

The Morphosyntax of Possessive Pronouns and Silent Nominals in Mongolian

This paper studies the morphosyntax of Mongolian possessive pronouns within the framework of Distributed Morphology. The core proposal is that pronouns are not lexical items but rather feature clusters that are driven by syntactic operations and formalized by vocabulary insertion.

Mongolian pronouns have three basic forms, the nominative, the genitive and the ADIAC. The nominative is unmarked and the other two marked. Morphologically, the ADIAC is totally transparent and regular while the genitive is not.

Table 1. Basic forms of pronouns in Mongolian (plural and honorific forms left out)

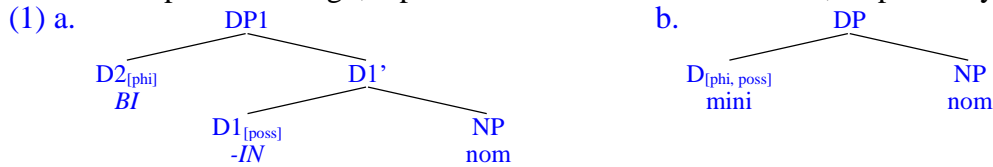
Person	Nominative	Genitive	Accusative/Dative/Instrumental/Ablative/Comitative
First	<i>bi</i>	<i>mini</i>	<i>nam-ig/-d/-aar/-aas/-tai</i>
Second	<i>či</i>	<i>čini</i>	<i>čam-ig/-d/-aar/-aas/-tai</i>
Third	<i>ter</i>	<i>tüüne</i>	<i>tüün-ig/-d/-eer/-ees/-tei</i>

Possessive pronouns have four forms, where possessivity and independency are all regularly expressed. Reflexivity, in contrast, is expressed by a dedicated suffix *-aa* in addition to the possessive impersonal pronoun *öör* ‘self’. When co-occurring with a dependent pronoun, *-aa* attaches to the possessum, not to the possessive pronoun, as in *mini ah-d-aa* ‘to my own brother’. Both dependent and independent pronouns can bear thematic roles hence arguments but only dependent ones take nominal complements. See Janhunen (2012: 133-141) and Kullmann and Tserenpil (2015: 255-263) for more details.

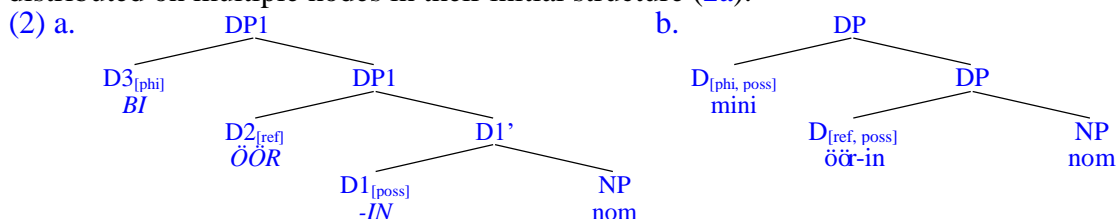
Table 2. Basic forms of possessive pronouns in Mongolian (informal dialectal forms left out)

Person	Dependent		Independent	
	Non-reflexive	Reflexive	Non-reflexive	Reflexive
First	<i>mini</i>	<i>(mini-)öör-in</i>	<i>mini-h</i>	<i>(mini-)öör-in-h</i>
Second	<i>čini</i>	<i>(čini-)öör-in</i>	<i>čini-h</i>	<i>(čini-)öör-in-h</i>
Third	<i>tüüne</i>	<i>(tüüne-)öör-in</i>	<i>tüüne-h</i>	<i>(tüüne-)öör-in-h</i>

Two questions arise here as to why the genitive takes irregular and fusional morphology compared with the ADIAC and why dependent and independent possessive pronouns are interchangeable as arguments. We show that these questions find resolutions in the portmanteau formation of possessive pronouns. Following Davis (2023), possessive forms spell out the fused outcome of the possessive determiner $D1_{[poss]}$ and $D2_{[phi]}$, which is a bare determiner with phi-features occupying Spec of $D1_{[poss]}$. This argument is based on a *bare phrase structure* theory (Chomsky 1995a, b), in which non-projecting heads are equivalent to phrases. Applying this analysis to *mini nom* ‘my book’, we obtain the initial structure (1a), in which *BI* and *-NI*, not real morphemes though, represent the content of $D2$ and $D1$, respectively.

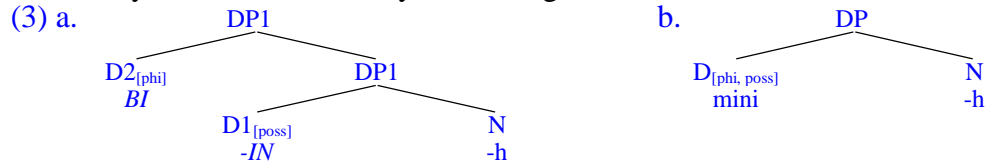


After (1a) is built and before the vocabulary insertion (VI) rule is applied, $D2$ and $D1$ undergo fusion (Halle and Marantz 1993; Embick and Marantz 2008), thereby creating a single node, with $[phi]$ and $[poss]$ clustered on it, as in (1b). Then, the VI rule applies and *mini* is inserted into $D_{[phi, poss]}$. Extending this analysis to reflexive possessives, we argue that their initial structure maximally involves three distinct D heads, each with $[phi]$, a reflexive feature $[ref]$ and $[poss]$, as in (2a). $[phi]$, $[ref]$ and $[poss]$ enter into the derivation separately, given that anaphors, with $[ref]$, are often deficient in phi-features (Reuland 2018: 2) and not all anaphors have $[poss]$. The complement of $D1$ is either a full nominal or a silent one with minimal lexical content. Given this structure, the reflexive possessive *mini öör-in* ‘my own’ is syntactically distributed on multiple nodes in their initial structure (2a).

