

Number, Gender and Person Agreement in Prenominal Possessives*

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1. Introduction

Traditionally possessives have been classified as either adjectives or pronouns with the prenominal possessive constructions in Romance languages being treated as adjectives, despite their failure to satisfy the general properties of adjectives (i.e. function as an attribute, function as a predicate, modification by an intensifier and occur in comparative and superlative forms) (Lausberg 1965, Grevisse 1969, among others).

2. Adjectival Agreement: Gender and Number

Following this treatment, these constructions do demonstrate adjectival-like agreement with the possessed noun with respect to number and in some cases gender, as seen in (1).

- (1) a. tus casas (Spanish)
you-familiar (pl.) houses (fem. pl.)
b. nuestras casas
our (fem. pl.) houses (fem. pl.)

However, in considering the forms classified as adjectival and the forms classified as pronominal, adjectival-like agreement is found in both. In Spanish the adjectival form is unstressed and appears only before the noun. This form shows agreement only in number, except for first and second person plural. This agreement is with the item possessed, not the possessor. Although considered adjectival, these forms do not occur with determiners. It is the pronominal form that is considered a "full" form, showing agreement in both number and gender and it is this form that can occur with a determiner. The short form is illustrated in Table 1 and the full form in Table 2. While these "full" forms occur separately, functioning as nouns, they can also occur postnominally functioning as adjectives.

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	Masculine (Sg/Pl)	Feminine (Sg/Pl)
Singular		
1 st	mi/mis	
2 nd	tu/tus	
3 rd	su/sus	
Plural		
1 st	nuestro/s	nuestra/s
2 nd	vuestro/s	vuestra/s
3 rd	su/sus	

TABLE 1. Spanish (short form).

	Masculine (Sg/Pl)	Feminine (Sg/Pl)
Singular		
1 st	mio/mios	mia/mias
2 nd	tuyo/tuyos	tuya/tuyas
3 rd	suyo/suyos	suya/suyas
Plural		
1 st	nuestro/s	nuestra/s
2 nd	vuestro/s	vuestra/s
3 rd	suyo/suyos	suya/suyas

TABLE 2. Spanish (full form).

The possessives considered adjectives in French always precede the noun they modify. They agree in number and gender with the thing possessed, not the possessor in the singular, while they agree in number only in the plural, as seen in Table 3.

	Masculine (Sg/Pl)	Feminine (Sg/Pl)
Singular		
1 st	mon/mes	ma/mes
2 nd	ton/tes	ta/tes
3 rd	son/ses	sa/ses
Plural		
1 st		notre/nos
2 nd		votre/vos
3 rd		leur/s

TABLE 3. French.

The situation in French is not the same as in Spanish with respect to agreement. In Spanish gender agreement is formed with an inflectional morpheme: *-a* for feminine; *-o* for masculine. This inflectional morpheme extends to other adjectives. Gender agreement in the French prenominal possessives is not consistent with the general rule of agreement found with adjectives in which the feminine is formed by adding *-e* to the masculine form.

Additionally the masculine form is used in front of singular feminine nouns beginning with a vowel or silent /h/, as in (2b). Reminiscent of the use of the masculine form of the article with stressed initial vowels words in Spanish, shown in (2a).

- (2) a. el alma (Spanish)
the-ms soul-fm
- b. mon amie (French)
my-ms friend-fm

There is both a stressed and an unstressed form. Only the unstressed forms are used in prenominal position. Moreover, these unstressed adjectival forms, like their Spanish counterparts, do not occur with a determiner.

Possessives functioning as pronouns replace the possessive adjective + noun¹. They appear with the definite article, as shown in Table 4.

	Masculine (Sg/Pl)	Feminine (Sg/Pl)	
Singular			
1 st	le mien/ les miens	la mienne/ les miennes	
2 nd	le tien/les tiens	la tienne/ les tiennes	
3 rd	le sien/les siens	la sien/ les siennes	
Plural	Masculine	Feminine	
1 st	le notre	la notre	Plural les notres
2 nd	le votre	la votre	les votres
3 rd	le leur	la leur	les leurs

TABLE 4. French.

