1983), which provides a different dimension to this fascinating concept.

In his model of possession based on various theses and hypotheses, Seiler (1983:4ff) demonstrates that there are various linguistic structures which express conceptual possession and that they are all systematically related in that "they serve the common purpose of expressing conceptual POSSESSION." (Seiler, 1983:3)

The linguistic structures which represent such a relationship of possession between two nouns, are limited by two prototypical constructions according to Serzisko (1984:9), namely (a) the mere concatenation of the two nouns (NN) without any formal means; and (b) the predicative connection of the two nouns by means of a verbal element (NVN). Graphically the two prototypical constructions can be plotted on a kind of scale or continuum with the construction more nominal in nature on the left extreme and the one more verbal in nature on the right extreme:

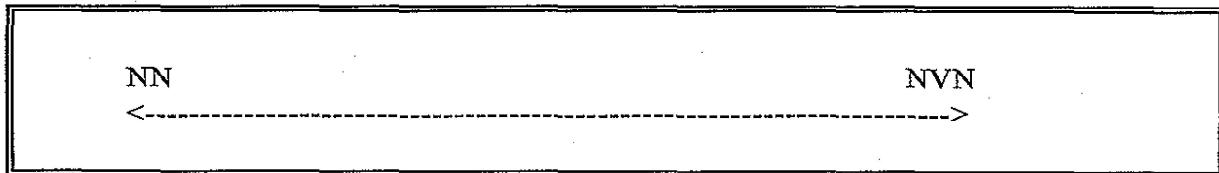


Fig. I. Continuum of possession with two prototypical extremes

Between the two extremes NN and NVN other constructions may feature, for example those in which POSSESSOR and POSSESSEE are connected by a separate element or connector (N conn N) as for instance the case in modern Persian as cited by Seiler (1983:33):

Modern Persian

(4) *hana-ji pidar*  
house-CONN father  
'father's house/house of father'

Another example of a construction which may feature between the two extremes is where the syntactic ties of both POSSESSOR and POSSESSEE with the sentence are indicated by means of case marking (N case N), as in Latin:

Latin

(5) *Marc-i pater*  
Mark-gen father  
'Mark's father'

By including these two types of constructions, the prototypical scale can now be presented as on the following continuum, with constructions such as (4) and (5) plotted between the extremes:

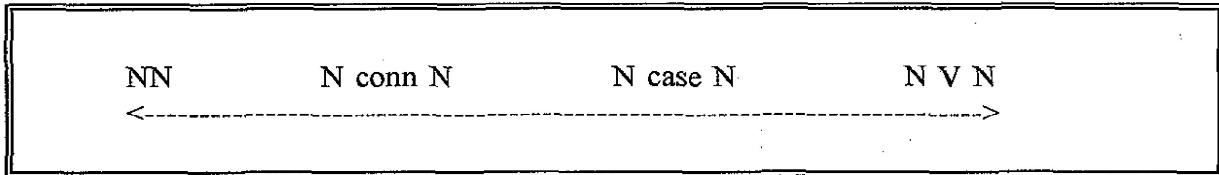
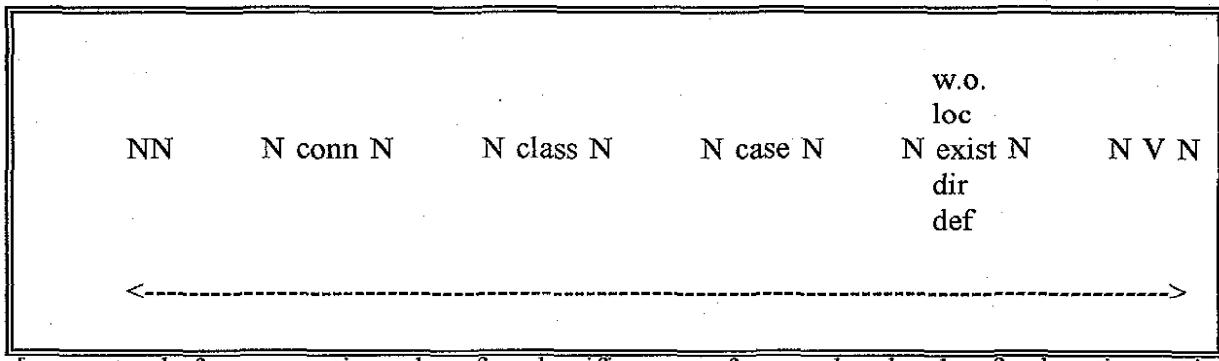


