
The grammatical behaviour of semantically noncanonical possessive relations in Oceanic

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Oceanic languages mark possession in two constructions: ‘direct’, for inalienables, with possessor-indexing marking the possessum noun, and ‘indirect’, where it attaches to a relational classifier (Lichtenberk 1983). However, several noncanonical semantic relations are marked directly or with a ‘food’ classifier - possession of: characteristics; items acting on the possessor; stories etc about the possessor; and intimate items. Earlier studies assumed that all noncanonical types behave alike, but Palmer (2008) found diverse treatment of noncanonical types in 7 languages. Here I survey intimate, characteristic, undergoer and subject matter possession in 23 languages from every major Oceanic subgroup, finding that no language treats all types alike. Instead, a bidirectional implicational hierarchy (1) treats noncanonical types either like canonical inalienables or like food. This requires an elaboration of Nichols’ (1988) inalienability hierarchy, as (2). Nichols’ “culturally basic items” requires expanding from “items essential for the possessor’s livelihood” (Chapell & McGregor 1996:4) to items in physical contact with the possessor, while characteristic, subject matter and undergoer possession are added. The study finds inalienability is not necessarily a lexical property of nouns (contra Nichols (1988:574)), the inalienability hierarchy applying to inalienable relations as well as to lexically specified inalienable nouns.

(1) inalien. < > subject matter < > characteristic < > undergoer < > food
(direct) (FOOD)

(2) body parts/ > part-whole/ > characteristics/ > cult. basic/ > undergoer
kin terms spatial rel's by subj. matter intimate

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