

Possession and necessity: From individuals to worlds

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of possessive morphosyntax to express modal necessity, as in the English use of *have to*. We claim that possessive modality constructions arise because both possession and necessity express a relation of inclusion between two arguments of the same semantic type: possession involves a relation of inclusion between two ⟨e⟩-type arguments, while necessity involves inclusion between sets of worlds. Differences between the two arise from their different syntax: possessive *have* expresses possession via syntactic transitivity, while modals conceal one argument within the modal head. The similarities and differences are captured within a realizational approach to morphology, in which vocabulary items like *have* and *must* are inserted to spell out structures consisting of formal features. The proposal is then extended from *have*-possession languages such as English to *be*-possession languages, focusing on possessive modality in Hindi-Urdu and Bengali. We argue that the possessive/modal head can be “applicative-like,” licensing oblique case on an argument that raises to its specifier.

This account explains why possessive morphosyntax is uniformly used to express modal necessity, and not other modal meanings: the universal force of elements like *have (to)* follows from the inclusion relation expressed by possession. Possessive modality thus sheds light not only on the semantics of possession but also on the compositional syntax of modal operators.

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1. Introduction

In a variety of languages modal necessity can be expressed with the same morphosyntax used to express predicative possession. This is true not only for *have*-possession languages like English, Spanish, and German, as in (1), but also apparently for *be*-possession languages like Hindi and Bengali, as in (2).

- (1) a. The children have to do their homework now. [English]
b. Juan tiene que comer esta manzana.
Juan has that eat-inf this-f apple
'Juan has to eat this apple.' [Spanish]

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- c. Der Hans hat rechtzeitig in Wien anzukommen
 the Hans has in-time in Vienna to-arrive
 ‘Hans has to arrive in Vienna in time.’ [German: Bhatt, 1997:(6)]
- (2) a. John-ko seb khaa-naa hai
 John-DAT apple eat-GER be.PRES
 ‘John has to eat the apple.’ [Hindi-Urdu: Bhatt, 1997:(8)]
- b. Ghor-ṭa-ke porijkar korte ho-be
 room-DEF-DAT clean do-INF be-FUT
 ‘The room has to become clean.’ [Bengali: Neil Banerjee p.c.]

We argue in this paper that the use of possessive morphosyntax to express modal necessity—which we refer to as *possessive modality*—reveals something about the syntactic representation of both predicative possession and necessity. Specifically, we argue that this morphosyntactic repurposing is best explained in terms of a semantic relation common to both possession and necessity. This common relation—which we argue should be represented syntactically as a feature—provides the basis for a common morphology. It also provides a new source of evidence for the semantic analysis of possession. Considerable work has been done on the formal semantics of modality, certainly in comparison with possession; our analysis requires that whatever relation is expressed by possession, it must closely resemble a relation involved in the composition of modal necessity.

One proposal that has been made for possession is that it expresses a relation of inclusion or containment in which the possessor includes the possessee, most obvious in sentences describing part-whole relations. We show that this analysis of possession can explain the extension to necessity: while possession involves inclusion between individuals, modal necessity involves the same relation between sets of worlds.

We thus propose that modal uses of possessive morphosyntax, of the types seen in (1) and (2), result from two changes. The first is a broadening of the semantic interpretation of a morphosemantic feature expressing inclusion, which we call *INCL*. This feature originally encodes a possession relation between individuals, but applied to sets of worlds it encodes modal necessity. The second change is that a feature contributing a modal base (*ROOT*, *EPIST*, etc.) is optionally added to the head hosting *INCL*. The result is a shift from a fully transitive structure (possessive *have*) to a raising structure (modal *have*).

Central to this account is a realizational view of morphology in which the syntax manipulates formal features and vocabulary items are inserted post-syntactically, as in Distributed Morphology (DM: Halle and Marantz, 1993, 1994). Auxiliary verbs like *have* and *be*, as well as modals like *must* and *may*, are represented in the syntax solely in terms of formal features. They differ from more “lexical” verbs (e.g. *dance*), whose syntax includes an additional root element (which in DM is associated with richer Encyclopedic knowledge). What this means is that the meanings expressed by functional elements, including auxiliary verbs, derive entirely from the interpretable formal features they spell out. Further following the assumptions of realizational morphology, functional vocabulary items can be underspecified, so that a single vocabulary item can spell out more than one featural representation. As we will see, the English vocabulary item *have* spells out not only the verbal head involved in predicative possession (*INCL*), but also a more complex verbal head that expresses modal necessity (*INCL + EPIST* OR *INCL + ROOT*).

In section 2, we discuss the possession relation, reviewing the range of meanings associated with possessive *have*. Among these is a relation of inclusion, which we show in section 3 is a relation centrally involved in modal necessity. Section 4 brings possession and modal necessity together, showing how the same features can account for the semantics of both constructions. Then, section 5 provides an account of the syntax of modal *have*, relating it both to the syntax of possessive *have* and to the syntax of true modals like *must*. Finally, in section 6, we extend the account to *be*-possession languages. We show that the differences between possessive modality in *have*- and *be*-possession languages can be understood entirely as a difference in the morphological realization of essentially identical syntactic representations. In other words, the apparently different forms that the construction takes in *have*-possession languages and in *be*-possession languages are superficial, and do not reflect any crosslinguistic difference in the underlying syntax of modality.

2. The syntax and semantics of possession

The semantic analysis of possession faces a persistent challenge from the wide range of interpretations available to possessive verbs like *have*, a range that makes it difficult to choose any single core meaning expressed by possession. Possessive modality constructions, however, offer a new source of evidence for the analysis of possession simpliciter: whatever relation is expressed by possessive *have*, it must be a relation that also holds in modal necessity.

In this section, we begin by reviewing the basic syntax of predicative possession, before addressing the range of meanings available to possessive *have* in English. We identify *inclusion* as a basic meaning of predicative possession; in

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