Two kinds of “possessor raising” in Choctaw

Summary. Choctaw has been described as having subject possessor raising, a construction where a noun phrase which would typically be the possessor of the subject itself becomes the subject. I show that subject possessor raising in Choctaw (henceforth external possession ‘EP’) actually comes in two types—thematic and athematic—which have previously been considered surface morphological variants. These two types of EP, which have been attested independently in different languages, exhibit morphological, syntactic and interpretative differences within Choctaw. Furthermore, I show that Choctaw’s object possessor raising construction necessarily involves thematic rather than athematic EP.

Two structures. I propose that thematic EP involves the structure in (1), with the possessor being introduced by an Appl head and raising to subject position (Spec-TP). It receives its possessor interpretation in the semantic composition (Wood & Marantz 2017). Athematic EP involves the structure in (2), where the possessor moves out of the left branch of a DP in Spec-TP to a higher A-position (here, Spec-XP). In (2), the DP originates in an internal argument position, but it could also have originated in an external argument position.

(1) thematic: $[TP \langle DP \rangle T^0 [vP \langle \text{ApplP} \rangle \langle DP \rangle \text{Appl}^0 [vP V^0 \langle DP \rangle ] ] ]$

(2) athematic: $[XP \langle DP \rangle X^0 [TP \langle DP \rangle D^0 \langle NP \rangle ] ] T^0 [vP \langle vP V^0 \langle DP \rangle ] ] ]$

Morphology. In both EP structures, the possessor has nominative Case. In thematic EP such as (3), an applicative morpheme (im-) appears on the verb and the possessum goes unmarked; in athematic EP such as (4), a possessive morpheme (also im-) appears on the possessum and the verb goes unmarked.

(3) Mary-at ofi im-illi-h. Mary-NOM dog APPL-die-TNS
   ‘Mary’s dog died.’

(4) Mary-at im-ofi illi-h. Mary-NOM POSS-dog die-TNS
   ‘Mary’s dog died.’

Explanation: thematic EP in (3) involves an applicative head and no possessive determiner; athematic EP in (4) involves a possessive determiner and no applicative head. Note the homophony of the POSS and APPL morphemes—I argue that this has led to the two constructions being viewed as mere morphological variants (Davies 1986:50, Broadwell 2006:305).

Range of possible predicates. Thematic EP is possible only with predicates that are (a) non-agentive and (b) eventive or stage-level. Good candidates are illi ‘die’, as in (3), and abiika ‘be/get sick’ (9); bad candidates are balili ‘run’ (5), and ossi ‘be small’. Athematic EP is permissible with a wider range of intransitives (possibly any), as shown in (6).

(5) # Mary-at ofi ñ-balili-h. Mary-NOM dog APPL-run-TNS
   ‘Mary ran from the dog.’ (no EP interpretation)

(6) Mary-at im-ofi balili-h. Mary-NOM POSS-dog run-TNS
   ‘Mary’s dog is running.’

Explanation: in thematic EP, the possessor is introduced in Spec-AppP and ends up as the subject. This explains why the predicate must be unaccusative: in an unergative, the possessum would be introduced in Spec-vP—higher than the possessor—so the possessor would be unable to raise over it to subject position. Appl$^0$ may also select only for certain predicates (e.g. stage-level). In contrast, athematic EP happens outside the vP, and is totally independent of the properties of the predicate.
**Interpretation of the possessor.** In thematic EP, inanimate possessors are banned (7). In athe
tematic EP, inanimate possessors are possible (8).

(7)  * Chokka-at  okkissa  im-oppolo-h.  (8)  Chokka-at  im-okkissa  oppolo-h.
      house-NOM  door  APPL-broken-TNS  house-NOM  POSS-door  broken-TNS
      ‘The house’s door is broken.’

*Explanation:* in thematic EP the possessor receives a theta-role. Cross-linguistically, external possessors tend to have obligatory ‘affectee’ interpretations (c.f. Lee-Schoenfeld 2006 on German, Guéron 1985 on French, Kempchinsky 1992 on Spanish), and inanimate entities are incompatible with this interpretation. By contrast, athe
tematic external possessors do not receive this interpretation (c.f. Aissen 1987 on Tzotzil, Deal 2013 on Nez Perce).

**Licensing of subject plural marker oklah.** The preverbal morpheme oklah associates with the subject of a clause and signals that it is plural (Broadwell 2006:239). In thematic EP, oklah obligatorily associates with the possessor (9); in athe
tematic EP, oklah associates only with the possessum (10), although not all speakers permit oklah here at all.

(9) Alikchi-yat  ofi  oklah  im-abiika-h.  (10) %John-at  im-ofi  oklah  abiika-h.
      doctor-NOM  dog  PL  APPL-sick-TNS  John-NOM  POSS-dog  PL  sick-TNS
      ‘The doctors’ dog is sick.’  ‘John’s dogs are sick.’

*Explanation:* In thematic EP, the possessor moves to the subject position (Spec-TP), so oklah can associate with it. The possessum remains within vP and is too low in the structure to associate with oklah. In athe
tematic EP, the whole complex DP moves to the subject position, meaning that it can associate with oklah. I propose that the possessor is unable to associate with oklah because it moves above the subject position (in support of this claim, I show that topicalized objects are also unable to associate with oklah).

**EP of objects.** Only thematic EP is available for objects. Firstly, the verb displays APPL morphology, as in (11). Secondly, only predicates where the possessor could be reasonably be interpreted as being affected by the predicate are permitted, hence why object EP is OK in (11) but odd in (12). Thirdly, inanimate possessors are impossible, as in (13).

(11) Tasibo-mat  naa baliili’  am-oppani-tok.
      crazy-DEM.NOM  car  1SG.APPL-break-PST
      ‘The crazy fool crashed my car.’

(12) *John-at  ofi  ā-pisa-tok.
      John-NOM  dog  1SG.APPL-see-TNS
      intended: ‘John saw my dog.’

(13) *Chokka aapisa  ā-kooli-li-tok.
      house  window  APPL-break-1SG-PST
      intended: ‘I broke the house’s windows.’

*Explanation:* Since EP of objects is thematic, I propose that it involves the same ApplP that is found in thematic EP of subjects (e.g. (3), (9)). This also explains why there is no thematic EP of subjects of transitives: they tend to be base-generated in Spec-vP, too high to be related to the possessor generated in Spec-ApplP.

**A remaining puzzle.** Under this account, there is no clear reason why subjects of transitives should be prevented from undergoing athe
tematic EP, yet they are. In the talk, I propose that this structure is ruled out because it would be impossible to simultaneously satisfy two conditions on Choctaw case-marking: (a) transitive subjects need to carry overt nominative case; (b) two nominative DPs cannot be adjacent within a clause, on account of a ‘case OCP’ restriction (cf. Mohanan 1994 on Hindi, Hiraiwa 2010 on Japanese).