Where trees don't HAVE branches and chairs don't HAVE legs:

Variation in Irish English possessive constructions

Many agree that POSSESSION is a basic concept of human cognition, yet it is one of the most difficult concepts to define. As a conceptual category whose linguistic expression varies considerably from one language to another (Isačenko 1974, Heine 1997, Stassen 2013), a cross-linguistic valid definition of POSSESSION must be semantically-based; coming up with a definition of POSSESSION based on its formal expression in a language such as English would result in difficulties when applying it to a typologically-different language, such as Irish. This problem becomes apparent when we examine a variety of English that has been heavily influenced by Irish, where some of the notions that are typically expressed as predicative possession in Standard English are not available as possessive constructions, but are rather expressed by other formal means. In other words, one cannot define POSSESSION in Irish based on its formal expression in English – and vice versa.

This paper examines these issues in a corpus of traditional Irish English, spoken in the western part of Ireland's County Clare. The language of the West Clare corpus is both conservative in nature as well as heavily influenced by Irish, and shows many non-standard features that can be attributed to the centuries-long contact between Irish and English. One of the most interesting grammatical phenomena observed in the corpus potentially arises from the convergence of the formal encoding of POSSESSION in English and that of Irish: data from the corpus shows that the predicative possessive construction [NP HAVE NP] only features animate entities as subjects, while inanimate subjects are entirely excluded. So while cases such as *This chair has four legs* or *That tree has crows on it* are commonly expressed as possessives in Standard English ('inanimate inalienable / alienable possession'; Heine 1997), they are unavailable as such in the West Clare corpus. This observation calls for a reconsideration of what constitutes as POSSESSION in the corpus – especially as we go on to explore the alternative structures used for expressing the so-called notions of 'inanimate possession'.

In view of this apparent animacy constraint one may wonder, then, how these Standard English possessive notions are expressed in the corpus. This paper reports on the formal variation conditioned by this semantic constraint, and describes how constructions involving the verb BE are used in order to express what constructions with HAVE do not. This phenomenon is then examined in light of predicative possessive constructions in Irish, where it has also been observed that animacy has a strong effect on the formal encoding of certain possessive notions (Ó Dochartaigh 1992). This investigation leads to a proposal of a semantic-based definition of the conceptual category of POSSESSION – one that applies to the language of the West Clare corpus, to Standard English and to Irish.

References

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