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ACQUISITION OF GENITIVE AGENTS IN SAMOAN

Alessandro Duranti
University of California, Los Angeles

Elinor Ochs
University of Southern California

INTRODUCTION[1]

Developmental psycholinguists have been centrally interested in children's understanding and linguistic articulation of what Slobin (1985) calls 'manipulative activity scenes'- in which an agent performing some action affects some object. The concern of the present study is to extend our understanding of manipulative activity scenes and grammar beyond the articulation of major sentential constituents, more specifically to attend to ways in which children and adults grammaticalize manipulative activity scenes and perspectives within genitive constructions. Genitives have been primarily associated with the encoding of locative relationships such as possessor or goal (cf. Clark 1978; Lyons 1968). In Samoan, however, the genitive construction encodes a wide range of semantic roles including human agents (cf. Duranti & Ochs in press). That genitives, often called "possessives," do not simply or exclusively express relations of ownership has been noted by a number of scholars. Further, the link between genitives and agency has been reported in the acquisition literature (cf. Budwig 1985) and in typological studies of ergative languages, which note that in several languages, the genitive and ergative marker are the same. In Samoan the genitive marker and the ergative marker are not the same. Nonetheless there is a strong semantic link between the two. Our Samoan data represent to our knowledge both the most varied and the most recurrent use of genitive constructions for semantic roles other than possession. In this paper, we describe how Samoan adults use genitive constructions and compare adult strategies with those of four young children.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Samoan adults and children differ little in their expression of major sentential constituents and in the use of ergative case marking. Both prefer verb-initial utterances that contain only two major constituents: a verb or verb complex (VC) and a nominal argument. The NP expressed tends to be an absolutive NP, either Subjects of intransitive verbs or Objects of transitive verbs. The basic structure of utterances is thus:

(1) VC + Absolutive NP

Du Bois (1987) suggests that in all languages speaker-hearers tend to avoid expressing Agents as full lexical NPs. Speaker-hearers typically identify agents from referents expressed in prior discourse as absolutive consituents. Our examination of Samoan speech and writing, however, suggest that this presumption requires further thought. In Samoan, Agent participants may be expressed through genitive constructions within the absolutive NP. If we take a strictly syntactico-semantic definition, viz. Agents to be Subjects of transitive clauses, then our data largely confirm Du Bois' findings. On the other hand, if we widen our notion of Agent to include potential or factual agents in described, evoked, or presupposed events, regardless of the grammatical role of the phrase in which they are linguistically expressed, our data show different results.

In Samoan, the Absolutive NP of a two constituent utterance is often a complex NP that includes both an Affected Object (or Undergoer) as a Head Noun and an Agent or some other semantic role(s) in the Modifier. The syntax of these constructions is schematically represented in (2) (the angled brackets indicate an "either or" condition in the case of coreferentiality of Pro and NP):

(2) Verb Complex + [Art <Gen Pro> Head Noun <Gen NP>]
NP

While genitive constructions in Samoan often express a relation of "possession," they express a wide range of other participant roles as well. Thus, in (3), the genitive phrase a Eki 'Eki's' refers to the person who prepared the food. Given that Eki is a young untitled male, it would be inappropriate, in a Samoan cultural context, to define the food he cooked for others as "belonging" to him. We consider this an example of genitive construction used to express an Agent:

(3) ("Pastor & Deacon")[2]

24 fai le umu kalo a Eki ma lu`au
do ART oven taro of Eki and palusami
(lit. make Eki's oven taro and palusami)
'Eki made baked taro and palusami'

Table 1 shows the distribution of different semantic roles in genitive phrases in adult speech. After Possessor and Body Part, Agent is one of the most common types of semantic roles expressed through genitive phrases. This finding opens up a whole series of questions about the definition and distribution of not only Agents but Actors, Experiencers and other semantic roles in a language like Samoan. Rather than the putatively "natural" or "universal" tendency for human participants to appear as Subjects, a tendency codified as

"Subjectivization" in Case Grammar (cf. Fillmore 1968; 1977; cf. also Kuno 1974) and "genitive ascention" in Relational Grammar (cf. Kimenyi 1980), Samoan seems to favor "Genitivization."

