

The locus of variation: A case study from Malayalam property concept constructions

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BACKGROUND Francez and Koontz-Garboden (In press) explore variation in the morphosyntax of **property concept propositions**, propositions expressible by sentences whose main predicate is an adjective. They observe that, intra- and crosslinguistically, such propositions are expressed as either canonical predicative structures (1) or as possessive structures (2).

- (1) Krishna is wise. (2) Krishna has wisdom.

They locate this variation in the form of sentences expressing property concept propositions in the lexicon. Specifically, they argue that the choice of form – possessive or canonical predicational – is determined entirely by the lexical semantics of the **property concept lexeme**, the lexical item that contributes the descriptive content in the main predicate of a property concept proposition (*wisdom* in (1), *wise* in (2)). They propose the **Property Concept Lexicalization Hypothesis** in (3), and argue that possessive morphosyntax surfaces because substance characterizing lexemes require possessive semantics in order to create property concept propositions (roughly, *having wisdom* is equivalent to *being wise*).

- (3) **Property Concept Lexicalization Hypothesis:** Property concept lexemes have one of two meanings: (i) **Substance characterizing** (predicates of substances, in a technical sense elaborated in the talk), (ii) **Individual characterizing** (predicates of individuals)

THE CHALLENGE: Menon and Pancheva (2014; MP hereafter) present data from Malayalam which, they claim, argue against locating variation in the lexicon, and for placing it in syntax instead. They develop an analysis in which property concept lexemes “... universally lexicalize as roots, rather than as adjectives or nominals, and that all property concept roots ... denote substance-like individuals, requiring possessive predication” (MP, 289-290). A consequence of their analysis is that adjectives, in the languages that have them, are syntactically derived from roots by covert morphology with possessive semantics. This paper reexamines MP’s data, arguing that it is not only consistent with, but in fact supports locating variation in the lexicon. TWO CLASSES OF PROPERTY CONCEPT LEXEMES IN MALAYALAM MP document two classes of property concept lexemes in Malayalam: those ending in *-a* (4a) and those ending in *-am* (4b).

- (4) Malayalam PC words (MP, 290)
a. *-a*: *valiya* ‘big’; *nalla* ‘good’; *čeriya* ‘small’
b. *-am*: *santosham* ‘happiness’; *madhuram* ‘sweetness’; *pokkam* ‘tallness’

MP assume, and we follow, that *-a* is otherwise a suffix that appears on verbs in the formation of relative clauses (Asher and Kumari 1997:117,353), while *-am* is a nominal derivational suffix (Asher and Kumari 1997:385).

These two classes show a range of contrasting distributional behavior, including in predication and comparison. In predication, the *-a* lexemes appear with a pronominal suffix to form a light-headed relative (MP, 292) and are used with the “equative copula” (5), the same form used in predication with other non-verbal predicates, e.g., nominals (6).

- (5) *ava[nalla-va] aaŋə* (6) *avan kolayali aaŋə*
she good-F.SG EQ-COP he murderer EQ-COP
‘She is good.’ ‘He is a murderer.’

-am lexemes, by contrast, invoke possession, being used in an existential construction with a dative-marked subject (7), as is the case for possessives generally (8).

- (7) *ava[kkə] pokkam uŋtə* (8) *ava[kkə] mookutthi uŋtə*
she.DAT tallness EX.COP she.DAT nose.pin EX.COP
‘She is tall.’ (MP, 294) ‘She has a nose pin.’ (MP, 294)

There is a similar contrast in comparatives, where *-am* forms trigger use of possession (with a dative subject and existential copula) (9), by contrast with *-a* forms (10).

- (9) *A-inə K-e kaa[-um (kuuʈuttal)* (10) *A K-e kaa[-um (*kuuʈuttal)*
 A-DAT K-ACC than-UM more A K-ACC than-UM (more)
pokkam unʈə nalla-van aaŋə
 tallness EX.COP good-M.SG EQ-COP
 ‘A is taller than K.’ (MP, 299) ‘A is better than K.’ (MP, 299)

MP’S ANALYSIS AND ITS PROBLEMS MP’s analysis is guided by the intuition that all PC lexemes are property-denoting in the sense of Chierchia and Turner 1988, and, hence, cannot on their own compose with individual denoting terms to form property concept propositions. PC lexemes taking *-a*, they argue, are first made into verbs by a null *v* head introducing possession and a degree argument, which is manipulated in comparatives, and existentially quantified in predication. The *-a* suffix is then treated, as elsewhere in the language, as relative clause forming morphology on verbs. This analysis is exemplified by the syntax and semantics of (the predicative form of) *nalla* ‘good’ in (11) (with μ a measure function):

$$(11) \quad \llbracket \llbracket \llbracket \sqrt{nall} + \emptyset_v \rrbracket_v + \text{POS} \rrbracket_v - a \rrbracket_{rel} \rrbracket = \lambda x \exists y \exists d. y \text{ is } goodness \ \& \ x \text{ has } y \ \& \ \mu(y) \geq d$$

The suffix *-am* takes a property-denoting root and creates a relation between degrees and instances of properties. The possessive construction expressing property concept propositions introduces the possessive semantics required to relate the property denoted by the PC lexeme to an individual and a degree (POS binds the degree argument in possessive predication).

On this analysis, then, PC lexemes have a uniform meaning, and variation within and across languages is in the inventory of and combination of functional heads. But the analysis has several drawbacks. First, there is no evidence for the null possessive verbalizer. Second, the degree-introducing denotation for *-am* incorrectly predicts that *-am* suffixed words are generally gradable. This seems wrong for words like *pazam* ‘banana’, *vellam* ‘water’, *ooʈ-am* ‘a run’. Most importantly, this analysis makes the existence of the two classes *accidental* – nothing prevents any root from merging with both the nominalizer *-am* and the null verbalizer. Stated in theory-neutral terms, why only *-am* lexemes trigger overt possession remains unexplained.

THE ALTERNATIVE We argue that the variation observed in the morphosyntactic behavior of the two classes of Malayalam lexemes conforms straightforwardly to the Property Concept Variation Hypothesis, and so argues in favor of lexical variation. The lexemes in one class are verbs with an individual characterizing denotation. These verbs compose with *-a* morphology like all verbs. The lexemes in the second class are pre-categorial substance characterizing roots (as in MP’s analysis). *-am* is a semantically inert nominalizer turning roots into nouns. This correctly predicts that *-am* derived words are semantically heterogeneous, including individual characterizing lexemes (e.g., *pazam* ‘banana’) and substance characterizing PC ones. The latter, given their substance denotation, require possessive semantics to form property concept propositions, in agreement with MP. The analysis captures the morphological facts and immediately predicts that only PC lexemes composing with *-am* occur in possessive constructions, using the tools and assumptions of Francez and Koontz-Garboden (In press) (compositional details given in the talk).

CONCLUDING REMARKS MP’s Malayalam data and analysis provide an intriguing test case for determining the location of variation. We argue against their claim that Malayalam argues for variation in the inventory of functional heads, and demonstrate that it conforms exactly to the predictions of an analysis pinning variation on lexical semantics.

Selected references Asher, R.E., & T.C. Kumari. 1997. *Malayalam*. New York: Routledge. Chierchia, G., & R. Turner. 1988. Semantics and property theory. *L & P* 11:261–302. Francez, I., & A. Koontz-Garboden. In press. Semantic variation and the grammar of property concepts. *Language*. Menon, M., & R. Pancheva. 2014. The grammatical life of property concept roots in Malayalam. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung* 18. Pp. 289–302.