Fig. II. Continuum of possession with four types of constructions

In this way Seiler (1983:72) sets up a scale of structures which cover the entire domain of possession, as illustrated in the following continuum:



[conn stands for connective, class for classifier, w.o. for word order, loc for location, exist for existence, dir for directionality, and def for definiteness]

Fig. III Seiler's continuum of possession

We will not, however, go into further detail here, but it should be clear at this stage that according to Seiler's model, possession is not regarded as a definite category or a particular construction. Seiler's model is rather a scale or operational programme which enables us not only to grasp the variety of structures which express possession, without reducing this to a specific construction, but also to integrate the various expressions of the concept possession in the description.

Seiler (1988:84) makes it clear that not all the constructions (or "techniques") represented on the scale are by any means present in every language, but that all languages should find their types of possessive constructions somewhere on the scale. He implies also, that the above continuum would accommodate every newly discovered structure.

The notion of a continuum is not totally new in the study of Bantu languages since Hendrikse and Poulos (1994) for instance link the noun and verb categories in Southern Bantu on a continuum despite their apparent notional incompatibility.

However, this approach necessarily differs considerably from the approach that has characterized the traditional description of possession, particularly in the Bantu language family. The necessity of such a totally different approach to the study of possession is endorsed by Claudi and Heine's (1989:15) observation that:

"Taxonomic structures such as word classes or syntactic categories are to some extent artificial entities; there is a lot of linguistic behaviour taking place between, rather than within, such classes or categories."

In view of this observation it will not be surprising if we find other structures in South-Eastern Bantu involving the notion of possession, which have seldom or never before been observed as possessives.

I shall initially assume, in accordance with Seiler's model, that in the conceptualisation of "possession" in Zulu, the two extreme poles of the continuum are NN, that is nouns in juxtaposition, and NVN, namely verb-like constructions.

### 3.1 *Nouns in juxtaposition (NN)*

Under the term juxtaposition we understand constructions which involve the concatenation of two nouns (NN) which express some possessive relation or other. The NN construction in this paper will include juxtaposed nouns without morphological marking of possession, as well as juxtaposed nouns with morphological marking of possession. We will be looking at a number of different NN constructions.

The typical pattern of juxtaposition without morphological marking in the Bantu languages is illustrated below by N2 and N3:

Tsonga

(6) N1 + V + N2 (possessor) + N3 (possession)  
*Dokodela upfula n'wana nomu*  
 doctor open child mouth  
 'The doctor opens the child's mouth'

In this example the nouns *n'wana* 'child' and *nomu* 'mouth' occur alongside each other without any kind of formal linking, or additional morphological marking in the adjacent words of the sentence.

Another construction which is very closely related to the NN construction, is that in which two juxtaposed nouns are followed by a verb that incorporates an applied extension as in:

Venda

(7a) *Vhashumi vho tswela khotsi anga mitshelo*  
 workers steal-appl father my fruit  
 'The workers stole my father's fruit'

## Tsonga

(7b) *Va-fana va-dy-el-a n'wana vuswa*  
 boys eat-appl child porridge  
 'The boys are eating the child's porridge'

Depending on the context, this type of construction is also often interpreted in a non-possession sense of 'The workers steal fruit for my father' or 'The boys are eating porridge for the child'

In Zulu, as in many other Bantu languages, we find a type of noun known as the "compound noun" which although not marked as such, often contains a notion of possession. As the name indicates, such nouns are constructed by means of a combination of words or stems.

