Shift from a possessive to a head marker in Turoyo

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Background and methodology

Turoyo (Neo-Aramaic) has 2 sets of possessive agreement suffixes used in constructions with an explicit possessor (Jastrow, 1967). This study examines the shift of the masculine possessive marker in head-marked constructions (HMCs) toward a possessive head marker without agreement—a phenomenon unnoticed in previous research.

I analyzed a corpus of texts from various scholars[1] and worked with Tur Abdin speakers (2023–24), who translated stimuli from Kurmanji and Turkish and evaluated Turoyo stimuli.

Singular possessors (PSRs)

In HMCs, only *-e* POS.3MS and *-a* POS.3FS are used (1). 1st and 2nd person suffixes are excluded, as personal pronouns do not occur in HMCs.

(1)
a.   +raġl-e   d=u-NəʕMan
        leg-POS.3MS   of=ART.MS-PN
‘Nuuman’s leg’

b.   +raġl-a   d=i-Maryam
        leg-POS.3FS   of=ART.FS-PN
‘Maryam’s leg’

With certain possessums that host the first set[2] of possessive suffixes, a gender agreement mismatch may occur when PSR is feminine, leading to variation in the expressed gender.

(2)   +qarʕ–a/–e   d=i–dawmo
        top-POS.3FS/-POS.3MS   of=ART.FS-tree

‘the top of the tree’.

See Figure 1 for a comparison of the suffixes’ frequency with feminine PSRs.

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[1] Beṯ-Ṣawoce, 1995; Häberl et al., 2022, 2024; Häberl & Loesov, 2021; Jastrow, 1967, 2002; Prym & Socin, 1881; Ritter, 1969, 1971; Ritter et al., 1967

[2] These include kinship terms, body parts, nouns indicating part-whole relations, inherent properties and other relational nouns (Jastrow, 1967).
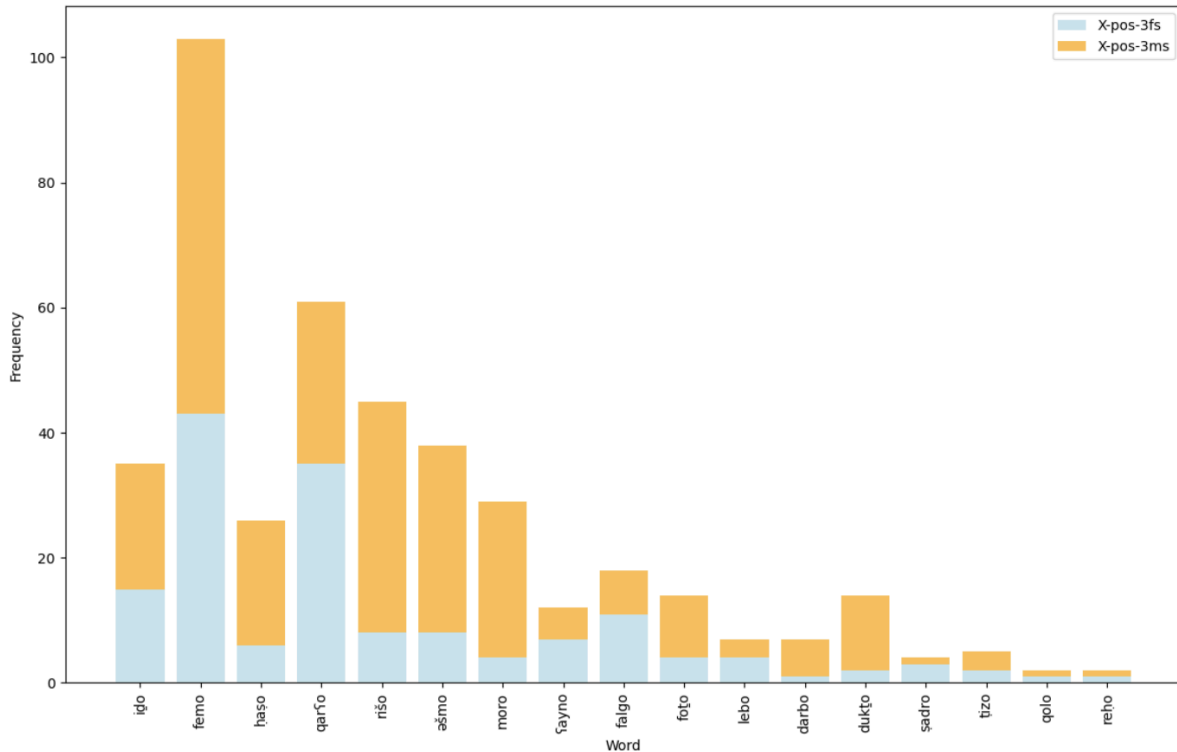
Figure 1. Comparison of POS.3MS and POS.3FS for feminine possessors

