

Passive and Characteristic Possession in Oceanic

Bill Palmer

University of Surrey

Most Oceanic languages have several possessor-indexing strategies. These include direct suffixation of the noun, typically for inalienable relationships; suffixation of a classifier marking edible items; and suffixation of a classifier marking possession of ordinary belongings. However, in many languages the direct and/or 'edible' classifier strategies turn up marking unexpected nominals: ones not referring to inalienable or edible items. Typically, in such cases the possessive relationship may be characterized as 'characteristic possession' (the possession of characteristics or qualities ascribed to the possessor), or 'passive possession' (where the possessum acts on or negatively affects the possessor).

The standard exemplar language is Bauan Fijian, where characteristic and passive possession are both marked using the 'edible' classifier:

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ke-mu          manrai
EDPOSS-2SGP   bread
'your bread'

no-mu          vale
GENPOSS-2SGP house
'your house'

ke-na          moto
EDPOSS-3SGP   spear
'his/her spear (s/he is/was speared with)'

no-na          moto
GENPOSS-3SGP spear
'his/her spear (s/he owns)''

ke-na          levu
EDPOSS-3SGP   big
'his/her size'
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Lynch (2001) surveys this poorly described phenomenon, and concludes that passive and characteristic possession are typically marked by direct suffixation, arguing that this can be reconstructed for Proto Oceanic. He argues that 'edible' classifier marking of passive possession results from parallel development, influenced by 'suffer' semantics associated with the verb 'eat' in some languages, and formal similarity between the edible classifier and a benefactive preposition.

This paper revisits the issues, presenting a fresh interpretation of the data and evidence supporting an alternative analysis. It argues that patterns across Oceanic suggest a distinction between possessor-indexing of nominalized verbs and of nouns, and concludes that direct marking of passive possession in fact does not occur, and is not reconstructible for POc.

The paper argues that the possession of nominalized verbs across Oceanic tends to take the form of direct suffixation, regardless of the strategy employed to mark passive possession, if any. It argues

that direct suffixation of nominalized verbs is not passive possession, but possession by the absolutive argument, even if agentive, and that this is reconstructible for POc.

The paper argues that many Oceanic languages do not formally distinguish passive possession of nouns, but that those that do, use the 'edible' classifier construction, presenting evidence that this occurs in enough higher-order subgroups to justify reconstructing 'edible' classifier marking of passive possession in POc.

Finally, the paper argues that the semantics of characteristic possession lead to diverse semantic associations and variable treatment across Oceanic. In some languages it is not formally distinguished. In others it is directly marked, with characteristics as inalienable 'parts'. Bauan-like marking with the 'edible' construction is rare and only occurs in languages also marking passive possession in this way, with characteristic possession marked by the 'edible' classifier because of an association between the uncontrolled nature of both intrinsic characteristics and of entities that act upon one. The paper concludes that the marking strategy for characteristic possession in POc cannot be reconstructed with confidence, but the rarity of the 'edible' construction and its dependence on similarly marked passive possession, make this an unlikely candidate.