Note that in many instances the first N does not occur as a separate lexical item, but rather in a compounded form as illustrated in the following examples:

## Zulu

(8a) *umninimuzi* (umnini + umuzi)  
 owner-homestead  
 'owner of the homestead'

## Northern Sotho

(8b) *monggae* (mong + gae)  
 owner-house  
 'house owner'

A more reduced form of this compounding occurs in constructions such as abbreviated noun plus noun (abbrNN):

## Zulu

(9a) *usokhaya* (uso + ikhaya)  
 father-house  
 'head of the house/owner of the family'

(9b) *unomvula* (uno + umvula)  
 mother-rain  
 'mother of rain'

(9c) *uMaMkhize* (uma + Mkhize)  
 daughter-Mkhize  
 proper name: 'daughter of Mkhize'

There is yet another construction where two nouns are juxtaposed, but in this case a separate morphological element is prefixed to the second noun, as for instance in:

## Zulu

(10a) *ihhashi labantu* (*la* + *abantu*)  
 horse of-people  
 'the people's horse'

## Tswana

(10b) *diaparo tsa mosimane* (*tsa* + *mosimane*)  
 clothes of-boy  
 'the boy's clothes'

In these examples it is clear that the noun indicating the possessee or thing possessed is followed by another noun, which indicates the possessor, to which a connecting element is prefixed. The connecting element is of a concordial nature and refers to the possessee.

Morphologically speaking, this is the most prominent way of expressing a possessive relationship in Zulu.

3.2 *Two nouns connected by a verbal element (NVN)*

We now move to the prototype on the right hand extreme of the continuum. This according to Seiler is NVN, which includes verbs of possession, i.e. equivalents of 'to be with', 'to have', 'to belong', etc. Heine (1994:27) terms this type of expression of possession as "predicative" possession and points out that the most salient pattern of expressing predicative possession in a given language is in fact provided by have-constructions.

In South-Eastern Bantu the have-construction is marked morphologically by the prefixing of a subject concord and a conjunctive or associative formative to a substantive, with a resulting copulative or predicative construction, e.g.

## Northern Sotho

(11a) *John o na le mpsa* (*o* + *na* + *le mpsa*)  
 John he has dog  
 'John has a dog'

## Xhosa

(11b) *Indoda inemoto* (*i* + *na* + *imoto*)  
 man he-has-motor-car  
 'The man has a motor car'

The predicative element in these constructions is the morpheme *-na-* which is freely translated as 'to have'.

In the discussion so far we have determined that "possession" in South-Eastern Bantu is in fact conceptualized by nouns in juxtaposition (NN), as well as by verb-like constructions (NVN). However, in our endeavour to represent all constructions that express a notion of possession on a continuum, two additional constructions may be identified in this regard, namely the N construction (noun implying possession) and the (N)V construction (verb of possession) which are both not included in Seiler's continuum. I will now discuss these two constructions separately.

### 3.3 Noun implying possession (N)

First of all there are instances in South-Eastern Bantu languages such as Zulu and Swati where a single noun without any morphological marking may express a concept of possession, as is the case for example with certain kinship terms, as in:

#### Zulu

(12a) *uyihlo* 'your father'  
*uyise* 'his/her/their father'  
*unina* 'his/her/their mother'

#### Swati

(12b) *babe* 'my father'  
*make* 'my mother'  
*unyoko* 'your mother'

In these examples a relation of possession between two nominals is intimated even though only one lexical item is used. The person with whom the relationship exists, is implied by only the one nominal, namely the possessive. In other words, the possessee inherently contains the exact reference to the possessor. Furthermore one may contend that kinship terms express an inherent type of possessive relationship.

