

“Alienability” Suffix in Bystraja Even and Other Tungusic

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All Tungusic languages feature a suffix $-ŋ(V)$, traditionally analysed as a marker of alienability (Boldyrev 1976, Kazama 2008, Malchukov 2023). Challenging this view, Aralova & Pakendorf (2023) argue against the alienability interpretation of the $-ŋ(V)$ suffix, using data from the Negidal corpus.

Aralova & Pakendorf (2023) suggest that it instead signals non-canonical possession, identifying two main lexeme groups that take this suffix: 1) body parts and 2) non-possessible items, including human beings, mass nouns, adjectives, numerals, and demonstratives.¹ The noun categories from the second group were earlier identified as those that (almost) obligatorily take this suffix, when possessed (Boldyrev 1976, Kazama 2008).

According to Aralova & Pakendorf (2023), the suffix indicates an alienable interpretation for body parts and marks an associative (or ‘free’, per Storto 2005) rather than direct relationship between the possessor and the possessum for non-possessible items.² My study reinterprets Aralova & Pakendorf’s (2023) analysis of the $-ŋ(V)$ suffix in Tungusic languages. I argue that at least in Bystraja Even, this suffix neither indicates non-canonical possessive relations nor relates to associative meaning.

My first argument centres on mass nouns, which, I contend, involve the same possessive relations as those established between the possessor and countable possessums. In Even, the noun *mo* ‘wood’ is a “semi-mass” noun. Although it can be pluralized as *mo-l* ‘wooden sticks’, it may be used in its unmarked form to refer to both single sticks and multiple pieces of wood. Many speakers allow both the presence and absence of the $-ŋ$ suffix in possessive constructions (e.g., *mo-ŋ-u* / *mo-wu* ‘my wood’, see example 1). This variation challenges the non-canonical possession hypothesis: if the relation was non-canonical, *mo-wu* (without $-ŋ$) would be unacceptable; conversely, if the relation was canonical, *mo-ŋ-u* should be ruled out. I argue that the availability of $-ŋ$ is related to the mass nature of *mo* ‘wood’ but does not signal non-canonical possession.

- (1) min mo-ŋ-u / mo-wu ulak-ča
 I.OBL wood-AL-POSS.1SG / wood-POSS.1SG get.wet-PTC.PST
 ‘My wood is wet.’

While Aralova & Pakendorf (2023) limit their discussion of mass nouns to ownership relations due to corpus constraints, my field data reveal a more nuanced picture. In contrast to the variation observed with ownership (example 1), part-whole contexts show no such variation. All speakers consistently reject the $-ŋ$ suffix in these contexts, as illustrated in example (2):

¹ According to Aralova & Pakendorf (2023), mass nouns cannot be possessed in their entirety; only portions of the mass can be possessed. In this sense, masses as a whole are considered non-possessible.

² According to Storto (2005), free interpretations are those expressed through a possessive construction but rely entirely on context for their meaning. A commonly cited example is: “Yesterday, John and Paul were attacked by two (different) groups of dogs; unfortunately, John’s dogs were rabid.”

- (2) erek okat mə-n / *mə-ŋə-n
 PROX river water-POSS.3SG / water-AL-POSS.3SG
 ‘water of this river’

Examples (1) and (2) support two key points: 1) the *-ŋ* suffix does not inherently signal non-canonical relations, and 2) mass nouns do not mandatorily require *-ŋ* marking when possessed. Furthermore, maintaining the non-canonical possession hypothesis would lead to the counterintuitive conclusion that part-whole relations are canonical while ownership is not.

The argument against incorporating associative meaning into the definition of *-ŋ* is, interestingly, supported by Aralova & Pakendorf's (2023: 1574) own observation. They note that all associative contexts featuring *-ŋ* involve nouns that inherently require this suffix when possessed. This insight suggests that the associative interpretation arises not from the *-ŋ* suffix itself but from the broader possessive construction. Consider example (3):

- (3) **Left context:** My friend and I are watching reindeer sled races. I am rooting for some reindeer and my friend is rooting for others. I say to my friend:
- | | | | | |
|-------|----------------------|---|-------------------------|--------------------|
| min | orə-l-bu | / | *orə-ŋə-l-bu | dabd-uka-r-∅ |
| I.OBL | reindeer-PL-POSS.1SG | / | reindeer-AL-PL-POSS.1SG | lose-CAUS-NFUT-3PL |
- ‘My reindeers [those that I am rooting for] are winning.’

This example demonstrates that the associative meaning persists even without the -ŋ suffix, which is ungrammatical in this context. This analysis avoids the typologically unusual proposition of a dedicated marker for free possessive relations.

Aralova & Pakendorf (2023) discuss the function of the suffix *-ŋ* without addressing its morphological nature. In my talk, I will propose that *-ŋ(V)* functions as a derivational morpheme, converting certain items from being unownable to ownable, thus making them relational and mandatorily possessed. This view contrasts with the notion of non-canonical possession; instead, I suggest that this suffix enables ordinary possession of specific items. For example, body parts in Tungusic are typically not ownable and thus require *-ŋ* to be owned, as for *ulle-ŋ-u* (meat-AL-POSS.1SG) ‘my meat [of an animal]’. However, in part-whole relationships, as in *ulle-wu* (meat-POSS.1SG) ‘my flesh’, they do not require this derivation, similar to the behaviour of mass nouns as seen in examples like (2).

The linear position of the $-\eta(V)$ suffix, previously overlooked, also supports the argument for its derivational nature. This suffix, associated with alienability, is positioned immediately after the root and is separated from possessive suffixes by number and case suffixes. This separation suggests that they are not as closely connected as might be assumed. The $-\eta(V)$ suffix is also retained when proprietive adjectives are formed, as noted by Aralova & Pakendorf (2023).

In Even, there are two propriative suffixes: *-lkan*, meaning ‘having X,’ and *-pč̣i*, meaning ‘having a lot of X.’ Both suffixes derive adjectives from nouns, and nouns retain *-ŋ*, as illustrated in examples (4). This supports the treatment of *-ŋ* as a derivational morpheme.

- (4) a. erek olla-pči / *olla-ŋa-pči okat
 PROX fish-ADJ.MULT / fish-AL-ADJ.MULT river
 ‘This is a river with a lot of fish.’

b. erek	*olla-pči	/	olla-ŋa-pči	bej
PROX	fish-ADJ.MULT	/	fish-AL-ADJ.MULT	man

‘This is a man with a lot of fish.’

While the distinction between inflection and derivation can be complex, I believe that those can be separated in Tungusic languages. In my talk, I will further explore other nouns that feature the so-called “alienability suffix”, including proper names, geographical terms, and certain kinship terms, demonstrating how their behaviour aligns with my analysis.

List of Abbreviations

1, 3 – first, third person, ADJ.MULT – adjective meaning ‘having a lot of X’, AL – “alienable” possession suffix -ŋ, POSS – possessive, PROX – proximal demonstrative, PTC.PST – past participle.

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