Unlike Spanish and French, the forms for both the possessive pronoun and the possessive adjective are the same in Italian. These forms agree in number and gender with the possessed and require a determiner with common nouns, as shown in Table 5.

¹This is the traditional interpretation. An alternate possibility is that the "so-called" pronominal form is an elliptical construction in which the noun has been deleted leaving the article and an adjectival possessive. Note that this form follows the general adjective gender agreement rule.

	Masculine (Sg/Pl)	Feminine (Sg/Pl)
Singular		
1 st	il mio/i miei	la mia/le mie
2 nd	il tuo/i tuoi	la tua/le tue
3 rd	il suo/i suoi	la sua/le sue
Plural		
1 st	il nostro/i nostri	la nostra/le nostre
2 nd	il vostro/i vostri	la vostra/le vostre
3 rd	il loro/i loro	la loro/le loro

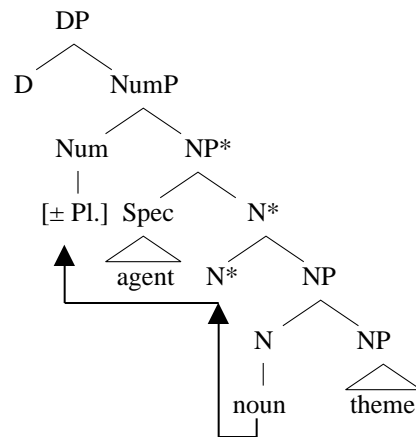
TABLE 5. Italian.

With agreement in number and gender evident, both Number (Valois, 1991) and Gender (Picallo, 1994) projections have been proposed.

2.1 Valois (1991)

Valois (1991) assuming the parallelism between CP and DP suggests that these structures differ in respect to the type of functional projections they contain. He proposes that the differences between languages is accounted for by the same mechanism accounting for differences between VPs, namely the presence or absence of head movement. He argues for a functional category between D and N suggesting that this category is Number Phrase which contains the number features of the DP. He proposes the following structure for French.

(3) NP Head Movement in French

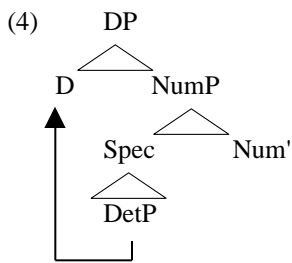


(Valois 1991: 53)

In briefly addressing the position of the prenominal possessive in English and French, he assumes that the possessive pronoun is projected in SpecNP* and obligatorily moves to Spec of NumP, which he proposes is the case position for the possessive pronoun. He concludes that the

difference between French and English is that "a pre-nominal possessive pronoun in French is case-marked once (by the noun), while it is case-marked twice in English (by both the noun and SpecNumP (Valois 1991: 103)). Italian possessives present a problem with respect to case assignment since the Det, following Valois, occupies the SpecNumP position. To account for the agreement between the possessive and the noun, Valois proposes that a mechanism of feature transmission operates between the determiner and the possessive.² The determiner, then, transmits its case to the possessive.

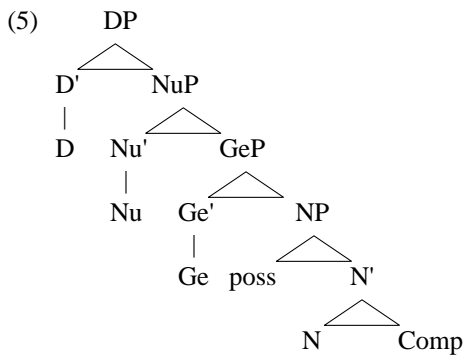
In observing that the possessive is marked for genitive case, which is not the case with adjectives; Valois discounts the possessive as an adjective. He argues that possessives are both XPs and determiners and as such they go through the Spec of NumP and then cliticize onto D, as illustrated in (4).



