Some Semantic Characterizations of Chinese Possessives
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1. Objective. This paper shows that (a) possessives in the Chinese DE construction have significantly different semantic properties from possessives in the English genitive -s construction, and (b) no ready explanation for these differences is found in the literature. This paper suggests that the possessor-de phrases in Chinese possessives are in fact parasites of relative clauses, and implements the idea formally to account for the differences.

2. Data and Phenomena. The possessive three victims’ hands in the English sentence (1a) has only the possessor-dominant definite (maximal) reading, i.e. three victims and six hands (cf. Barker 1991). Depending on the choice of classifiers, similar possessives in Chinese with the DE construction can have either possessor-dominant readings as in (1b), where the classifier ge is related to shou-hai-zhe ‘victim’, or possessee-dominant readings as in (1c), where the classifier zhi is related to shou ‘hand’. Moreover, there is no definiteness or maximality effect in (1b) or (1c) (cf. Partee (in press) and Yang 2005), so that (1b) can be true in a situation in which exactly four hands which belong to three victims were found near the river, and (1b) can be true in a situation in which exactly three hands which belong to two victims were found near the river.

(1) a. [Three victims’ hands] were found near the river.
   
   three-classifier victim DE hand passive find ASP.
   ‘Hands of three victims’ were found.’

   three-classifier victim DE hand passive find ASP.
   ‘Three hands of victims’ were found.’

The DE construction also allows a high degree of freedom in the usage of quantificational possessees compared to English genitives. While using two in (2a) is fine, using every or most in (2a) is only marginally acceptable. This phenomenon may be explained by the definiteness requirement arising from the genitive -s. Nonetheless, liang-ben ‘two-classifier’, mei-yi-ben ‘every-classifier’, and dai-bu-fen-de ‘most’ in (2b) are all acceptable, though these are all indefinite quantifiers. This phenomenon is unnoticed and left unexplained in the literature.

(2) a. John’s two/every/most book(s)
   
   b. Zhang-San DE liang-ben/mei-yi-ben/dai-bu-fen-de shu
   Zhang-San DE two-classifier/every-classifier/most book
   ‘ZhangSan’s two/every/most book(s)’

It has also not been remarked on that the underspecified relations between possessors and possessees in possessives can be specified explicitly in the Chinese DE construction. For example, while the relation between a man Zhang-San and his books is underspecified in the possessive Zhang-San DE shu ‘Zhang-San DE book’, the relation is fully specified (as the ownership relation) in Zhang-San yong-you DE shu ‘John own DE book’.

3. Analysis and Proposal. These facts do not fall out in any obvious way from existing theories of the possessive in English (c.f. Barker 1991, Vikner & Jensen 2002, Asher & Denis 2004, etc.) or Chinese (c.f. Huang 1982, Huang 1989, Partee (in press), Yang 2005, etc.). To explain the difference between Chinese and English possessives, we propose that (a) syntactically, possessives in Chinese DE construction are in fact parasitic on the relative clause construction rather than exploiting something like a covert version of the English genitive -s, (b) semantically, the relative clause construction and lack of definiteness effect from the relative clause construction in Chinese possessives can account for the phenomena mentioned above. We spell this idea out by making use of ideas about the semantics of relative clauses found in the work of del Gobbo (2003).