Gender as a Derivational Constraint in Predicative Possession: The case of Heritage Tamil

The resilience of core syntactic properties of grammars is a well-attested phenomenon in heritage language syntax (Lohndal et al, 2019; Lohndal, 2021; D'Alessandro et al, 2025). The central idea of this research agenda is that there are certain core-structural and perhaps universal properties of language which develop unhindered despite reduced access to input in heritage languages. This abstract illustrates an instance of gender features creating constraints in the syntax of predicative possession (PrPoss) with the involvement of nominalizers (NMZR). The connection between features (gender) and derivational structure (PrPoss) is resilient in a grammar that develops under a constrained context of acquisition: Tamil (Dravidian) spoken as a heritage language in New Delhi, India where the L2 is Hindi-Urdu (Indo-Aryan). There are three parts to this abstract: (i) The gender system of Tamil and its connection with NMZR, (ii) PrPoss in Tamil and its relation to gender and NMZR, and (iii) Empirical attestation of these structural constraints in Heritage Tamil.

I. Gender System of Tamil: Tamil has solely biological gender (BG) features (Corbett, 1991). Only [+HUMAN] nouns are assigned gender features in the lexicon - structurally represented as a feature on N, (1a - b).

(1a) [nP [n [NP [**N boy.MASC**]]]]   (1b) [nP [n [NP [**N girl.FEM**]]]]

The nominal domain also contains a functional head n – nodal for two phenomena: (i) Grammatical gender (ii) Nominalization (Kramer, 2015). Since Tamil lacks grammatical gender altogether, the only function of n in Tamil is nominalization. It has been established that in languages where n carries grammatical gender features, nominalized structures too are gendered (Kramer, 2015). In this abstract I contribute a corollary to this: when n is devoid of gender features, as in Tamil, nominalized entities are not gendered, and the process of nominalization cannot access gender features at all. The point is illustrated by (2) and (3). (2) contains a verb with PNG affixation. The verb inflects for the different gender features of **Ram.M** and Sita.F. However, when the same verb phrase is nominalized (3) , the resultant structure is not gendered; the nominalized 'going' does not show any gender features.

(2) **ram**/sita   viitu-ku   po-n-**aan**/aa   (3) ram/ sita viitu-ku po-n-adu

   Ram.M/Sita.F house-DAT go-PST-**MSG**/FSG   Ram.M/Sita.F house-DAT go-PST-NMZR

   'Ram/ Sita went home.'   'Ram/ Sita's going home'

Essentially, n in Tamil can nominalize but it doesn't have access to gender features. This is further corroborated by the fact that the nominalizer (NMZR) in Tamil is derived from the III person non-gendered pronoun *adu* (Krishnamurthy, 2003). Thus, n in Tamil has no connections with gender features. With this in place, we probe into the domain of PrPoss to explore the role of n in the syntax of possession.

II. PrPoss, n and BG-carrying nouns: Possession can be expressed attributively (eg. John's book) as well as predicatively (This book is John's.). This abstract focuses on the latter and highlights the involvement of n in the formation of PrPoss. PrPoss constructions can be argued to contain a null stand-in for the possessum, e, in the predicate - 'This book$_i$ is John's e_i.' The structure of PrPoss is given in (4), where the subject DP 'this book' is located at the specifier of PredP, and the rest of the sentence 'is john's' located in its complement. Following Szabolcsi's (1994) and den Dikken's (1998) characterisation of attributive possession, I develop (4) as the underlying representation of PrPoss. Pred takes a small clause configuration containing the possessor PP and e as its complement.

(4) [PredP [**DP this book**$_i$] [Pred' [Pred is] [nP [PP John's] [n' [SC [n e_i]]]]]]

As with all null elements, e requires structural licensing. This licensing is done by structurally

relating *e* to the subject DP in two ways: *e* is anaphorically co-indexed with DP and can obtain its reference from the subject DP. I propose that these two structural relations are conducted by the functional projection *n*P.

The reason for positing *n*P as the licensor of *e* in PrPoss is twofold: (a) Morphological evidence: in many languages, PrPoss is realised with a nominalizer morpheme, and (b) Structurally, *n* can stand for the elided possessum in 'This book is John's *e*.' and convey that [PP+SC] is a nominal element. I infer from (4) that the presence/ absence of BG features on a noun determines its occurrence in PrPoss configurations. The inference is explained as follows: the syntax of PrPoss requires a structural relationship between *e* and the subject DP; a relation mediated by *n*. *n* cannot establish the requisite connection with BG carrying nouns, as *n* is incompatible with BG.

Based on this I predict that Tamil BG nouns cannot occur in PrPoss. Only non-BG nouns can. This prediction is empirically attested: (5) is grammatical, as it contains non-BG nouns such as 'house' and 'child'. (6), on the other hand, is ungrammatical – 'boy' and 'student' are BG carrying nouns, and thus, cannot be licensed by *n* in the configuration of PrPoss.

(5a) *inda viidu ram-oda-du*	(5b) *inda kuLandai sita-oda-du*
this **house** Ram-POSS-NMZR	this **child** sita-POSS-NMZR
'This house is Ram's.'	'This child is Sita's.'
(6a) **inda paiyan ram-oda-du*	(6b) **inda student sita-oda-du*
this **boy** Ram-POSS-NMZR	this **student** Sits-POSS-NMZR
'This boy/son is Ram's'	'This student is Sita's.'

With (5-6) I establish that structural constraints related to *n* disallow BG-nouns in Tamil PrPoss.

III. BG and PrPoss in Heritage Tamil: Our next line of inquiry is: How does this phenomenon develop when Tamil is acquired in a context of acquisition that deviates from the norm? In order to address this question, I take up the case of Heritage Tamil (HT) acquired in New Delhi with Hindi-Urdu as the L2. When a heritage language develops with reduced access to PLD, it tends to diverge from the baseline variety of the same language. However, not all aspects of grammar are equally susceptible to change. Core syntactic phenomena are relatively resilient to change, whereas domains that require intensive learning on the part of the language acquirer tend to undergo change. This is attributed to the fact that core syntax is a part of UG and can develop even with restricted PLD. On the other hand, case-by-case learning counts on rich PLD, and suffers in its absence. **The Study:** The relationship between BG nouns and PrPoss outlined here is a part of core syntax. It falls out from a fundamental property of grammars that features (BG) drive syntactic computations (PrPoss). Thus, I predict that HT speakers will retain this constraint in their grammar. To empirically attest the prediction, I conducted a picture-description task with 14 HT speakers (mean age=21.4). **Results:** A total of 151 tokens of PrPoss were produced in this task. HT speakers maintained the distinction found in baseline Tamil: they produced PrPoss for non-BG nouns, such as (5), but did not produce any instances of PrPoss for BG nouns such as (6). The set of pictures and the sentence-beginning prompts given for both types of nouns were the exact same. Thus, despite the same conditions of elicitation, HT speakers made a distinction between BG nouns (6) and non-BG nouns (5) in the domain of PrPoss. Based on these results, we can conclude that HT speakers have structurally encoded the constraint in (4) for PrPoss.

Conclusion: The idea that features drive syntactic computation is a central one within the current theory of syntax. In this abstract, we find empirical attestation for gender features and predicative possession in a heritage grammar, demonstrating that core syntax develops despite reduced PLD.

Selected References: den Dikken, M. (1998). Predicate Inversion in DP. In *Possessors, predicates and movement in the determiner phrase*,177–214. | Kramer, R. T. (2015). *The morphosyntax of gende*r. Oxford University Press| Szabolcsi, A. (1994). The noun phrase. In *The syntactic structure of Hungarian* 179-274