Possessors and Agents: Who’s in Control?
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Introduction: This paper examines genitives that are associated with agent theta roles in Polynesian languages such as Niuean, Tongan, Tuvaluan, and Samoan (with a focus on Niuean). I consider two relevant constructions, both of which have been considered to involve control. There are several problems with subsuming them under a control analysis; the goal of this paper is to develop an alternative unified analysis for the two constructions.

The Constructions: The paper will focus on the genitive relative and the unaccusative genitive.

(1) e mena haau [ ne tunu ai e moa ]
ABS.C thing 2SGEN T/A cook RESPRN ABS.C chicken
“the thing you cooked the chicken in” (Seiter 20b:97)
(i.e. “your thing that ___ cooked the chicken in”)

(2) Kua fakamagamaga [ e tau gutu he tau maulele…]
PERF faka-open-open(PL) ABS.C PL mouths GEN.C PL birds
“The birds opened their mouths in the nest.” (Sperlich 1997, GMP 2009)
(i.e. “cause-open [the mouths of the birds]”)

In (1) the agent of the relative clause is expressed as a genitive DP appearing outside of the relative clause. In (2) the agent of the clause is expressed as a genitive DP within the theme DP. In each example, the agent is not expressed in the normal position, nor in the normal case.

Previous Analyses: For (1), previous analyses have considered that there is a relation of coindexing or control between the genitive DP (in bold) and a null agent argument in the relative clause (Herd, Macdonald, and Massam to appear, Otsuka 2007). Yet both these papers also argue (in different ways) that the position controlled into cannot in fact exist, making this construction diverge from standard control analyses. A previous analysis of (2) considers that there is a relation between the genitive DP (in bold) and a null agent, namely a relation of backwards control (Homer 2009a,b). Yet, here again, the agent has been argued not to independently exist in such sentences, which are intransitive in nature (Duranti and Ochs 1990). In addition, standard (backwards/forwards) control analyses have not involved a non-agent genitive D.

Analysis: This paper will adopt the view that external arguments are merged as specifiers of functional projections, headed either by a Voice head (fully agentive: Borer 2005, Kratzer 1996) or an Applicative head (less agentive – Kim in prep, cf. Pylkkänen 2002). The claim is that the Gen⁰ head in genitive agent constructions acts as an applicative head, within a mixed category, being embedded under a D but above a reduced CP (1) or a VP (2). The Gen/Apl head is licensed by the selecting D and, like high applicatives, it serves to establish a relation between the genitive DP in its specifier and a sister ‘eventive’ phrase, but as well, like low applicatives, it establishes a relation between two nominals, i.e. between the genitive DP and the NP which lexically heads the matrix DP containing both (cf. Kayne 1994). The structure (before NP movement) for (1) is shown in (3) and that for (2) (before V movement) is in (4). (Some word order issues are simplified here to save space.)

(3) “DP interrupted by CP” (cf. “his mistake to make” “her game to lose”)
i.e. “the his [to make [mistake]] → the his [mistake], [to make mistake]”

(4) “DP interrupted by VP”
i.e. [IP the his [open mouth] ] → [ open [ the his [open mouth ] ] }
In (3), rather than being a DP-gen raised from an agent position (Clark 1976), or a DP-gen that controls an agent pro or PRO, the DP-gen here is the agent, but it is expressed as a genitive, case-marked by the Appl/Gen head, due to the influence of the selecting D (cf. Hale 2002, Kornfilt 2003, Miyagawa 2008, Krause 2001), which is the functional head of the relative clause.

In (4), the situation is identical except that the complement of Gen is not a reduced relative clause, but rather, it is a VP, which interrupts the nominal extended projection, and takes nP as its complement. In this case, the V raises to initial position to form the main verb of the sentence. (Control is an alternative analysis here, but it would be forwards control by the verb to a PRO-verb. The pros and cons of the raising and control analyses will be further discussed, and the proposed analysis will be supported. The issue of possessor fronting will also be addressed.)

The force of this analysis is to capture the observation of Ackerman et al (2004) about similar constructions in other languages, namely that the nature of the genitive relation, which is always an underspecified one, is mediated by the predicate of the sentence, i.e. the usual loose genitive relation between nominals is actually being spelled out by the predicate.

In summary, then, in this paper, two constructions are examined that have in common that they involve agentive genitive DPs. Previous analyses of the constructions are outlined as are the various problems for these analyses. An alternative analysis is proposed, which claims that the genitive arguments are applied external arguments, which bear a relation both to their selected event, and to the nP which heads the DP projection. In essence, in (1,3), a sentence ends up as a DP (cf Kayne 1994) and in (2,4), a DP ends up as a sentence. The paper will provide additional support for the proposed analysis, and it will also present new Niuean fieldwork data.