Systematicities in the possessive marking of Nkep
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Possessives in Nkep (Northeast Santo, Vanuatu; Oceanic) can be expressed in several ways:

1. Direct suffixation:
   nëthngë-c
   stomach-1s.poss
   'My stomach'
2. Indirect (classifier) possession:
   a. nithel   na-ngër
      banana food.class-3p
      'Their bananas'
   b. nloom   h-ooc
      house   gen.class-1s
      'My house'
3. Associative possession:
   nra   hen   wam
   pig   of   that.one
   'That man's pig'

What makes Nkep possessives worth a closer look are the numerous lexically specified alternatives for the direct possessive suffixes. Compare the endings for the possessed forms of *leg* and *hand* in (4) and (5) for example.

(4)   *leg*

Person	Singular	Plural
1	nweileic	nweileicam
1 inclusive		nweileir
2	nweileim	nweileicei
3	nweilein	nweileingör

(5)   *hand*

Person	Singular	Plural
1	nwaalküc	nwaalkücam
1 inclusive		nwaalkör
2	nwaalküm	nwaalkücei
3	nwaalkön	nwaalküngör

In this paper, I examine the form of direct possession with body parts and consider the structural and historical implications of this variability. Using a corpus of largely conversational speech recorded in Nkep, we find some evidence that changes to the Nkep possessive system continue to take place.

I then use the corpus to explore in more detail the semantic basis of the different possessive constructions. There has been some debate in the literature about whether the forms in (2)

qualify as heads or classifiers (Lichtenberk 1983, Franjieh 2016). We find that in everyday speech possessives behave a lot like true classifiers (Grinevald 2000).

Possessive marking in Oceanic languages is well-trodden ground. However, this paper adds to our descriptive understanding of the phenomenon, including how it has changed over time, and also demonstrates how the systematic study of variation and change enhances descriptive adequacy (Meyerhoff 2017).

References

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