

Adjectival possessives that aren't quite adjectives

Data. In Italian, possessives encoding person distinctions (henceforth, ϕ -possessives) occur in both definite and indefinite DPs. While they typically appear prenominally, they may follow the noun under appropriate discourse conditions, as in (1c).

- (1) a. il mio libro. 'my book'
 b. un mio libro. 'a book of mine'
 c. un/il libro MIO. 'my book/a book of mine'

Several Italo-Romance varieties spoken in e.g. Veneto, Tuscany, and Sicily exhibit a dual series of ϕ -possessive forms (Cardinaletti 1998; Manzini & Savoia 2005). Prenominal ϕ -possessives, which usually do not agree in gender and number, are marginal or ungrammatical in indefinite DPs such as (2b). Postnominal agreeing ϕ -possessives are allowed in indefinite DPs, though with varying degrees of acceptability, as shown in (2c).

- (2) a. el me libro. 'my book' (Verona; Veneto)
 b. ??un me libro. 'a book of mine.'
 c. un/el libro MIO 'my book/a book of mine'

Other northern varieties spoken in Lombardy and Emilia exhibit only prenominal ϕ -possessives, which cannot (or only marginally) occur in indefinite DPs, as in (3b).

- (3) a. l mè libro. 'my book' (Locarno; Canton Ticino)
 b. *?vün mè libro. 'a book of mine'
 c. *l/vün libro ME. 'my book/a book of mine'

Southern varieties show comparable patterns, although in most cases ϕ -possessives occur only postnominally. Our discussion concentrates on two main patterns. One pattern, typical of Sardinian and Salentino varieties, features ϕ -possessives in both definite and indefinite DPs:

- (4) a. su libru meu. 'my book' (Logudorese Sardinian)
 b. unu libru meu. 'a book of mine.'

In the second pattern, which is found in most upper-southern varieties, an asymmetry emerges between DPs headed by a definite article and those featuring an indefinite article, a demonstrative or other D-elements. In the latter, ϕ -possessives tend to occur in an English-like 'double genitive' construction, as shown in (5b), from Silvestri (2016: 129, 139).

- (5) a. u cwanə mwija. 'my dog' (Verbicaro)
 b. quidda cammisa da mija. 'that skirt of mine'

Analysis. In most Western Romance varieties, adnominal DPs are licensed by prepositions (Longobardi's 2001 'free Genitives'), while ϕ -possessives are case licensed via Agree (with the notable exception in 5b). Φ -possessives are probed by the Person feature of D (Longobardi 2008, Bernstein 2008). We consider the possibility that, in the languages under analysis, D's person feature is *inherited* (Chomsky 2008) by a lower functional head, corresponding to Crisma et al.'s 2024 GenH (High Genitive), see also Longobardi (1996) and, for a compatible analysis, Eguren & Roca (2025). Φ -possessives are first-merged in a lower position (GenL in Crisma et al. 2024), where they are theta-licensed and probed by GenH, as illustrated in (6). We assume that the derivation does not crash if GenH fails to agree with a matching Goal (Preminger 2014). Typological variation follows from the fact that languages spell out either the Probe (GenH) or the Goal (GenL); the Goal in GenL is an XP that can be coordinated and modified, while the status of the higher copy in GenH is more controversial (according to Cardinaletti 1998,

pronominal forms are ‘weak’ elements). GenL ϕ -possessives are eventually crossed by N, which moves to an intermediate position in the functional spine of the DP.

$$(6) \quad [_{DP} D [_{GenH} \{u\phi\} \dots [_{GenL} \{i\phi\} [_{NP} N$$

$\uparrow$
 (2a), (3a)

$\uparrow$
 (5a)

In the Italo-Romance varieties under analysis, determiners are merged in D regardless of the occurrence of possessives in GenH. The former satisfies an orthogonal property known as *strong D* (Longobardi 2005, 2008), an externalisation condition triggering the occurrence of an overt determiner at the edge of the DP that, under certain conditions, leads to the external merge of an expletive-like D element.

Although determiners and ϕ -possessives in (6) can in principle co-occur, we put forward the hypothesis that combinations such as (2b) and (3b) are marginal/excluded on semantic grounds. We contend that ϕ -possessives probed by GenH are not referentially inert, as one would expect if ϕ -possessives were bona fide adjectives. In the Italo-Romance varieties exemplified in (2), (3), and (5), ϕ -possessives trigger presuppositions that make them incompatible with certain D elements such as indefinite articles and, though not identically so, demonstratives (which were not exemplified in the preceding dataset). It is worth noting that GenL ϕ -possessives, which are probed by GenH but remain in situ as in (5a), are subject to the same restrictions. Since they cannot be licensed via Agree, they are instead licensed through the double-genitive construction exemplified in (5b).

How, then, do we account for languages like those in (1) and (4), where definite and indefinite DPs show no asymmetry? Analogously, why can postnominal ϕ -possessives in (2c), found in Veneto, Tuscan and some Sicilian varieties, co-occur with any type of D element? We follow Lyons (1986) in referring to this type of ϕ -possessive as bona fide ‘adjectival’, and we take its distinctive property to be the possibility of occurring predicatively, both within the DP and as the complement of copular verbs. In languages with a dual series of ϕ -possessives such as Veneto, Tuscan and Sicilian in (2), one can easily distinguish the adjectival from the ‘functional’ series, while in languages like Italian (1), Salentino and Sardinian (4), the distinction is not straightforward. The consequence is that (apparently?) the latter varieties are not subject to (in)definiteness-related restrictions. We believe that a more adequate characterization of adjectival ϕ -possessives will emerge from a closer examination of their syntax in predicative positions, which were not exemplified here.

To sum up, typologically, the set of Romance varieties under consideration falls into two types of ϕ -possessive systems: (i) ‘functional’ only (Lombard, Emilian, Upper Southern); (ii) ‘functional’ and ‘adjectival’ (Veneto, Tuscan, Sicilian, where the distinction is straightforward; Italian, Sardinian, Salentino, where the distinction is blurred).

Within this framework, D-matching ϕ -possessives of the French/Spanish type (‘D-checking’ since Lyons 1986) are analyzed as functional ϕ -possessives licensed by the mechanism in (6), which additionally satisfy the *strong D* requirement through overt realization in D. The difference between French and Spanish is that French patterns with type (i), whereas Spanish, which also exhibits adjectival possessives, belongs to type (ii).

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