Table 1

Distribution of Semantic Roles in Genitives (Adult)*

Speakers:	Semantic Roles** Encoded:								
	POSS	BEN	GL/LC	AG	ACT	EXP	PART	PNT	REL/KIN
Women	.19 (27)	.14 (20)	.06 (9)	.16 (22)	.16 (23)	.06 (8)	.04 (6)	.01 (2)	.16 (22)
Men	.21 (17)	.12 (10)	.16 (13)	.19 (16)	.08 (7)	.06 (5)	.10 (8)	-	.23 (19)
TOTAL:	.20 (44)	.13 (30)	.10 (22)	.17 (38)	.13 (30)	.06 (13)	.06 (14)	.01 (2)	.23 (51)

*Each genitive construction may encode more than one semantic role. **POSS=possessor, BEN=benefactive, GL/LC=Goal/locative, AG=agent, ACT=actor, EXP=experiencer, PART=body part or other part/whole relation, PNT=patient, REL/KIN=social relationship, including kinship.

There are, however, semantico-pragmatic differences between the use of genitive vs. ergative NP's (Duranti & Ochs in press). In contrast to languages like English, where Subjects of transitive verbs can express a wide range of semantic roles (Keenan 1984), in Samoan, ergative NP's cover a restricted set of roles, typically human initiators of actions (cf. Cook 1988). Furthermore, ergative NP's may index or assign accountability to the participant role (cf. Duranti 1988). When the genitive phrase, as opposed to the ergative phrase, is used to refer to the putative agent, the focus is on the product or result of the action (if the verb is a potentially transitive verb) rather than on the party responsible. For this reason, genitive phrases seem to cover cases that in other languages might be expressed by passives or stative-like clauses, where the Patient or underlying Object acquires the syntactic role of Subject.

THE ACQUISITION OF GENITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Is complexity of the Absolutive NP something that unifies both adult and child language? Or is it here that adults and children's speech differs? In contrast to acquisition of clause structure, the acquisition of genitive construction shows a clear progression towards a broader range of semantic roles encoded and more complex head nouns.

Table 2
Semantic Roles in Genitive Constructions (Children)*

Child/ Age:	Semantic Roles Encoded:								
	POSS	BEN	GL/LC	AG	ACT	EXP	PART	PNT	REL/KIN
Kalavini									
(1;7)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
(1;9)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
(1;11)	1.0 (1)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
(2;1)	.26 (10)	.68 (26)	.11 (4)	-	-	-	-	.03 (1)	-
TOTAL:	.29 (11)	.67 (26)	.10 (4)					.03 (1)	
Iakopo									
(2.1)	-	.67 (2)	-	-	-	-	-	.33 (1)	-
(2;8)	.45 (17)	.48 (20)	-	.03 (1)	.11 (4)	.08 (3)	.16 (6)	-	-
TOTAL:	.38 (17)	.49 (22)		.02 (1)	.09 (4)	.07 (3)	.13 (6)	.02 (1)	
Pesio									
(2;3)	.38 (11)	.35 (10)	.10 (3)	.04 (1)	-	-	.04 (1)	.14 (4)	.07 (2)
(2;10)	.73 (129)	.14 (24)	.07 (13)	.05 (8)	.02 (3)	.02 (4)	.06 (10)	.03 (5)	.01 (2)
TOTAL:	.68 (140)	.16 (34)	.08 (16)	.04 (9)	.02 (3)	.02 (4)	.05 (11)	.04 (9)	.02 (4)
Niulala									
(2;11)	.26 (20)	.54 (42)	.19 (15)	.03 (2)	.06 (5)	-	.13 (10)	.03 (2)	.01 (1)
(3;6)	.32 (14)	.23 (10)	.02 (1)	.09 (4)	.02 (1)	.05 (2)	.32 (14)	-	-
	.28 (34)	.43 (52)	.13 (16)	.05 (6)	.05 (6)	.02 (2)	.20 (24)	.02 (2)	.01 (1)
TOTAL:	.49 (202)	.33 (134)	.09 (36)	.04 (16)	.03 (13)	.02 (9)	.10 (41)	.03 (13)	.01 (5)

*Each genitive construction may encode more than one semantic role

Table 2 indicates the acquisition patterns of four children: Kalavini, Iakopo, Pesio, and Niulala. At an early point in acquisition, children use genitives primarily to express possessor and benefactor roles. The youngest child, Kalavini, does not encode genitive agents at all. The next youngest child, Iakopo also does not encode genitive agents in the earliest recording session and produces only 1 seven months later. Genitive Agents account for somewhat more of Pesio's and Niulala's genitive constructions, with the last session of Niulala at 3 years 6 months showing the greatest proportion at 9%. These data suggest a developmental pattern towards increased use of genitive NPs to encode Agent roles. In the corpus at hand genitive Agents characterize 4% of children's genitive constructions in comparison with 17% of adult genitive constructions.