He further proposes that the possessive receives case in SpecNumP. SpecNumP as a case position, which accounts, according to Valois, for the co-occurrence of the possessive pronoun with a determiner in Italian, but not in English and French. As Valois admits this depends crucially on the SpecNumP not being available for full DPs. This seems to be an ad hoc stipulation.

2.2 *Picallo (1994)*

Picallo (1994) also argues for a Number Phrase, She proposes that the possessive in Catalan is generated in the Spec of NP, as shown in (5).



²This mechanism is similar to that which operates in Italian impersonal passives allowing for the expletive pronoun to transmit its features including case to the post-verbal subject.

Picallo assumes both a Nu(mber)P and a Ge(nder)P for Catalan with the noun moving up through GeP and then NuP. If the noun moves and the possessive stays in situ, the result will be a postnominal possessive. When the possessive moves up first, it will be in a position to merge with the determiner as I have argued for in French and Spanish (Antrim 1996, 1999).

3. Pronominal Agreement: Person

However, possessives also demonstrate agreement with the possessor with respect to person. The pronominal element agrees in person with its referent while the adjectival element agrees in number and gender with the item possessed. This suggests that a possessive must be checked for possibly three agreements.³ Possible agreements since complete agreement is not overtly present pronominally for all persons in French and Spanish.

Haegman (2000) in discussing possessive doubling constructions in Dutch observes that the doubling possessive agrees with the external possessor in terms of number, gender and person, as seen in (6).

- (6) a. Valère zenen boek
 Valère (masc.) poss. (masc.) book -> his book
 b. Marie euren boek
 Marie (fem.) poss. (fem.) book -> her book

Evidence for a separate projection for person comes from the possessive constructions in Isthmus Zapotec, a language spoken in Mexico. In Isthmus Zapotec the possessive and the person morphemes are separate, as shown in (7).

- (7) a. s – palu – be
 Poss. Stick 3rd p. sg.
 His stick
 b. s – palu – lu
 Poss. Stick 2nd p. pl.
 Your stick

3.1 Olson (1989)

Olson in re-examining the status of the possessive in German with respect to Abney's (1987) DP hypothesis, suggests that the possessive is a genitive marked personal pronoun. This case-marked pronoun, then, functions as a specifier of the DP. Comparing the pronominal possessive and the determiner, she suggests that their structure varies with respect to agreement relationships. The determiners show agreement for the features person, number, case, and gender with the noun; whereas, the possessives have inherent person and number features that do not necessarily agree with the noun, in addition to, the agreement features of the noun, as shown in (8).

- (8) a. der Mist [3ps Sg Nom Masc]
 the dirt
 b. dein -er Katze
 2ps sg GEN 3ps sg DAT Fem 3ps sg DAT FEM

³The idea of a separate projection for person was first suggested to me by J.-R. Vergnaud.

These agreement facts parallel those discussed for French and Spanish, where possessives reflect the person of the possessor and the agreement features of the noun possessed. To resolve this apparent clash in features, Olson proposes that the agreement features of the noun are copied onto DET establishing a Head-to-Head relationship with the noun. The agreement shown by the possessive, then, is a "reflex" not only of its structural position, but also of its morphological structure.

She cites coordination facts as evidence for the possessive being a maximal projection functioning as a specifier. The possessive can coordinate with other possessive phrases, as in (9).⁴

- (9) a. Sie treffen sich in deiner und Karls Lieblingsnape.
 They meet themselves in your and Karl's favorite bar.
 They meet one another
 b. Ohne seines Vaters und meinen Rat sollte er nichts unternehmen.
 Without his father's and my advice he should not undertake anything.

However, the possessive cannot be coordinated with determiners, as shown in (10).

- (10) a. *Ich wasche deinen und den Wagon.⁵
 I wash your and the car.
 b. *Karl repariert weder das noch mein Telefon.
 Karl repaired neither the nor my telephone

While her account attempts to reconcile the categorical duality of possessives, it cannot be extended to the Romance languages because of the degradation of agreement between the possessive and the noun, as in Spanish, and the occurrence of the article with the possessive, as in Italian.

