
Against ‘inalienable’ possession

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Inalienable possession (IP) is often viewed as a semantic relation of possession in which possessor and possessum are presented as inseparable, with the possessum an untransferable relational noun. Inalienable possession is expressed in French by a definite article introducing the possessed noun (Hatcher 1944, Kayne 1975, Vergnaud & Zubizarreta 1992, Guéron 2006). The subscripts in (1) indicate IP.

- (1) a. Oriane_i; a levé les_i mains
Oriane has lifted the hands
‘Oriane_i lifted her_i hands’

It has rarely been noted that ‘definite’ IP extends to mental and physical states (good spirits, life, and health), and (entirely transferable) articles of clothing, personal protection, or adornment, as in 2ab:

- (2) a. Pierre_i; a gardé le_i moral/ perdu la_i vie
Pierre has kept the mood/ lost the life
‘Pierre kept up his_i good spirits/ lost his_i life’
b. Pierre_i; s_i’est sali la_i chemise/ déchiré le_i pantalon
Pierre to-SELF dirtied the shirt/ torn the pants
‘Pierre dirtied his_i shirt / tore his_i pants’

I claim that IP in French is neither inalienable nor possessive. I show that the definite determiner in IP is a ‘weak definite’ in the sense of Aguilar-Guevara (2014). I also argue that *only nouns that can be located on or in the body of an animate DP can function as weak definites in IP contexts.*, and that this generalization derives from the syntax of Location as proposed by Rooryck & Vanden Wyngaerd (2011).

References: • Aguilar-Guevara, A. (2014) Weak definites: semantics, lexicon and pragmatics. PhD, Utrecht • Hatcher, A.G. (1944) Il me prend le bras vs. il prend mon bras. *Romanic Review* 35, 2:156-164. • Kayne, R. (1975) *French syntax*. Cambridge: MIT • Rooryck, J. & Vanden Wyngaerd, G. (2011) *Dissolving Binding Theory*, OUP.