The expression of modifiers and arguments in the noun phrase and beyond

A typological study

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A major semantic distinction obtaining in phrases and clauses is that between modifiers and arguments. While arguments are inherent to the meaning of the head of the phrase or clause, modifiers merely supplement the head with additional information. Typical examples of argument-taking heads are verbs and adpositions, but also relational nouns such as kinship terms and body part terms. Typical examples of modifier-taking heads are non-relational nouns, such as those denoting concrete, inanimate objects, like ‘pot’ or ‘pen’.

This dissertation investigates to what extent the modifier/argument opposition constrains the morphosyntactic expression of possessive NPs, adpositional phrases and verbal main clauses. Using data of 64 different languages from all over the world, it is shown that the modifier/argument distinction strongly correlates with four typological parameters: locus of marking, the referentiality of person marking, the formal bondedness of person marking, and identity of marking. The first three parameters apply to possessive NPs: it is shown that possessive modifiers, as functionally optional enrichments of the head, are more likely to be the locus of morphosyntactic marking than possessive arguments. Also, possessive modifiers tend to be expressed by more referential and more formally independent person markers than possessive arguments. The final parameter applies beyond the domain of the NP: it is shown that if a language uses the same morphosyntactic form to mark modifiers in phrases and arguments in clauses, it also uses this form to mark arguments in phrases. Together, these findings demonstrate the typological relevance of the semantic opposition between modifiers and arguments, in the possessive NP and beyond.
The expression of modifiers and arguments  
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Cover photo: The Bungehuis. Taken by Wietse de Graaf.

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The expression of modifiers and arguments in the noun phrase and beyond
A typological study
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List of abbreviations

1  first person  INDF  indefinite
2  second person  INS  instrumental
3  third person  IPFV  imperfective
A  actor  LOC  locative
ABL  ablative  M  masculine
ABS  absolutive  MIN  minimal number
ACC  accusative  N  neuter
ACT  active  NF  non-feminine
AL  alienable  NFOC  non-focus
ALL  allative  NFUT  non-future
ANTIP  antipassive  NOM  nominative
AOR  aorist tense  NPST  non-past
ART  article  NVIS  non-visual sensory evidence
ASS  associative  OBJ  object
ATTR  attributive marker  OBL  oblique
AUG  augmentative  OPOSTP  object of postposition
C  common  PART  partitive
CM  conjugation marker  PFV  perfective
COM  comitative  PL  plural
COMPL  completive  POSS  possessive
CONN  connective  POT  potential
DAT  dative  PRS  present
DECL  declarative  PST  past
DEF  definite  REC  recent
ERG  ergative  REL  relative
FIN  finite  REM  remote
FOC  focus  REP  reportative
FUT  future  REPV  reportative
GEN  genitive  SG  singular
HUM  human  SUP  superessive
INAL  inalienable  TR  transitive
INCL  inclusive  VIS  visible
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