### 3.4 Verb of possession ((N)V)

Secondly there is yet another very interesting way in which possession may be expressed in South-Eastern Bantu and which has not traditionally been treated as such. I refer here to the use of a single verb to express the concept of possession, as in the case of the verb stem *-fuya* (own stock) in Zulu:

#### Zulu

(13) *lo muntu ufuyile*  
 this person (s)he-own-stock-PERF  
 'this person is rich in cattle/owns a lot of stock'

Since the verb stem *-fuya* includes the semantic connotation of 'owning stock', there is no need for this verb stem to be followed by any object whatsoever, in order to clarify its meaning.

In Zulu for instance, we find two other verb stems that function in a similar manner to *-fuya*, namely *-akha* 'build' and *-zala* 'bear/give birth', which both, when used in the stative form, incorporate a notion of possession, as illustrated in the following examples.

#### Zulu

(14a) *Indoda yakhile*  
 man he-build-PERF  
 'The man owns a house'

(14b) *Le nkomo izele*  
 this cow she-give-birth-PERF  
 'This cow has a calf'

(14c) *UNomsa uzele*  
 Nomsa she-give-birth-PERF  
 'Nomsa has many children'

It is noteworthy that in all these examples, the possessee has been implied. Furthermore, there is a close association between the possessor and the possessee, for instance a person and his/her cattle, a person and his/her house, a person and his/her children and so forth, in all these verb stems which include a notion of possession.

#### 4. EXTENSION OF SEILER'S CONTINUUM

In an attempt to put some order into the variety of constructions involved in the conceptualization of possession in South-Eastern Bantu, let us now return to the original scale or continuum (Fig. III) in which Seiler illustrates the two prototypical extremes NN and NVN. Seiler (1988:84) makes it clear that not all the constructions (or "techniques") represented on the scale are by any means present in every language, but all languages should find their types of possessive constructions somewhere on the scale. He implies also, that the continuum would accommodate every newly discovered structure.

However, evidence from South-Eastern Bantu, as presented in this article, indicates that the conceptualization of possession moves beyond these prototypical boundaries. In fact, the N construction (noun implying possession) and the (N)V construction (verb of possession) in South-Eastern Bantu, compel us to extend the continuum to the left of Seiler's prototypical NN slot and also to the right of Seiler's prototypical NVN slot. If we look at Fig. IV we will notice that in order to accommodate possessive constructions such as kinship terms which intimate a possessive relationship with another nominal without the mention of such nominal, we need an extension of the continuum to the left, resulting in a single N on the extreme left pole. On the right hand, the continuum needs to be extended to include verb stems which suggest a possessive relationship, thus resulting in an (N)V slot on the right extreme pole of the continuum.

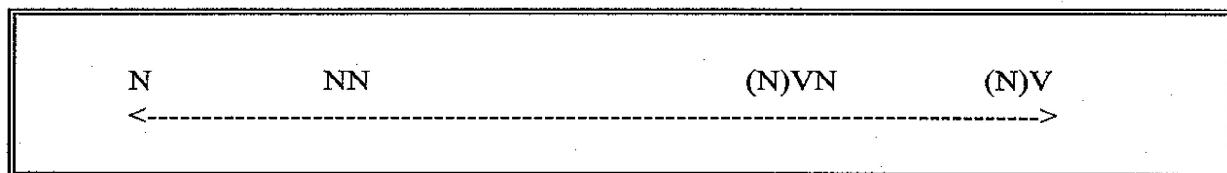


Fig. IV. Extended continuum of possession

Thus an important observation regarding the extended continuum of possession is the recognition of a nominal lexical item on the left side and a verbal lexical item on the right.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one should keep in mind that possession covers a wide spectrum, and it would be impossible to do justice to all its manifestations in an article of this nature. However, the different types of possessive constructions illustrated in this article should be an indication that we are not dealing with a discrete word category, but with a semantic concept "possession" which is reflected in many different types of constructions in South-Eastern Bantu. The continuum approach enables us to accommodate seemingly discrete and unrelated constructions such as nominal versus verbal forms on opposing poles of an intecategorial continuum.

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