Alienability distinctions as inflectional classes
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Alienability distinctions are a form of nominal classification arising in possessive paradigms (Nichols & Bickel 2013). They typically oppose two constructions. Inalienably possessed nouns typically include body parts or kin terms, though the type of nouns belonging to the inalienable class varies between languages (Nichols 1988:572). Alienable nouns are the remainder of nouns. There are various treatments of this phenomenon, often involving the presence of a semantic feature of alienability on nouns: the presence of the inalienable value triggers the use of a different construction (Chappell & McGregor 1996).

Although the inalienable class typically includes kin terms and body parts, it is never a unitary class defined by strict rules of membership: not all kin terms and body parts will belong to it, or it will have further members chosen particularly among those words that express a part-whole relationship (Nichols 1988:572). For example, in Eastern Pomo, the inalienable class comprises a closed, unproductive subset of kin terms (McLendon 1975:92, 108).

The fact that the inalienable class is not semantically homogeneous or exhaustive is a problem for a semantic definition, which often becomes circular: some nouns are marked differently because they are inalienable, but we only know that they are inalienable because they are marked differently. In most languages, a semantic feature such as 'kin term' is not sufficient to define the set of members of the inalienable class, and these have to be specified lexically. Similarly, a distinction in terms of relational nouns (those nouns whose lexical semantics include an inherent possessive relationship), is not sufficient to account for the phenomenon, because not all relational nouns belong to the inalienable class. In a lot of languages, the categorization of nouns is fixed, and the assignment to a class is thus lexical. Lexical classes which are marked morphologically differently (even through periphrasis for some of the classes) without any change in meaning are inflectional classes, and I propose to treat most cases of alienability distinctions as inflectional classes. This treatment has the advantage of not requiring an ad hoc semantic feature, and of taking these cases of classification in the realm of known phenomena.

Furthermore, a lot of languages in fact present more than two classes, which are difficult to reconcile with the basic idea of a bipartition of nouns in terms of alienability, and more akin to a treatment as inflectional classes. Similarly, the fact that some languages, such as Biak, present heteroclisis between classes is a further indication of their status of inflectional classes: one does not see why there would be a principled reason for the word wife to be alienable in some persons, and inalienable for others if the choice was in terms of semantics. I provide evidence for alienability distinctions to be considered as inflectional classes from Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages spoken in New Guinea, as well as Pama-Nyungan and Pomoan languages.

References

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