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Nominal tense in Tundra Nenets and Northern Samoyedic

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The paper addresses the meaning and basic syntax of the so-called predestinative forms in Tundra Nenets (Uralic), productively derived from nouns by the suffix $-d^{\circ}/-d\dot{\alpha}$. Their meaning can roughly be described as a two-place relation ‘X (meant/destined) for Y’. Predestinative forms correspond to X and head NPs where the dependent corresponds to Y. The latter will be referred to as ‘beneficiary’. The structure of the predestinative NP is parallel to the structure of the regular possessive construction. If the possessor or the beneficiary is pronominal and overt, it stands in the nominative. The head noun has to bear possessive agreement, cf. $(pid\dot{\alpha}r^{\circ}) \eta\dot{\alpha}no-r^{\circ}$ ‘your boat (you.NOM boat-2SG)’ and $(pid\dot{\alpha}r^{\circ}) \eta\dot{\alpha}no-d\dot{\alpha}-r^{\circ}$ ‘boat for you (you.NOM boat-PRED-2SG)’. If the possessor or the beneficiary corresponds to a lexical NP, it stands in the genitive and possessive agreement is absent, cf. $Wata-h \eta\dot{\alpha}no$ ‘Wata’s boat (Wata-GEN boat)’ and $Wata-h \eta\dot{\alpha}no-d^{\circ}$ ‘boat for Wata (Wata-GEN boat)’. Both the regular possessor and the beneficiary are NP-internal and cannot be separated from the head by clause-level elements.

The paper argues that predestinative phrases indicate future possession and therefore serve to express nominal tense with the nominal scope, in the terminology of Nordlinger & Sadler (2004). This means that the tense is NP-bound and deictically interpreted in relation to the time of utterance. In a number of languages nominal tense with nominal scope serves to temporally locate the nominal independently of the possessive relation. In other languages it is only active in possessive constructions and not expressed in non-possessive NPs. Nenets belongs to the latter type. It exhibits a two-way system of nominal tense in possessive phrases: present and future (\emptyset and $-d\dot{\alpha}/-d^{\circ}$). This goes against Nordlinger & Sadler’s typological observation that “if a language has independent nominal TAM at all, it will encode minimally a distinction between past and nonpast tense”.

A non-possessive NP with nominal tense has only one interpretation. For instance, *I met a future doctor* can only mean that the relevant person is not a doctor at the time of speech. However, there may be two interpretations of tense in a possessive phrase. It can be interpreted with respect to two different semantic predicates: either the nominal referent itself or the possessive relation. Thus, *I met my future doctor* can mean that the relevant person is not a doctor at the time of speech, i.e. the entity that can be referred to as ‘doctor’ does not (yet) exist (possession takes scope over tense). In the second interpretation he is already a doctor at the time of speech, but not ‘my doctor’ (tense takes scope over possession). In Nenets predestinative constructions the (pragmatic) existence of the possessed entity is not presupposed at the time of utterance, but is predicated for the future with respect to the speech time.

This is supported by the following arguments. Predestinatives occur in three cases: the nominative, accusative and genitive. These mostly serve as subjects, objects and adjuncts, respectively. Crucially, their availability is restricted, unlike for regular possessives. First, predestinative subjects and objects are only compatible with verbs which tend to introduce a novel entity into the discourse (verbs of appearance and creation). The respective NP may be referential, but is not associated with the pragmatic presupposition of existence and therefore the interlocutors do not have a mental representation of the referent at the time the utterance is produced. Second, predestinatives are totally excluded from syntactic constructions which, by their nature, require pragmatically presupposed NPs, such as passives, relativizations and constructions where verbal agreement is triggered by a topical argument. These facts indicate that the entity denoted by predestinatives does not pragmatically exist at the time of speech, but its existence is predicated for the future as somebody’s possession. In other words, possession takes scope over tense. Note that Alexiadou et al. (2007) argue for the intrinsic link between possession (person feature) and tense, but suggest the following structure for Somali: TP > PossP > DP. If the current analysis is on the right track, Nenets data appear to suggest the opposite hierarchy of projections: PossP > TP > DP.