According to Olson the agreement features of the noun are copied onto DET, if this were the case in Spanish then the possessive should reflect gender agreement with the noun which is not the case, as seen in (11a). The correct form for the Spanish possessive in this example is given in (11b), in which there is agreement as to number but not as to gender. Olson's account is unable to explain this reduction in agreement features.

- (11) a. *mia casa
 my-sg-fm house-sg-fm
 my house
 b. mi casa

Nor will her account explain the presence of the determiner with the possessive in Italian, given that in her account both the specifier and the head positions in DP are both filled with the

⁴The German examples are from Olson; however, the glosses are mine.

⁵Several conference participants questioned Olson's examples on coordination (examples (10) and (11) in this paper) citing the duality of forms as pronouns or determiners:i.e. *deinen* meaning either your or yours and *das* being either a determiner or a pronoun. In (11a) if you change *den Wagon* to *diesen Wagon* it becomes acceptable.

pronoun and the genitive marker, respectively. However while her account proves problematic with the data from Romance languages, the intuition that possessives are pronominal is valid.

3.2 *Pronominal-like Behavior*

Evidence for a person projection and an agreement relationship between the possessive and a pronominal element is found in the pronominal-like behavior of the possessive. The pronominal possessive behaves like a pronoun with respect to binding. These possessive constructions can be bound by a c-commanding QP, as seen in (12) for French.

- (12) La photo de chaque_i photographe de sa_i ville préférée.
The picture of each photographer of his favorite town.

The second property possessives have in common with pronouns is the ability to bind a reflexive, as shown in (13) for Spanish.

- (13) Su_i foto del mismo_i
his picture of himself

Finally, possessives behave like pronouns with respect to weak crossover effects, as seen in (14) for Portuguese.

- (14) a. Quem_i ama a sua_i mãe?
Who loves his mother
b. *Quem_i a sua_i mãe ama t_i
who_i does his_i mother love t_i

Agreement with Person with respect to the possessive provides an explanation of this pronominal behavior. The possessive, then, appears to collapse two-three functional categories. One of which is Person. The remaining number depending on whether AGR is further decomposed into Number and Gender.

4. Coordination

If pronominal possessives reflect features of both adjectival agreement and person agreement, then they should demonstrate properties common to both adjectives and pronouns. One property common to both adjectives and pronouns is that of coordination. Both adjectives and pronouns can be coordinated, as in (15), respectively.

- (15) a. un chien petit et marron (French)
a dog small and brown
b. Tu y yo tendremos que juntarnos la semana que entra. (Spanish)
You and I will have to meet the week that follows.
You and I will have to meet next week.

However, these possessive forms can not be coordinated, as shown in (16) for both French and Spanish, respectively.⁶

- (16) a. *mon et ton livre (French)
 my and your book
 b. *mi y tu libro (Spanish)

Coordination constructions with possessives, in Spanish, depend on the number of individuals involved; the second occurrence of the possessive can be deleted if the nouns refer to the same individual or aspects of the same thing, as shown in (17).

- (17) a. mi madre y mi padre
 my mother and my father (different people)
 b. my amigo y colega
 my friend and colleague (same person)
 c. su paciencia y valor
 his patience and courage (aspects of same virtue)

In (18b), there is one referent and thus one possessive. This correlates with the use of the determiner, shown in (18).

- (18) el misterio o enigma del origen
 the mystery or enigma of the origin⁷
- (19) a. la casa tuya y mía⁸
 the house your and my
 the house of yours and mine → our house
 b. la casa tuya y la ec mía

⁶Note that they can be coordinated in the fully inflected form, as in (i), leading to the two traditional classes of "weak" and "strong" (Lausber 1965).

(i) Perdimos el mio y el suyo.
 We lost mine and his.

⁷When the nouns form a single complex idea or mean essentially the same thing, only the first article is necessary, unless the nouns vary wrt gender, in which case both articles would be used, as in (i) (Butt and Benjamin 1988).