Children's use of genitive constructions to express Agent roles is illustrated in (4) through (6) below:

(4) (Pesio, 2;10)

kusi::: -si:: lou aka?/
write -te your picture
(lit. 'draw -aw your picture?')
'are you drawing the picture?'

(5) (Niulala, 2;11)

masae le [ofu]vae [o] Fineaso
ripped the pants [of] Fineaso
'Fineaso ripped his pants'

(6) (Pesio, 2;10)

sa fai makou mea'ai
TA make our(excl) food
'(We) made food for ourselves.'

Genitive constructions of children and adults also differ in complexity of the head noun. In adult constructions where the modifier is an Agent, Actor, or Experiencer, the head noun is often a nominalization. In children's constructions, nominalizations are both rare and relatively late to be productively acquired. These patterns are expressed in Tables 3a and 3b.

Table 3a
Nominalized Head Nouns in Genitive Constructions (Adults)

Women:	Men:	TOTAL:
.13 (18)	.07 (6)	.11 (24)

Table 3b
Nominalized Head Nouns in Genitive Constructions (Children)

Kalavini		Iakopo		Pesio		Niulala	
(1;7)	-	(2;1)	-	(2;3)	-	(2;11)	.01 (1)
(1;9)	-	(2;8)	-	(2;10)	.01 (2)	(3;6)	.10 (4)
(1;11)	-						
(2;1)	-						
Total:	-		-		.01 (2)		.06 (7)

Tables 3a and 3b indicate that 11% of adult genitive constructions contain nominalizations, whereas only 2% of children's genitive constructions contain nominalizations. Table 3b indicates further that nominalized head nouns are absent or rare before children reach 3 and half years. To some extent this developmental pattern is linked to the late emergence of agents, actors and experiencers as genitive modifiers in children's speech.

CONCLUSIONS

The Samoan data presented here suggest that while Samoan adults and children both favor a clausal strategy of highlighting the affected object in a manipulative activity scene, Samoan children have difficulty exploiting the grammar of genitive noun phrases to encode agent roles as well. This pattern implies that children's two-constituent utterances differ from those produced by adults. In children's utterances, when an Agent is not encoded as a major sentential constituent, it is likely not to be encoded as a genitive modifier. That is, Agents are likely not to be found anywhere within the two-constituent clause. In interpreting children's speech, then, hearers must resort to one of the pragmatic strategies suggested by Du Bois, namely, locating Agent participants in the immediate setting or in previously

mentioned absolutive NPs. In contrast, interpreters of adult speech may locate the agent participant inside the absolutive NP itself.

For all acquirers, the morpho-syntax of noun phrases is an important dimension of linguistic competence . In Samoan, however, and perhaps in other languages with a two-constituent bias, genitive constructions, nominalizations and other types of complex noun phrases lace even the most informal of conversations. In all kinds of Samoan talk, the absolutive NP in a two-constituent utterance is often heavy, loaded with information concerning human participants and the actions, states and locations that bind them. Speakers regularly produce such verb-initial utterances as 'Look at the stretching of that one' (Va'ai le fa'ake'e'ku'u a lele (PI-3:24)), 'Exceptional is the anger of the girl' (Ese fa'ali'i o lea kegikiki (PI-3:46)), 'Look at the actions of Sio' (Va'ai le fai'iga o Sio (PI-9:50)), 'Do you know about our going to New Zealand?' (E ke iloa 'oe le maa ooga i Giusila? (uaki: 377)). That such constructions are used so often and with such a variety of meanings suggests that the internal structure of the noun phrase is a particularly central domain of grammatical and conversational competence for Samoan children to acquire.

NOTES

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2) Abbreviations: AFF= affect particle; ART= article; DX= deictic particle; EMP= emphasis particle; INT= intensifier, sometimes with reflexive function; Prep= preposition; pro= clitic pronoun; TA= tense/aspect marker; PST=past.

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