

A reference point analysis of Latvian and Old Russian nominal possessive constructions

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The point of departure of this paper is the challenge put forward in Taylor 2000 to look at possessive constructions cross-linguistically. Our small contribution is to compare Taylor's analysis of the English [NP's N] construction with the possessive constructions in Old Russian and Modern Latvian,¹ our respective specialities.

Taylor 2000 is a study of a single construction in English, [NP's N]. He argues that this construction is always accounted for by the *reference point analysis* (see also Langacker 1991:167–180). In brief, the reference point analysis (figure 1) sees the possessor as a *reference point* (RP), which is used to mentally access a *target* (T), which is the possessee. Reference points always have to be *topical* and *informative* of the target. To account for all uses of [NP's N] and to delimit this construction from the closely related *of* construction, Taylor in effect has to resort to three related “functions”. The first is the reference point analysis on an instance level (RP_{INSTANCE}), where the RP identifies a particular instance of the head noun, as in *John's car*. Second, there is the reference point analysis on a type level (RP_{TYPE}), where the NP as a whole names a *type*, not a particular instance, as in *woman's magazine*. Third, there are instances with relational nouns,² where there is no reference point involved, but instead a participant highly intrinsic to the relation denoted by the head noun, and therefore highly informative (NON-RP_{INTRINSIC}). In English, these are not realised by the [NP's N] construction, but rather by the *of* construction. Taylor postulates a subtle difference between the constructions *Rome's destruction* and *the destruction of Rome*, where Rome in the first case is topical, and therefore a RP, whereas in the second case it is not topical, only highly informative of the head noun, and therefore not a RP.

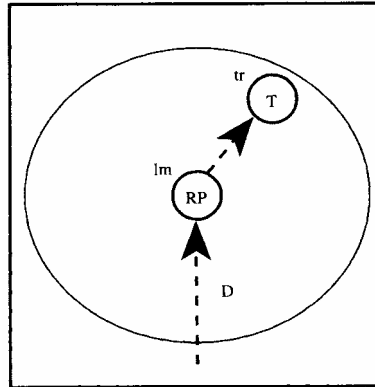
When we apply these three “functions” to the possessive constructions in Old Russian and Modern Latvian respectively, we get results that deviate remarkably both from English and each other. In Old Russian RP_{INSTANCE} and NON-RP_{INTRINSIC} are realised by the same means, either by denominal adjectives in complementary distribution with the genitive, or (marginally) by the dative. RP_{TYPE}, on the other hand, is exclusively realised by a more narrow range of denominal adjectives than those seen in the two first “functions”. In Latvian, on the other hand, all three functions are realised almost exclusively by the genitive. Thus we see a notable difference in the scope of the genitive constructions in the two systems, and also that

¹ Both languages will be studied as *synchronic* systems in this paper. The focus of interest is their typological differences, not the genetic relationship between them, which would be a subject in itself.

² Relational nouns include deverbal nouns, kinship terms, inherent parts of wholes and others.

denominal adjectives in Old Russian and the genitive in Latvian have remarkably wide scopes of usage.

Figure 1



Reference point analysis of [NP's N] (Taylor 2000:136, after Langacker 1991:172)

References

- Langacker, Ronald W. (1991): *Foundations of cognitive grammar*. Vol. 2. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Taylor, John R. (2000): *Possessives in English. An Exploration in Cognitive Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.