(i) las aulas y los equipos
 the classrooms (fm) and the equipment (ms)

⁸There is dialectal variation with respect to the acceptability of using the full form with the definite article. Some Peninsula dialects reject the full form with the definite article, but do accept the full form with the indefinite or a numeral, as in (i). In these dialects, when the definite article is used only the clitic form is possible. (Manual Echeveria, p.c.)

(i) a. una casa mía
 a/one house my
 one house of mine
 b. tres casas mías
 three houses my
 my three houses

Postnominal possessives behave differently than their prenominal counterparts in Spanish. The postnominal can be coordinated, as in (19), with the presence/absence of the second article reflecting a difference in interpretation. In (19a) there is only one house involved; whereas, in (19b) there are two houses.

In respect to French, in coordinated structures the use of the possessive follows that of Spanish, where the possessive is repeated when reference is to different individuals or aspects, as shown in (20).

- (20) a. ma mère et mon père
1st sg fm mother and 1st sg ms father
my mother and my father
b. *ma mère et père
c. *ma mère et soeur
my mother and sister
d. mon ami et collègue
my friend and colleague

In (20d), one referent/individual is understood; while in (20a-c) there are two individuals involved.

Likewise, in Italian coordinated structures the possessive must be used with each element of the coordination if those elements refer to different "individuals", as shown in (21).

- (21) a. il mio soprabito e il mio cappello
1st sg ms coat and 1st sg ms hat
my coat and my hat
b. *il mio soprabito e cappello

If the coordinated structure refers to one "individual", then only the first instance of the possessive is necessary, as in (22) where the item functions as both a coat and a blanket.

- (22) Questo è il mio soprabito e coperta.(Italian)
This is (the) my coat and blanket.

5. Possessives as Clitics

These coordination facts rather than supporting their pronominal analysis Olson gives for German, suggest that in the Romance languages under discussion, the prenominal possessives are not pronominal. However, if these possessives are clitics, then the data on coordination can be explained. If possessives are clitic-like then they could not be coordinated, as clitics can not be coordinated. Considering these forms as clitics also explains the variation with respect to gender and number agreement. The prenominal form is a reduced form of the full form. While the full form is marked for person, number and gender, the reduced prenominal form is marked only for person and number. This is illustrated in (23).

- (23) a. mio/mia -> mi
my (masc.)/my (fem.) -> my
b. mios/mias -> mis
my (masc. Pl.)/my (fem. pl.) -> my (pl.)

Saltarelli in a paper presented to the Second International Congress on Spanish in America notes that this loss of gender marking is characteristic of the progression from nominal to clitic object pronouns. In considering the morphology of clitics, Harris (1995) also observes the loss of gender features in the presence of person features in verbal clitics. This corresponds to the situation with the possessive. Comparing the similarity between plural markings on possessives and verbal clitics Harris notes that first and second person clitics and the possessive form *nuestro* –*s/nuestra* –*s* have two markers of plurality: one in the stem and another in the suffix. The first person possessive *mi* is proprietarily singular; it may or may not be vicariously plural by nature of agreement. This propriety number occurs only in the possessive not with respect to any other adjectival form.

6. Conclusion

The possessive appears to collapse two-three functional categories. The number depending on whether AGR is further decomposed into Number and Gender. For French the prenominal possessive shows agreement in number and gender for 1st, 2nd and 3rd person singular, but only shows number agreement for 1st, 2nd and 3rd person plural. The Spanish prenominal possessive shows agreement in number and gender only for 1st and 2nd person plural; all other forms show agreement only in number. This appears to account for the French and Spanish prenominal forms. Note the similarity to the agreement pattern of the definite article. The singular definite article in French shows overt gender agreement, but non-overt number agreement; whereas, the plural definite article shows overt number agreement, but non-overt gender agreement. However in Spanish the definite article shows overt gender agreement in both the singular and the plural, but only overt number agreement in the plural. However, this structure does not reflect the semantics of the prenominal possessive as a two-place predicate.

Two related factors need to be considered in order to account for the agreement pattern in prenominal possessives:

- i) Their status as clitics since the more clitic-like the less agreement in gender and number, and
- ii) Their status as pronouns accounting for person agreement.

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