Possessive markers in Komi-Zyrian: topic, presupposition, or discourse markers[1]

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In Komi-Zyrian (Pechora dialect) direct objects (DOs) can take the marker of the accusative case, cumulative markers of accusative and possession (referring to the person and number of the possessor) and can remain unmarked. Serdobolskaya, Toldova (2012) show that accusative/non-marked DOs are in complimentary distribution depending on animacy: animate DOs, proper names and pronouns may take the accusative, while non-animate DOs may be non-marked (see also Klumpp 2014). Hence, we differentiate between two strategies of DO marking in Komi-Zyrian, 0/Acc vs. Poss.

The distribution of the two strategies is based on the information structure of the sentence, on the one hand, and on referential properties of the DO, on the other hand. Poss is most often preferred in the following contexts:

1. The DO is a possessum of either an explicitly mentioned participant, or the speaker/hearer/focus of empathy etc.
2. The DO is a sentence topic.

For other types of contexts, Serdobolskaya, Toldova (2012) claim that Poss is most often chosen if DO belongs to the theme of the sentence; if it belongs to rheme, the 0/Acc strategy is a preferred one. Serdobolskaya, Toldova (2017) show that the following rules are most relevant in these cases:

3. The DO is marked with Poss if another element is in narrow focus (the verb, the subject, other arguments, adverbials).
4. The DO is marked with Poss in case of partitive specificity as defined in von Heusinger (2011).
5. The DO is marked with Poss in case it has a modifier that triggers the exhaustive interpretation.

These rules may be explained based on presupposition: Poss encodes the presupposition of existence/uniqueness of the DO. It is by definition present in the type 5, and with some reservations in 1 (see Dobrovie-Sorin 2004, Barker 2011). Topical NPs (2) involve the presupposition of existence as claimed in (Lambrecht 1994). Narrow focus constructions (3) are analyzed as presupposition triggers (Levinson 1983). Partitive specificity contexts (4) involves the presupposition of existence (von Heusinger 2011).

However, the presupposition-based explanation does not reflect the following facts:

The use of the DO possessive markers is not required (or even preferred) in the context of several presupposition triggers, e.g.:

- 'stop' verbs, the verb 'know', causal adverbial clauses;
- contrast (on the contrary, if the DO bears the contrastive focus, the 0/ACC strategy is required).

Moreover, in the contexts (2)-(5) possessive markers are not used in case of semi-activated discourse status (which is measured in terms of high referential distance, cf. Chafe 1994).

Hence, however appealing the presupposition analysis, it does not cover all the data. To attain the explanatory adequacy, we analyze the linear position of the DO, namely, the following parameters: the (non-)adjacency of the DO to the verb and the VO/OV word order. Based on the corpus and elicited data, we show that the non-marked DOs occurring left-adjacent and right-adjacent to the verb have different referential properties: the left-adjacent DO is most often definite, and the right-adjacent DO is most often indefinite. Thus, the choice of the marking and the linear position interact in signalling the referential properties of the DO in Pechora Komi-Zyrian.

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