Several possessums, e.g., *rišo* 'head' and *ḥaṣo* 'back', predominantly take POS.3MS over POS.3FS. For certain nouns, the suffixes seem to be in free variation, e.g., *iḏo* 'hand' and *femo* 'mouth'.

Moreover, HMC cannot be replaced with the independent construction with the definite article (IC).[3]

(3)   *(u‒)fem‒o   d=u‒baḥar

       (ART.MS‒)coast‒SG   of=ART.MS‒sea

Intended meaning: 'the/a seashore'

Plural PSRs

HMCs with plural PSRs behave differently from those with singular PSRs. Although the suffix -*ayye* (POS.3PL) might be expected[4], it is not grammatical.

(4)   *raġl‒oṯ‒ayye   d=an‒naʕim‒e

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[3]This term is used in (Kuzin, 2019).
[4]It may be expected from the paradigm, cf. (Jastrow, 1967).

leg-PL-POS.3PL   of=ART.PL-child-PL
'Childrens' legs'

Instead of (4), three possible constructions are attested.

I.(5)   ar-raġl-ote̲   d=an-naʕim-e
         ART.PL-leg-PL   of=ART.PL-child-PL

II.(6)   raġl-ot̲-e   d=an-naʕim-e
         leg-PL-(e)   of=ART.PL-child-PL

III.(7) raġl-e   d=an-naʕime
         leg-POS.3MS   of=ART.PL-child-PL

It is plausible to gloss *-e* in (6) as POS.3MS, given its homophony with the last segment of the plural suffix *-ote̲*. To decide whether *-e* denotes possession rather than plurality, a lexeme with distinct allomorphs for these markers would be needed. However, there is no such lexeme.

Construction III (7) exemplifies dependent plurality[5], where the singular form is used despite children having multiple legs.

Analysis

In summary:

- HMCs cannot replace ICs when PSR is singular;
- In HMCs with plural PSRs, agreement is impossible; instead, IC or structures like (6) and (7) are used.

Key questions: What does *-e* in (6) mean, and why does it occur with feminine PSRs? To answer both, I propose analysing *-e* as a generalized possessive head marker.

First, if we return to (3), intuitively, a construction impossible in the singular but productive[6] in the plural (6) seems unlikely. Thus, it is preferable to analyze them in the same way—i.e., to claim that *-e* in (6) conveys possessive meaning rather than plurality alone which is motivated by its homonymy with POS.3MS.

Moreover, since the plural marker can be omitted (7), I argue that N[PL]-POS.3MS and N-PL-POS.3MS share the same structure. While optional/dependent PL is not this study's focus, I suggest that the plural marker in (7) is optionally deleted during spell-out,[7] leaving only the possessive suffix. When the plural marker is present (6), the possessive suffix remains in the same position.

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[5](Ivlieva, 2020)
[6]Corpus data support that it is indeed productive; however, a detailed discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper.
[7]Perhaps, in the form of an Impoverishment rule in Distributed Morphology (DM; Bobaljik, 2017).

Thus, I contend that *-e* as it appears in (2), (6) and (7), functions as a generalized possessive head marker remaining in the structure (regardless of the presence of plural marking). The table below summarizes my observations. The third column highlights the central claim of this talk:*-e* is a possessive head marker, unspecified for φ-features.

Table 1. Suffixes in HMC and IC

PSR NUM	PSR GN	**-POS.3MS/HM**	-POS.3FS	IC
sg	m	+	*	*
sg	f	+	+	*
pl	∅	+	∅	+

In the talk I will propose an analysis in DM.

Glosses and abbreviations

1, 2, 3 — 1, 2, 3 person, art — article, f — feminine, gn — gender marker, hm — head marker, HMC — head-marked construction, IC — independent construction, m — masculine, N — noun, num — number, pl — plural, pn — proper noun, pos — possessive, PSR — possessor, sg — singular.

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Funding