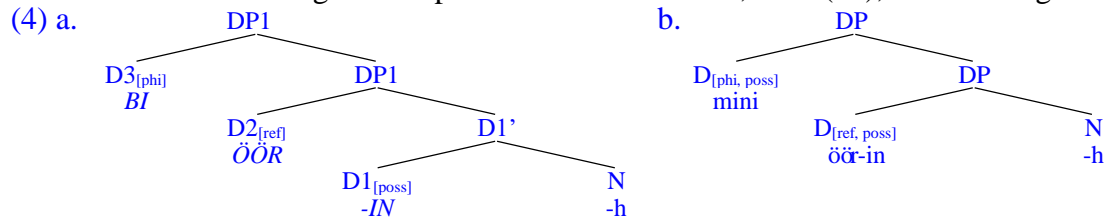


In (2), unlike in (1), both fusion and VI apply twice. When they apply to $D2_{[ref]}$ and $D1_{[poss]}$, *mini* is inserted into their fused outcome, i.e., $D_{[ref, poss]}$, as in (2b), and when they apply to $D3_{[ref]}$ and $D1_{[poss]}$, *öör-in* ‘own’ is inserted into $D_{[phi, poss]}$. Importantly, after fusion, DP remains a layered projection, containing two D heads. $D_{[phi, poss]}$ takes care of personal possession and $D_{[ref, poss]}$ takes care of reflexive possession. *Öör* lacks phi-features (at least gender and person), which makes it dependent on $D_{[phi]}$. This means that $D_{[phi]}$, whether or not it has a morphological realization, must be syntactically present for $D_{[poss]}$. Given this, *öör-in* is an impersonal pronoun.

The silent nominal involved in *mini-h* ‘mine’, also lacking [phi], is not a full nominal and therefore is realized not as a lexical word but as a suffix. The VI rule chooses *-h* for it. Ultimately, *mini-h* is formed by combining *mini* and *-h*.



With $D1_{[ref]}$ absent from (3a), *mini-h* is not coreferential with a local subject. When coreferentiality is assigned to *mini* and a local subject, *mini-h*, functioning as an anaphor, has an initial structure as in (4a), in which $D1_{[poss]}$ fuses into $D3_{[phi]}$ and $D2_{[ref]}$ respectively, and the fused outcomes are assigned morphemes *mini* and *öör-in*, as in (4b), the resulting structure.



With *öör-in* present, the possessive *mini* is optionally unrealized. This is because possessivity is involved in *öör-in* and phi-readings are obtained through binding of *mini*, explicit or implicit, by a local subject with [phi].

As regards the category of the silent nominal N, it lacks not only [phi] but also maximum lexical content. This means that it, analogous to English *one*, is some sort of indefinite pronoun, according to Baker’s (2003: 95ff, 127ff) criterion. The silent nominal finds another form *bey* ‘body’ as in *öör-in bey* ‘own’s own body/oneself’. *Bey* in this use has minimal lexical content and refers to a local subject, indicating its pronominal nature.

Back to our earlier two questions, the answers are as follows. The morphological irregularity of the pronouns is attributed to the fact that their syntactic structure, involving [poss], is richer than that of the ADIAC forms but their morphology is more compact. The interchangeability of dependent and independent possessives as arguments is accounted for by claiming that they share the same structure with the silent nominal as in (4) but dependent possessives come as a result of dropping *-h*, the exponent of the silent nominal, for phonological reasons, leading to its silence. When they are not arguments, dependent possessives are assigned the structure in (1).

The proposed analysis has four typological implications. First, a reflexive pronoun, for example, in *ko a li* ‘his body/himself’ in Haitian Creole (Rooryck 2011: 29) instantiates the silent nominal and may be subject to the same analysis. Second, the silent-nominal analysis accounts for why the same form is employed for both dependent and independent pronouns in some languages, e.g., *watashi-no* in Japanese and *ziji-de* in Chinese. Third, English *own*, which has been regarded as a possessive adjective but is functionally equivalent to the unlexicalized form *self’s*, is in fact a reflexive possessive pronoun, instantiating the constellation of *SELF* ($D_{[ref]}$) and *’S* ($D_{[poss]}$). This connects to the putative ambiguous reading of sentences such as *John_i loathes his_{i/j} shoes*. Under the present analysis, when *his*, the portmanteau form of *SHE* and *’S*, refers back to *John*, the sentence involves an implicit *own* and is subject to the Binding Principle A, not to Principle B, with no violation of it. Fourth, the blurredness of head-phrase distinction under the bare-phrase spirit leads to the syntactic transparency and morphological compactness of possessive pronouns.

References

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