

# North Sámi Possessive Constructions in the Era of Truth and Reconciliation

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Our study of North Sámi possessive constructions illustrates a two-way relationship between **cognitive linguistics**, which can help to document injustices perpetrated against indigenous peoples, and an **indigenous language** that sheds light on the semantics of possession.

North Sámi is spoken by approximately 20,000 people in northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland, where it is under contact pressure from majority languages. Discriminatory policies against the Sámi people and their language were in effect in all three countries until the second half of the 20th century, and unofficial discrimination continues. Parliaments of Norway and Finland approved the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to address these issues in 2017, whereas Sweden rejected a parallel proposal in 2018 (Barents Observer 2018). We present two datasets: one longitudinal (>2K examples culled from >.5M words representing literary works), and one from a digital corpus of contemporary newspapers (20M words). We examine two possessive constructions in North Sámi: “NPx” possessive suffixes attached to the possessum noun triggering complex morphophonological alternations, and “RefIN” a morphologically simpler analytic construction.

**What Cognitive Linguistics Contributes to Documenting Discrimination** Our longitudinal data track the distribution of the two possessive constructions through three generations, showing that the simpler RefIN construction (initially used mostly in non-prototypical expressions of possession) is gradually replacing NPx. Trudgill (2002) and McWhorter (2007, 2011) argue that the “normal” state of language is highly complex, and that languages that are most exposed to contact and adult learners (which is the case for North Sámi, Keskitalo et al. 2013) show evidence of morphological simplification, favoring analytic constructions such as RefIN (cf. also Bentz & Winter 2013). The fact that this change is observed also in Finland (Finnish has a possessive suffix) shows that this is a language change, not merely the result of language shift. The timing of this linguistic change corresponds to educational policies that removed Mid generation speakers from their L1 environment during their school years, creating a socio-linguistic situation that disadvantaged morphological complexity. This usage-based analysis provides concrete documentation of a language change catalyzed by discriminatory policy.

**What North Sámi Contributes to Understanding of Inalienable Possession** Languages with multiple possessive constructions tend to distinguish inalienable vs. alienable possession. Use of North Sámi NPx vs. RefIN constructions attested in contemporary newspaper data suggests a semantic distinction resembling inalienable vs. alienable possession, where possessums referring to kin and body parts have higher use of NPx than other nouns. This follows the iconic relationship between conceptual distance (closer for inalienable) and formal markers (closer for affixes) observed cross-linguistically (Haiman 1985:130; Croft 1990: 174-176). Our usage-based analysis of North Sámi data extends the traditional understanding of inalienable possession, since frequent use of NPx is also found with other possessums that one cannot easily disown, such as the products of authorship (*reive* ‘letter’, *sárdni* ‘speech’), actions (*dáhpi* ‘custom, habit’, *suddu* ‘sin’), and culturally essential possessions (*eallu* ‘reindeer herd’, *boazu* ‘reindeer’). Furthermore, there is evidence of productivity, especially for products of authorship such as *preassadieđáhus* ‘press release’. Differences in distribution of possessive constructions cannot be attributed to frequency alone, bolstering the argument that these are semantic distinctions.

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